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Agency Development of Preservice Teachers Progressing Through an Undergraduate Education Program

by

Tracy Christina Stockdale

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Education
in Curriculum and Leadership
(CURRICULUM)

Columbus State University
Columbus, GA

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Dedication

They say it takes a village, and it definitely takes a village to persevere and finish a dissertation. A huge thank you to my family, friends, and colleagues for your love and patience as we navigated this journey! Your faith, encouragement, and support kept me going each day! I will forever be grateful for every one of my cheerleaders.

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Dr. Jan Burcham, thank you for serving as my committee chair. Thank you for pushing me to finish my dissertation and helping me navigate the challenges along the road. Although this process was not easy, you never gave up on me. You encouraged me to persist, helped guide me in the right direction, and continued to give positive and realistic feedback. I am thankful for your support and guidance.

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Abstract

Research suggests student achievement improves when teachers connect with their students and create lessons and instruction based on their needs (Hattie, 2003; Stronge, 2018). Unfortunately, educators throughout the United States report losing control over the educational decisions they make in their classrooms at startling rates (Ingersoll, 2011; Wright, 2020). A recent study by Ingersoll, Merrill, Stuckey, and Collins (2018) found that approximately 50% of educators leave the profession within their first five years of teaching. An analysis of the attrition data showed that teachers often leave the profession due to perceptions of low classroom autonomy (Ingersoll et al., 2018). The purpose of this exploratory case study was to explore agency development of preservice teachers as they progress through an undergraduate education program at a university in southwestern Georgia. Data were collected from three sources: the Perceived Agency Survey (Hull & Uematsu, 2020), three focus group interviews, and three individual interviews. An analysis of data revealed that preservice educators perceive connections with others as positively influencing their agency. Therefore, university education programs should continue to provide support and advice to preservice teachers on advocating for their agency through lessons and field experiences. Additionally, providing opportunities for preservice educators to meet with other cohorts may foster a continued sense of community and agency building. However, this sense of community and connection should not stop after graduation. It would benefit schools to create a mentor program with a continued support system that may provide the connections one needs to build autonomous motivation to continue in the profession.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Background of the Problem

In recent years, an upturn in awareness has focused on how teachers influence their students. Hattie (2003) theorized that a teacher could have the most significant and explicitly encouraging effect on students' growth, development, and academic success. Stronge (2018) found evidence to suggest that student achievement improves when teachers deliver superior instruction. Moreover, Stronge (2018) reported that effective teachers set high expectations and find ways to connect with their students.

The influence of a teacher on their students also relies heavily on the presence of teacher autonomy or teacher agency (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010; Lennert da Silva & Molstad, 2021). Ryan and Deci (2000) described autonomy as a psychological need that individuals incessantly seek to satisfy. Furthermore, autonomy refers to an individual's aspiration to control their behaviors and have the freedom to make their own decisions (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Reeve & Cheon, 2021). Agency is defined as an individual's capacity to act decisively and skillfully within their role (Lennert da Silva & Molstad, 2021). When teachers feel supported and autonomous in the workplace, they are more comfortable adapting their lessons to meet the changing needs of the diverse population they teach (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009; Strong & Yoshida, 2014). Hyslop-Margison and Sears (2010) advocated for professional autonomy, trusting that autonomy enriches a teacher's perception of responsibility. Autonomous teaching freedom in the classroom also leads to job ownership, pride in student success, and improved classroom procedures (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010).

Unfortunately, a glance through the history of the American education system shows an evolution of reforms that have threatened teacher autonomy and replaced it with extreme

pressures and accountability measures (Brown, 2012; Crowe, 2011; Ingersoll, 2011; Peterson & West, 2003; Ruff, 2019; Wright, 2020). Research on one-room schoolhouses reported that teachers and communities took pride in their new buildings, the school providing a compelling sense of local autonomy (Beisaw & Baxter, 2017). In addition, teachers enacted a high degree of agency while teaching reading, writing, math, and basic manners (Chen, 2021). However, early pride and autonomy swiftly shifted with the onset of programs funded by the United States Department of Education (United States Department of Education, 2021). The Department of Education was founded to develop and create successful schools for all students and brought a long list of educational reforms, from adopting national standards to countless improvement initiatives (Chen, 2021; United States Department of Education, 2021). Although the educational shifts and reforms sound promising to stakeholders, teachers report that their autonomy is at-risk when navigating through each change (Lamb, 2008; Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

A recent study by Ingersoll, Merrill, Stuckey, and Collins (2018) found that approximately 50% of educators leave the profession within their first five years of teaching. Some teachers leave due to family commitments (Voke, 2002), low salaries (Inman & Marlow, 2004), and class sizes (Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2019). An analysis of the data also revealed that teachers often leave the profession due to low levels of autonomy and a decreased sense of influence regarding classroom and schoolwide educational decisions (Ingersoll et al., 2018; Sutcher et al., 2019). Chambers Mack, Johnson, Jones, Tsatenawa, and Howard (2019) agreed, stating that teachers who perceived low levels of support and displayed minimal administrative responsibility had a higher possibility of leaving the profession. Regrettably, educators' dissatisfaction with the work environment has not changed significantly in the last 20 years. Tye and O'Brien (2002) stated that teachers chose to leave the profession

due to conditions challenging their agency and competence. One of the most prominent challenges teachers reported was increased accountability measures. Teachers felt pressured by high-stakes testing, rigorous standards, and scripted lessons designed around test preparation (Tye & O'Brien, 2002; Walters, 2004).

Even though teachers leave the profession each year for a multitude of reasons (Ingersoll et al., 2018; Tye & O'Brien, 2002), new educators are preparing to enter the profession with great aspirations (Walters, 2004). When asked why they wanted to be a teacher, educators indicated that they wanted to make a difference in the lives of their students, improve society, take on the responsibility of working with students, gain a feeling of accomplishment, and educate others on a subject that was of interest to them (Ni & Rorrer, 2018). However, preservice teachers felt that accountability measures might suppress their aspirations, leaving little room to enact professional agency (Hull & Uematsu, 2020; Ng, 2006). Therefore, it is vital to study how agency develops and changes in preservice teachers and how they may enact agency throughout their educational journey (Hull & Uematsu, 2020).

Statement of the Problem

A problem exists in schools, classrooms, and educational communities throughout the United States. That problem is that as educational expectations in the United States continually shift toward implementing rigorous standards and increased accountability demands, teachers are losing influence over instructional decisions in their classrooms and schools (Ingersoll, 2011; Wright, 2020). Although educators are expected to prepare students to thrive in a diverse, global society (Lanier, 1997; Tichnor-Wagner, Parkhouse, Glazier, & Cain, 2019), they are likely to do so in a reform-filled vacuum that disregards one's need for educational autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Lamb, 2008; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Currently, some educators perceive a sense of

agency when setting up their classroom management and routines (Guay, Roy, & Valois, 2017; Strong & Yoshida, 2014); however, they do not report that same sense of agency when discussing curricular autonomy (Ormond, 2017; Phillips, 1991), instructional autonomy (Baron, Immekus, Gonzalez, & Yun, 2016; Phillips, 1991) and accountability measures (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Ingersoll, Merrill, & May, 2016; Rex & Nelson, 2004). This problem impacts educators because as professional autonomy diminishes, so does one's motivational levels (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Gagne & Deci, 2005; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014) and sense of job satisfaction (Kengatharan, 2020; Worth & Van den Brande, 2020). Many possible factors contribute to this problem, including the adoption of scripted curriculums (Valli & Buese, 2007; Ward, 2015; Wright, 2020) and the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which mandated high accountability measures to improve student proficiency in the areas of reading and math (Ashby, 2007; Peterson & West, 2003). NCLB was replaced in 2015 with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which provides states more agency when selecting their academic goals and the consequences if they are not achieved (Heise, 2017). In addition, high-stakes testing (Au, 2007, 2011) threatens an educator's agency due to the intense preparation needed for students to do well. When educators focus on the results of the high-stakes assessments and not the process, they often lose their sense of student-centered teaching autonomy, replacing it with a more controlling teaching style (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Ryan & Weinstein, 2009). Lastly, some educators perceive that the implementation of the rigorous Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) stripped educator agency and replaced it with high accountability measures to assist in providing students with the skills and knowledge needed to become college and career-ready (Kendall, 2011; Matlock et al., 2016). Moreover, most research on educator

autonomy was conducted on teacher perceptions of autonomy outside of the United States (Angel-Alvarado, Wilhelmi & Belletich, 2020; Burga & Atay, 2020; Dampson, Apau, & Amuah, 2019; Eren, 2020; Lennert da Silva & Molstad, 2020; Strong & Yoshida, 2014; Wermke, Olason Rick, & Salokangas, 2019), creating a gap in research on how teaching agency develops in the American educational system. There is also an absence of research in the area of teacher agency development, as most research focused on teacher support processes within the development of student autonomy (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Pelletier, Seguin-Levesque, & Legault, 2002; Reeve, 2002; Reeve & Cheon, 2021). This study will contribute to the knowledge needed to address this problem by exploring how preservice elementary teachers perceive agency development as they progress through an undergraduate program at a university in southwestern Georgia.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to explore agency development of preservice teachers as they progress through an undergraduate education program at a university in southwestern Georgia. As they progress through an undergraduate education program, the agency development of preservice teachers will be defined as controlling what is taught and how it is taught (Hull & Uematsu, 2020; Lennert da Silva & Molstad, 2021). The current study utilized the word agency, as defined above. However, this dissertation used autonomy when referring to its original citation in current literature and past research. Parrott and Da Ros-Vaseles (2004) reported that when autonomy is nourished in undergraduate education programs, preservice teachers are more likely to advocate for using developmentally appropriate activities in the school setting. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) agree, stressing the importance of supporting autonomy development of teachers, so they can continue to make informed decisions within their classrooms and become decision-makers within the schools. According to Lipponen

and Kumpulainen (2011), agency is essential in teaching because it inspires engaging and student-centered classrooms, fosters learner-centered teaching approaches, and facilitates teacher voice and knowledge in educational decisions. Furthermore, when analyzing agency development and teacher education programs, Lipponen and Kumpulanien (2011) reported that agency was critical because it prepared teachers to control curriculum delivery, utilizing learner-centered approaches.

Research Questions

The research questions framing the current study were:

1. How does preservice teachers' sense of agency develop as they progress through an undergraduate education program at a university in southwestern Georgia?
2. What factors do preservice teachers perceive to influence their agency as they progress through their classes?
3. What are preservice teachers' current perceptions of agency, defined as controlling what is taught and how it is taught?

Theoretical Framework

The self-determination theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan (2000) provided theoretical roots for this study. According to Deci and Ryan (2000), SDT stresses that individuals are naturally inquisitive and attempt to do well when motivated. Therefore, SDT emphasizes the importance of constructing an environment supporting the psychological needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Numerous studies about SDT suggest that when these three psychological needs are fulfilled, individuals experience autonomous motivation, and positive well-being, and operate at optimal levels (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Within the realm of SDT, autonomy refers to an individual's control over their behaviors, relatedness is the need to interact

with others, and competence relates to pursuing situations in which one can control the outcomes and consequences (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

When an individual's psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met, they are more likely to display autonomous motivation (Gagne & Deci, 2005). Niemiec and Ryan (2009) studied SDT within the school setting and found that students are more intrinsically motivated when their psychological needs are met. Therefore, researchers suggested that teachers enact autonomy to establish classrooms capable of cultivating learner autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Reeve and Cheon (2021) also believed that educators should apply SDT through autonomy-supportive, learner-centered, and flexible teaching. Unfortunately, Niemiec and Ryan (2009) specified obstacles that stand in the way. Many teachers resort to controlling classroom actions, which hinders autonomous motivation development due to the administration's and other stakeholders' high accountability measures. Teachers feel pressured to have high test scores, maintain high expectations, and use scripted curriculums, which take away from student-centered lessons (Roth, Assor, Kanat-Maymon, & Kaplan, 2007).

Methodology Overview

This qualitative exploratory case study added to the body of research by exploring agency development of preservice teachers as they progress through an undergraduate education program at a university in southwestern Georgia. The case study design was the best fit for this qualitative study due to the exploration of answers to a constructed research question and because the researcher had very little control over the events within the study (Johnson & Christensen, 2017; Yin, 2008). A case study is valuable because researchers explore an idea within the constructs of its actual, real-life setting (Yin, 2008). The qualitative case study was

also the most appropriate because the researcher explored within a bounded system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The participants and program of study are bound to one university in southwestern Georgia. Ellinger and McWhorter (2016) suggest that an exploratory case study be conducted when the researcher wants to gain more information about a phenomenon with little prior research. Through survey information, open-ended interviews, and focus groups, the researcher gleaned information through elementary preservice teacher views, making sense of agency development in preservice teachers, a phenomenon with very little current research (Creswell, 2014; Ellinger & McWhorter, 2016).

The population of this study consisted of preservice teachers admitted to an undergraduate education program at a university in southwestern Georgia. The participants were enrolled in one of the following: Block 1 (semester 1), Block 2 (semester 2), Block 3 (semester 3), or Block 4 (student teaching) classes. All students enrolled were invited to participate in the initial part of the study via email. The email highlighted the study goals and objectives and explained that participation was voluntary for all elementary preservice educators. Initial data were collected through a five-point Likert scale survey created by Hull and Uematsu (2020) that measures preservice teachers' perceived agency. Although the survey was initially created to gather data on preservice physics educators, the specific physics questions will be modified with permission from Hull and Uematsu to fit elementary preservice teachers (see Appendix A).

The researcher scheduled focus groups and individual interviews after the survey to explore preservice teacher perspectives in more depth. The researcher scheduled three focus group interviews, resulting in 10 participants. The researcher purposely selected participants with a high sense of agency, a median sense of agency, and a low sense of agency enrolled in each of the following: Block 1 (semester 1), Block 2 (semester 2), Block 3 (semester 3), and

Block 4 (student teaching) classes. Participants were purposefully selected to ensure they could provide the information required by the researcher (Johnson & Christensen, 2017).

This study also required an individual interview sample size of three purposefully selected from the population. Three interviews were essential so the researcher could deeply explore why preservice teachers perceive different levels of agency (high, median, low). The researcher analyzed the Perceived Agency Survey and focus group interview transcripts and selected three participants to interview: a preservice teacher with a high sense of agency, a median sense of agency, and a low sense of agency.

The focus groups were held first and were semi-structured. The researcher facilitated the focus group and individual interviews using a list of open-ended questions that concentrated on the central focus of the study (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). Open-ended questions were written based on the survey questions and current literature. The open-ended questions were part of the focus group interview guide used by the researcher; however, participants' responses changed the order and led to other questions during the focus group session (Galletta, 2013).

Individual interviews were scheduled after the focus groups. The semi-structured interviews allowed participants to expand their perceptions of perceived agency and agency development. The open-ended questions were part of the interview guide; however, some wording was changed based on the participant's responses (Galletta, 2013).

With participant permission, each interview and focus group discussion was recorded. Additionally, notes were taken to capture critical thoughts and any additional emergent themes. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes to an hour. According to Merriam (1998), researchers should collect and analyze data concurrently when conducting a qualitative study. A transcription application helped transcribe the data as the researcher completed the

interviews. All data were verified by two means to check reliability and validity. After the transcription was complete, the researcher read the transcripts and listened to the interviews, noting any changes or discrepancies (Merriam, 1998). Additionally, participants were invited to member check the transcripts, identifying any errors in transcription or researcher insight (Johnson & Christensen, 2017; Merriam, 1998).

When all the data gathered from the focus groups and individual interviews were transcribed, and member checking of the transcripts was finished, the data were coded using inductive coding. Additionally, the exact language of the study participants was coded versus the researcher's ideas and words (Saldana, 2013). A list of themes was recorded during the initial analysis of the transcripts. The data were coded using different colors for each potential theme, making it easier to organize, structure, and retrieve (Maxwell, 2005). Throughout the coding process, the researcher analyzed subthemes as well. The data were transferred into a content analysis table, making it easier to separate the specific information into the various subthemes. The data for each theme and subtheme were transferred verbatim, with quotation marks displaying the participants' exact words and phrases (Saldana, 2013).

Lastly, the researcher used three data sources to triangulate the data: results from the preservice teachers' Perceived Agency Survey, focus group interviews, and individual interviews. Hull and Uematus (2020) suggest that researchers conduct follow-up interviews after administering the Perceived Agency Survey to help validate the study and allow participants to share their perceptions in more depth. Participants were allowed to member check their transcripts for accuracy. This review was necessary to enhance the reliability and validity of the study (Johnson & Christensen, 2017; Merriam, 1998). The SDT was used when analyzing and interpreting the data, reporting ways the results tie into the existing theory and body of literature.

Delimitations and Limitations

Limitations are components that could influence a study that the researcher cannot regulate, while delimitations are boundaries set by the researcher to make the study manageable and relevant. Some of the limitations and delimitations within the current study include the following:

1. Results gained from this study may be unable to generalize to unlike populations. Study results are limited to preservice teachers' agency development at the southwestern university in Georgia, and it may not be generalizable to other undergraduate teacher education programs. However, the results may be able to be generalized to like populations.
2. Due to the open-ended aspect of a qualitative case study design, the researcher could not verify the results by comparing them to similar case studies. However, the results were verified through triangulation of the data sources and data analysis.
3. The participants were recruited from one university, making the target population accessible to the researcher.
4. Since participants' qualitative responses were self-reported, a bias may exist based on individual experiences outside the teaching program and field experiences.
5. The researcher used a purposive sample of the undergraduate teacher education program population that may not represent the entire teacher education program population.
6. Most preservice teachers who volunteered to participate in the focus group and individual interviews were female. Only one male volunteered to participate. Despite multiple follow-up emails, the researcher could not recruit other males within the teacher education program to participate in the follow-up interviews.

Definition of Terms

Accountability: Evaluating teacher effectiveness regarding how well students perform on standardized assessments and school-related exams (Piro & Mullen, 2013).

Agency: Controlling what is taught and how it is taught (Hull & Uematsu, 2020; Lennert da Silva & Molstad, 2021).

Autonomous motivation: When one is motivated by internal factors (Gagne & Deci, 2005).

Autonomy: Personal ownership over one's behavior and the freedom to make their own decisions (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Reeve & Cheon, 2021).

Common Core State Standards: A set of standards that provide all students with the skills and knowledge needed to become college and career-ready (Kendall, 2011).

Competence: Pursuing situations in which one can control the outcomes and consequences (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Differentiation: A strategy teachers use in their classrooms to meet the diverse educational needs of their students (Subban, 2006).

Every Student Succeeds Act: Provides states more agency when selecting their academic goals and the consequences if they are not achieved (Heise, 2017).

High-stakes Testing: Assessments used to make educational decisions that affect schools, students, teachers, parents, and even districts (Au, 2007, 2011).

No Child Left Behind Act: A movement to help allocate federal monies to schools to help close the academic gap of all groups of learners. Schools had to report their data to have 100% of students proficient in reading and math (Peterson & West, 2003).

Preservice Teacher: An individual learning to teach and currently enrolled in an educational program (Glenn, 2006).

Relatedness: The psychological need for humans to interact with others, emphasizing the importance of social relationships and the care of others (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT): This theory focuses on motivation development within social situations (Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to Deci and Ryan (2000), the self-determination theory accentuates the significance of creating an environment capable of supporting the psychological needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy. When these needs are supported, one can experience individual motivation and optimum daily functioning (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Scripted Curriculum: A set of boxed instructional materials that individuals or companies prepare outside of the school, often requiring the teacher to follow them verbatim while providing the lesson (Ede, 2006).

Significance of the Study

Research suggests that student achievement improves when teachers deliver exceptional instruction and find ways to connect with their students (Hattie, 2003; Stronge, 2018). Unfortunately, educators throughout the United States report losing influence over instructional decisions within their classrooms and schools at alarming rates (Ingersoll, 2011; Wright, 2020). In addition, a teacher's influence on their students depends on teacher autonomy or agency (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010; Lennert da Silva & Molstad, 2021). As a teacher's sense of professional autonomy lessens, so does one's sense of job satisfaction (Kengatharan, 2020; Worth & Van den Brande, 2020) and motivational levels (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Gagne & Deci, 2005; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014). A low sense of professional autonomy also causes

many educators to leave the profession within their first five years of employment (Chambers et al., 2019; Ingersoll et al., 2018).

Limited research explores or examines teacher education and agency development within teacher education programs (Hull & Uematsu, 2020; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). Much of the research focused on educator perspectives about agency development has been conducted outside of the United States (Angel-Alvarado, Wilhelmi & Belletich, 2020; Burga & Atay, 2020; Dampson, Apau, & Amuah; Eren, 2020; Lennert da Silva & Molstad, 2020; Strong & Yoshida, 2014; Wermke, Olason Rick, & Salokangas, 2019). However, Lipponen and Kumpulainen (2011) believe that preservice teachers should understand agency and its development, as agency can influence what educators do within their classrooms and schools (Hull & Uematsu, 2020). Therefore, the findings of this study may benefit preservice teachers, professors, teacher education programs, student teaching coordinators, cooperating teachers, and other individuals who may work to foster the agency development of preservice educators. The study results may suggest possible changes to the undergraduate educational program or student-teacher placements, capitalizing on approaches that may positively nurture the continued development of autonomy within preservice educators.

Summary

Hattie (2003) reported that although numerous factors affect a student's learning and motivational levels, a teacher is among the most influential. Furthermore, the influential impact of a teacher in the classroom relies heavily on teacher autonomy (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010). Autonomy refers to an individual's desire to control their behaviors and has the independence to make their own choices (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Reeve & Cheon, 2021) and is a psychological need that individuals continually seek to satisfy (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When

teachers feel supported and autonomous in the workplace, they are more likely to feel comfortable adapting their lessons to meet the changing needs of the diverse population they teach (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009; Strong & Yoshida, 2014).

Unfortunately, as educational expectations in the United States continually shift toward adopting rigorous standards and increased accountability demands, teachers report low autonomy regarding instructional decisions in their classrooms and schools (Ingersoll, 2011; Wright, 2020). With very little research conducted in the United States on teacher agency, specifically agency development in preservice teachers, this study explored this research gap by exploring how preservice teachers perceive agency development as they progress through an undergraduate program at a university in southwestern Georgia.

Chapter II: Review of Literature

The following literature review is an assembly of information about the history of teacher agency and its current place in the American educational system. In order to better understand the importance of agency development in teachers and students, this review of literature will focus on recurring themes in research. The chapter includes the theoretical framework, Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory, on which this study is based, the historical journey of educational shifts and teacher agency, professional and preservice teachers' perceptions of agency in schools, perceived effects of agency on motivation and job satisfaction, and teacher and classroom agency as it relates to curriculum decisions and accountability measures.

Theoretical Framework

Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory (SDT) provided a solid theoretical background for this research. SDT begins with the notion that humans are naturally curious beings and strive to do well when motivated. According to Deci and Ryan (2000), SDT accentuates the significance of creating an environment capable of supporting the psychological needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Numerous studies about SDT suggest that when these three psychological needs are satisfied, individuals experience independent motivation, and positive well-being, and can function at optimum levels (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2008). Figure 1 outlines the components of SDT.

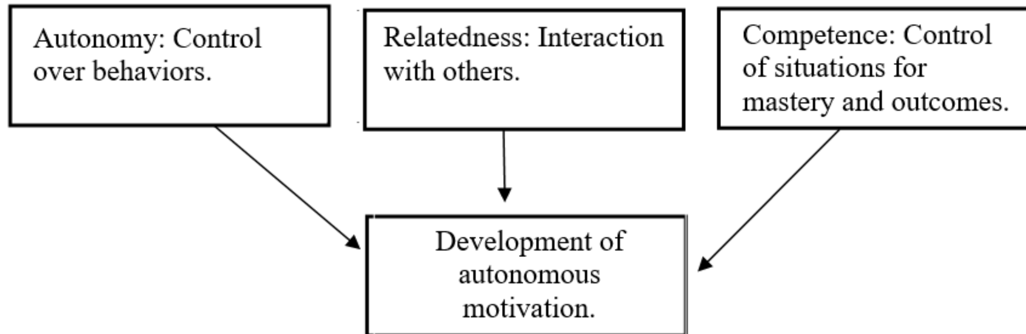

Figure 1. Deci and Ryan's (2000) SDT theoretical framework.

SDT theorists have outlined and defined each of the three psychological needs. Within the realm of SDT, autonomy refers to an individual's aspiration to control their behaviors and have the freedom to make their own decisions (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Relatedness is characterized as the psychological need for humans to interact with others, emphasizing the importance of social relationships and the care of others (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Lastly, Deci and Ryan (2000) explained that competence relates to the idea that individuals pursue situations where they can control the outcome and, in turn, experience mastery and overcome trials.

Gagne and Deci (2005) reported that a crucial aspect of SDT is the difference between autonomous motivation and controlled motivation. In their review of SDT, Gagne and Deci (2005) explained that when an individual's psychological needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy are met, they are more prone to be autonomously motivated, or motivated by internal factors. Conversely, when an individual's psychological needs are not sufficiently met, they are prone to be motivated by external factors (Gagne & Deci, 2005). These extrinsic rewards often lead to a controlled type of motivation (Deci, 1971). SDT suggests that the main difference between autonomous and controlled motivations is how they are regulated and the associated experiences with each motivation. Gagne and Deci (2005) noted that autonomous and controlled

motivations are planned and deliberate. Alternatively, individuals who fall within the realm of amotivation often lack purpose and inspiration (Gagne & Deci, 2005).

Niemiec and Ryan (2009) explored SDT and how it applies to students and teachers in the educational setting. The researchers specifically looked at how students develop intrinsic and extrinsic motivations at school. When students are intrinsically motivated, they obtain a sense of enjoyment from the activity and complete it because they want to. In contrast, extrinsically motivated students are driven by the promise of a reward after completing the activity or task (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Students tend to be more intrinsically motivated when their psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met. Niemiec and Ryan (2009) stated that when teachers can facilitate lessons that empower students' autonomy development, the students display an increased sense of intrinsic motivation and higher levels of self-esteem. The researchers also found that when teachers maintain a controlling learning environment, they weaken a child's opportunity to develop intrinsic motivation.

Although research recommends that teachers set up their classroom environments to cultivate students' autonomy, competence, and relatedness, Niemiec and Ryan (2009) specified barriers that stand in the way. Many teachers resort to controlling classroom actions due to pressure from the administration and other stakeholders. Teachers feel pressured to have high test scores, maintain high expectations, and use scripted curriculums, which take away from student-centered lessons (Roth et al., 2007). As pressures intensify, teacher autonomy is threatened, and educators have less excitement and energy to bring to their lessons. Increased pressure also finds educators tapping into external rewards to promote student success (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Instead of focusing their energies on successful teaching strategies that promote student choice and autonomy, educators employ external motivational strategies to meet

accountability challenges. Unfortunately, the continued use of extrinsic motivation only hinders the learning process and impedes the development of autonomous motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Ryan and Weinstein (2009) conducted a literature review about how increased pressures accompanying school accountability measures affect motivational development. The researchers were particularly interested in the pressures that accompany high-stakes assessments. For their research, Ryan and Weinstein (2009) defined high-stakes testing as a reform used by educational communities to track student progress and motivate educators and students to continue improving by offering rewards for success and sanctions for unmet goals. Much of the research pointed to the detrimental fact that high-stakes assessments require intense preparation, and teachers often lose focus on creating lessons of interest and importance to learners (Ryan & Weinstein, 2009). Ryan and Weinstein (2009) also found that lost within test preparation and high-stakes testing is a teacher's autonomy to utilize best practices, which results in a controlling teaching style.

When analyzing high-stakes testing from an SDT point of view, controlling teaching and learning strategies hinders students' autonomous motivation development (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Deci, Spiegel, Ryan, Koestner, and Kauffman (1982) examined how teaching styles differ depending upon the pressures placed upon them. They found that teachers often adopted a controlling teaching style when they felt solely responsible for ensuring students performed well on standards and assessments. When working with students, controlling teachers relied more on direct instruction, displayed more criticism of students and their work, and tolerated minimal student choice or independence (Deci et al., 1982). Deci et al. (1982) also reported that teachers

who did not feel pressured for their students to perform on assessments displayed more autonomy, validated students' choices, and were not perceived as controlling in the classroom.

The age of standardized assessments is not going away soon; therefore, Ryan and Weinstein (2009) suggested that stakeholders work together to find student-centered approaches that promote active learning and knowledge development. However, this would require schools to have faith in the power of teacher autonomy, allowing teachers to use the assessments to drive their instruction and give students continuous feedback to learn from the assessments (Ryan & Weinstein, 2009). Additionally, Ryan and Weinstein (2009) advocated removing rewards and sanctions associated with high-stakes testing. Removing the high-stakes portion of the testing would grant teachers the autonomy to utilize learner-centered teaching strategies that increase intrinsic motivation.

In his early research, Reeve (2002) supported using SDT in schools to build autonomously motivated students. He argued that teachers could flourish and become more autonomously motivated when meeting students' psychological needs. Additionally, Reeve (2002) recognized how teachers could foster students' psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Reeve (2002) stressed the importance of student choice and voice in the classroom to promote student autonomy, while relatedness is developed through social interactions with peers and other individuals. Lastly, the necessity of competence could be supported through a stable classroom environment that offered structure (Reeve, 2002). This structure includes balancing educational challenges, teacher feedback to facilitate success, and clear-cut classroom expectations and boundaries. Although Reeve's (2002) concept of SDT in schools seems compelling, the concern lies within the notion of teacher autonomy. In order for teachers to meet the psychological needs of the students, educators need the autonomy to make

learner-centered changes and decisions, all of which cater to autonomous motivation (Pelletier, Seguin-Levesque, & Legault, 2002; Reeve, 2002).

Even though numerous factors affect a student's learning and motivational levels, one of the most influential is the teacher (Hattie, 2003). Keeping teachers at the heart of their discussion, Reeve and Cheon (2021) built upon previous research to report how SDT could be applied in the classroom through autonomy-supportive teaching. Autonomy-supportive teaching is learner-centered and requires flexible teaching that revolves around student interests and needs (Reeve, 2002; Reeve & Cheon, 2021). Unfortunately, many teachers today resort to a controlling teaching style due to external pressures (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). However, educators can learn how to become more autonomously supportive when given the opportunity. Reeve and Cheon (2021) found that students, teachers, and the classroom climate profited from an autonomy-supportive teaching approach. Students reported a decline in frustration and negative feelings regarding school. Students became more intrinsically motivated when teachers endorsed autonomy-supportive teaching strategies (Reeve & Cheon, 2021). Autonomy-supportive teaching also brought upon a supportive classroom climate. Lastly, teachers reported that they could build their autonomy, strengthening job satisfaction, competence, and relationships with their peers and students (Reeve & Cheon, 2021).

Historical Overview of Teacher Agency

Throughout history, the role of a teacher has evolved and transformed. Teachers today are finding themselves collaborating with colleagues, cultivating relationships with students, motivating them and catering to their unique learning styles, and keeping up with educational shifts, all while preparing students to flourish in an ever-changing global society (Lanier, 1997; Tichnor-Wagner, Parkhouse, Glazier, & Cain, 2019). In addition, student achievement and

teacher accountability are at the forefront of classrooms, schools, and educational communities throughout the United States (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Ruff, 2019). Although many educational shifts sound promising to outside stakeholders, teachers report that their autonomy is at-risk when navigating and voicing opinions about the new demands (Lamb, 2008; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). To understand teachers' concerns about agency, one must evaluate the historical journey of the teaching profession.

Agency at the Turn of the Century

The founding of the United States Department of Education started a process of educational change that created continuous challenges to teacher autonomy (Lamb, 2008). At the turn of the 20th century, America's teachers reported that as their classroom workloads increased, so did administrator control and scrutiny (Levin & Pinto, 1992). The rigid increase in control caused a quick decline in teacher autonomy, and teachers began to begrudge it (Levin & Pinto, 1992). Levin and Pinto (1992) reported that teachers felt their job was becoming increasingly inconsequential, as their autonomy to make classroom decisions was replaced with dictated lessons and outside power.

Although many teachers felt like their classrooms operated like mini-factories, they found ways to advocate for autonomy (Levin & Pinto, 1992). Teachers' unions began to spring up everywhere, promoting workers' rights and interests (Robson, Pennington, & Squire, 2018). Robson et al. (2018) wrote that the teachers' unions were pivotal in negotiating teachers' salaries, working hours, and school conditions. Moe (2009) added that worker autonomy increases when unions can make positive professional changes for educators. Unions bargain with school districts to place administrator and district control restrictions, allocating more teacher agency (Hoxby, 1996; Levin & Pinto, 1992).

Additionally, John Dewey (1904, 1916) challenged the severity that characterized many American classrooms, stressing the importance of agency in developing student-driven lessons. Dewey (1904) wanted to trade the industrial look of a traditional classroom, where children sat in rows and were delivered innumerable hours of direct instruction, for a student-centered, student-driven classroom. He advocated that children learn best when given opportunities to engage in activities and peer conversation, and most of these educational activities require teacher autonomy to plan and develop (Dewey, 1916). Although support for Dewey's concepts has changed throughout the years, it is crucial to note Dewey's influence on teacher autonomy (Levin & Pinto, 1992).

Agency During A Nation at Risk

The 1980s were filled with a shifting academic atmosphere. The delivery of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) created national anxiety as it unveiled the shortcomings of the American educational system, documenting its decline as a scholastic superpower (McIntush, 2000). In addition, the report detailed a list of suggestions that would better the status of American public schools. The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) suggested that in order to improve public schools, states should adopt rigorous standards, analyze and increase their graduation requirements, implement standardized assessments, allocate ample financial resources, and approve curriculum updates to include instruction in the arts and technology.

Wright (2020) stated that educators quickly lost their influence over educational decisions as the government required regulated accountability. Teachers felt the burden as foreign countries began surpassing American students' academic achievement. Teachers throughout America suddenly found themselves tied to scripted curriculums and mandated

assessments, which weakened their pedagogical autonomy (Wright, 2020). Additionally, teachers lost autonomy over selecting appropriate texts and the delivery of content, and they had very little influence on the operation of their schools and classrooms (Ingersoll, 2011). The National Institute on Student Achievement, Curriculum, and Assessment (1999) reported that as the United States moved rapidly towards higher educational requirements and increased accountability demands, teachers lacked time to complete all the new tasks expected.

Agency in the Era of Accountability

Although the new expectations may have looked daunting from a teacher's perspective, the era of change was only beginning. In 1989, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) developed and adopted the first set of national standards, paving the way for a new age of accountability. The NCTM standards were a rigorous set of math standards that challenged how children thought about numbers (Crosswhite, Dossey, & Frye, 1989). Crosswhite et al. (1989) reported that the NCTM standards were a road map for mathematics instruction and were not developed to threaten educator agency. With no ties to a standardized curriculum, the NCTM standards provided guidance when making educational decisions (Perry, 1997).

The NCTM standards affected professional teachers and student teachers alike (Frykholm, 1996; Maccini & Gagnon, 2000). Frykholm (1996) reported that although student teachers agreed that the NCTM standards were relevant to their mathematics instruction, the materials and tools needed to implement the standards successfully were absent. Student teachers felt extreme pressure to utilize the NCTM standards from their professors; however, they did not feel the same pressure from their cooperating teachers (Frykholm, 1996). Maccini and Gagnon (2000) found that professional educators also felt that the NCTM standards required

materials and tools unavailable at school. This lack of resources confused many educators about applying the NCTM standards effectively, leaving them to resort to comfortable strategies and lessons.

External regulation and control hit an all-time high in 2001 with the introduction of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which emphasized high accountability measures to ensure American students were proficient in math and reading (Peterson & West, 2003). According to Brown (2012), NCLB was simply a corporate model that punished educators and students by introducing impractical expectations and assessment models. Sunderman, Tracey, Kim, and Orfield (2004) analyzed teachers' perceptions of the effects of NCLB on their daily work and classrooms. Many teachers reported that the extreme pressures to improve test scores lowered their confidence and performance. In addition, NCLB impacted their autonomy, as they felt pressured to focus mainly on tested standards, reducing valuable time for essential skills not tested (Sunderman et al., 2004). Lastly, teachers felt that providing families the choice to leave low-performing schools immediately indicated a lack of teacher quality, negatively affecting overall staff and school morale. Moreover, if that was not enough, low-performing schools felt the impact of the economic sanctions placed on schools that did not meet their adequate yearly progress (Sunderman et al., 2004).

Accountability also paved the way for the development and adoption of scripted curriculums. Although scripted curriculums were not a new model, they provided an avenue for schools to standardize and oversee a teacher's daily instruction (Au, 2011). Valli and Buese (2007) stated that as teachers dive into scripted curriculums, their autonomy to make student-driven instructional decisions decreases. In order to keep up with the pacing guides and curriculum maps, educators found themselves pressing on with instruction, foregoing

opportunities to investigate concepts deeper or create units based on student interest and drive. These outcomes are consistent with the work of Kang (2016), who analyzed a prescribed reading curriculum from an educator's standpoint. Kang (2016) found that teachers often find themselves in an awkward position of adopting pedagogies that contradict their educational principles to meet the accountability pressures exerted on them by the administration and school leaders. However, Kang (2016) also reported that some educators continue to make student-driven instructional decisions, adapting and modifying the prescribed curriculum to meet the diverse needs of their students.

Many of the newly adopted scripted curricula were in response to meeting the educational outcomes of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). The CCSS are rigorous standards that provide all students with the skills and knowledge needed to become college and career-ready (Kendall, 2011). Lavenia, Cohen-Vogel, and Lang (2015) specified that many states in America quickly embraced the CCSS to capitalize on federal monies tied to the Race to the Top (RTT) grant program (United States Department of Education, 2009). The RTT program awards states federal monies for meeting academic goals, analyzing and measuring growth with rigorous assessments, recruiting capable and effective educators, and improving low-performing schools (United States Department of Education, 2009).

Crowe (2011) indicated that teacher accountability is one of the main components of RTT. According to Crowe (2011), states must analyze their teacher preparation programs to ensure all educators are capable and effective. Some states intended to measure teacher effectiveness by analyzing student achievement. In this way, they reported any correlations

between student teaching success and academic achievement. States also used feedback surveys and turnover rates to track educator success (Crowe, 2011). All the gathered data was public and can be used by states to concentrate their energies on improving weak teacher programs.

Regardless of why states chose to adopt the CCSS, Lavenia, Cohen-Vogel, and Lang (2015) reported that one positive outcome of the CCSS was that students everywhere were learning the same rigorous standards. Matlock et al. (2016) conducted a mixed-methods study to analyze teachers' views on implementing CCSS. Overall, the survey results indicated that educators held a favorable view of the implementation. However, elementary teachers regarded the implementation significantly different than their high school peers, as did teachers early in their careers compared to veteran teachers. Matlock et al. (2016) also found that educators leaving the profession earlier than expected shared neutral feelings about the CCSS, and educators who vowed to continue teaching shared positive feelings about the CCSS.

Unfortunately, Matlock et al. (2016) discovered the opposite results when teachers expanded upon their perceptions. Many educators perceived that the way the CCSS was implemented limited their agency within the classroom, and most highlighted dissatisfaction with the adoption of scripted curriculums. Furthermore, when schools adopted the CCSS, staff members had very little decision-making power, and directives came from the top down. Lastly, Matlock et al. (2016) acknowledged that many teachers stated that as teacher accountability increased, their autonomy decreased. Matlock et al. (2016) suggested that more and more teachers may share their negative perceptions about the CCSS as accountability measures continue to grow.

Historical Conclusion

A historical journey through America's educational reforms continues to point in one direction: teacher accountability (Brown, 2021; Crosswhite et al., 1989; Ingersoll, 2011; Wright, 2020). News outlets throughout America quickly publish every educational shortcoming, opening doors to public scrutiny and declining trust in teachers (Mackenzie, 2007; Ward, 2015). Ward (2015) warned that as the American education system undermines teacher autonomy, replacing it with scripted curriculums and high-stakes accountability, teacher morale and job satisfaction rates will decline. This decrease in morale led Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran (2014) to believe that a decrease in student achievement and success would follow, as success is positively associated with high morale.

Teacher autonomy dwindles as the American education system weeds through a series of reforms. Teaching was a profession filled with the promise of agency, as Beisaw and Baxter (2017) noted in their work on one-room schoolhouses. Chen (2021) elaborated on one-room schoolhouses, finding that teachers enacted a high degree of agency while teaching reading, writing, math, and basic manners. However, the founding of the United States Department of Education started a process of educational change that challenged even the best one-room schoolhouse educators and continues to challenge teachers today (Lamb, 2008). From the findings reported in *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) to the adoption of the CCSS (Kendall, 2011), teacher accountability is the primary outcome, and agency is at risk. As teachers continue to find ways to enact some agency into their classrooms, stakeholders are continually looking for the next research-based reform that may result in a push for new programs or practices (Slavin, 2020).

Perceptions of Agency

Teachers can significantly impact students' development and academic growth (Hattie, 2003) by setting high expectations, connecting with their students, and creating student-centered lessons (Stronge, 2018). Hyslop-Margison and Sears (2010) stated that these critical components of teaching often rely upon the realm of teacher autonomy. Unfortunately, as educational systems throughout the United States continue to focus their time and attention on accountability measures, educators are finding themselves losing control over educational decisions (Ingersoll, 2011; Wright, 2020), which diminishes autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Lamb, 2008; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Although teachers may perceive a decrease in individual agency (Knight, 2019), researchers recognize the need for autonomy development for both practicing and preservice teachers (Eren, 2020; Lipponen & Kumpulanien, 2011; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). The following section explores how teachers and preservice teachers perceive educational agency in schools and undergraduate programs.

Teacher Perceptions of Agency

Taking time to analyze individual autonomy and its effects on classroom practices is vital to teaching (Eren, 2020). When teachers perceive the freedom to choose how they run their classrooms and what strategies they utilize to teach lessons, they are often more engaged and motivated (Knight, 2019). While a large body of research supports teacher autonomy in the classroom (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Reeve & Cheon, 2021; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009; Strong & Yoshida, 2014), many teachers continue to perceive a decrease in individual classroom autonomy (Knight, 2019). Sparks and Malkus (2015) conducted a survey and reported that teachers perceived a significant decrease in professional autonomy between 2003 and 2015. Teachers described feeling inadequate when trying to meet

the educational demands of their students, sharing that they had very little freedom to choose strategies to teach the content, classroom management techniques, books to incorporate into lessons, the amount of homework given, and even how they assessed the students (Sparks & Malkus, 2015). Ball (2003) added that teachers report feelings of anxiety and frustration as they watch the shift of power swiftly move from respecting the educational decisions of an educator to a top-down systematic approach. Ball (2003) worried that as educational systems throughout the United States continued to take control over the day-to-day operations and decisions that were once the teacher's responsibility, too much pressure would be put on educators' output and test scores.

Although educators value agency, Kauffman, Johnson, Kardos, Lieu, & Peske (2002) illustrated the importance of providing support and advice to teachers in curriculum and instruction. Support and guidance are especially critical for new teachers, who bring fresh ideas and excitement; however, they often seek advice on interweaving their ideas and the mandated curriculum and standards (Kauffman et al., 2002). Unfortunately, school districts sometimes confuse mandating a scripted curriculum to guide educators instead of peer coaching, peer interactions, or professional development (Kauffman et al., 2002). Subsequently, instead of finding themselves supported in their journey to enact and develop autonomy, educators discover themselves tied to a scripted curriculum that often decreases their autonomy to make instructional decisions, and they may even begin to implement pedagogies that undermine their educational beliefs (Kang, 2016; Valli & Buese, 2007).

With very little research available on teacher perceptions of autonomy in the United States, Strong and Yoshida (2014) conducted a study to assess whether Friedman's (1999) Teacher Work-Autonomy Scale (TWA), which was validated in Israel, continued to be a valid

measure of teacher autonomy in the United States. Strong and Yoshida (2014) also gathered data on how educators perceived their teaching autonomy.

The study results revealed that the TWA data from teachers in the United States differed from Friedman's (1999) original work. For example, when analyzing elementary teachers' survey items, the questions relating to teacher autonomy and school operations prevented a rational five-factor solution found during Friedman's original sample. However, secondary educators reported the opposite for a perfect five-factor solution. The difference could be because elementary teachers are often tied to a standardized curriculum with little room for teacher autonomy and lesson flexibility (Strong & Yoshida, 2014).

In contrast, secondary teachers experience more freedom through departmentalization, team teaching, common planning times, and increased decision-making within the curriculum, assessments, and even pace (Strong & Yoshida, 2014). Strong and Yoshida (2014) noted that although the sample of secondary teachers ended with a five-factor solution similar to Friedman's, three items about school finances and structure were deleted. These factors are often out of a teacher's realm of responsibility in the United States, which may not always be the case in other countries. Furthermore, Friedman's (2009) original study used samples from educational structures in Israel that are incomparable to groups in the United States.

The researchers reported that elementary and secondary teachers perceive classroom management as an area where they experience the most teacher autonomy. Classroom management encompasses everything from expectations and rewards to daily processes and the learning environment (Strong & Yoshida, 2014). Strong and Yoshida (2014) discussed classroom management as an area often left to the teacher's discretion and unaffected by most governments and policymakers, alluding to why it rated highest in teacher autonomy.

Elementary and secondary teachers did not perceive assessment and professional development the same. The discrepancy could be because the elementary teachers had more questions regarding autonomy in these two sections than the secondary educators. Lastly, secondary educators held higher perceptions of curricular autonomy than their elementary peers (Strong & Yoshida, 2014). The researchers attributed this difference to team teaching, school structure, and curricular demands.

Pearson and Moomaw (2005) recognized that building initiatives to increase teacher autonomy in the classroom may be a powerful way to resolve some of the problems in today's school systems. Wynn and Brown (2008) concurred, expressing the notion that school leaders have an indispensable role in supporting teachers and positively impacting the educational culture of a school. Educators value an administrative team who takes the time to provide guidance and support while recognizing the importance of building teacher agency with their schools (Wynn & Brown, 2008). According to Pelletier and Sharp (2009), school administrators can positively or negatively affect a teacher's perception of agency, and teachers often perceive more agency with supportive and noncontrolling administrators. Conversely, educators often feel vulnerable and pressured by controlling administrators, which decreases their sense of agency within the school setting. As pressures from controlling administrators continue to loom, an educator's need for autonomy decreases, additionally decreasing their need for competence and relatedness (Pelletier & Sharp, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

An educator's demographics can also influence their perceptions of autonomy. Dampson, Apau, and Amuah (2019) explored how educators in central Ghana perceived teacher autonomy and whether teacher demographics affected teacher autonomy. Dampson et al. (2019) found that younger teachers just starting their careers perceive higher levels of teacher autonomy than

experienced teachers. Khezerlou (2013) reported similar findings when analyzing Turkish and Iranian educators' perceptions of autonomy. Turkish and Iranian teachers who earned a master's degree in education perceived less educational agency than their peers who had obtained a bachelor's degree (Khezerlou, 2013). Concerning gender, Dampson et al. (2019) reported no statistically significant difference in the autonomy perceptions between male and female educators in Ghana. In contrast, male educators in Turkey and Iran perceived less autonomy than their female peers (Khezerlou, 2013). Khezerlou (2013) suggested that the difference in autonomy between the two genders may exist because male educators are less involved in making educational decisions than female educators.

Dampson et al. (2019) expanded their study by analyzing teachers' perceptions of their overall autonomy. Overall, most teachers' perceptions of autonomy were positive, noting that although the curriculum was somewhat standard, they could make changes based on teacher and learner needs. However, when expanded upon in the interviews, mixed feelings were captured, as some teachers expressed being able to make multiple changes, and others felt severe pressure to follow the district mandates (Dampson et al., 2019).

Wermke, Olason Rick, and Salokangas (2019) documented similar results from their exploration of German and Swedish teachers' perceptions of autonomy from a classroom, school, and administrative level. The Swedish teachers perceived a high sense of classroom autonomy, as only student performance matters to parents and administrators, not the teaching strategies (Wermke et al., 2019). Swedish teachers reported that "the grapevine" keeps everyone in check at the school level, and parents and colleagues will alert the administration to any teachers not performing or completing their tasks (Wermke et al., 2019). As for the administrative realm, Swedish educators do not perceive autonomy in how the school operates or distributes funds, but

they perceive autonomy in distributing and using the goods and resources within their classrooms. Wermke et al. (2019) also found that with the increased pressure placed on standardized assessment in Sweden, some Swedish teachers felt more restricted in their autonomy.

The German teachers also perceived a high sense of classroom autonomy; however, they also felt a heightened sense of school and administrative autonomy because their administrator was also a teacher (Wermke et al., 2019). German teachers reported that ineffective teachers often continue to work due to an absence of consequences from trust in teacher autonomy. Lastly, German teachers perceived the department heads as individuals who made school-level decisions without consulting their peers (Wermke et al., 2019). The autonomy afforded to the department heads sometimes resulted in educators' lack of interest in making decisions.

Although studies indicate that educators from different cultural backgrounds experience autonomy in a variety of ways (Bugra & Atay, 2020; Dampson et al., 2019; Khezerlou, 2013; Wermke et al., 2019), Eren (2020) reported that educators from many cultural upbringings often perceive autonomous teachers as open-minded, creative, and strategic problem-solvers who take time to challenge their students and make educationally sound decisions to adapt the curriculum when warranted. Bugra and Atay (2020) disagreed with Eren's (2020) notion of a standard definition of teacher autonomy. The researchers analyzed data from English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers and found they had varying definitions of teacher autonomy (Bugra & Atay, 2020). For example, some teachers believed teacher autonomy was about the freedom to make classroom and instructional decisions without involvement from outside individuals. Other EFL teachers described autonomy as being aware of oneself and career responsibilities while adhering to professional development. Bugra and Atay (2020) also asked teachers to choose a

metaphor to classify autonomy. Again, the metaphors varied greatly, from a bonsai tree to a queen (Bugra & Atay, 2020). Although the metaphors differed, most could be viewed positively, allowing EFL educators to express their ideas creatively. Overall, Bugra and Atay (2020) discovered that the participants felt autonomy was a positive aspect of teaching but viewed it from multiple and different perspectives.

Though it can be argued that a similar definition exists throughout various cultures, teachers worldwide reported sometimes feeling confined to the curriculum due to assessments and school demands (Angel-Alvarado, Wilhelmi, & Belletich, 2020; Eren, 2020; Lennert da Silva & Molstad, 2020). As more and more governments adopted standardized curricula and exams (Dubetz, 2014; Molstad, 2015), educators revealed a disconnect between local and national expectations (Lennert da Silva & Molstad, 2020). For instance, educators in Brazil often created and administered internal assessments in addition to the national exams, while their school heads felt overworked, always documenting successes, teacher strategies, and plans (Lennert da Silva & Molstad, 2020). Additionally, Lennert da Silva and Molstad (2020) documented differences at the local level, stating that educators in Brazil often planned alone because collaboration time did not fit into their daily schedules due to extreme workloads. However, school administrators set aside time in Norway for education teams to plan and organize lessons together (Lennert da Silva & Molstad, 2020).

Lastly, autonomy can be perceived differently depending on the classes or grades one teaches. Angel-Alvarado, Wilhelmi, and Belletich (2020) concluded that teachers in Spain who taught standard classes perceived less autonomy than their colleagues who delivered electives. Regular education teachers felt they did not have leeway to deviate from the planned lessons due to the standardized nature of the Spanish school system. Regular education teachers also

reported less enjoyment during their classes than elective educators (Angel-Alvarado et al., 2020). Elo and Nygren-Landgards (2021) expanded on autonomy differences, diving into educators' perceptions within the Finnish education system. In Finland, the secondary school systems are scrutinized regarding students' scores on their standardized assessments. Finnish educators feel torn between preparing students for standardized assessments and enacting agency to develop creative, student-driven lessons (Elo & Nygren-Landgards, 2021). However, Elo and Nygren-Landgards (2021) found that many teachers in Finland continued to push the boundaries, finding ways to enact agency in an educational system that puts extreme pressure on assessment accountability in secondary grades.

Preservice Teacher Perceptions of Agency

Although student teachers must complete a work-integrated learning (WIL) experience commonly known as student teaching (Kazeni & McNaught, 2020), many student teachers report feeling inadequate when they leave school and secure their first teaching positions (Bezzina, 2006). Therefore, Kazeni and McNaught (2020) organized a study to analyze student-teacher involvement in a collaborative focus group working through the challenges and learning experiences during the WIL time. During their WIL experience, the student teachers felt the collaborative workshops were effective in helping them navigate the challenges of student teaching, understanding how cooperative learning can help them be successful as educators, and linking together new and old teaching knowledge (Kazeni & McNaught, 2020). As for teacher autonomy, the student teachers discussed being appreciative of the autonomy they gained through their experiences; however, they felt that they still needed to work closely with their cooperating teachers to learn how to navigate the classroom and use the autonomy positively (Kazeni & McNaught, 2020).

The goal of teaching programs is to cultivate a culture that promotes valuable and confident educators who can develop and retain agency (Coker, 2017). When analyzing autonomy development and teacher education programs, Lipponen and Kumpulanien (2011) reported that professional agency was vital in preparing teachers to make learner-centered educational decisions. A preservice educator's agency takes time to develop and generally happens in steps (Lipponen & Kumpulanien, 2011; Ticknor, 2015). Lipponen and Kumpulanien (2011) reported that preservice teachers must first realize they have the agency to influence others and make decisions. When teacher educators initiate discussions with preservice teachers, leaving room for collaborative discourse, preservice educators can begin to initiate ideas (Lipponen & Kumpulanien, 2011). The second step involves the development of relational agency. Teacher educators should take time to acknowledge preservice teachers' ideas, sharing the authority of the classroom (Lipponen & Kumpulanien, 2011). Public recognition of ideas encourages the development of agency and shapes educator decisions. Lastly, Lipponen and Kumpulanien (2011) stated that preservice educators develop accountability agency to propose and evaluate ideas with continued collaborative efforts and discourse. Once educator agency starts to develop, preservice teachers must continue to take action to continue building relationships that will help foster their autonomy development (Lipponen & Kumpulanien, 2011; Ticknor, 2015). Unfortunately, Lipponen and Kumpulanien (2011) found that when preservice teachers are paired with traditional teacher educators, they do not always have the opportunity to develop agency due to an unequal relationship. Traditional teacher educators often have strong beliefs and do not always allow preservice teachers to enact ideas or educational practices.

As the demands on teachers continue to change, teacher education programs work to adjust to meet the needs. Coker (2017) reported that agency development began before enrolling

in the teacher education program for many student teachers. Participants discussed their life and career histories, reminiscing about adults who encouraged them to become teachers and how it impacted their decisions. Participants also reviewed the support they received within the educational program (Coker, 2017). Although participants highlighted materials and cultural beliefs as essential agents of their program, their relationships with others held the most value for success and agency development. Coker (2017) found that participants valued the support they received from their mentor teachers, program peers, and personal academic tutors (PAT). With such a high value placed on the relationships within the program, Coker (2017) suggested that the teacher education program continue developing and maintaining personal connections to improve the program's outcome and increase agency development. Lastly, when discussing the future, participants focused their energies on the qualities they would like to bring to their classrooms rather than teaching skills (Coker, 2017).

Student teachers often continue in education when they feel self-efficacy and autonomy (Coladarci, 1992). Gonzalez et al. (2018) discovered that preservice teachers who perceived their professors advocated for autonomy, set clear expectations, and balanced control felt more confident in their professional expertise, abilities, and temperaments. A preservice teacher's professional expertise, abilities, and temperaments also positively predicted their perceived self-efficacy for various teaching approaches, classroom management strategies, and student interest and curiosity (Gonzalez et al., 2018). Preservice teachers' self-efficacy also positively predicted their dedication to the profession, fulfillment levels, thoughts about being a good teacher, and persistence in education (Gonzalez et al., 2018). Lastly, Gonzalez et al. (2018) found that when preservice teachers perceived their professors as supportive of their autonomy, it positively

influenced their self-efficacy, while controlling professors hindered a preservice educator's sense of self-efficacy and commitment to the profession.

Lastly, Garza, Werner, and Wendler (2016) were interested in preservice teachers' perceptions of moving from students to teachers, focusing on the transition. The participants filled out a reflection questionnaire at the end of their practicum experience, including how they felt about the upcoming transitions and what they learned through the experience. First, participants wrote about how their behaviors and personal choices had to change as they went into student teaching. These changes included taking time to dress that part of a teacher, perceived grooming standards that would be acceptable as a teacher, and gaining a sense of reliability and punctuality (Garza et al., 2016). The second theme Garza et al. (2016) discussed was preservice teachers' awareness of developing rapport with their students. Participants capitalized on adjusting their attitudes to interact with the students as teachers, not peers. Lastly, participants wrote about beginning to see themselves as professionals (Garza et al., 2016). Through the practicum experience, participants analyzed how they want their students to learn, respond to students' needs, and modify student-driven instructional decisions. Garza et al. (2016) suggested that the study outcomes could help universities find preservice teachers to develop their professional agency as they move from practicum experiences to student teaching.

Effects of Agency

Ryan and Deci (2000) described autonomy as a psychological need that individuals persistently strive to fulfill. When exploring autonomy from an educational standpoint, Peasron and Moomaw (2006) described teacher autonomy as the freedom to make decisions about curriculum choices, instructional strategies, and classroom management. Research suggests that when teachers perceive autonomous teaching opportunities, they take ownership of their job,

celebrate student success, and display improved classroom procedures (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010). Additionally, autonomy influences educators' motivation (Gagne & Deci, 2005) and job satisfaction levels (Kengatharan, 2020; Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2014; Worth, 2020). The following section explores recent research on teacher agency and how it affects one's motivational and job satisfaction levels.

Motivation

Teacher motivation often depends on their sense of autonomy or individual self-efficacy (Gagne & Deci, 2005). Teachers who work in an educational environment that promotes agency feel respected and valued for their effort. Promoting and developing one's autonomy leads to a greater sense of competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2008). Numerous studies suggest that when these three psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) are fulfilled, individuals experience autonomous motivation, and positive well-being, and operate at optimal levels (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2009) agreed, adding that autonomy is related to teacher self-efficacy and can positively impact one's motivation to learn and work.

According to the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), when teachers have the autonomy to control their learning environment and make learner-centered decisions, they can positively impact students' perceived competence, which builds autonomous motivation. The SDT was the driving force behind a study conducted by Guay, Roy, and Valois (2017), which evaluated how differentiated instruction affected students' competency perceptions and the development of autonomous motivation. Guay et al. (2017) found that differentiated instruction positively impacts students' autonomous motivation when teachers control their classroom structures and routines. This positive impact is particularly true when teachers routinely use

differentiated instructional practices in their classrooms and are consistent with the SDT. On the other hand, there was no perceived association between classroom structure and students' autonomous motivation when differentiated teaching methods were sporadically used. Guay et al. (2017) suggested the lack of association could be because the instruction is not at an appropriate pace and level for students; however, more research is needed to confirm the notion.

Researchers have conducted a few studies to determine how a teacher's sense of motivation in the classroom may affect student motivation (Haevens et al., 2018; Katz & Shahar, 2015; Roth et al., 2007). Roth et al. (2007) reported that autonomously motivated educators often create environments that encourage, support, and develop student autonomy. Katz and Shahar (2015) added that teachers who feel motivated to come to work often promote autonomy-supportive classrooms. In turn, students in these autonomy-supportive learning environments describe increased motivation. Haevens et al. (2018) extended their research to include motivational styles and autonomy development in physical education classes and sports teams. According to Haevens et al. (2018), coaches and physical education teachers who exercised a controlling motivational style often reported lower motivational levels among their students and athletes. Conversely, coaches and physical education teachers who employed an autonomy-supportive environment encountered more positively motivated students and athletes (Haevens et al., 2018).

Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2014) developed a study to determine if teacher autonomy and teacher self-efficacy are independent factors that influence an educator's sense of workplace fulfillment, emotional well-being, and commitment. The researchers utilized Pearson correlations and regression to analyze the data. The regression analysis indicated that teachers' sense of self-efficacy and autonomy positively influenced workplace fulfillment and engagement

(Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2014). On the other hand, self-efficacy and autonomy were negative predictors of emotional fatigue. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2014) also found that teacher autonomy had a high association with job engagement for educators reporting weak levels of self-efficacy.

A lack of research specifically analyzes agency and motivation within preservice teachers. Therefore, Alkan and Arslan (2019) investigated how learner autonomy may be associated with academic motivation and the self-value of preservice educators. The research team defined learner autonomy as one's ability to continue adapting to changes without obtaining support from others and felt that learner autonomy was crucial to the success of teachers in an ever-changing world (Alkan & Arslan, 2019). The study was performed in two stages. Alkan and Arslan (2019) translated the Autonomous Learning Scale (ALS; Macaskill & Taylor, 2010) into Turkish during stage one. They worked with a team of 335 Turkish pre-service educators to determine reliability and validity. Once the translation was complete with acceptable reliability and validity measures, the research team began stage two of the study. Data were collected from 776 preservice teachers throughout different education programs in Turkey. Alkan and Arslan (2019) used three instruments to gather the data. The recently translated ALS was used to establish participants' autonomous learning levels. At the same time, they used the General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE; Jerusalem & Schwarzer, 1981) to collect information on participants' beliefs about handling situations and dealing with barriers. Lastly, the Academic Motivation Scale (AMS; Vallerand et al., 1992) measured the participants' external, internal, amotivational levels. The GSE and the AMS were previously translated into Turkish and had high validity and reliability ratings (Alkan & Arslan, 2019).

Alkan and Arslan (2019) analyzed the data and highlighted many findings. First, they found that autonomous learning was not dependent on age, suggesting that educators should

develop lessons designed to help build learner autonomy at any age. In addition, Alkan and Arslan (2019) reported that autonomous learning continued to occur in participants regardless of their income or living status (rural or urban). However, autonomous learning levels differed significantly depending on participants' educational program, high school choice, and gender (Alkan & Arslan, 2019). Most of the differences between participants' academic and high school choices are related to Turkey's educational structure. Participants who needed high university and high school exam scores to enter their chosen fields reported less learner autonomy than their peers (Alkan & Arslan, 2019). The lower levels of learner autonomy may be due to Turkey's belief in a rote-memorization system, which values the memorization of information to obtain high scores. As for gender, female participants displayed a more heightened sense of learner autonomy than males. Alkan and Arslan (2019) noted that males have more individual choices in Turkey, whereas females have shielding families, putting more effort into their achievements. Furthermore, Alkan and Arslan (2019) found a significant relationship between academic achievement and learner autonomy, suggesting that Turkish schools should foster learner autonomy activities. Lastly, Alkan and Arslan (2019) highlighted that as learner autonomy increases, so do participants' levels of self-efficacy and motivation, again supporting the development of learner autonomy.

Job Satisfaction

Research has also associated teachers' perceptions of agency with overall job satisfaction. Studies have indicated that many educators report that one of the most critical components of their job is having the freedom to make decisions through a high sense of autonomy (Kengatharan, 2020; Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2014; Worth, 2020). Kengatharan (2020) wanted to determine if a relationship existed between teacher autonomy, classroom behavior, student

commitment, and job satisfaction. Kengatharan (2020) found that teachers who perceived having a more significant influence on what happened in their classrooms felt an increased sense of job contentment. This sense of autonomy came from teaching practices, classroom management, and instructional strategies. Kengatharan (2020) also asserted that good student conduct was a positive indicator of a teacher's job satisfaction. Lastly, Kengatharan (2020) found that teacher autonomy can help improve the relationship between job fulfillment and students' behaviors. When teachers control their classroom environments, they can manage students' behaviors, leading to a more positive teaching experience and increased job satisfaction (Kengatharan, 2020; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). Pearson and Moomaw (2005) agreed, indicating that teacher autonomy also positively impacts an educator's perception of competence and proficiency while decreasing job anxiety and stress.

A quantitative study by Worth and Van den Brande (2020) analyzed the relationship between teacher autonomy, job happiness, and retention of educators in the United Kingdom (U.K.). Worth and Van den Brande (2020) found that educators feel they have less authority over how they conduct their work and perform their jobs than individuals in similar professions. Additionally, 38 percent of U.K. educators felt they had little say in their educational growth and professional development; however, they reported high autonomy over classroom management and lesson ideas. Worth and Van den Brande (2020) also found that new teachers perceived less independence than more senior ones. An increased sense of autonomy is particularly true for most teachers who hold leadership roles within the school setting. Lastly, the data strongly suggested that having a high sense of teacher autonomy is associated with positive views on job satisfaction and increased retention (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020).

On the contrary, Dincer (2019) found that although some English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers working in Turkey perceived their actual autonomy levels as lower than their desired autonomy levels, their autonomy was not significantly related to their job satisfaction. Most Turkish EFL teachers felt that their job satisfaction was tied to their love for the teaching profession and reinforcing and witnessing student motivation (Dincer, 2019). Similarly, Esfandiari and Kamali (2016) reported that Iranian educators perceived a negative correlation between teacher agency and career fulfillment. However, the negative correlation could be clarified by the lack of autonomous freedom allotted to Iranian teachers. When granted a new sense of autonomy, Iranian educators may feel insecure or inadequate in enacting agency (Cakir & Balcikanli, 2012; Esfandiari & Kamali, 2016).

Agency in the Educational Setting

As educational systems within the United States continue implementing rigorous standards and increased accountability demands, many educators report losing their instructional and classroom autonomy (Ingersoll, 2011; Wright, 2020). Sehrawat (2014) recognized that although curricular and accountability demands are a prominent aspect of today's educational system, teachers could enact agency by interweaving best practices with the mandated curricula and assessment measures. The following section reviews recent literature regarding teachers' perceptions of how current curricular agency and accountability measures affect agency.

Curricular Agency

Although schools continually adopt and implement scripted curricula, the adopted curricula are not a replacement for teacher autonomy (Wright, 2020). Some researchers view teachers' autonomy to make curricular decisions based on their students' needs as essential to successful schools (Averill, 2020; Sehrawat, 2014; Sommarstrom, Oikkonen, & Pihkala, 2021).

According to Sehrawat (2014), autonomous teachers take the initiative and time to plan and personalize lessons based on student interests and needs. Autonomous teachers also select texts to teach from, gather materials to supplement lessons, and even create assessments that continue to drive instruction (Sehrawat, 2014; Vangrieken, Grosemans, Dochy, & Kyndt, 2017). Moreover, Sanchez-Suzuki Colegrove and Zuniga (2018) suggested that when educators can enact their agency throughout daily instruction without the anxiety of repercussion, they begin to experiment with new strategies, facilitate both their agency and student agency, and create a positive learning environment that coexists in the world of standardized curricula and assessments.

Sommarstrom et al. (2021) analyzed the role of teacher agency when planning and facilitating lessons that required collaborative partnerships with local businesses. When planning the collaborative lessons, the educators enacted agency by creating learning activities that either exceeded the curricular expectations, were precisely similar to the curricular expectations, or were even changed entirely due to the needs of the students (Sommarstrom et al., 2021). Nevertheless, Alvunger (2018) indicated that standardized curricula and educator agency could co-exist. Teachers can use their curricular knowledge to organize and create interdisciplinary lessons and activities that draw lessons and ideas from the scripted curricula (Alvunger, 2018).

Unfortunately, not all educators feel supported when developing and enacting agency. Harris and Graham (2019) noticed that educators sometimes express interest in developing agency in curricular choice; however, curiosity dwindles quickly due to increasing accountability measures. Baron, Immekus, Gonzalez, and Yun (2016) reported similar findings from their study about teacher and administrator perceptions of supports and barriers when enacting autonomy to include developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) in kindergarten classrooms.

An analysis of the data showed that although kindergarten educators and administrators felt that DAP was essential, administrators placed a higher value on DAP than teachers (Baron et al., 2016). Educators communicated that they felt uncomfortable enacting autonomy to use DAP activities in their classrooms because of negative peer and administrative perceptions (Baron et al., 2016). Teachers also discussed pressures to replace DAP with more rigorous tasks to ensure students were ready for continued classroom success and assessments. Most teachers articulated the need for more professional learning to incorporate DAP and play-based learning activities in their classrooms. If everyone received the training, including peers and administrators, teachers might feel more comfortable incorporating DAP.

Autonomous teachers are considered by many to be active catalysts for change in both their classrooms and school communities (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015). For example, when teachers feel autonomy over curricular decisions, they are often more determined to engage in meaningful professional development classes (Sehrawat, 2014). Once the professional development classes are over, autonomous teachers feel motivated to bring back their new information to enact change in their classroom and often share it with others in the school setting (Imants & Van der Wal, 2019).

A recent international movement has identified the need for teachers to have a voice in curriculum development and teaching strategies (Huges & Lewis, 2020; Ormond, 2017; Phillips, 1991). With changes that continue to rewrite history, teachers in New Zealand requested autonomy to create a history curriculum that addressed the objectives and aligned to assessment and current historical content (Ormond, 2017). Ormond (2017) found that three critical challenges existed when teachers had more autonomy to develop their curriculum. First, educators reported experiencing difficulty aligning their curriculum to the mandatory

assessments. Second, teachers also had trouble integrating programs that covered history with appropriate scope and complexity. Last, balancing a curriculum that appeals to students and holds their interest was complex. Although most teachers had favorable thoughts about curriculum autonomy, they found some challenges associated with autonomy and choice challenging (Ormond, 2017).

Similar to New Zealand, educators in Wales also participated in helping develop curricular concepts within six Areas of Learning and Experience (Education Wales, 2017). Huges and Lewis (2020) found that all participants considered the new curriculum optimistic, reporting that the new curriculum was appropriate for the students and gave teachers more opportunities to plan student-centered lessons. Although the educators described the new curriculum as an opportunity to enact pedagogical agency, the school they worked for planned to purchase a standardized program. Some participants felt the standardized program would help them plan their lessons, building upon existing materials. However, teachers felt they needed more time to fully implement the new curriculum and standardized program (Hughes & Lewis, 2020). To help alleviate some of the implementation anxiety, the educators preferred a slow roll-out with accompanied professional development, highlighting ways to incorporate existing practices with the new materials (Hughes & Lewis, 2020).

Phillips (1991) discovered that teachers in England also preferred a gradual roll-out of the newly adopted national curriculum, which proved to be a theme that continues to reoccur throughout history (Huges & Lewis, 2020). Phillips (1991) gathered data from a survey administered to history teachers by the University of Bristol. Three main topics emerged from the data. First, many history teachers feared that they would have to redefine their roles with the newly adopted curriculum (Phillips, 1991). Instead of having the freedom to choose historical

events to teach and study, educators would be required to teach lessons based on irrelevant events. Second, the history teachers shared nervous feelings regarding a lowered sense of job satisfaction because having the autonomy to make instructional and curricular decisions was positively related to job satisfaction (Phillips, 1991). Lastly, Phillips (1991) found that teachers worried there would not be enough educational time allotted for the national curriculum. Teachers were concerned that the time crunch may cause them to move to a direct instruction approach, leaving rich tasks and student-driven projects behind. Phillips (1991) suggested that if school systems adopt standardized curriculums, they open dialogue with staff members, allowing room for teaching autonomy and flexibility.

Educational Accountability

With the emergence of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) implementation, student achievement and teacher accountability continue to spotlight educational communities throughout the United States (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Ruff, 2019). NCLB initially intended to reach academically left behind students, giving them a boost to close the achievement gap in American schools (Ashby, 2007). On the surface, Darling-Hammond (2007) stated that NCLB appeared to be a productive Act that promised higher test scores, highly trained professionals, and more school choices for families. Nevertheless, with all these new changes came multiple challenges for schools, states, and districts. For example, many states reported taking away authentic learning and student-driven decisions, replacing them with a standardized curriculum with a rote-memorization focus (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Dee & Jacobs, 2011).

Another challenge was meeting the rigorous demands of the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) report. According to Porter, Linn, and Trimble (2005), AYP is the amount of

improvement a school should make to close the achievement gap. Unfortunately, most public schools found themselves on the AYP "failing" list year after year due to limitations beyond their control (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Dee & Jacobs, 2011). These limitations came in multiple forms, including financial allocations, unattainable goals, and teacher turnover due to impossibly high expectations and lack of classroom autonomy. Darling-Hammond (2007) acknowledged that many schools were closing achievement gaps year after year; however, they were still considered failing the AYP because they did not reach 100% mastery in all student categories. As a result, instead of improving the schools as initially planned, NCLB turned into an Act where struggling students were pushed out or continued to slide backward (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Struggling students were not the only individuals affected by NCLB. Beisser (2008) reported that as schools allocated educational resources and monies to fund programs to improve student progress in reading and mathematics, options for gifted learners suffered. Many educators stated they lacked the appropriate time each day to challenge and adequately prepare for their gifted students (Beisser, 2008). Siemer (2009) expanded on NCLB and gifted learners, asserting that NCLB apportioned very little funding to support the gifted education programs and curriculums. Siemer (2009) also noted that since gifted learners often produce high test scores, educators sometimes felt compelled to retain the gifted students in a classroom that may not necessarily meet their needs as a trade for higher classroom and school test scores.

Additionally, the intense change in working conditions and absence of student-driven lessons brought on by NCLB caused many educators to leave the teaching profession (Wronowski & Urick, 2019). Beisser (2008) reported that the restrictions placed on failing schools caused many successful and qualified educators to resign from their positions, taking

with them the skills and knowledge needed to meet their students' needs. Unfortunately, finding qualified teachers to replace them has been challenging (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Wronowski & Urick, 2019).

Ingersoll et al. (2016) discovered that some aspects of accountability impacted teacher retention more than others. First, implementing mandated standards and assessments did not affect teacher retention; however, the outcomes did affect teacher retention. Schools rated high performing had less teacher turnover than those that were not highly rated. In addition, the sanctions were placed on some poor-performing schools, driving more teachers to leave the profession (Ingersoll et al., 2016). Moreover, Ingersoll et al. (2016) found that schools with effective administration, appropriate resources and support, faculty input into schoolwide decisions, and teacher autonomy experienced lower teacher turnover rates than those who did not have the same characteristics. However, regardless of whether the school was high-performing or low-performing, the central aspect affecting teacher retention was perceived autonomy. When teachers have the power to make decisions about their classroom, instructional materials, pedagogy, and assessment practices, they are more likely to continue in the profession than those whose autonomy is stripped away (Ingersoll et al., 2016).

Lastly, a study by Rex and Nelson (2004) explored how secondary teachers responded to the demands of high-stakes testing. The researchers collected data from self-reports and classroom observations. Rex and Nelson (2004) found that educators continued to make educational and instructional decisions based on the students' needs, disregarding high-stakes accountability. When asked what drove the continued autonomy, the teachers discussed the necessity to ensure students have the skills and knowledge to succeed outside the classroom and not just the experience needed to pass an assessment (Rex & Nelson, 2004). Additionally, Rex

and Nelson (2004) reported that although administrators encouraged time for test preparation, the educators often disregarded the expectations and taught lessons they felt needed priority.

Summary

As student achievement worries and teacher accountability measures continue to dominate educational communities across the United States, teachers report a decreased sense of autonomy within the classroom (Lamb, 2008; Ruff, 2019; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). With theoretical ties to Deci and Ryan's (2000) SDT, autonomy is a psychological need that fosters motivation and positive well-being. Additionally, a heightened sense of autonomy can positively connect to an individual's motivational levels, fulfillment, and job satisfaction (Alkan & Arslan, 2019; Kengatharan, 2020; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014).

Research has noted that student teachers continue to work in the educational field after graduation if they have a heightened sense of self-efficacy and autonomy (Coladarci, 1992). Although professional and preservice educators perceive autonomy as essential to teaching and learning, most feel restricted by standardized lessons and extreme accountability (Dampson et al., 2019; Darling-Hammond, 2007). Hence, Garza et al. (2016) capitalized on the importance of universities discovering ways for preservice teachers to continue developing and maintaining agency through their education program, which would hopefully carry into their professional careers. Coker (2017) and Lipponen and Kumpulanien (2011) agreed, highlighting that teacher education programs should celebrate collaboration and personal connections to increase agency growth. Therefore, it is crucial for researchers to continue studying agency development in preservice teachers and how they enact agency throughout their educational journey (Hull & Uematsu, 2020) and into their professional careers (Garza et al., 2016).

Chapter III: Methodology

Although Hattie (2003) reported that a teacher is one of the most influential factors affecting a student's educational experience and motivational levels, teacher attrition rates remain high throughout the United States (Harfitt, 2015, Ingersoll et al., 2018). An analysis of the attrition data showed that teachers often leave the profession due to perceptions of low classroom autonomy (Ingersoll et al., 2018) and lack of administrative support (Chambers et al., 2019). Ingersoll et al. (2018) reported that nearly 50% of educators leave the profession within the first five years of their teaching career.

Unfortunately, as educational expectations in the United States continually shift toward adopting rigorous standards and increased accountability demands, teachers report low autonomy regarding instructional decisions in their classrooms and schools (Ingersoll, 2011; Wright, 2020). With very little research conducted in the United States on teacher agency, specifically agency development in preservice teachers, this study explored how preservice elementary teachers perceive agency development as they progress through an undergraduate program at a university in southwestern Georgia. The findings of this study may be beneficial to preservice educators, professors, student teaching coordinators, mentor teachers, and many other stakeholders who work to foster agency development of elementary preservice educators. Additionally, the results may suggest possible changes to the undergraduate educational program or student-teacher placements, capitalizing on approaches that may positively nurture the continued development of autonomy within preservice educators.

This chapter includes the following sections: research questions, research design, the role of the researcher, participants, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis procedures, and a summary. The research questions were used to guide data collection.

Research Questions

The research questions that framed the current study were:

1. How does preservice teachers' sense of agency develop as they progress through an undergraduate education program at a university in southwestern Georgia?
2. What factors do preservice teachers perceive to influence their agency as they progress through their classes?
3. What are preservice teachers' current perceptions of agency, defined as controlling what is taught and how it is taught?

Research Design

In order to gain knowledge and begin to understand how preservice teachers perceive agency development as they progress through an undergraduate education program, qualitative research is most appropriate because, through inquiry, the researcher can build a detailed, descriptive picture of what they have learned (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, qualitative research allows the researcher to study events in "natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). Merriam (1998) added that individuals could use qualitative studies in various specialties and fields of practice. Lastly, qualitative research is the best design when a researcher is interested in constructing meaning about how individuals perceive the world and their lives within it (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After the results are analyzed, the researcher shares their interpretations of the participants' beliefs on the subject of interest (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Although there are various qualitative study designs, the case study was the best fit for this qualitative study due to the exploration of answers to a constructed research question and because the researcher has very little control over the events within the study (Johnson &

Christensen, 2017; Yin, 2008). Yin (2008) states that a case study is valuable because researchers explore an idea within the constructs of its actual, real-life setting. Stake (1995) clarifies that case study research is intended to be an inquiry and evaluation of a particular case, where the researcher aims to understand the intricacy of the idea or event being studied.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) maintain that a "case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (p. 37). Therefore, a qualitative case study was appropriate for the current study because of the exploration within a bounded system. First, the number of individuals invited to participate in the study was limited to those enrolled in one university's undergraduate elementary education program. Also, the researcher explored preservice educators' perceptions of agency development in only one university in Georgia, bounding the results to that school's undergraduate program. Therefore, the unit for this bounded case study was a university's undergraduate elementary education program, specifically preservice educators enrolled in Blocks 1, 2, 3, or 4 of the elementary education program. The subunits within this bounded case study were the preservice educators who perceive a low, median, or high sense of agency.

Additionally, Ellinger and McWhorter (2016) report that there are three main types of case studies: explanatory research sets out to find out why or how an event occurred, or a situation came about; exploratory research is utilized when the researcher wants to explore a phenomenon that has very little prior research; descriptive research is an avenue researchers use to provide detailed descriptions of a phenomenon or event. Although all three case study research designs were evaluated and considered for the current study, the exploratory case study design was the best fit. Through the exploratory case study design, the researcher deeply explored the phenomenon of interest (Ellinger & McWhorter, 2016): preservice elementary

educators' perceptions of autonomy development. The explanatory case study design was inappropriate because the researcher did not determine a causal relationship. Furthermore, the descriptive case study design was inappropriate because the researcher wanted to go beyond a description of the event.

Since this study explored preservice teachers' perceptions of agency development at only one university in southwestern Georgia, an exploratory, a qualitative case study was the most rational choice for gathering, exploring, and evaluating the data. Through survey information, open-ended interviews, and focus groups, the researcher gleaned information through preservice educator views, making sense of agency development in preservice teachers (Creswell, 2014). The exploratory case study was also supported by how well this methodology suited the study's research questions. Table 1 depicts the alignment between the research questions and instruments for the focus group interviews. Table 2 depicts the alignment between the research questions and instruments for the individual interviews.

Table 1

Focus Group Interviews Research Questions and Instrument Alignment

<table>
<tr><th>Research Question</th><th>Focus Group Interviews</th></tr>
<tr><td>How does preservice teachers' sense of agency develop as they progress through an undergraduate program at a university in southwestern Georgia?</td><td>Focus Group Interview Protocol/ Perceived Agency Survey Results

<u>Introductory Questions:</u>
1. What made you want to become a teacher? Or go into education?

<u>Key Questions:</u>
1. What comes to mind when you think about the word "agency"?
2. What are your thoughts on mandated textbooks? Do you feel the need to change up the material used to benefit the students? Explain.
3. You are enrolled in Block _______. How have your experiences differed with making educational decisions during your time in the education program?
4. Have you noticed any changes as you have progressed through your classes? Describe your perceptions.
6. How would you describe your experiences with others influencing your teaching/educational decisions? (If clarification is needed: give ideas such as parents, principals, cooperating teachers, etc.)
7. What do you think has the most significant impact on your agency? Why?

<u>Closing Questions:</u>
1. Is there anything that you would like to add?
2. If you could summarize your experiences with agency during your time in the educational program with one word, what would that word be and why?</td></tr>
<tr><td>What factors do preservice teachers perceive to influence their agency as they progress through their classes?</td><td>Focus Group Interview Protocol /Perceived Agency Survey Results

<u>Key Questions:</u>
1. What comes to mind when you think about the word agency?
3. You are enrolled in Block _______. How have your experiences differed with making educational decisions during your time in the education program?
4. Have you noticed any changes as you have progressed through your classes? Describe your perceptions.
5. What grade bands have you worked with during your time in the educational program? What have been your experiences as you have worked with different educational grades?

<u>Closing Questions:</u>
1. Is there anything that you would like to add?</td></tr>
<tr><td>What are preservice teachers' current perceptions of agency, defined as controlling what is taught and how it is taught?</td><td>Focus Group Interview Protocol /Perceived Agency Survey Results

<u>Key Questions:</u>
1. What comes to mind when you think about the word agency?
2. What are your thoughts on mandated textbooks? Do you feel the need to change up the material used to benefit the students? Explain.
6. How would you describe your experiences with others influencing your teaching/educational decisions? (If clarification is needed: give ideas such as parents, principals, cooperating teachers, etc.)
7. What do you think has the most significant impact on your agency? Why?</td></tr>
</table>

Table 2

Individual Interview Research Questions and Instrument Alignment

Research Question	Instrument
How does preservice teachers' sense of agency develop as they progress through an undergraduate program at a university in southwestern Georgia?	**Perceived Agency Survey Results/Individual Interview Protocol** Key Questions: 1. You are currently enrolled in the Teacher Education program in Block _______. What specific experiences with autonomy have you experienced during this Block or previous blocks? 6. Describe your motivation when thinking about going to class? Field experiences? Teaching? Making decisions? Explain. 7. Is there anything you would change in the teaching field to help you become more motivated? Closing Questions: 1. Where do you see yourself in five years? Do you think your experiences with agency impacted your answer? 2. Is there anything that you would like to add?
What factors do preservice teachers perceive to influence their agency as they progress through their classes?	**Perceived Agency Survey Results/Individual Interview Protocol** Key Questions: 2. During our focus group you mentioned that you did/did not feel comfortable steering away from the mandated textbooks. Can you elaborate on why you feel that way? 3. How do you feel about using all of the materials supplied by the district as a teacher? Do you feel that you can make changes? Explain. 4. Last time we met, you talked about some of your practicum/student teaching placements. Tell me in more depth about how your mentor teachers perceived agency. How do you think their perceptions affected you? In what ways? 5. If you could choose any grade level to work with, which grade level would you choose? Do you think autonomy has anything with your choice? 6. Describe your motivation when thinking about going to class? Field experiences? Teaching? Making decisions? Explain. 7. Is there anything you would change in the teaching field to help you become more motivated? Closing Questions: 1. Where do you see yourself in five years? Do you think your experiences with agency impacted your answer?
What are preservice teachers' current perceptions of agency, defined as controlling what is taught and how it is taught?	**Perceived Agency Survey Results/Individual Interview Protocol** Key Questions: 1. You are currently enrolled in the Teacher Education program in Block _______. What specific experiences with autonomy have you experienced during this Block or previous blocks? 2. During our focus group you mentioned that you did/did not feel comfortable steering away from the mandated textbooks. Can you elaborate on why? 3. How do you feel about using all of the materials supplied by the district as a teacher? Do you feel that you can make changes? Explain. 7. Is there anything you would change in the teaching field to help you become more motivated? Closing Questions: 1. Where do you see yourself in five years? Do you think your experiences with autonomy impacted your answer?

Role of the Researcher

The researcher strongly believes that her work with practicum and student teachers has left a lasting impression on her growth as an educator. The researcher recently finished mentoring her third student teacher. The student teachers often walk into their classroom placement full of excitement, energy, and an "I will change the world" attitude. The student teachers often remind the researcher of why she became a teacher. They remind her to bring a sense of fun back into the classroom while focusing on standards and pacing. They remind her to continue to smile each day, sing songs to get the student's attention, and share many best practices used long after the student teacher's time. However, sometimes that energy quickly fades, and the student teachers leave the experience with a fear of going into the profession instead of the excitement that initially drew them to working with children. Therefore, the researcher hopes that this study's results will help cooperating teachers, professors, and education programs capitalize on any approaches that may contribute to building autonomy within preservice educators and retaining these educators in the profession.

During the current study, the researcher followed all protocols the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) set forth. The researcher adhered to the data collection procedures, coded and analyzed the data, shared the study results, and offered further study recommendations. Although a doctoral student at the same university as the participants, the researcher did not have any personal or professional relationships with any participants, which may have prevented them from being forthcoming with their responses.

Following the acceptance of IRB approval (see Appendix B), the researcher contacted the current professors within the elementary education program at the university via email (see Appendix C). The researcher introduced the study and asked the professors for permission to

attend their classes to introduce the study objectives to the preservice elementary educators. The researcher also asked the professors to forward the introductory email with the embedded Google Form to the students enrolled in their classes (see Appendix D). Students interested in participating in the study were asked to email any questions to the researcher. Interested students were also given a digital consent form (see Appendix E) and could leave the study if needed. Once students returned the digital consent form, the researcher maintained the forms on a password-protected computer. The consent forms are kept for one year after the study is complete. Once the study and successful dissertation defense are complete, the researcher will delete all consent forms from the password-protected computer after one year.

Initial data were collected through a five-point Likert scale survey created by Hull and Uematsu (2020) that measured preservice teachers' perceived agency. The researcher created a Google Form with the consent form embedded within the form and the survey. Participants who signed the consent form were directed to continue to the next screen and complete the survey. Participants who chose not to participate were logged off and thanked for their time. The researcher thanked the participants for filling out the initial survey. Participants who completed the initial survey were entered into a drawing to win a 10-dollar gift card to a local coffee shop. The researcher purchased a 10-dollar gift card from the local coffee shop. Once all participants completed the Google Form, the researcher used a random generator and chose one participant to win a 10-dollar gift card to the local coffee shop. The local coffee shop was chosen because of its proximity to the university's education department, and the researcher had no personal or professional ties with the local coffee shop.

After the initial data were collected, the researcher was responsible for disaggregating the data. The researcher scheduled focus groups and individual interviews after the survey to

explore preservice teacher perspectives in more depth. Participants who elected to fill out the initial survey received an email that outlined the study goals and objectives and invited them to volunteer their time to participate in a focus group interview. The email also highlighted focus group protocols. Once participants responded, the researcher purposely selected participants with a high sense of agency, a median sense of agency, and a low sense of agency enrolled in each of the following: Block 1 (semester 1), Block 2 (semester 2), Block 3 (semester 3), and Block 4 (student teaching) classes. Participants were purposefully selected from the sample to ensure they could provide the information required by the researcher (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). The selection criteria for recruiting participants for the focus group was their sense of agency (high, median, low) as determined by the Perceived Agency Survey and their Block (semester) within the Teacher Education program. This criterion was essential when analyzing how elementary preservice teachers' sense of agency may change throughout their education program and possible factors affecting their perceptions.

The researcher was open to suggestions about choosing a place where participants felt comfortable participating in the focus group interviews. The researcher thanked the participants for their time and offered each focus group participant a five-dollar gift card to the local coffee shop. The local coffee shop was chosen because of its proximity to the university's education department, and the researcher had no personal or professional ties with the local coffee shop. The researcher reminded participants that the focus group interviews were recorded; however, participants' personally identifiable information was protected and safeguarded using pseudonyms for names, and a password-protected computer was used for all data collected.

Lastly, the researcher scheduled three individual interviews, and participants were purposefully selected from the population. The researcher analyzed the Perceived Agency

Survey and selected three participants to interview: a preservice teacher with a high sense of agency, a median sense of agency, and a low sense of agency. Three interviews were essential so the researcher could deeply explore why preservice teachers perceive different levels of agency (high, median, low). The selected participants received an emailed letter that outlined the study goals and objectives and invited them to volunteer their time to participate in an individual interview. The letter also highlighted individual interview protocols. The researcher was open to suggestions about choosing a place where participants felt comfortable participating in an individual interview. The researcher thanked the participants for their time and offered each focus group participant a five-dollar gift card to the local coffee shop. The researcher also reminded participants that the individual interviews were recorded; however, participants' personally identifiable information was protected and safeguarded using pseudonyms for names, and a password-protected computer was used for all data collected. The researcher created a key for the pseudonyms, which was saved on the same password-protected computer. The researcher was the sole person accessing the password and the computer used to store the data.

The researcher built trust with the participants by providing consent forms and maintaining professional research ethics. The researcher ensured that participants' personally identifiable information was protected and safeguarded using pseudonyms for names and a password-protected computer for all data collected. Furthermore, the researcher reached out to participants and invited them to member check their transcripts from the focus group interviews and individual interviews. The use of member checking was essential to ensure the transcripts were valid and correctly represented participants' thoughts and ideas (Merriam, 1998).

Participants

Participants for this study were preservice elementary teachers enrolled in a university in southwestern Georgia. The university is diverse and has approximately 8,200 students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs. The student-to-faculty ratio is approximately 15 to one. The university employs approximately 800 faculty and staff members and holds accreditation through the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges.

To explore the research questions set for this study, preservice elementary teachers already accepted into the Teacher Education program were invited to participate. Participants apply for admission into the teacher education program during their sophomore year of college, usually after finishing approximately three semesters of classwork. To be admitted into the teacher education program, participants must enroll as a student at the university, take the Georgia Assessments for the Certification of Educators (GACE) Admissions Examination and the Educator Ethics Assessment, complete the coursework requirements outlined for their specific degrees with the specified minimum Grade Point Average (GPA), complete a Dispositions, Attributes, and Proficiencies (DAP™) Interview, and apply for a Georgia preservice certificate. Additionally, participants fill out an online application and complete a background check with the campus police department. Once complete, participants submit all necessary documents to an online portal.

After participants are admitted into the undergraduate teacher education program, they progress with their cohort. Cohorts follow a prescribed set of teacher education classes each semester and must earn a minimum grade C in each required class. Table 3 features the classes and field experiences required during each block, or semester. Interwoven within the classes are

field experiences. Field experiences are opportunities for preservice educators to observe classrooms and apply the skills and knowledge gained through their education classes in a local classroom under the supervision of a professor and clinical supervising teacher. The university pays special attention to ensuring that preservice educators complete their field experiences in various settings.

Table 3

Required Classes and Field Experiences by Block (Semester)*

Block (Semester)	Credit Hours	Required Classes
Block 1 14 Credit Hours	3	* STEAM Education for Young Children
	2	Cognitive and Language Development in Elementary Education
	3	*Teaching Children to Read
	3	Algebra and Proportionality
	3	Developing Movement Skills in Elementary Education
Block 2 14 Credit Hours	4	*Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment
	4	*Teaching Language Arts in Elementary Education
	3	*Reading in the Content Areas: Concentration in Social Studies
	3	Understanding Geometry and Measurement
Block 3 15 Credit Hours	4	*Science in Elementary Education
	4	*Math in Elementary Education
	4	*Diagnostic Assessment and Prescriptive Reading Instruction
	3	Understanding Data Analysis and Probability
Block 4 12 Credit Hours	10	*Student Teaching
	2	Classroom Management

The participants were enrolled in classes for one of the following: Block 1 (semester 1), Block 2 (semester 2), Block 3 (semester 3), or Block 4 (student teaching). Each block occurs after participants are admitted into the teacher education program, usually at the start of their junior year of college. All students enrolled were invited to participate in the initial part of the study via email. There were 66 preservice elementary education teachers invited to participate in the study, and 37 preservice elementary education teachers responded, with a response rate of 56 percent. However, after analyzing the consent forms, it was noted that six participants opted out of the study. Therefore, 47 percent (N=31) of the preservice elementary education teachers completed the Perceived Agency Survey (Hull & Uematsu, 2020). Demographic data were collected on gender, block enrollment, race/ethnicity, and age. Table 4 provides demographic data reported by 31 participants who completed the Perceived Agency Survey (Hull & Uematsu, 2020).

Table 4

Perceived Agency Survey Participant Demographics

	N	%
Gender		
Female	28	90
Male	3	10
Block/Semester in Elementary Teacher Education Program		
Block 1 (Semester 1)	17	54.8
Block 2 (Semester 2)	5	16.1
Block 3 (Semester 3)	5	16.1
Block 4 (Student Teaching)	4	13
Race/Ethnicity		
Asian or Pacific Islander	0	0
Black or African American	9	29
Hispanic or Latino	2	6
Native American or Alaskan Native	0	0
White or Caucasian	18	59
Multiracial or Biracial	2	6
Age		
18 – 24 years old	24	77
25-34 years old	3	10
35 – 44 years old	3	10
45 – 54 years old	0	0
55 years and older	1	3

All preservice educators who completed the initial survey received an invitation to participate in a focus group discussion. The goal of the focus group was to facilitate a discussion between the group members and create an open environment where participants feel comfortable

sharing their thoughts and perceptions without feeling judged (Hennink, 2014). After participants responded, the researcher purposely selected participants with a high sense of agency, a median sense of agency, and a low sense of agency enrolled in each of the following: Block 1 (semester 1), Block 2 (semester 2), Block 3 (semester 3), and Block 4 (student teaching) classes. Johnson and Christensen (2017) suggest that participants are purposefully selected from the sample so they can provide the data required to answer the research questions. In order to explore participants' sense of agency, what might affect their agency, and how it may change throughout the program, participants with different perceived agencies (high, median, low) and enrolled in different semesters were purposefully selected to participate in the focus group interviews. Since multiple participants had the same perceptions of agency (low, median, high), the researcher randomly drew the participants.

The researcher analyzed the Perceived Agency Survey and focus group transcripts, selecting three participants to interview individually: a preservice teacher with a high sense of agency, a median sense of agency, and a low sense of agency. The researcher scheduled three individual interviews. The selected participants received an emailed letter outlining the study goals and objectives and inviting them to volunteer their time to participate in an individual interview. The individual interviews helped the researcher explore participants' beliefs, perceptions, and experiences with agency.

Table 5 displays focus group and individual interview participant demographics. All preservice elementary teachers have been given pseudonyms for this study to protect their personally identifiable information. Additionally, each participant has a unique identifier. For example, Randi is coded as participant 1-1 because she is Block 1, participant 1. All unique identifiers are included with participants' quotes for clarification.

Table 5

Focus Group and Individual Interview Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Block/Semester	Age	Identifier
Randi	Female	White/Caucasian	Block 1	35 – 44 years	1-1
Sheryl	Female	White/Caucasian	Block 1	18 – 24 years	1-2
Lincoln	Male	White/Caucasian	Block 2	18 – 24 years	2-1
Terri	Female	Black/African American	Block 2	18 – 24 years	2-2
*Amanda	Female	White/Caucasian	Block 2	18 – 24 years	2-3
Natalia	Female	White/Caucasian	Block 3	25 – 34 years	3-1
*Becca	Female	Black/African American	Block 3	18 – 24 years	3-2
Robin	Female	Black/African American	Block 3	25 – 34 years	3-3
* Joy	Female	White/Caucasian	Block 4	18 – 24 years	4-1
Kelly	Female	White/Caucasian	Block 4	18 – 24 years	4-2

The following descriptions were gathered and written from participants' responses to the initial interview questions. They are presented in the same order as the table above (ordered by block and assigned participant identifier).

Randi (1-1)

Randi, a Caucasian female who is in the 35-44 years age bracket, is currently enrolled in Block 1. Although Randi has just started her educational teacher journey, she noticed that many students need support and guidance in and out of the classroom. Randi has recently made a career change and has decided to become a teacher. She enrolled in the education program to be a positive role model for students. Ultimately, Randi would like to be a school counselor;

however, she is starting with early childhood to get her “feet wet.” Randi’s goal may be to become a high school counselor someday, helping students find their passions in life.

Sheryl (1-2)

Sheryl, a Caucasian female who is in the 18-24 years age bracket, is enrolled in Block 1. She enjoys the classes and has found writing lesson plans exciting. Sheryl finds the program supportive and enjoys working with her mentor teacher. Sheryl feels that becoming a teacher was a “calling,” as she has always loved children. She used to babysit for many families before coming to college and even wrote “lesson plans” for the children she babysat.

Lincoln (2-1)

Lincoln, a Caucasian male who is in the 18-24 years age bracket, is enrolled in Block 2 of the elementary education program. He wanted to go into education because his teachers were “a lot like moms” to him growing up. As he has progressed through the elementary education program, Lincoln has had many individuals ask him why he, a male, wants to be an elementary teacher. Lincoln stated that being a male in an elementary education program can be difficult. Lincoln hopes to be a positive role model for his students, following the path his elementary teachers paved for him.

Terri (2-2)

Terri, an African American female who is in the 18-24 years age bracket, has always wanted to work with children. From a young age, she started babysitting. As she was growing up, her family noticed that she enjoyed working with children. Therefore, they kindled an educational fire within her. Terri is enrolled in Block 2. She feels very confident in her choice of profession and university. She stressed how much she enjoys studying at the university because it is very supportive and diverse.

Amanda (2-3)

Amanda, a Caucasian female who is in the 18-24 years age bracket, is in Block 2 and has been enjoying the classes thus far. She likes to learn from her mentor teachers and bring new ideas to the classroom. Amanda wants to be a teacher because she loves watching students learn. She gets very excited when a child finally understands a concept they have been struggling with for a while. Amanda gets very excited each block when they work with a new mentor teacher.

Natalia (3-1)

Natalia, a Caucasian female who is in the 25-34 years age bracket, is enrolled in Block 3 and is passionate about academics. Natalia stressed the importance of being emotionally there for her students throughout her interview. She is excited to watch them grow and learn as she prepares them for their future. Natalia became a teacher to be a role model for children. Natalia felt that as our educational system changes, she wants to do her best to keep up with the changes and make decisions based on what the students need.

Becca (3-2)

Becca, an African American female who is in the 18-24 years age bracket, is a Block 3 student who goes to school daily to make a difference in the lives of the students she teaches. Her mom has always said she is a positive role model for children. Becca is confident in her ability to talk in front of others and engage her audience. She feels that is an asset to her teaching abilities, as teaching is all about getting up and speaking in front of others. Becca is becoming a teacher because she wants to help support other schoolchildren.

Robin (3-3)

Robin, an African American female who is in the 25-34 years age bracket, is enrolled in Block 3 and wants to be a teacher because she previously worked with children at after-school

programs and daycares. Robin found that she enjoyed writing lessons at the after-school program and daycare. Robin stated that writing creative lesson plans came quickly to her, and she enjoyed watching the students learn about the new concepts. Her mom has pushed her to return to school for her elementary education degree. Becoming a teacher is a career change for Robin, as she previously attended school majoring in psychology with a minor in sociology.

Joy (4-1)

Joy, a Caucasian female who is in the 18-24 years age bracket, is enrolled in Block 4 and is currently student teaching. Joy decided she wanted to be a teacher because she has a family member with special needs and spent a great deal of time helping him with learning tools and strategies. Joy loves to watch children grow and learn. She prides herself on the fact that she is very organized and is extremely good at differentiating instruction. Joy states that she is confident when making decisions about students and their needs.

Kelly (4-2)

Kelly, a Caucasian female who is in the 18-24 years age bracket, has been enjoying her student teaching experience during Block 4. She became an elementary school educator because most of her family members are teachers. Kelly grew up playing school with her siblings while her mom worked on classwork. She enjoys working with children and has had a positive experience with her mentor teacher during Block 4. Kelly finds that lesson planning has gotten easier during her time in the program. Kelly has found that the students this year are very needy, so she works hard to build relationships with them.

Instrumentation

Initial data were collected through a five-point Likert scale survey created by Hull and Uematsu (2020) that measured preservice teachers' perceived agency. Although the survey was

initially created to gather data on preservice physics educators, the specific physics questions were modified with permission from Hull and Uematsu (see Appendix A) to fit elementary preservice teachers (see Appendix F). Here is an example of one of the changes. The original question was written as follows: I will consider carefully what physics textbook to use in my classroom. The question would be slightly modified and written as follows: I will consider carefully what textbooks to use in my classroom. Hull and Uematsu (2020) reported that "although their survey is specific to physics, the questions themselves can readily be modified for use in other contexts, often by a change as trivial as replacing the word physics with math" (pg. 58).

Hull and Uematsu (2020) conducted five survey validation interviews and shared the survey with a board of 10 experts to establish validity and reliability. The original survey had 44 questions. After the interviews and expert discussions, 31 items remained valid (Hull & Uematsu, 2020). Three preservice educators were recruited to participate in the pilot study. The three participants took the survey twice, indicating that the instrument was reliable (Hull & Uematsu, 2020). Lastly, Hull and Uematsu (2020) recruited 144 preservice educators to participate in their study. The preservice educators completed the 31-question survey. The researchers used Rasch analysis results to support the validity of 27 of the 31 questions on the survey (Hull & Uematsu, 2020).

All 27 questions on the teachers' Perceived Agency Survey were used, and a five-point Likert scale followed each question: strongly disagree, disagree, undecided, agree, and strongly agree. The first few questions gathered demographic information: age, race/ethnicity, gender, and block (semester) of study. The survey took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete.

After administering and analyzing the preservice teachers' Perceived Agency Survey, the researcher conducted semi-structured focus groups and individual interviews. The researcher sent a letter via email inviting participants to volunteer their time to participate in a focus group interview (see Appendix G). Three focus group interviews were held: one with participants who perceive low agency, one with participants who perceive median agency, and one with participants who perceive high agency. Each focus group interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The researcher was open to suggestions about choosing a place where participants feel comfortable participating in the focus group interviews. The researcher thanked the participants for their time and offered each focus group participant a five-dollar gift card to the local coffee shop. The researcher reminded participants that the focus group interviews were recorded; however, participants' personally identifiable information was protected and safeguarded using pseudonyms for names, and a password-protected computer was used for all data collected.

The researcher crafted the open-ended, focus group interview questions based on current literature and the topics included in the preservice educators' Perceived Agency Survey (Hull & Uematsu, 2020). Utilizing semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions was most suitable for the case study design because they provided the depth needed to fully explore preservice educators' perceptions of agency development (Merriam, 1998). Open-ended questions also allowed the researcher to explore new topics that may arise throughout the interviews (Johnson & Christensen, 2017; Merriam, 1998). Table 6 outlines the focus group questions and the related research that supports the question. Table 6 also highlights the correlation between the focus group questions and the study research questions.

Table 6

Focus Group Interview Questions, Supporting Literature, and Research Question Alignment

Question Sequence	Interview Questions	Supporting Literature	Research Question Alignment
Introductory Questions	Throughout the focus group interview, how would you like to be addressed? What block are you currently enrolled in? What made you want to become a teacher? Or go into education? Is there anything else you would like us to know before moving on? Do you have any questions?	Creswell; 2014	RQ 1 RQ 2
Key Questions	What comes to mind when you think about the word agency?	Hull & Uematsu, 2020; Lennert da Silva & Molstad, 2021	RQ 1 RQ 2 RQ 3
	What are your thoughts on mandated textbooks? Do you feel the need to change up the material used to benefit the students? Explain.	Baron et al., 2016; Hull & Uematsu, 2020; Ingersoll et al., 2016; Ormond, 2017; Phillips, 1991	RQ 1 RQ 3
	What are some professional areas in which you feel a sense of agency? Explain.	Guay et al., 2017; Lipponen & Kumpulanien, 2011; Strong & Yoshida, 2014	RQ 1 RQ 2
	You are enrolled in Block _______. How have your experiences differed with making educational decisions during your time in the education program?	Coker, 2017; Dampson et al., 2019; Lipponen & Kumpulanien, 2011	RQ 1 RQ 2
	Have you noticed any changes as you have progressed through your classes? Describe your perceptions.	Ball, 2003;	RQ 1 RQ 2
	What grade bands have you worked with during your time in the educational program? What have been your experiences as you have worked with different educational grades?	Strong & Yoshida, 2014	RQ 2
	How would you describe your experiences with others influencing your teaching/educational decisions? (If clarification is needed: give ideas such as parents, principals, cooperating teachers, etc.)	Hull & Uematsu, 2020; Pelletier & Sharp, 2009,	RQ 1 RQ 3
	What do you think has the most significant impact on your agency? Why?	Kauffman et al., 2002	RQ 1 RQ 3
Closing Questions	Is there anything that you would like to add? If you could summarize your experiences with agency during your time in the educational program with one word, what would that word be and why?	Creswell, 2014	RQ 1 RQ 2

Introductory questions were written first to solicit demographic information and create an inviting environment for the focus group interview (Creswell, 2014). Additionally, the researcher used current literature to develop the key focus group interview questions and the closing questions. According to Creswell (2014), key questions are those most related to the study, while the closing questions allow participants an opportunity to add anything they may have missed sharing.

Open-ended, redirecting questions were added at the end of the focus group interview protocol to keep the conversation on the topic of the study (Chen, 2012). Here is an example of one of the redirecting questions: I heard you mention ____ earlier in the interview. Can you tell me a little more about that? Chen (2012) suggests that researchers develop open-ended probes that can be used to gather more information and keep the conversation flowing. Therefore, if needed, the researcher included open-ended probes at the end of the interview protocol (see Appendix H). Here is an example of an open-ended probe: Can you tell me more about that? All three focus groups were asked the same open-ended questions; however, the follow-up probes and redirecting questions differed depending on the participants.

After the focus group interviews, the researcher scheduled three individual interviews to explore participants' perceptions of autonomy development in more depth (see Appendix I). The individual interviews lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Although the interviews were recorded, participants' names were protected through pseudonyms, and a password-protected computer was used for all data collected. The researcher was open to suggestions about a location where participants felt secure participating in the individual interview. Again, the researcher thanked the participants for their time and offered each participant a five-dollar gift card to the local coffee shop.

The individual interview protocol centered around current literature and the participants' responses during the focus group interviews. The researcher designed introductory questions to help ease participants' anxiety during the individual interview to help maintain rapport while fostering a safe and open environment (Fontana & Frey, 1998). The key, or main questions related to the study goals, were designed to gather more in-depth information about participants' perceptions regarding autonomy development (see Appendix J). The questions were highly open-ended because they were based on participants' perceptions shared during the focus group interviews. Although each participant was asked the same questions, the wording varied depending on their perceived agency level. For example, the words low, median, and high was inserted into the interview questions. Additionally, the researcher asked participants to expand on some of the ideas they shared during the focus group in more depth.

As stated above, questioning probes and redirecting questions were added to the individual interview protocol to support deeper questioning and keep the conversation on the topic (Chen, 2012). Closing questions were also included in the interview protocol to allow participants to share any additional information or ask questions (Creswell, 2014). Table 7 lists the questions crafted for the individual interviews and the supporting literature. Table 7 also highlights the correlation between the individual interview questions and the study research questions.

Table 7

Individual Interview Questions, Supporting Literature, and Research Question Alignment

Question Sequence	Interview Questions	Supporting Literature	Research Question Alignment
Introductory Questions	It is nice to meet with you again. How are you doing today? Do you have any reservations about the interview? Any questions? Has anything changed that you want me to be aware of since the last time we met during the focus group interview? It is nice to meet with you again. How are you doing today?	Creswell; 2014; Fontana & Frey, 1998	RQ 1
Key Questions	You are currently enrolled in the Teacher Education program in Block _______. What specific experiences with agency have you experienced during this Block or previous blocks?	Coker, 2017; Dampson et al., 2019; Lipponen & Kumpulanien, 2011	RQ 1 RQ 3
	During our focus group you mentioned that you did/did not feel comfortable steering away from the mandated textbooks. Can you elaborate on why you feel that way?	Baron et al., 2016; Hull & Uematsu, 2020; Ingersoll et al., 2016; Ormond, 2017; Phillips, 1991	RQ 2 RQ 3
	How do you feel about using all of the materials supplied by the district as a teacher? Do you feel that you can make changes? Explain.	Hull & Uematsu, 2020	RQ 2 RQ 3
	Last time we met, you talked about some of your practicum/student teaching placements. Tell me in more depth about how your mentor teachers perceived agency. How do you think their perceptions affected you? In what ways?	Ball, 2003; Coker, 2017; Dampson et al., 2019; Lipponen & Kumpulanien, 2011; Pelletier & Sharp, 2009,	RQ 2
	If you could choose any grade level to work with, which grade level would you choose? Do you think agency has anything with your choice?	Strong & Yoshida, 2014	RQ 2
	Describe your motivation when thinking about going to class? Field experiences? Teaching? Making decisions? Explain.	Deci & Ryan, 2000	RQ 1 RQ 2
	Is there anything you would change in the teaching field to help you become more motivated?	Deci & Ryan, 2000	RQ 1 RQ 2 RQ 3
Closing Questions	Where do you see yourself in five years? Do you think your experiences with agency impacted your answer? Is there anything that you would like to add?	Creswell, 2014; Kauffman et al., 2002	RQ 1 RQ 2 RQ 3

Data Collection

Several methods were employed to explore data regarding agency development of preservice teachers as they progress through an undergraduate education program at a university in southwestern Georgia. This study collected three main types of data: a preservice teachers' Perceived Agency Survey (Hull & Uematsu, 2020), focus group interviews, and individual interviews. Participant recruitment and data collection complied with the guidelines set forth by the IRB (see Appendix B). The researcher maintained all consent forms, survey data, focus group transcripts, and individual interview data on a password-protected computer. Additionally, pseudonyms were used to protect all personally identifiable information. The researcher created a pseudonym key that was saved on the researcher's password-protected computer. The researcher is the only individual that has access to the password-protected computer. The researcher's computer is stored in the researcher's home office.

Preservice Teachers' Perceived Agency Survey

Data were first collected through a five-point Likert scale survey created by Hull and Uematsu (2020) that measures preservice teachers' perceived agency. The survey was in a Google Form, and all data was saved on a password-protected computer. The consent form was embedded within the Google Form, and participants who signed the consent form were directed to continue to complete the preservice teachers' Perceived Agency Survey. Participants who chose not to participate were thanked for their time and logged off the survey. Once finished, the data from the Google Form was used to create a spreadsheet for analysis. The researcher removed all personally identifiable information from the spreadsheet, generating random numbers. The researcher created a key that matched the participants' personal information with a

random number. The key and the data spreadsheet were saved on a password-protected computer, accessible only to the researcher.

Focus Group Interviews

The second source of data collected was the focus group interviews. Hennrick (2014) states that the interactive nature of a focus group interview helps researchers glean knowledge and data that are not always easy to get during individual interviews. Participants who completed the initial survey received an email inviting them to volunteer their time to participate in a focus group interview. Three focus group interviews were scheduled after the participants volunteered and were chosen to participate in the focus group interviews. Krueger (2002) states that a focus group should include similar people. Therefore, the researcher met with three focus groups: participants who perceive low agency, median agency, and high sense of agency. In order to explore multiple perceptions, the researcher invited one participant from each block that perceives a low sense of agency, one from each block that perceives a median sense of agency, and one from each block that perceives a high sense of agency. Thus, a sample size of 12 focus group participants, four in each interview, were randomly selected based on their agency perception group (low, median, high). If participants declined to participate in the focus group interview, the researcher chose another participant from the sample. If a participant decided to leave the study after the interview started, it was noted in the discussion section. Focus group interviews lasted between 45 minutes to one hour.

The researcher created a focus group protocol to help guide the interviews (see Appendix H). Each focus group began with introductory questions soliciting participants' demographic and background information (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 1998). To help create an open and trusting environment, the researcher shared her personal experiences working with

preservice educators. According to Fontana and Frey (1998), participants are often more apt to share their experiences openly and honestly if they feel an established rapport with the researcher. The focus group was then asked the key questions and ended with the closing questions (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 1998). Key questions are those most connected to the research questions and related to the purpose of the study (Creswell, 2014). Creswell (2014) reports that closing questions are easier to answer and allow participants to reflect upon the interview and add any additional information. Each type of interview question is highlighted within the protocol.

Individual Interviews

An interview is a method that researchers use to gain information on the event or phenomenon they are studying (Maxwell, 2013). The three individual interviews were open-ended, semi-structured interviews with three preservice teachers. Utilizing semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions was most suitable because they provided the depth needed to fully explore preservice educators' perceptions of agency development (Merriam, 1998). Open-ended questions also allowed the researcher to explore new topics that may arise throughout the interviews (Johnson & Christensen, 2017; Merriam, 1998). Therefore, the researcher created an interview protocol to help guide the interviews (see Appendix J). The focus group interviews helped the researcher determine which three participants best fit the purpose of the study and were willing to participate further in the study. After analyzing the results of the Perceived Agency Survey and the focus group transcripts, the researcher chose three participants to talk to more deeply about their perceptions of autonomy. An invitation was emailed to a preservice teacher with a high sense of agency, a median sense of agency, and a low sense of agency.

Although the participants had already met the researcher during the focus group interviews, it was crucial to build rapport again (Fontana & Frey, 1998). At the beginning of the interview, participants had an opportunity to share any reservations about participating in the individual interview. Furthermore, the researcher utilized active listening (verbally and nonverbally) to build and maintain rapport throughout the interview (Hull, 2007). Lastly, the researcher agreed on a comfortable interview location for the participant to help ease any anxiousness.

Once an open and trusting environment was established, the interviewer asked the key questions and ended with the closing questions (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 1998). Each type of interview question is highlighted within the protocol. Each interview lasted 30 to 45 minutes, and the interviewer left sufficient time for participants to share their ideas or gather their thoughts.

The focus group and individual interviews were recorded using the Microsoft 365 transcription feature. This feature allowed the researcher to record directly into Microsoft Word, complete with timestamps. Microsoft 365 also allowed the researcher to edit the transcription if corrections were needed after replaying the audio and checking the original transcription. In addition, the transcription application allowed the researcher to be present in the interviews and engage with participants without taking detailed notes to capture the interview.

Data Analysis

When participants finished their Perceived Agency Survey, the data from the Google Form were used to create a spreadsheet for analysis. All personally identifiable information was removed from the spreadsheet and replaced with a generic code generated by the researcher. The code included the block of the participant, the level of agency, and the participant number. A

key was created and saved on the researcher's password-protected computer, only accessible to the researcher. Survey data were screened to determine any missing values or extreme outlying answers. The researcher deleted any data with missing values or extreme outliers, documenting what was removed and its reasoning.

All data were entered into SPSS for analysis. SPSS is a statistical software program that researchers may use to analyze and run statistical data. Descriptive statistics were run to determine how preservice elementary teachers perceive their current agency. Participants' demographic data were run and presented in a table. Since Likert-scale data is ordinal and the distance between the choices cannot be quantified, the results of each question were analyzed and presented throughout the results.

Although it is a qualitative case study, the researcher collected survey data and ran descriptive statistics to help determine participants' current perceptions of agency and use the results to identify participants invited to be interviewed for a more in-depth understanding of agency development. The survey results allowed the researcher to expand on participants' perceptions during individual and focus group interviews. Additionally, the results of the descriptive statistics helped purposefully select participants with a high sense of agency, a low sense of agency, and a median sense of agency for the focus group interviews and individual interviews.

Qualitative data analysis should occur in conjunction with data collection (Merriam, 1998; Saldana, 2013). Therefore, all recordings were transcribed promptly using the Microsoft 365 transcription application. After transcript completion, they were verified using two different methods. The researcher re-read the transcripts while listening to the recordings, attending to any errors in transcription. Additionally, transcripts were shared with each participant for review

and member checking (Merriam, 1998). The use of member checking was an essential step for verifying information. Participants were emailed a password-protected Portable Document Format (PDF) copy of their transcripts (see Appendix K). The password was sent in a separate e-mail to increase the security of the original document (see Appendix L). The email accompanying the PDF transcript asked participants to read the document and comment on whether the transcripts accurately described their experiences. Participants could also comment on anything they want changed if needed (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). The researcher's contact information was provided within the email for any questions or comments participants had.

When all transcripts were checked and verified, the data was analyzed. The protected data was transferred to the Dedoose software platform to begin the coding process. The researcher utilized an inductive coding approach, allowing one to discover emerging patterns and themes within the raw data without predefining a set of codes (Saldana, 2013; Thomas, 2006). Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2013) report that inductive coding is more of a "bottom-up" approach, where coding emerges throughout the data collection process. Moreover, when utilizing an inductive coding approach, researchers allow the codes to emerge from the data and do not begin with a list of preconceived codes (Miles et al., 2013). Williams and Moser (2019) added that inductive coding maximizes specific thematic categories and outcomes opportunities. Figure 2 outlines the researcher's linear qualitative data coding process (Creswell, 2002).

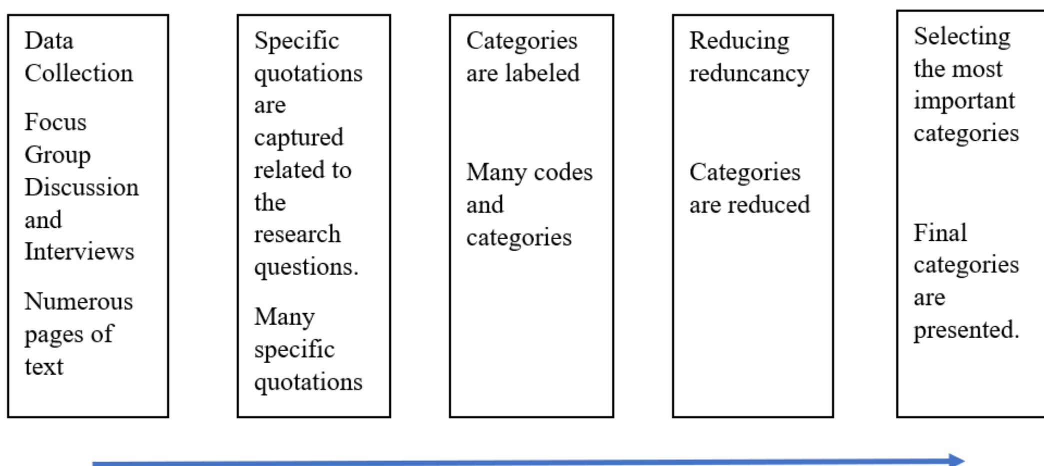

Figure 2. Linear process for inductive data analysis.

The researcher used the coding process to integrate the data collected with the theoretical framework and the research questions driving the current study (Saldana, 2016). Saldana (2016) describes the two stages of the coding process as First Cycle and Second Cycle. During the First Cycle of coding, the researcher created a list of initial codes, which will be very extensive and include a variety of possible categories (Saldana, 2016). However, during the Second Cycle of coding, the researcher began to look at all possible codes, making sense of themes and categories (Saldana, 2016). Additionally, any subthemes began to shine through during the Second Cycle. Using First and Second Cycle coding, the researcher could categorize the data, draw conclusions, and analyze the results within the theoretical framework and research questions upon which the study was built (Saldana, 2016).

Throughout the process, the exact language of the study participants was analyzed and coded versus the researcher's ideas and words (Saldana, 2013). A list of themes was recorded during the initial analysis of the transcripts. The first list was pervasive, as it included every theme that was an initial possibility. However, some initial theme ideas were eliminated or combined during the second and third readings of the transcripts. After the third reading, the

remaining themes were used to start the coding process. The data was coded using different colors for each potential theme, making it easier to organize, structure, and retrieve (Maxwell, 2005). Within each theme, subthemes also emerged. The researcher noted any differences in participants' perceptions within each theme. These differences were coded and considered subthemes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The researcher transferred the coded data to a content analysis table, separating the specific information into various subthemes. The data for each theme and subtheme was transferred verbatim, with quotation marks displaying the participants' exact words and phrases (Saldana, 2013).

Once coded, the data was analyzed for emerging patterns, themes, and connections. The patterns and themes were compared to prior research on preservice educators' autonomy development to note similarities and differences. The researcher also compared the patterns and themes to the Perceived Agency Survey results of the preservice educators. Furthermore, the researcher analyzed the patterns and themes within the realm of the self-determination theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan (2000). Taking time to analyze the results and how they fit into the SDT gave the researcher a lens into what information is essential to the study and what data to share with stakeholders (Green, 2014). Lastly, emerging patterns and themes were interpreted, and the results were shared with stakeholders.

The researcher triangulated the data using three sources: the preservice teachers' Perceived Agency Survey, focus group interviews, and individual interviews. Conducting follow-up focus group interviews and individual interviews after administering the preservice teachers' Perceived Agency Survey aided in the study's validation while ensuring participants understood the intent of the questions (Hull & Uematsu, 2020). The researcher paraphrased and summarized participants' thoughts throughout the interviews to clarify if needed. Member

checking was utilized to ensure the credibility of the data collected during the focus group and individual interviews. Furthermore, Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest that using detailed descriptions when reporting the findings and any bias the researcher may have due to their background with the dissertation topic is essential to build further validity.

Summary

This chapter outlined the qualitative case study research method for exploring preservice elementary teachers' perceptions of agency development as they progressed through an undergraduate program at a university in southwest Georgia. Participants were invited to complete the preservice teachers' Perceived Agency Survey. After the survey results were analyzed, the researcher conducted focus group interviews and individual interviews. The data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed for emerging patterns, themes, and connections. The analysis results are presented in Chapter 4 of this dissertation report, and the conclusions are discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter IV: Results

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to examine the agency development of preservice teachers as they progressed through an undergraduate educator preparation program at a university in southwestern Georgia. With approximately 50 percent of educators leaving the profession within the first five years of teaching (Ingersoll et al., 2018), preservice teachers must begin to understand agency and its development (Hull & Uematsu, 2020; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). This knowledge can influence what educators do in their classrooms and schools (Hull & Uematsu, 2020). Since there has been very little research conducted in the United States on agency development within preservice teachers, the results of this study may help fill the research gap by exploring how preservice teachers develop agency as they progress through a teacher education program.

The research questions that guided this exploratory case study were the following: (1) How does preservice teachers' sense of agency develop as they progress through an undergraduate education program at a university in southwestern Georgia? (2) What factors do preservice teachers perceive to influence their agency as they progress through their classes? (3) What are preservice teachers' current perceptions of agency, defined as controlling what is taught and how it is taught?

Chapter 4 is organized into the following sections: an outline of the participants, a findings section focused on each research question that includes participants' quotes, data supporting each theme and subtheme, and the correlating results from the Perceived Agency Survey (Hull & Uematsu, 2020), and a summary of the chapter.

Participants

Participants for this study were preservice elementary teachers enrolled in a university in southwestern Georgia. The participants were enrolled in one of the following: Block 1 (semester 1), Block 2 (semester 2), Block 3 (semester 3), or Block 4 (student teaching) classes. There were 66 preservice elementary education teachers invited to participate in the study, and 37 preservice elementary education teachers responded, with a response rate of 56 percent. However, after analyzing the consent forms, it was noted that six participants opted out of the study. Therefore, 47 percent (N=31) of the preservice elementary education teachers completed the Perceived Agency Survey (Hull & Uematsu, 2020).

After the initial data were analyzed, the researcher conducted three focus group interviews, purposefully selecting participants with a high sense of agency, a median sense of agency, and a low sense of agency enrolled in each of the following: Block 1 (semester 1), Block 2 (semester 2), Block 3 (semester 3), and Block 4 (student teaching) classes. The researcher noted that no student teacher (Block 4) participant had a low sense of agency; therefore, only three individuals were invited to participate in that focus group interview. Three focus groups were conducted at a comfortable location for the participants; however, only 10 preservice teachers were present, as one could not attend the scheduled interview due to an illness.

Once the focus group interviews were complete, the researcher analyzed the Perceived Agency Survey and focus group transcripts, selecting three participants to interview individually: a preservice teacher with a high sense of agency, a median sense of agency, and a low sense of agency. All three interviews were held at a comfortable location for the participants.

Findings

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to explore agency development of preservice elementary teachers as they progressed through an undergraduate education program at a university in southwestern Georgia. The findings from the study addressed the three research questions posed at the start of the study. The following section includes descriptions of the findings organized by the research questions and includes the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data analysis.

Agency Development of Preservice Teachers

How does preservice teachers' sense of agency develop as they progress through an undergraduate education program at a university in southwestern Georgia? As participants progressed through their teacher preparation program, perceptions of agency development were connected to personal motivation (N=9), program expectations (N=10), and grade-level field experiences (N=10). Table 8 outlines the themes and subthemes that emerged from the interview data based on the frequencies of references related to each theme and subtheme. Participants shared that their confidence and advocacy increased as they progressed through the Blocks, which increased their sense of agency. Participants also perceived that they were given more opportunities to enact agency as they progressed through the Blocks. Block 1 participants felt constricted by the lesson plan format and the intense expectations required during the first semester of the teacher education program. However, participants in Blocks 2, 3, and 4 shared that as they continued through the teacher education program, they were given more opportunities to enact agency both within their lessons and field experiences. Lastly, participants perceived that agency development could be connected to their grade-level field experiences. Regardless of Block enrolled, some participants felt enacting agency within the classroom came

more naturally with lower elementary (N=6), while others (N=4) felt enacting agency came more naturally with upper elementary. The following describes detailed findings for research question one and includes participants' quotes, data supporting each theme and subtheme, and the results from the Perceived Agency Survey (Hull & Uematsu, 2020).

Table 8

Agency Development of Preservice Educators

Theme	Subtheme	Frequency	Participant Quotes (Example)
Theme 1: Personal Motivation Frequency – 20 Frequency by Block Block 1- 3 Block 2- 4 Block 3- 7 Block 4- 6	Subtheme 1: Confidence	11	"As I move through my classes in the education program, I have noticed that I am more confident in myself as a teacher. I started out very shy and nervous, but now I am confident, which makes me motivated to continue" (Joy, 4-1).
	Subtheme 2: Advocacy	9	"I keep myself motivated to continue because I know I have to advocate for the students I work with" (Amanda, 2-3).
Theme 2: Teacher Education Program Expectations Frequency – 24 Frequency by Block Block 1- 8 Block 2- 6 Block 3- 4 Block 4- 6	Subtheme 1: Lesson Plans	13	"The university is so strict with your lesson plan choices during Block 1. There is so much you cannot do. However, during Block 2 it has been more relaxed, and I can start to plan my own lessons based on what the students need" (Lincoln, 2-1).
	Subtheme 2: Expectations Change Through the Blocks	11	"When you are in Block 3, the professors are going to expect you to do what is best for the students in your class. Your mentor teachers are going to expect that as well" (Natalia, 3-1).
Theme 3: Grade Level Field Experiences Frequency - 10 Frequency by Block Block 1- 2 Block 2- 3 Block 3- 3 Block 4- 2	Subtheme 1: Agency Comes More Naturally in Lower Grades	6	"The younger kids, like in kindergarten and first, love to come to school most of the time. So you can do what you need to make sure they are learning, and they will most likely enjoy the lessons" (Sheryl, 1-2)
	Subtheme 2: Agency Comes More Naturally in Upper Grades	4	"It seems that there is more room to try new things when the students are in fourth or fifth grade. You can tap into their interest and meet them there with your lessons" (Kelly, 4-2).

Personal motivation. Participants perceived that agency development was connected to their motivation within the program. Participants stated that as they progressed through the program, they were given more opportunities to enact agency within their field experiences and classroom expectations, which created a sense of motivation to continue in the program. According to Natalia (3-1), having agency can be an "uplifting experience." She shared that once you realize you can make some changes to meet the needs of the students, you are more motivated to keep trying. Kelly (4-2) reiterated Natalia's perception, adding that "agency keeps you motivated to spend more time creating lessons that are best for the students in your classes. Sometimes that means working late, which is what my mentor teacher and I have done."

Natalia and Kelly's perceptions were echoed by 29 participants who "agreed" (N=9) or "strongly agreed" (N=20) with the following statement: I will provide quality education to my students, even if I need to spend more time preparing for class than my colleagues do. Amanda (2-3) observed that the few mentor teachers she has worked with have "…gone above and beyond to prepare quality lessons. Often these teachers were the last to leave at the end of the day. However, they were motivated to do what the students needed." Amanda continued to talk about how during Block 1, there were moments when she felt defeated and her motivation was low; however, as she progressed through the program, she gained more self-confidence to enact agency or try something new. "It almost becomes natural. The more freedom you have to do awesome lessons, the more excited you are to present them to your professors."

Throughout the interviews, the perception that participants' motivation came from the confidence gained through the teacher education program was cited 11 times. During the focus group interview, Lincoln (2-1) discussed how his experiences differed from Block 1 to Block 2. He shared that in Block 1, the expectations were strict and that changing the lesson ideas and

format was challenging. However, during Block 2, Lincoln felt his confidence grow, stating that he could "choose more of what I'm going to do. You are granted more agency, making you think more positively."

In comparison, the notion that participants' motivation stemmed from their opportunities to advocate for themselves and the students was mentioned nine times during the interviews. Becca (3-2) perceived that she had more opportunities to advocate for herself and her students and felt more motivated to continue. Amanda (2-3) expressed that she keeps herself "motivated to continue because I know I have to advocate for the students I work with."

Lastly, participants (N=8) often expressed a positive change in their motivation as they progressed through their classes. Kelly (4-2) shared, "The more you can successfully advocate for the students, the more you want to do it again." During Block 1, Kelly struggled to "see past the strict lesson plan format." However, as she progressed through her classes, she noticed more freedom in writing lessons and what types of lessons the preservice educators could teach during their field experiences. As she progressed through her classes, Kelly's outcome on completing the program became more positive. "I am now student teaching and am excited to continue in my classroom when I finish."

Participants shared that they felt motivated to continue in the program because they found value in relating to the students and advocating for their needs. Many participants talked about being a voice for the students, working to build up their confidence to make student-driven decisions in the classroom. These findings are consistent with Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory (SDT) which stresses that when an individual's psychological needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy are met, individuals experience autonomous motivation.

Confidence. As participants progressed through their teacher education classes and Blocks enrolled in the program, they found that they were more confident in their teaching abilities, which increased their motivation to continue teaching. Joy (4-1) shared that she is motivated to attend classes because "during my first Block, Block 1, I was like a scared little kid in the corner. However, now I'm definitely more confident than I was, and I could definitely do this if they gave me a job tomorrow." Joy said she "just loves, loves, loves, loves her mentor teacher and loves the teaching environment."

Natalia's (3-1) experiences were similar to Joy's, as she shared positive experiences about being more confident about incorporating best practices when working with mentor teachers who trusted the process.

> I'm interested in trying new lessons that will engage the students that I am working with. I have noticed that it sort of depends on how open your mentor teacher is to trying something new and like, trusting the process. I always try to get to know the students and propose different lessons to my mentor teacher. I am more confident to try it (new lessons) now in Block 3 than when I was in Block 1.

Randi (1-1) had extremely tough classes during her first semester at the university. She suffered many personal setbacks, creating multiple obstacles in her educational journey. Randi shared that her motivation to continue in the program came from a different place.

> I received a phone call from someone asking if I needed to withdraw from the program. I said, who told you I wanted to withdraw? And the poor lady that called me said that it was my professor. I told her, oh no! I am not going to withdraw.

Randi said the phone call motivated her to continue at the university and follow her dream of being a teacher. In the end, Randi was grateful that the professor had pushed her this hard and pushed her to continue in the program, not give up and walk away.

Advocacy. Participants also expressed that motivation came from advocating for the students they encountered in their field experiences. Although participants discussed the importance of enacting agency when advocating for the students during their field experiences, most participants (N=8) mentioned that it is hard to advocate for them during Block 1. Terri (2-2) mentioned that advocating for students in Block 1 is difficult because "you are just learning how to interact with the students by watching the teacher." However, Terri found that in Block 2, she had more interaction with the students and could speak up and talk to her professors or mentor teachers about lessons or ideas that might be best for her learners. Natalia (3-1) was relieved to be in Block 3 this semester. "I finally feel like I have more say in the classroom and more experience to bring to my lessons. I am not embarrassed to speak up and control some of the outcomes. Like what the kids need!" Natalia continued to talk about how her confidence in creating more student-centered lessons has grown throughout the program.

Participants also discussed how motivation to be an advocate pushes them to continue in the teacher education program at the university. Becca (3-2) continues her educational journey because she wants to be an advocate for students. Becca said, "I have to get through my master's degree someday so I can do just that. I have big plans and want to continue to work towards them." Sheryl (1-2) also shared that most of her motivation to attend class daily comes from wanting to do what is best for the students. Sheryl feels she will become an advocate for students because "as long as there is data to support a change, I will talk to my mentor teacher and try to make that change."

The motivational theme derived from the focus group and individual interview data were consistent with various questions on the Perceived Agency Survey; however, the results varied by Block. Most participants in Blocks 3 and 4 (N=8) “agreed” with the following statement: I will consider carefully what textbook to use in my classroom. Alternatively, most participants in Blocks 1 and 2 (N=14) “disagreed” or were “undecided” about that statement.

When Kelly (4-2) was asked to expand on what motivates her to introduce a curriculum or text that she thinks might be the most effective for the students, she stated:

> I am motivated because I have to think about what my students need. I am currently student teaching and have learned from many of my mentor teachers that change is good. However, to make those changes and introduce other lessons, there has to be data or something to support it. I guess you could say I am practicing what I know I will need to do when I get my own classroom.

Amanda (2-3) had similar thoughts, highlighting that she is just as important in a child’s life as their mentor teacher. Amanda shared, "so many people ask why I am going into education now, at such a rough time. I want to make a difference in a child, or maybe more.” She continued to describe the importance of researching and finding texts you can use to connect with the students you teach.

Sheryl (1-2) reported that she disagreed with the statement because many times in the elementary school setting, one does not “get the opportunity to pick the textbooks they use.” She mentioned that it might be easier to enact agency with some of the lessons you choose to teach; however, she has had no experience observing an educator who can “pick their text.”

Likewise, the results of the Perceived Agency Survey revealed that, as a whole, participants find personal value in teaching. Participants’ perceptions of finding personal value

in teaching were consistent throughout the Blocks, as seven participants “agreed” they found personal value in teaching, and 24 participants “strongly agreed” they found personal value in teaching. The seven participants who “agreed” were all enrolled in Block 1.

Lincoln (2-1) shared that sometimes the value in teaching comes at times you would not even imagine. For example, Lincoln talked about a lesson that did not go the way he had planned. However, “even when things don’t always go as planned, one can learn from the mistakes… you learn and try again!” Randi’s (1-1) perceptions were similar, as she said, “you can’t learn if you do not have a chance to make mistakes.”

Joy (4-1) finds personal value in going the extra mile for the students she teaches. Joy expressed value in the following way: “We do the houses that Ron Clark does, so going, like, the extra mile to set things up that are important for the students.” Natalia (3-1) communicated her value in connecting with the students. She said, "I get excited seeing them (the students) exceed when maybe they thought they couldn’t.”

Throughout the interviews, participants in each Block stated that to be responsible, they needed a sense of agency to find lessons that catered to the student's needs. The majority (N=27) of participants also “strongly agree” that they feel responsible for doing their part in helping students learn, with three participants “agreeing” and only one participant “undecided.” Robin (3-3) expanded on her responsibility, saying, “We can try new things if the students need them.” Kelly (4-2) mentioned that as a student teacher, she was “responsible for making sure the students were learning.” She felt she could only do this through agency, sharing her ideas with her mentor teacher and “always trying something new!”

Natalia (3-1) also stated that she feels responsible for helping her students learn. Her perceptions of how she stays responsible include continuously checking in with her mentor

teachers and professors. As she goes through her teacher education program, Natalia has learned that she has to rely on the support of others. "I am motivated to make a difference in the classroom. I share my lesson plan ideas with others and get feedback. In this way, I ensure that I teach the students and make myself a better educator."

Teacher education program expectations. The second theme emerging from the data was that participants perceived that agency development was connected to the expectations of the university's teacher education program. Participants referenced agency development concerning lesson plans 13 times during the focus group and individual interviews. Participants discussed the lesson plan expectations, sharing perceptions of how the expectations changed throughout the Blocks. Natalia (3-1) said that she had many more opportunities to enact agency within her lesson plans now that she was in Block 3. "Agency in Block 1 is difficult. There is just too much we have to cover, and the time it takes to write a lesson in Block 1 does not allow for as much agency." Amanda (2-3) agreed, "Even though I am only in Block 2, I noticed more chances to write lessons that might be more interesting to the students."

Additionally, participants in Blocks 2, 3, and 4 perceived that the expectations of the teacher education program changed as they progressed through their classes, providing them with more opportunities to enact agency within their field experiences. Lincoln (2-1) believed agency development had more to do with the professors' expectations in each Block. "You get more freedom in Block 2 to make your own decisions. The Block 2 professors will tell you what they expect from you but will let you try new lessons." Robin (3-3) agreed, stating that as preservice teachers continue to go through the program, there are more opportunities to "try new things if the students need them." Terri (2-2) felt that the gradual release of "freedom" as you

move through the Blocks lent itself to "asking your mentor teacher to try different lessons based on the needs of the students and not based on the sole expectations of that college class."

According to Niemiec and Ryan (2009), the SDT also applies to students in the educational setting. When students are intrinsically motivated, they obtain satisfaction from an activity and complete it because they want to. As participants moved through the program, they perceived that more opportunities were available to enact agency within their lessons. The professors facilitated opportunities that empowered the preservice teachers' autonomy development, which can positively increase their sense of intrinsic motivation (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Lesson plans. All of the participants interviewed discussed the university's expectations of lesson plans. Participants enrolled in Blocks 2, 3, and 4 (N=8) perceived that they could enact more agency within their lessons as they continued through the teacher preparation program. On the other hand, the students enrolled in Block 1 (N=2) perceived that the lesson plan format was rigid, preventing them from controlling what was taught or how it could be taught.

Lincoln (2-1) and Terri (2-2) had similar experiences with Block 1 lesson plans. Lincoln said the "emphasis on the lesson plans might be unnecessary." However, he did note that the differentiation portion of the lesson plan format could be a positive aspect. It made it easier to "see the diversity of needs in the class…and meet the backgrounds of our learners." Terri added that during Block 1, she "basically followed what the mentor teacher had said. I followed her guidelines…making sure I had everything she wanted." However, Terri shared that during Block 2, she could create more student-friendly lessons, enjoying the fact that she did not stick to such strict parameters.

Kelly (4-2) was highly grateful for her professors in Block 1; however, she also mentioned that some lesson plan expectations were too intense. According to Kelly, "If I had to sit down and write those intense lessons for every subject, every day, I would never be able to continue to be a teacher. I would be burned out already before even graduating." Kelly is currently student teaching and has noticed that most of the lesson plan expectations from Block 1 would make it almost impossible to be an educator.

Although Robin (3-3) also agreed that Block 1 was intense, she stated, "I love out-of-the-box lesson plans…I will work to make sure it follows the kind of pattern that is going on at the school. But, I'll push the limits just a little." Thinking outside the box allowed Robin to find agency within the program's expectations. Amanda's (2-3) perceptions mirrored Robin's, as she mentioned that sometimes agency comes from advocating for yourself. When Amanda gets an idea for a lesson that may not fit the program's expectations, she discusses her idea with her professors and advocates for her agency.

The results of the Perceived Agency Survey were similar when analyzing the item: I feel that I have control over what I teach and how I teach it. Most students in Block 1 "disagreed" (N=2) or were "undecided" (N=12) about this statement. When asked to expand on their thinking concerning how much control they have over the lessons they write, Randi (1-1) and Sheryl (1-2) both perceived that the strict lesson plan format made it difficult to really "try something new." Randi felt the format for the lesson plans was overwhelming. She shared:

> The lesson plans are so strict that they say that there is a certain way that we must write them. It is a bit frustrating because the teachers that we are assigned to in the classrooms say that we will never write lesson plans like that. So, I feel that it is a lot of work that we will not use…I feel that so much of what we turn in is strictly textbook. The

experience that I am supposed to be getting is sometimes masked by the expectations of someone else.

Sheryl (1-2) shared a feeling of anxiety when thinking about writing lesson plans for Block 1. According to Sheryl, the professors are helpful and want the students to succeed; however, they do not "really give us much leeway when it comes to what we plan and how it can be taught."

Throughout the focus group interviews, the students enrolled in Block 1 voiced excitement about the potential to enact more agency within their lessons, as shared by their peers in Blocks 2, 3, and 4. As Randi (1-1) listened to her peers in other Blocks share their experiences with lesson plans, she stated, "After listening to what you are saying and how it is going to be different in the other blocks, I am thinking maybe I can make it through the program." Sheryl (1-2) echoed similar sentiments, sharing that she perceives that the lesson plans will become more "student-centered" as she continues through the teacher education program.

There was also a discrepancy between Blocks when analyzing the results from the following survey item: Generally, someone else decides what and how I teach. Participants in Block 1 "agreed" (N=3) or were "undecided" (N=13) about someone else deciding what and how they teach, with only one participant "disagreeing." Most participants in Block 2 (N=5), Block 3 (N=4), and Block 4 (N=1) "disagreed" with the statement. Additionally, three participants from Block 4 and one from Block 3 "strongly disagreed" with the statement.

From Joy's (4-1) experience, mentor teachers and professors generally influence preservice educators' lessons during Block 1. "You are more of a guest in the classroom. It is not your place to make many educational decisions," says Joy. However, as you move through your classes, you "have more of a say and have more support. Since I am student teaching, I am

basically treated as an equal rather than a guest." Becca (3-2) said she could understand why so many individuals in Block 1 were undecided about how others may decide what and how the material is taught. During Block 1, Becca was uncomfortable writing lesson plans and shared that she "was not very good at writing them." Therefore, she often contacted her professors and mentor teacher for help writing her lesson plans. "If other individuals assist with the lesson plans, it can take away from a student's agency, and they may feel as if that person is telling them what to do," added Becca.

Expectations change through the blocks. Some participants also shared perceptions of agency that develop through the natural expectations of the teacher education program. Participants enrolled in Blocks 2, 3, and 4 (N=8) perceived that the program's expectations provided more opportunities to enact agency within their lessons and classroom experiences as they continued through the teacher education program. Natalia (3-1) mentioned that her sense of agency was much higher now that she is enrolled in Block 3. Natalia said that "when you are in Block 3, the professors are going to expect you to do what is best for the students in your class. Your mentor teachers are going to expect that as well." She went on to talk about a unit that she was working on with her mentor teacher. Natalia was excited and proud to bring her ideas to her mentor teacher. She also felt confident that her professors would be proud of her for expressing her data-driven ideas.

Since Kelly (4-2) is student-teaching, she feels that the program expectations continue to encourage students to make decisions.

> For example, as you start in the program, there is not a lot that you have control over. The lesson plans are set, and you follow the strict lesson plan guide. However, as you move through the program, you are naturally expected to, I guess, use more agency in

your lessons. Your professors will expect you to create lessons based on what the students need, even though you have class expectations. The lesson might have to be a science lesson, social studies, or something else.

Joy's (4-1) perceptions were similar to Kelly's. She added that the part she enjoyed most about each Block was that the classes were more relevant to their learning, and they could take the information to their field experiences. Joy positively expressed that "my class is on behavior management this semester. We have guest speakers, and it's all about stuff I will need to know."

Although participants in Blocks 2, 3, and 4 shared perceptions of enacting more agency within their classes, assignments, and field experiences as they progressed through the teacher education program, Block 1 participants started the interviews with perceptions of disbelief. Randi (1-1) perceived that during Block 1, the class expectations were rigid and the program was "not allowing you to make any changes." Randi shared frustrations with the rigid nature of the program, wondering how she could continue to grow as an educator. Randi said, "My Block 1 experience is totally opposite of the others. I feel that everything is strictly textbook, from what I am learning to what I turn in." However, as the interview progressed, Randi expressed a more optimistic feeling toward the program, as she anticipated positive agency changes in Block 2.

Although participants shared experiences with agency development throughout the interviews, the majority of preservice educations were "undecided" (N=14) or "agreed" (N=5) with the following survey item: I prefer curriculum that tells the teacher exactly what to do, so that I don't risk making the wrong decision. Only 12 participants "disagreed" with the statement. An analysis by Block showed that the 12 participants that "disagreed" were enrolled in Blocks 2, 3, and 4. However, one Block 2 participant and one Block 3 participant were undecided. Block 1 participants marked either "undecided" (N=12) or "agree" (N=5).

When asked to elaborate on her answer, Amanda (2-2) stated, " I want to do a good job. Sometimes having a book to guide you makes it easier to plan lessons and make sure you are right." Amanda hopes she will feel more comfortable changing up the curriculum and lessons as she gets into Block 3 and Block 4. Sheryl (1-2) shared similar feelings, "I watch my mentor teacher make decisions as she goes. However, I am undecided because, with a curriculum, I can at least have some starting point."

Robin (3-3) mentioned that although she disagreed with having a prescribed curriculum, she did think that the curriculum could "help customize what we are learning in class and could be a source to check for more. Like a guide for the teacher." Terri (2-2) agreed. She felt the prescribed curriculum could "be used as a resource." However, she wants to see schools solicit teachers' input on what might be a "good resource for struggling students." Terri and Robin shared perspectives that even if a school purchases a prescribed curriculum, it is important to change up the material if it is going to benefit the students.

Grade-Level field experiences. The third theme from the study was that participants perceived that agency development could be connected to the grade levels they were placed in during their field experiences. Some participants (N=6) perceived that agency came more naturally while working with students in lower elementary grades. Amanda (2-3) shared positive experiences working with primary students. She noticed that connecting with the first-grade students in her field placement came more naturally than with the fourth-grade students. Amanda found the standards "easier to connect with as well in first grade. So, creating lesson plans is more fun at this level too."

In contrast, some participants (N=4) perceived agency development as more natural when working with upper elementary grades. When asked about grade-level experiences and agency,

Natalia (3-1) quickly shared positive experiences working with upper elementary grades. She preferred the upper elementary classrooms because the students were often more independent and did not need as much "hand-holding." Natalia continued to talk about how it was easier to enact agency into upper-grade lessons because "you don't need to spend so much time going over the activities each day."

Lower elementary grades. Some participants felt that enacting agency within the classroom came more naturally when working with lower elementary grades. Sheryl (1-2) mentioned that "the younger kids, like in kindergarten and first, love to come to school most of the time. So you can do what you need to make sure they are learning, and they will most likely enjoy the lessons." Joy (4-1) echoed the same thoughts, sharing that she finds it easier to enact agency with "the little kids because I am bigger than them, and they still look up to me." Joy said, "I find when students are closer to my age, they sometimes like to argue." However, she believed it was easier to enact agency once she got their respect, even with the older children.

Terri (2-2) talked about how she feels more confident making decisions during her second-grade field experience. According to Terri, "the students are very competitive! They love a good Kahoot or Blookit." Terri advocates for new lessons that correspond to the students' competitive nature. She did not see this same type of competition when placed in an upper elementary classroom, making it harder for her to justify lesson changes.

Although Lincoln (2-1) acknowledged that working with kindergarteners forged many opportunities to enact agency within the classroom, he also shared the importance of taking the lead from your mentor teacher. Since it is not his classroom, Lincoln feels uncomfortable making many changes to the lessons or how his mentor teacher teaches. He tends "to take on

many traits from other people, so like if I see something the teacher is doing…I'm just like, this person is a teacher, so I am going to teach how they are teaching."

Lastly, participants (N=3) shared their perceptions that standardized testing hinders one's agency. Amanda (2-3) shared worries about being an upper-grade elementary educator. "There is so much pressure on teachers in third through fifth grade. The stress of the Georgia Milestones hinders what they can do in their classrooms." Sheryl (1-2) agreed with Amanda even though this was only her first Block in the education program. "Although I have not had the experience of the Georgia Milestones yet, all the negative talk about how they prepare for it makes me think about how it will affect agency in those grades."

Upper elementary grades. Alternatively, some participants perceive that enacting agency comes more naturally when working with the upper elementary grades. Robin (3-3) worked with a second-grade classroom and felt many students had short attention spans. She had to try to "hook" them to get them interested. However, third and fourth-grade students do not need much emphasis on grabbing their attention, and Robin can spend her time creating lessons the student will enjoy. Robin says

> They love things with technology, like PowerPoint, quizzes, Kahoots, Blookets, and stuff like that. They enjoy competition. That is what I know- they do like competition. The other thing about students in third or fourth grade is that they will own it- rise up to what the challenge is!

Robin also discussed that as she has progressed through the teacher education program, she feels that the conversations with her mentor teacher flow more easily. These conversations also make it easier to suggest lesson ideas and changes.

Kelly (4-2) found it easier to shy away from a textbook or curriculum when the students are older. When planning lessons, Kelly researches different lessons she wants to try based on what the students are "into." "Kids go through many trends throughout the year, and I try to stay on top of what they like. It is easier with the fifth graders because they will tell you exactly what they like and don't like!"

Natalia (3-1) had similar sentiments, sharing that when working with the younger grades, there is "a lot more repetition, and you have to make sure that they understand it." Natalia felt that it was necessary to follow the curriculum more steadily with the younger children, as there are many reteaching opportunities built into the curriculum. However, with upper-grade students, Natalia can often "give them direction, and they know what they are supposed to do." Since most students can start immediately, she feels that leaves more room in the day to incorporate different lessons and present learning in different ways.

When asked about their perceptions regarding the Georgia Milestones, only one participant discussed a positive perception. Kelly (4-2) shared that she perceived the Georgia Milestones preparation as "a time when I can enact agency. I know what the students need to know and where they are. Then I can design lessons to help them get there." As she continued talking about her experiences with the Georgia Milestones, Kelly admitted that her perception might change when she has her classroom. "The pressures may be different when it is your classroom. Maybe there won't be as much wiggle room to change the lessons," Kelly added.

Although participants differed in their perceptions of agency development based on their grade-level experiences, they all agreed that it was their job as educators to do what was best for the students in their classrooms. On the Perceived Agency Survey, all participants (N=31) "strongly disagreed" with the following statement: It doesn't really matter whether I do my part

in helping students learn or not- they will meet plenty of other teachers. Throughout the interviews, participants often talked about how important it was to leave an impact on the students they teach. According to Kelly (4-2), “I have to get up each day and think about what I can do to make something better for the students.”

Additionally, the Perceived Agency Survey results show that participants believe they influence their students' progress. The majority of participants (N=21) marked “disagree” with the following question: I think the progress of my students is independent of anything I, as a teacher, might do. Participants often talked about their different field experiences when asked to expand upon their notions. Natalia (3-1) said she feels more “comfortable influencing students at a higher grade. It just comes more naturally to me!” On the other hand, Terri (2-2) feels she can enact more agency with the lessons she writes for her lower elementary field experience. Regardless of their grade-level preference or comfortability, participants agreed that they feel responsible for doing their part in helping the students learn and grow.

Influences on Agency Development

What factors do preservice teachers perceive to influence their agency as they progress through their classes? When exploring what factors preservice teachers perceive to influence their agency, the researcher noted that participants perceive that connections with others positively influence agency development. Participants in each Block shared that they felt that their peers (N=5), students in their field experiences (N=10), mentor teachers (N=8), and professors (N=7) positively influenced their agency development. Participants shared that the individuals they are connected to within the program influence their lesson plan ideas and their confidence to advocate for best practices, both practices participants perceived to be part of agency development. Conversely, participants also shared challenges that impact their agency development. These challenges include the negative energy that envelops today's educational system (N=10) and the rigid schedules they adhere to during their grade-level placements (N=10). Although participants in all Blocks felt that these challenges affected their sense of agency, they also shared a responsibility to help their students learn. The following describes the detailed findings for research question two and includes participants' quotes, data supporting each theme and subtheme, and the results from the Perceived Agency Survey (Hull & Uematsu, 2020). Table 9 outlines the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data based on the frequencies of references related to each theme and subtheme.

Table 9

Influences on Agency Development

Theme	Subtheme	Frequency	Participant Quotes (Example)
Theme 1: Connections Influence Agency Development Frequency – 43 Frequency by Block Block 1- 11 Block 2- 15 Block 3- 10 Block 4- 7	Subtheme 1: Peer Support	8	"It is so nice that the students in other Blocks at the university are willing to look at our plans and give us advice" (Sheryl, 1-2).
	Subtheme 2: Relationships with Students	11	"To make changes to my lessons, I have to build a relationship with the students I teach and analyze their needs" (Becca, 3-2).
	Subtheme 3: Mentor Teachers	16	"I am lucky to have mentor teachers that understand that I'm a college student and that there are requirements that need to be in my lessons, and they are willing to let me try a new lesson for the students" (Amanda, 2-3).
	Subtheme 4: Professors	8	"For the most part, the professors are there to support you. If they did not support you, I think many students would leave after Block 1, since it is such a hard Block" (Amanda, 2-3).
Theme 2: Challenges to Agency Development Frequency – 20 Frequency by Block Block 1- 5 Block 2- 6 Block 3- 5 Block 4- 4	Subtheme 1: Negative Energy	13	"There are some teachers who say that we are crazy to get into teaching. They are waiting to get out. It can just be so negative, you know" (Randi, 1-1).
	Subtheme 2: Rigid Schedules	7	"The schedule needs to be more flexible. The schedule cannot be so rigid. Some students are morning learners, and some are afternoon" (Sheryl, 1-2).

Connections influence agency development. While coding the data, the researcher noted that all participants (N=10) described their connections with others as a positive influence on their sense of agency and how it develops. "It is so nice that the students in other Blocks at the university are willing to look at our plans and give us advice," says Sheryl (1-2). As a Block 1 preservice educator, Sheryl does not perceive that she has "very much say in her lessons or how to teach a concept. However, when you connect with your peers, you realize there is hope that agency will eventually be possible." Participants found their connections with their peers, students, mentor teachers, and professors to be the most influential on their agency development. All participants (N=10) discussed that the demands of the teacher education program were rigorous, and looking to others for support made it feasible to continue within the program and enact some agency along the way

Deci and Ryan (2000) reported that individuals often develop autonomous motivation when their needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence are met. Connections with others satisfy one's need for relatedness or interaction with others. Participants positively discussed their connections with individuals in and out of the teacher education program. The connections participants built with their peers, mentor teachers, and professors may have satisfied their need for social interactions, while the relationships they built with the students in their field experiences may have satisfied their need to care for others (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Peer support. Participants (N=5) stated that they rely on their peers to help them with their lesson plans and the everyday demands of the education program. "During Block 1, you feel like there is no room for decision-making or mistakes," says Sheryl (1-2). "However, when you find peers enrolled in other Blocks to help you navigate the plans and expectations, you notice that you will get more say throughout the program." Sheryl continued to share her

feelings of excitement as she watched her peers in Block 2 and Block 3 enact more agency within their lessons and talk more positively about their field experiences. "I will get there one day! I'll be the teacher who gets to try a new lesson as well," added Sheryl.

Terri (2-2) shared that individuals enrolled in other Blocks can significantly assist the students. Terri states that the students in the teacher education program are "like a little community. If we have questions or problems, I know we could ask somebody from another Block to help out." Robin (3-3) concurred, adding, "now, many students are coming to me and asking for my help!" Robin feels confident in supporting her peers but is willing to ask for advice if needed. Terri and Robin agreed that as they progressed through the teacher education program, their peers positively impacted their sense of agency development, sharing ideas of how to change their lessons to meet the needs of the learners.

Kelly (4-2) felt very helpless when she started in Block 1. Nevertheless, she met a peer in Block 2 and felt the peer's guidance pushed her to continue.

> I was very stressed out during block one. I had many ideas for my lesson plans but did not know where to begin. So, I was lucky to meet a peer who could guide me into putting my ideas on paper and then presenting those ideas to my professors in my lesson plans. Block 1 can be challenging, but with some peer support, it is doable!

Kelly believes she is now a positive "peer" to others enrolled in Blocks 1, 2, or 3. "I like to share my ideas with them and reassure them that as they continue, there are many opportunities to make changes based on what the students need."

Relationships with students. Secondly, participants found that their relationships with the students can help develop agency. When asked what agency meant to them, all participants (N=10) noted that agency allows educators to "do what is best for kids." As the interviews

continued, participants (N=6) shared that this type of agency, making decisions for students, develops as you start to build relationships with students. Kelly (4-2) had a hard time imagining that she would ever be "making as many student-driven lesson choices" as she does now during student teaching. "If someone had asked me about agency during Block 1, I would not have had an answer," Kelly said. However, she realized that throughout her time in the teacher education program, Kelly has watched multiple mentors build connections with students, which drives their lessons and teaching decisions. "I will strive to make those connections when I get my classroom. It could be one of the easiest ways to justify your teaching methods," added Kelly.

"In order to make changes to my lessons, I have to build a relationship with the students I teach and what their needs are." Becca (3-2) describes that she started making changes that were based on student needs after she had a chance to meet the students in her field experience.

> This year I did early placement so I could meet the students and teachers when school started. I noticed the students were very hungry because they did not eat until the end of the day. So, I wanted to make sure they had a snack. I know they were in fourth grade, but they were hungry. I mentioned it to my teacher. When I returned to the classroom the next time, the teacher had already taken care of it.

Becca says that her perception of agency and its development has grown through these experiences. "Each Block in the program, I have felt more comfortable connecting with the students and sharing my teaching suggestions."

Randi (1-1) recognized that the mentor teachers who took the time to build relationships with the students seemed to have a more successful classroom environment and were able to advocate the necessary changes. She shared a story about observing a fifth-grade teacher praised by many for being a phenomenal educator. However, there was a lack of relationship between

the teacher and the students. The students did what they were told, no questions asked. In contrast, her placement with the first-grade teacher was the opposite. "It almost seemed like chaos from when you walked in the door. However, the kids love her and respect her. And she has a relationship with them, which was missing from the fifth-grade classroom." Randi described this extra bit of love and care showed her that all students are different and have different needs.

Amanda (2-3) and Robin (3-3) found power in the relationships they built with students during their field experiences. Amanda felt that when you take time to get to know your students, you can understand their needs. Amanda believes one "cannot differentiate instruction if they do not understand what the students really need." Robin feels that her relationship with the students has significantly impacted her agency development and success in the teacher education program. She recalled an experience in which she had to think "quickly on her feet" and change her activity.

> One of the girls in fourth grade told me she had a really bad case of stage fright standing in front of the class and talking in front of the class. It just so happened that it was the same day I was going to be observed. And I told her that I was going to be very nervous too. We talked about what I usually do when that happens. I smile, practice, and find someone friendly in the audience to make me feel better. And then the little girl says," Oh, I can do that for you!"

Robin smiled when sharing that story, explaining how important that quick change meant to her and the student.

Terri (2-2) believes that agency is all about the students. "Even on your rough days, when you don't think you're impacting them, it just takes one student to come up to you and tell

you that you are making an impact!" She said that once you get to know your students, you can "do what is best for those students." Natalia (3-1) shared one of her proudest moments as a preservice educator. Natalia was excited to announce that "I am finally at a place where I can understand how to build community and connect with my student, which is critical for them to succeed."

Mentor teachers. Another subtheme noted was that preservice educators (N=8) perceive mentor teachers as influential aspects of agency development. Lincoln (2-1) takes much of his lead from his mentor teacher, observing how she responds to the students and making changes based on their needs. Lincoln enjoys working with his Block 2 mentor teacher because "she allows for more hands-on experiences," and he can get into the classroom and work more with the students. Lincoln felt that these "hands-on experiences" gave him more agency during his lessons and when working with students in the classroom. When asked to explain this perception, Lincoln shared,

> It feels like you are working against the teacher in Block 1 when you have to pull out the kids all the time for your portfolio interviews. But in Block 2, you're working with the teacher because you don't have all that extra stuff to do.

Although Lincoln shared that his agency continued to build during Block 2, he did have reservations about changing too much in the classroom or lessons. Lincoln will suggest ideas; however, he does not "feel like I can change too much because it is their classroom."

Terri (2-2) was lucky to have mentor teachers who understood that she was a college student and had requirements to meet for her program. Terri believed that this flexibility lends itself to preservice teachers who are open and willing to adapt their teaching to the needs of the

students. Regrettably, Terri did say that some of her peers have mentioned that their mentor teachers are not as flexible with their classrooms:

> I hear how disheartening and difficult it can be for a mentor teacher not to be flexible or be able to take their hands off the class for a moment. I hear this from others and their experiences. Some of my classmates stated, "How am I going to get this all done?" They will try to figure it out, I guess.

Terri wished that her peers had the same positive experience as she did. She was lucky to have teachers just ask her what she needed to do and trust her decisions. Terri feels that trust is one of the underlining elements of building agency. "I appreciate a teacher who will give their input into my lesson but is also able to take their hands off when it comes to giving us space in the classroom." Terri added that when mentor teachers trust the process and respond with, "Just tell me what you need to do, and I will support you. This is all you; you go for it," agency development begins.

Robin (3-3) stressed the importance of remembering that everyone has an "off" day once in a while. Sometimes that happens to be a mentor teacher. She shared that one of the mentor teachers she worked with had some medical concerns impacting her relationship. However, Robin said, "I have to take the personal feelings out of it and focus on the positive things that go well."

Natalia (3-1) had a similar experience, taking it as a learning experience. Natalia believes this experience helped her build a different type of agency, an agency of working with others. Natalia has collaborated with many individuals in the teacher education program, from professors to mentor teachers. Although she shared that she has "definitely learned a lot from the teachers," Natalia said that you have to "discover your teaching style and find a voice to

speak up for yourself. Sometimes you must continue to smile and learn, regardless of what is going on with your mentor teacher." Natalia says that she will have to remember this lesson when she starts her student teaching next Block. "Although I know I am there to learn alongside my mentor teacher, I should also focus on advocating for myself and what I can learn and try."

Natalia's perception of advocating for oneself when working with others resonated with 25 preservice educators who "agreed" (N=11) or "strongly agreed" (N=14) with the following: It might be the case that at my school where I am teaching, a more experienced teacher will not want me to use research-based pedagogy but to instead stick to traditional ways of teaching. Nevertheless, I will keep trying to introduce a curriculum that I think will be the most effective. Kelly (4-2) believes that learning to advocate for yourself with others is crucial in the profession. Through her field experiences, she has witnessed educators "shutting down others' ideas. Therefore, one valuable lesson that preservice teachers can learn is how to promote their agency with other teachers." Kelly added that "sometimes you have to advocate for yourself with your mentor teacher. Some need a little push!" As Kelly wraps up her student teaching experience, she hopes she will continue to find the courage to "incorporate effective lessons regardless of what her colleagues may think!"

Amanda (2-3) agreed that having mentor teachers who trusted them made it easier to feel comfortable trying a lesson that would meet students' needs. According to Amanda, she is "lucky to have mentor teachers that understand that I'm a college student and that there are requirements that need to be in my lessons. They are willing to let go and let me try a new lesson for the students."

Alternatively, four participants (all enrolled in Block 1) were "undecided," and two "disagreed" with the survey item: It might be the case that at my school where I am teaching, a

more experienced teacher will not want me to use research-based pedagogy but to instead stick to traditional ways of teaching. Nevertheless, I will keep trying to introduce a curriculum that I think will be the most effective. Sheryl (1-2) expanded on her thoughts, sharing that she was still undecided about how to approach an experienced teacher. "I know my professors would tell us that we need to incorporate lessons that are best for kids; however, I don't know how I would respond to an experienced teacher if they told me what to do." During the focus group interviews, Sheryl mentioned that listening to her peers has given her "hope that I will eventually learn how to advocate for my classroom agency."

In addition, participant responses varied when responding to the following question: I will teach in the way I think is best, regardless of what my principal or other teachers might think. An analysis of data showed that nine participants "disagreed," nine participants were "undecided," 10 participants "agreed," and three participants "strongly agreed." The responses were also consistent between the Blocks, as at least one participant from each Block chose disagree, undecided, agree, or strongly agree in response to the statement.

Throughout the interviews, most participants (N=7) agreed that teaching in a way they think is best is something they are hopeful will happen once they graduate and have their classroom. However, the responses varied by Block. Participants in Blocks 2, 3, and 4 focused on the word "principal." Although Kelly (4-2) believes that learning to advocate for yourself with others is crucial in the profession, she did express some hesitation about advocating with a principal. "Working with principals is not something I have experienced independently during my time in the program," says Kelly. Natalia (3-1) agreed with Kelly, adding that although she feels that she can advocate agency with a mentor teacher and colleague, working with a principal is "something that would be new for me." Natalia and Kelly mentioned that once you are hired

and can establish a working relationship with the principal, it might be “easier to teach in a different way that the principal wants because you have experience.”

Participants in Block 1 found it difficult to see past their current expectations. Sheryl (1-2) said it is hard right now in Block 1 to create lessons that are not in line with the program's expectations. However, as she progresses through the teacher education program and eventually gets her classroom, she will have more opportunities to teach in the best way for her students. Randi (1-1) was also optimistic that her lesson plans could change as she progressed through the program. As a Block 1 student, Randi felt the pressure to write her lessons a specific way; however, after listening to her peers, she said, “Since you are saying it is totally going to be different. Maybe I can do this!”

Professors. Lastly, many preservice educators (N=7) perceived the university professors as positively impacting their sense of agency. Becca (3-2) believes that “the professors have a big influence. I want to please them! When my professors are excited and show us how to do things, I get excited and want to please them.” Becca felt that talking to the professors about new ideas and ways to teach a particular lesson gave her more confidence to enact agency with her mentor teacher. Becca shared a story about a mentor teacher she worked with who was “not a fan of the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)” system the school had in place. The teacher “yelled a lot and did not talk to the students kindly.” However, after talking to the professors, Becca realized that the mentor teacher did enact agency, “negatively changing things.” She and her professors talked about ways to change the situation, and she has “learned what I want to do in my classroom and how I can make those changes.”

Lincoln (2-1) shared that he has enjoyed the professors at the university. Lincoln shared that the professors are incredibly supportive of the lessons and activities you plan for your field

experiences. He feels that most professors even encourage them to think about how to teach lessons differently, which builds confidence and a sense of agency. This support has motivated Lincoln to continue his educational journey.

Robin (3-3) and Terri (2-2) discussed how helpful and friendly the professors were, sharing that they felt comfortable asking for feedback. Sheryl (1-2) agreed, stating, "I enjoy how much my one professor is so excited about teaching and children. It makes it easy to want to make decisions for the kids and keep going. I guess you could call that my first idea of agency!" Although Sheryl mentioned that she had not had a chance to “really try something new,” she realized that the potential to become a teacher that controls how lessons are taught was there. “I want to be as excited about making decisions in my classroom as this professor,” added Sheryl.

Challenges to agency development. Although the preservice educators were delighted to talk about the many positive influences on their agency and experiences, they also perceived challenges that hindered their agency. The researcher noted that participants’ (N=8) sense of excitement changed while discussing the challenges they perceived as hindering agency development. The first challenge noted included the negative energy surrounding the educational system. “There are some teachers who say that we are crazy to get into teaching. They are waiting to get out. It can just be so negative, you know,” said Randi (1-1). Kelly (4-2) agreed, “You walk into a classroom, and the teacher automatically reminds you how much it has changed. I remember one teacher telling me, " You will not have any say in the classroom.” After this conversation, Kelly started to think about her decision to be a teacher. She shared the conflict that started to “eat away at me. What would happen if I did have to follow a curriculum as it was written or teach lessons in a prescribed way?” Fortunately, Kelly has not had that

experience during her student teaching, and she hopes the same will be true of her first teaching position.

The other challenge participants perceived to contest their agency development was the adoption of rigid schedules. Regardless of Block enrollment, participants (N=10) discussed the difficulties that rigid schedules put on their opportunities to change their lessons or incorporate new activities that meet learners' needs. Natalia (3-1) shared that these extra activities allow her to enact agency in the classroom because she is planning a lesson that controls. However, Natalia found that sometimes these lessons do not fit into the daily schedule, go over the allotted time, and are "pushed on the back burner." "It saddens me when I try something new, and the kids are really into it, like collaborating and learning, and then the timer goes off. I need a little wiggle room to keep going!" However, Natalia states that with the rigid daily schedule, it is hard to advocate for more time or to try new activities.

Negative energy. Participants from each Block shared excitement as they entered the program, ready to change the world and do what is best for students. However, participants (N=10) discussed the negativity surrounding going into the teaching profession during each interview. Regardless of the Block enrolled, participants agreed that the negativity comes from both individuals inside and outside the schools. Randi (1-1) has noticed the negativity that many teachers, administrators, and parents are questioning her decision to return to school to become a teacher. They say, "You're crazy! I can't wait to get out. I can't wait to do something else because, you know, it's not like it used to be." Amanda (2-3) agreed, stating that the negative comments start to weigh on your decisions. "Teachers will share that they have no voice in education anymore. That everything they do is mandated one way or another," Amanda added.

The worry of not “having a say in their lessons” was echoed throughout the interviews. Participants (N=5) in Blocks 3 and 4 shared that they worried that once they left the teacher education program, their agency might “leave too.” Participants in Block 4 shared stories about how they often controlled the lessons they taught and the positive feelings that radiated from those situations. “I enjoy working with my mentor teacher because she is always up to try a new way of teaching a lesson. However, she does get some kickback from her peers when she tries new ideas,” said Kelly (4-2). Kelly feels fortunate that she can continue to “build my agency by working with a great mentor teacher who is willing; however, I am nervous that I will not have the same experience when I have my job.”

Natalia (3-1) feels negativity sometimes builds in the school's atmosphere. She shared a story about perceiving a hostile atmosphere within the school during her field experience placements. “It was the not the best experience that I have had.” Natalia said that the principal did not always support the teachers, which made staff resent the job and the expectations. According to Natalia, the teachers often would complain that there was no reason to “try new things because others often shut it down.” Natalia said she still felt that she needed to enact some agency in her lessons while she was there; however, “what happens if you get into a school like that and you forget how?”

Terri (2-2) has learned how to shut off many negative comments she hears. According to Terri, these comments come from all over:

> Teaching will always be about what is best for the students, no matter what. Like all the outside effects or other comments we are hearing, the educational standards, the comments about there being no money. And then there are the comments about school shootings and the needs of the students. Hearing all of these things can be so hard.

> However, it is just that you have to ignore those comments and come into the classroom every day and think about what is best for those students.

Terri went on to share that she has to remember this each day she walks into the classroom. "Even on your rough days… you're impacting them. It just takes one student."

Although participants perceived challenges that may hinder agency development, the results of the Perceived Agency Survey indicated that regardless of the challenges, preservice educators feel responsible for helping their students learn. The majority of participants (N=27) "strongly agreed" that they feel responsible for doing their part in helping their students learn. Additionally, three participants "agreed," and only one was "undecided" about the statement; all were enrolled in Block 1.

When asked why they perceived that it was their responsibility to ensure their students were learning even though there were challenges, participants (N=8) believed it was "all about the students." Terri (2-2) acknowledged that obstacles could stand in the way of agency; however, she repeatedly stated that "it is always going to be about what is best for the students, no matter what." Amanda (2-3) shared that the negativity currently surrounding the teaching profession will stick around for a while, yet, educators need to find the passion for helping them "continue to make an impact on the students because it is our responsibility to help them learn." Lastly, Lincoln (2-1) stated that he has to remain optimistic about being an educator, which will help eliminate some negative pressures.

Rigid schedules. A second subtheme that emerged from the data was that today's rigid schedules challenge agency in the classroom. This idea was interwoven throughout all of the interviews (N=10). Sheryl (1-2) felt that " the schedule needs to be more flexible. The schedule cannot be so rigid. Some students are morning learners, and some are afternoon." She would

like to see educators have more input into their schedule and have the opportunity to make changes to the schedule if they were best for the students. When asked how flexible schedules would promote agency development, Sheryl referred to the definition of agency that was presented before the start of the study: controlling what is taught and how it is taught. "For a start, if teachers could change their schedules, they would influence how things are taught because it might lead to flexible lessons and adding activities. Maybe a unit that incorporated more than one subject at once!"

Participants elaborated on their responses, discussing how much easier agency (controlling what is taught and how it is taught) would be if the schedules were not so rigid. "If the schedule was flexible, my mentor teacher could use more time on certain subjects," said Sheryl (1-2). Kelly (4-2) agreed with Sheryl, adding that there would be more time to stay on a subject, even tying it into other curricular areas. "There are separate blocks for all subject areas, and there is little flexibility when you go over your time." Furthermore, participants "strongly agreed" (N= 15), "agreed" (N=13), and were "undecided" (N=3) with the following statement: If my students do not understand what they are learning, I will take more time with the material, even if that means that some planned topics are not taught in class.

Although Natalia (3-1) "strongly agreed" that it is essential to take more time with material that students find challenging, she also discussed how difficult it could be to steer away from the required lessons and materials within each subject area. "There are so many expectations for you to meet specific requirements for the classroom, whether it is the schedule or the materials. So, you cannot always bring in other lessons and activities." When asked to expand on the extra lessons, Natalia stated that "having opportunities to bring in extra lessons

and materials is a chance to have some agency, a chance to teach a concept in a different way than what was in the teacher's guide."

Amanda (2-3) resonated with Natalia, sharing that inserting new lessons or enacting agency to teach materials differently if warranted by the student's needs is challenging when schedules are so rigid. "You can research best practices and come up with great lessons to try; however, when the bell rings, your time is up. The next subject begins."

If Becca (3-2) could change one thing in the teaching field that might influence her agency development, she would like to see the daily schedule include a margin of flexibility.

> It needs to be more flexible, and the schedule cannot be so rigid. Some kids are morning learners, and some kids are not. Some kids are afternoon learners, and some kids are not. So, teachers have to have the opportunity to change their schedules when needed and when it benefits the kids. Like maybe, the reading and math switched based on the kids' needs. Everything is just so rigid.

Becca said that having the ability to change the schedule based on the learner's needs is agency! "You are controlling how something is taught by changing the schedule."

Preservice Teachers' Current Perceptions of Agency

What are preservice teachers' current perceptions of agency, defined as controlling what is taught and how it is taught? Throughout the interviews, participants discussed their current perceptions of agency. Participants shared varying perceptions of agency. The first perception (N=8) was that agency in the classroom came from opportunities to differentiate lessons and activities. Additionally, participants (N=7) perceived that agency was necessary to impact the lives of their students. Regardless of Block enrollment, participants shared that when they were given opportunities to take control of how they were teaching a subject or lesson, they were doing "what was best for kids" and making an impact. Lastly, although most participants perceived agency as necessary for the success of their students, some (N=4) felt that it could be challenging to develop. The following describes the detailed findings for research question three and includes participants' quotes, data supporting each theme and subtheme, and the results from the Perceived Agency Survey (Hull & Uematsu, 2020). Table 10 outlines the themes and subthemes that emerged from the interview data based on the frequencies of references related to each theme and subtheme.

Table 10

Preservice Teachers' Current Perceptions of Agency

Theme	Subtheme	Frequency	Participant Quotes (Example)
Theme 1: Varying Perceptions of Agency Frequency – 32 Frequency by Block Block 1- 5 Block 2- 12 Block 3- 8 Block 4- 7	Subtheme 1: Differentiation	16	"Agency is all about making a plan for my students. I know that everyone will learn differently, so I have to differentiate or make a plan" (Becca, 3-2).
	Subtheme 2: Impact	9	"I feel that you can impact the students when you have agency. You can change your lessons to help them learn" (Kelly, 4-2).
	Subtheme 3: Difficult	7	"Trying to enact agency can be frustrating. Like we have to do these specific writing lessons, and they are a lot. They are not the writing lessons I would have chosen" (Lincoln, 2-1).

Varying Perceptions of Agency. Throughout the interviews and survey data, participants shared varying perceptions of agency. Participants (N=8) quickly shared the word "differentiation" when asked to talk about their agency perceptions. Kelly (4-2) said that was the first word that "popped into her head. "If you think about it, differentiation completely fits the definition of controlling how something is taught." According to Kelly, "when you have to change your lesson or intervention for a child, you are enacting agency. You are contolling what you are doing." Although Terri (2-2) agreed with Kelly, she also wanted to add the word impact. Terri believes that when teachers can control how they teach something, they can better meet their student's needs and make an impact! The last subtheme that emerged from the interviews was that participants (N=4) perceived agency as challenging. Lincoln (2-1) shared that agency can be difficult to enact sometimes because there are mandated lessons one must follow. For example, one of my field placement schools has "these specific writing lessons, and they are a lot. They are not the writing lessons I would have chosen," added Lincoln.

According to Reeve and Cheon (2021), through differentiating lessons, the participants are beginning to implement autonomy-supportive teaching. Joy (4-1) reported she "absolutely loves to watch her students continue to grow as learners and want to learn!" Participants talked about differentiation as a way to incorporate learner-centered lessons. Additionally, the planned lessons revolve around student interests and needs (Reeve, 2002; Reeve & Cheon, 2021). In addition, when educators can endorse autonomy-supportive teaching strategies, the classroom climate positively impacts students' autonomous motivation (Reeve & Cheon, 2021).

Differentiation. First, regardless of Block enrollment, participants (N=8) perceived agency to come from differentiated lessons and activities. Lincoln (2-1) mentioned multiple times throughout the interview that he perceived agency to come in the form of differentiation. Lincoln felt that "to help the students, we need better differentiation in our plans." He said that sometimes differentiation is even on-the-spot thinking, changing things up if you notice the students need more or less of a lesson at that time. Becca's (3-2) perceptions were similar: "Agency is all about making a plan for my students. I know that everyone will learn differently, so I have to differentiate or make a plan."

Joy (4-1) shared that she often networks with others and advocates for the students she teaches. Now that Joy is completing her student teaching, she believes she enacts agency daily when she enters the classroom. Joy feels like she "is always collecting data" and making changes to each child's learning plan. Additionally, Joy says that as an educator, you must advocate for agency, "going the extra mile to set things up that are important for the students." Terri (2-2) also believes that one needs to analyze the data to see what the students know and do not know, which can help educators differentiate their lessons to ensure that the students are learning and can respond to your teaching.

Participants' perceptions of differentiation were consistent with the participants who "agreed" (N=19) and "strongly agreed" (N=5) with the following: Curricular resources are, at most, a guide for teachers to use or modify creatively, as the situation requires. Natalia (3-1) felt that differentiation was one of the easiest ways to modify a curriculum. Natalia said that differentiation is easier to justify when communicating with others. She believes that if educators take time to communicate their classroom data and changes to parents, administration, or even colleagues, they will be more supportive of your reasons behind the differentiated changes. Amanda (2-3) had a similar perception: "I always think being open and honest about your reasons to make changes makes things more manageable and accepted."

Sheryl (1-2) pointed out that, as a Block 1 student, she is still learning about agency. However, she said maybe, "I can say differentiation." Sheryl admitted that she was unsure if that was what she truly believed or if she thought about differentiation because it was a "buzz" word she heard throughout her classes and field experience. Sheryl shared that her perceptions may change if she is asked this same question after a few semesters more in the teacher education program. Sheryl's "buzz" word of differentiation resonated with participants' perceptions from Blocks 2, 3, and 4. Nevertheless, Natalia (3-1) noticed one difference, "As you continue through your classes, you realize that during Block 1, you are learning about differentiation. As you progress, you are actually differentiating and making those changes!"

Most participants perceived that agency was attainable when your mindset focused on doing what is best for kids. Robin (3-3) answered that educators' classroom decisions are about the students. She is always willing to "try new things if the students need them." Robin described her experiences with agency as an inspiration. This inspiration is a benefit for both the teacher and the students. Robin said:

> I always want to step up and help students with what they want. And in order to do that, you have to have agency. So, it inspires me to make decisions based on what the students want and what I can do to help them achieve that! I want to be someone in their path who cares for them and takes the time to do what they need.

According to Robin, an educator who enacts agency will help children no matter the reason. "If five children are struggling, the educator will find time to help all five. The same will be if only two students are struggling."

The Perceived Agency Survey results revealed that most preservice educators (N=29) perceive it essential to choose textbooks and materials in their classrooms. Throughout the interviews, participants highlighted various thoughts about why they needed to choose their textbooks and materials carefully. Some participants (N=7) felt it was pertinent for educators to choose their materials based on the differentiated needs of the students in their classroom. Lincoln (2-1) summarized his perceptions in the following way:

> Yes, I would change up the materials if it was going to benefit the students. I mean, I think that's always the end goal as an educator. I have to ask myself, what will the students walk away with at the end of the year or the end of the day? What is going to work for them and their education? So yes, I would always want to change up the materials.

Amanda (2-3) shared that now that she was in Block 2 she could agree with most of her peers that "it is necessary to change up the materials if the children need something more." Nevertheless, Amanda admitted that she did not have the same thoughts during Block 1. "You have to get into the classroom to really see and understand differentiation and why teachers need to have the opportunity to make changes for the students." Amanda continued to say that part of

understanding and developing personal agency was experiencing the classroom and building on what you know is best.

Joy (4-1) felt that teachers should be free to change the mandatory curriculums to benefit the students. Randi (1-1) agreed, sharing that the changes are justifiable when teachers change their lessons or activities based on what is best for students. Randi continued, "I'm not just going to go off on a limb because I don't like what the curriculum says…I can justify about anything to my principal if it is best for kids." Lincoln (2-1) added that "making changes is necessary for the students to be successful."

Becca (3-2) goes into each day with a plan; however, she noticed that teaching is about flexibility. When asked to elaborate on her idea, Becca stated that to have agency in the classroom, schools and educators must be flexible. "You can bend one way and then bend another. That is what you have to do as a teacher, be flexible and make changes for students." Those changes that you make are agency, or "a way to be flexible based on what the students need."

Impact. Natalia (3-1), Terri (2-2), Kelly (4-2), and Amanda (2-3) agreed that agency was necessary to impact the lives of their students. Kelly referred to a time when she made a change and felt it impacted a student. Kelly noticed that one of the students was not responding to her mentor teacher's lesson. Therefore, she thought about another way to teach the same lesson. The student started to respond and smile. "I feel that you can impact the students when you have agency. You can change your lessons to help them learn," added Kelly.

Amanda and Natalia had the same feelings, determined to make an impact on kids. Amanda noticed that many of her mentor teachers and professors talk about "the impact you will make on students." Amanda began to relate to her professors' ideas once she entered the

classroom. "When you enter the classroom, your perception changes. You meet the kids and want to help them all." Natalia wants to "make an impact and do everything I can to help them succeed." She shared that she has learned from some great mentor teachers.

Terri (2-2) states that you can impact the students when you have agency. Terri shares that the students also impact you as an educator.

> There is nothing that we cannot do when we can impact others. I enjoy watching my students grow and when I can make changes and impact their life. I want the students to know that I care about them and that I can understand what is going on in their life, their education, and all of those things. When that happens, it also impacts you as the teacher because you see the students learning from your lessons. When you have the agency to change how you teach and meet the student's needs, it also impacts you!

Terri says that since this learning impacts both individuals, an educator can take it and transfer it to future lessons and classes.

Participants (N=7) also expressed that agency development was necessary to find one's teaching voice or style. Kelly (4-2) stated that another aspect of impacting a child's learning is having the freedom, or agency, to find teaching styles that work for the students in your classes. Kelly said she "strongly disagreed" with the following statement on the Perceived Agency Survey: My students may have taken many classes before taking my class, and they will have an idea of how a class "should go." I need to teach in that style, too; otherwise, it will be too strange for my students. According to Kelly, there is no "one-fit teaching style that magically works and impacts all students." Kelly said this is a crucial reason teachers need agency in their classrooms. If teachers taught just like the teachers before them, "some students would be left behind, and the impact would not be there."

An analysis of the data found that 10 other participants "strongly disagreed," 22 participants "disagreed," seven were "undecided," and only two "agreed" with the statement. When asked how they would make the changes so that it would not be "too strange" for the students, participants (N=2) stated that it might happen when you set up your classroom and expectations right from the start. Amanda (2-3) acknowledged that you cannot guarantee that it will not be strange, "but you can sure try by trying different teaching styles and lesson ideas." Sheryl (1-2) had a similar perception, sharing that "once you get to know your students, you can create lessons that meet their needs." Sheryl admitted that "getting to know the students" might look different for different teachers; however, that is where the agency comes in to make those decisions.

Difficult. While most participants perceived agency as necessary for the success of students and their classrooms, some (N=4) felt it could be challenging to attain. When participants were asked to elaborate on their thoughts, they often discussed the negativity that enveloped the teaching profession. Additionally, the researcher noted that although some participants started the interviews focusing on the challenges associated with agency, their perceptions often changed during the interviews. For example, Lincoln (2-1) started the interview with the notion that agency is frustrating. He was frustrated that he often had to create lessons based on the "expectations of the program." Lincoln said he had to write a lesson plan for a writing curriculum that he did not think was the best for the students. Nevertheless, since it was an expectation, he had to follow those specific writing lessons. As the interview progressed, Lincoln ended by sharing that "sometimes it is easy to make it seem negative." He focused on the positive, revealing that "when you have agency, it makes you think in a more positive light…but when you stop and think about it, it is really about being able to make those changes!"

Sheryl (1-2) and Randi (1-1) also admitted to getting stuck in the rut of Block 1 lesson plans. "There are just so many expectations when it comes to Block 1 lesson plans that you feel you never are going to be able to write a lesson that you would like to try," said Sheryl. Randi resonated with Sheryl, sharing that "right now in Block 1, it is very intense and very strict". She feels that the professors consistently tell the Block 1 students that "this is how it has to be, and they are not allowing you to make any changes." Nevertheless, by the end of the interviews, both Sheryl and Randi did discuss how an educator's agency is necessary for student success.

Even though developing agency can be perceived to be difficult, participants "strongly agreed" (N=27) and "agreed" (N=3) that they felt responsible for doing their part in helping their students learn. While some participants felt that there were roadblocks that made agency challenging, they still agreed that they had to find ways around the challenges because they were responsible for their student's learning. A few participants (N=3) shared that one way to navigate the roadblocks was to focus on the community. Terri (2-2) shared that "within a community, there are agencies that help build up the community." Robin (3-3) immediately thought about companies that work for something else. That something else could be for the betterment of a customer or the betterment of the company's employees. Robin continued with an example: "I think about Marvel movies, something about the agency part of the superheroes, and things like that. For example, there are so many that are helpless, and the superheroes are there to help them, to take up for them."

When Robin expanded upon her idea, she related it to being a teacher in the classroom. Robin feels that when students learn in a positive, safe environment, they are more motivated to help each other. A feeling of motivation is valid for the educator as well! She needs the freedom to build a classroom community that can help each other.

Terri (2-2) also talked about needing freedom to build up the classroom community. She wants everyone to feel safe and welcome in her classroom. In order to create a positive environment, Terri feels educators must have the opportunity to “get to know their students, implementing things that they know and are surrounded by, making a safe, diverse classroom.” Terri is optimistic that when her students feel safe in the classroom, they will be more motivated to learn and thrive. In turn, educators will feel motivated to make decisions based on what the students need to flourish.

Summary

The researcher conducted a qualitative exploratory case study to examine the agency development of preservice teachers as they progressed through an undergraduate educator preparation program at a university in southwestern Georgia. Data were first gathered from the Perceived Agency Survey (Hull & Uematsu, 2020). The researcher also conducted three semi-structured focus group interviews and three individual interviews to understand participants’ perceptions of agency development. Several themes and subthemes emerged from the survey and interview data, presented throughout chapter four.

The first research question for this study, “How does preservice teachers' sense of agency develop as they progress through an undergraduate education program at a university in southwestern Georgia?”, was answered with three themes that emerged from the data. As participants progressed through their teacher preparation program, perceptions of agency development were connected to personal motivation, program expectations, and grade-level field experiences. Participants shared that their confidence and advocacy increased as they progressed through the Blocks, which increased their sense of agency. Participants also perceived they were given more opportunities to enact agency as they progressed through the Blocks. Block 1

participants felt constricted by the lesson plan format and the intense expectations required during the first semester of the teacher education program. However, participants in Blocks 2, 3, and 4 shared that as they continued through the teacher education program, they were given more opportunities to enact agency both within their lessons and field experiences. Lastly, participants perceived that agency development could be connected to their grade-level field experiences. Regardless of Block enrolled, some participants felt enacting agency within the classroom came more naturally with lower elementary grades, while others felt enacting agency came more naturally with upper grades.

The second research question for this study, "What factors do preservice teachers perceive to influence their agency as they progress through their classes?, was answered with two themes that emerged from the data. When exploring what factors preservice teachers perceive to influence their agency, the researcher noted that participants perceive that connections positively influence agency development. Participants in each Block shared that they felt that their peers, students in their field experiences, mentor teachers, and professors positively influenced their agency development. Participants shared that the individuals they are connected to within the program influence their lesson plan ideas and their confidence to advocate for best practices, both practices participants perceived to be part of agency development.

Alternatively, participants also shared challenges that impact their agency development. These challenges include the negative energy that envelops today's educational system and the rigid schedules they adhere to during their grade-level placements. Although participants in all Blocks felt that these challenges affected their sense of agency, they also shared a responsibility to help their students learn.

The third research question for this study, “What are preservice teachers' current perceptions of agency, defined as controlling what is taught and how it is taught?, was answered with one theme that emerged from the data. Throughout the interviews and survey data, participants shared varying perceptions of agency. The first perception was that agency in the classroom came from opportunities to differentiate lessons and activities. Additionally, participants perceived that agency was necessary to impact the lives of their students. Regardless of Block enrollment, participants shared that when they were given opportunities to take control of how they were teaching a subject or lesson, they were doing “what was best for kids” and making an impact. Lastly, although most participants perceived agency as necessary for the success of their students, some felt that it could be challenging to develop.

Chapter V: Discussion

Summary of the Study

Research suggests student achievement improves when teachers connect with their students and create lessons and instruction based on their needs (Hattie, 2003; Stronge, 2018). Unfortunately, educators throughout the United States report losing control over the educational decisions they make in their classrooms at startling rates (Ingersoll, 2011; Wright, 2020). In addition, a teacher's influence on their educational decisions depends on teacher autonomy or agency (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010; Lennert da Silva & Molstad, 2021). As a teacher's sense of agency in the classroom lessens, so does an educator's sense of job satisfaction (Kengatharan, 2020; Worth & Van den Brande, 2020) and motivational level (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Gagne & Deci, 2005; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014). A decrease in educators' professional agency has also caused many to leave the profession within their first five years of employment (Chambers et al., 2019; Ingersoll et al., 2018).

Even though teachers leave the profession for a multitude of reasons (Ingersoll et al., 2018; Tye & O'Brien, 2002), new educators are planning to enter the teaching field with grand ambitions (Walters, 2004). When asked why they chose to study education, preservice teachers often indicated that they wanted to make a difference in the lives of their students, improve society, gain a feeling of accomplishment, and educate others on a subject that was interesting for them (Ni & Rorrer, 2018). Nevertheless, preservice teachers also felt that accountability measures might subdue their aspirations, leaving little room to enact agency within their classrooms (Hull & Uematsu, 2020; Ng, 2006). Limited research has been conducted in the United States on agency development within teacher education programs (Hull & Uematsu, 2020; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory case study

was to explore agency development of preservice teachers as they progress through an undergraduate teacher preparation program at a university in southwestern Georgia.

Data were collected from three sources: the Perceived Agency Survey (Hull & Uematsu, 2020), three focus group interviews, and three individual interviews. All participants accepted into the university's elementary education program were invited to complete the Perceived Agency Survey. After analyzing the survey results, the researcher conducted focus group and individual interviews. The data were transcribed, coded, and analyzed for emerging patterns, themes, and connections. Several themes and subthemes captured participants' perceptions of agency as they progressed through their teacher education program and were used to answer each research question.

The findings from this study strengthen our understanding of preservice teachers' perceptions of agency as they progress through their teacher education program. The analysis of the findings presented in Chapter 5 shed light on what professors, teacher education programs, student teaching coordinators, and cooperating teachers may do to continue to foster agency development within preservice educators. This chapter includes an analysis of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and implications of the study.

Analysis of the Findings

Data analysis included triangulation from three sources of data: the Perceived Agency Survey (Hull & Uematsu, 2020), three focus group interviews, and three individual interviews. Six major themes were identified and reflected participants' perceptions of agency development as they progressed through their teacher preparation program.

Theme 1: Personal Motivation

Participants stated that as they progressed through the program, they were given more opportunities to enact agency within their field experiences and classroom expectations, creating a sense of motivation to continue. Participants perceived that agency development was connected to their motivation within the program. According to Gagne and Deci (2005), motivation often depends on one's sense of autonomy or self-efficacy. Therefore, teachers feel respected and valued for their efforts in an educational environment that promotes agency (Gagne & Deci, 2005).

Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2009) stated that autonomy is related to teacher self-efficacy and positively impacts one's motivation to continue learning and working. Participants may have been motivated to continue in the program because they found value in relating to the students and advocating for their needs. Many participants talked about being a voice for the students, working to build up their confidence to make student-driven decisions in the classroom. These findings are consistent with Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory (SDT) which stresses that when an individual's psychological needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy are met, individuals experience autonomous motivation.

Although Block 1 students did not perceive the freedom to make changes in their lesson plans or within their field experiences, participants perceived more agency as they progressed through the teacher education program. Lincoln (2-1) shared that even though he was only in Block 2, there was more room "to try new lessons." Throughout the interviews, participants shared that they felt their agency began to develop after Block 1, as they were given more freedom in the teacher education program and from their mentor teachers. This agency, or

freedom, may have motivated participants to be more positive in their decisions, continue in the program, and want to do what was best for the students (Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2008).

Many preservice educators who participated in the focus group interviews stated that discussing agency development was beneficial. Eren (2020) reported that analyzing agency and its effects on classroom practices is vital to teaching. Participants in Block 1 mentioned that sometimes it is easy to focus too much of one's attention on the strict parameters of the teacher education program, such as the lesson plan formats. However, after listening to their peers in Blocks 2, 3, and 4, Block 1 participants shared a more positive outlook on the program and their chosen field. For example, as Randi (1-1) listened to her peers in other Blocks share their experiences with lesson plans, she stated, "After listening to what you are saying and how it is going to be different in the other blocks, I am thinking maybe I can make it through the program." Sheryl (1-2) echoed similar sentiments, sharing that she perceives that the lesson plans will become more "student-centered" as she continues through the teacher education program. As participants perceive more freedom to choose how they write their lessons and the strategies they use to teach them, they are often more engaged and motivated (Knight, 2019). Hence, having conversations about agency and its development throughout the program may increase preservice educators' motivation and engagement as they progress.

Theme 2: Teacher Education Program Expectations

Participants perceived that agency development was connected to the expectations of the university's teacher education program. Regardless of Block enrolled, participants perceived that the expectations of the teacher education program changed as they progressed through their classes, providing them more opportunities to enact agency within their field experiences. All participants discussed the lesson plan format mandated by the professors in Block 1. Participants

felt that the lesson plan format was too intense and rigorous and left little room for agency. Although participants shared that the professors in Block 1 supported their growth and education, they felt that their experiences in Blocks 2, 3, and 4 lent them to enact more agency and create student-centered lessons. The support participants perceived to change their lessons, or try something new, is consistent with the work of Sanchez-Suzuki Colegrove and Zuniga (2018), who reported that when educators can enact their agency throughout daily instruction without the anxiety of repercussion, they begin to experiment with new strategies, facilitate both their agency and student agency, and create a positive learning environment.

Reeve and Cheon (2021) realized that the self-determination theory (SDT) could be applied to the classroom through autonomy-supportive teaching. Autonomy-supportive teaching is learner-centered and requires flexibility in teaching, which revolves around student interests and needs (Reeve & Cheon, 2021). During Kelly's (4-2) interview, she mentioned that as preservice educators progress through the program, the professors expect them to create lessons based on the students' needs. Robin (3-3) and Amanda (2-3) became more competent in advocating for lessons that might be considered "out of the box." However, these same lessons were designed to meet students' needs.

Even though many participants perceived agency development within the program, they did not always have the same perceptions when discussing their field experiences. Sheryl (1-2) mentioned that it is hard to enact agency when your mentor teacher must follow various lessons and expectations. Being tied to a specific set of lessons makes it difficult for educators to continue to be autonomously motivated to continue in the teaching field (Gagne & Deci, 2005). When asked to expand on her thoughts, Sheryl said that she noticed her mentor teacher does not get to steer away from the approved lessons, even though they might be best for students. When

teachers lack the trust to control how they present lessons in their classrooms, their competence and motivation can be affected (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

When analyzing the results from the SDT lens, participants in Block 1 felt they did not have much agency or control over their behaviors and lessons in the classroom (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Some participants focused on the challenges that come with the expectations of Block 1, which also hinders one's feeling of competency. However, Block 1 students had similar perceptions to their peers regarding relatedness. Regardless of enrollment status, each participant positively talked about their connections with others in and out of the program. These connections may have positively influenced participants' psychological need for relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Participants in Blocks 2 and 3 had similar perceptions of agency. These preservice educators agreed that their relationships with others positively impacted their sense of agency and how it develops. These connections helped meet their psychological need for relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). However, their psychological needs for autonomy and competence continued to develop. Although they felt they were starting to enact change within their field experiences, some participants still felt there were challenges to their agency. During the interviews, participants tended to fixate on some of the negative aspects that hinder agency development; however, their views often softened as they listened to their peers. They would then start to talk about their experiences with agency, seeing it from a different angle and focusing on some of the positive aspects. This change of perceptions is pertinent to building autonomous motivation, as educators can learn to be autonomously supportive when given the opportunity (Reeve & Cheon, 2021).

Participants in Block 4 perceived to have more agency than their peers in Blocks 1, 2, and 3. They were confident in their abilities to control their behaviors and begin making student-driven decisions (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Kelly (4-2) said she stays motivated in the program because "I have to think about what my students need. I am currently student teaching and have learned from many of my mentor teachers that change is good." The Block 4 participants also had a strong sense of relatedness, discussing the relationships with their students, professors, and mentor teachers as providing the social interaction they need to thrive (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Lastly, Block 4 participants also noted that they were competent in controlling their situations. Joy (4-1) says that as an educator, you must advocate for agency, "going the extra mile to set things up that are important for the students." Joy explained that she was ready for a full-time job and was motivated to continue in the field. According to Deci and Ryan's (2000) SDT, Kelly and Joy are beginning to develop autonomous motivation since their autonomy, relatedness, and competence needs are met.

Theme 3: Grade-Level Field Experiences

Participants perceived that agency development could be connected to the grade levels they were placed in during their field experiences. Some participants perceived that agency came more naturally while working with students in lower elementary grades, while others perceived agency development as more natural with upper elementary grades.

Participants who perceived that agency came more naturally working with students in lower elementary grades reported that students in lower elementary often enjoyed school and had different needs than their peers in upper elementary grades. Participants felt it was easier to enact agency in lower grades due to the absence of standardized assessments. According to Ingersoll (2011) and Wright (2020), as educational systems in the United States continue to

increase accountability, educators report losing their instruction and classroom agency. Participants discussed the pressures of standardized testing that begins in third grade. Pressure to have high test scores and ensure students are prepared for the standardized assessment may negatively affect one's agency.

Alvunger (2018) states that a standardized curriculum and teacher agency can co-exist. Participants who perceived agency to come more naturally with upper-grade elementary classes often discussed the perception that it was easier to plan lessons around the curriculum based on what the students are "in to." Participants found that students in upper elementary had longer attention spans and could "share their likes and dislikes" (Kelly, 4-2). Building this rapport with the upper-grade elementary students also made planning different lessons more manageable for the preservice teachers (Garza et al., 2016).

Although participants acknowledged that upper-grade students were expected to achieve high scores on the Georgia Milestones, most did not believe that "preparation for the assessment was solo in driving their lessons" (Natalia, 3-1). Kelly (4-2) believed that preparing for the assessment was another reason to differentiate her lessons. Kelly stated that she knew what the students might need and could tailor her lessons to help them succeed. This sense of agency to make curricular decisions based on students' needs is vital to successful schools (Averill, 2020; Sehrawat, 2014; Sommarstrom et al., 2021). Sehrawat (2014) and Vangrieken et al. (2017) added that when teachers have agency, they can select texts to teach from, gather materials to supplement their lessons, and even create assessments that drive instruction. Even with the pressures of standardized testing, upper-grade elementary preservice teachers found ways to enact agency and discuss its importance throughout the interviews.

Theme 4: Connections Influence Agency Development

When exploring what factors preservice teachers perceive to influence their agency, the researcher noted that participants perceive that connections with others positively influence agency development. Participants in each Block shared that they felt that their peers, students in their field experiences, mentor teachers, and professors positively influenced their agency development. Participants shared that the individuals they are connected to within the program influence their lesson plan ideas and their confidence to advocate for best practices, both practices participants perceived to be part of agency development.

All participants discussed that the demands of the teacher education program were rigorous; however, looking to others for support made it feasible to continue within the program and enact some agency along the way. Building a support system is consistent with the work of Gonzalez et al. (2018), who found that preservice teachers who perceive that their professors advocate for their agency and have clear expectations are more likely to feel confident in their professional expertise and abilities. These connections also came from peers in the program. According to Kazeni and McNaught (2020), when preservice educators connect and collaborate with their peers, they can share their learning and navigate the program's challenges together.

Building these relationships aids in developing autonomous motivation through relatedness. According to Deci and Ryan (2000), relatedness is the psychological need for humans to interact with others, emphasizing the importance of social relationships and the care of others. While most participants shared stories about how they interacted with others during their program, it is essential to mention that agency development began before preservice teachers even enrolled in the teacher education program (Coker, 2017). Participants started their interviews by discussing why they wanted to become a teacher. Most reminisced about the adult

who encouraged them to become teachers and was their “cheerleader from the sideline.” According to Coker (2017), teacher education programs must continue to develop and maintain personal connections to improve the program’s outcome and retain the agency that begins to develop.

Although most participants felt “lost” during Block 1, they were more confident once they established connections with others. Throughout the interviews, preservice teachers in Block 1 discussed contacting their professors and leaning on their peers for support. When individuals take time to provide guidance and support to others, agency begins to build within the program, school, and individual (Wynn & Brown, 2008). These connections also helped many participants feel more competent in their abilities within the teacher education program. “It is so nice that the students in other Blocks at the university are willing to look at our plans and give us advice,” says Sheryl (1-2). Amanda (2-3) agreed, adding, "for the most part, the professors are there to support you. If they did not support you, I think many students would leave after Block 1 since it is such a hard Block.” Participants shared that they were motivated to continue in the program due to their relationships with others, possibly due to their psychological needs of relatedness and competence being met (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Participants also found that their relationships with the students in their field experiences can help develop agency. All participants noted that agency allows educators to “do what is best for kids.” However, to know what that “best” might be, teachers need opportunities to build relationships with their students. According to Garza et al. (2016), when preservice educators develop their professional agency in their teacher education programs, they are more likely to develop a rapport with their students. This rapport helps preservice educators understand how their students learn, how to respond to a student’s needs, and ways to modify their student-driven

instructional decisions (Garza et al., 2016). Garza et al. (2016) added that it is essential for teacher education programs to help preservice teachers develop their professional agency, so they can build this rapport with their students and enact agency in their educational decisions.

Theme 5: Challenges to Agency Development

Although participants discussed how their agency developed as they progressed through the teacher education program, they perceived challenges that hindered their agency development. The first challenge noted was the negativity that envelops the educational system. Participants in all Blocks shared that individuals inside and outside the school and program are highly pessimistic about the American educational system. Participants felt this negativity might wear on them as they leave the program, affecting their teaching and sense of agency. Wynn and Brown (2008) expressed that school leaders are indispensable in supporting teachers and positively impacting the school's educational culture. Therefore, it is essential that administrators take time to provide guidance and support while recognizing the importance of building teacher agency in the school (Wynn & Brown, 2008). By building time for support, some of the negative energy may be transformed into "doing what is best for kids."

Additionally, participants viewed the rigid schedule they must adhere to during the field experiences as challenging to their agency development. Participants perceived that agency (controlling what is taught and how it is taught) would be more accessible if the schedules were not so rigid. Participants hoped that as they moved into their classrooms, they could enact agency to change their schedule based on the needs of the students. Having the opportunity to change one's schedule might be a small initiative that could eventually lead to increased teacher agency (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005).

Theme 6: Varying Perceptions of Agency

Throughout the interviews and survey data, participants shared varying perceptions of agency. The majority of participants perceived that agency was realized through differentiated lessons and activities. Participants also agreed that agency was necessary to impact the lives of their students. Lastly, while most participants perceived that agency was necessary for the success of their students and classrooms, they felt that it could be challenging to attain.

These varying perceptions may be because a preservice educator's agency takes time to develop and generally happens in steps (Lipponen & Kumpulanien, 2011; Ticknor, 2015). First, preservice teachers must realize they have the agency to influence others and make decisions (Lipponen & Kumpulanien, 2011). Regardless of Block enrollment, preservice teachers perceived agency as being able to implement differentiated lessons and activities. Participants felt that differentiation was one of the first ways they could enact agency in the teacher education program and their field experiences. Even when participants felt that the format of the lesson plans might be unnecessary in Block 1, they did highlight the importance of differentiation. According to Lincoln (2-1), the lesson plan format made it easier to "see the diversity of needs in the class…and meet the backgrounds of our learners."

The second step involves the development of relational agency (Lipponen & Kumpulanien, 2011). As preservice educators progress through their classes, they are determined to make an impact on the students. Teacher educators should take time to acknowledge preservice teachers' ideas, sharing the authority of the classroom. As the preservice educators progressed through their program, they perceived that they were able to make a few changes in their lessons and during their field experiences that created that impact on

the students. Being heard helped build their relational agency, allowing them to enact agency to impact their learners.

Lipponen and Kumpulanien (2011) stated that preservice educators' last step is to develop accountability agency, which provides opportunities to propose and evaluate ideas with continued collaborative efforts and discourse. Preservice educators build their accountability agency by continuing to build relationships that will help foster agency development (Lipponen & Kumpulanien, 2011; Ticknor, 2015). Although participants valued the connections they built to support their agency development, the negativity surrounding the teaching profession may make it difficult for some to attain accountability agency.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations are components that could influence a study that the researcher cannot regulate. Some of the limitations within the current study include the following:

1. Results from this study may be unable to generalize to unlike populations. Study results are limited to preservice teachers' agency development at the southwestern university in Georgia, and it may not be generalizable to other undergraduate teacher education programs. However, the results may be able to be generalized to like populations.
2. Due to the open-ended aspect of a qualitative case study design, the researcher could not verify the results by comparing them to similar case studies.
3. Since participants' qualitative responses were self-reported, a bias may exist based on individual experiences outside the teaching program and field experiences.
4. The researcher used a purposive sample of the undergraduate teacher education program population that may not represent the entire teacher education program population.

5. Most preservice teachers who volunteered to participate in the focus group and individual interviews were female. Only one male volunteered to participate. Despite multiple follow-up emails, the researcher could not recruit other males within the teacher education program to participate in the follow-up interviews.

Recommendations for Future Research

Examining the findings resulted in recommendations for future research projects. The first recommendation is to conduct a study in which a cohort of preservice educators is followed throughout their first few years of teaching after leaving the university. Throughout the study, participants in Block 4 expressed high perceptions of agency and were motivated to continue teaching in their classrooms after graduation. However, research has shown that approximately 50% of educators leave the profession within their first five years of teaching (Ingersoll et al., 2018). Therefore, by following a cohort of preservice teachers throughout their first few years of teaching, researchers may be able to examine and explore perceptions of agency and motivation that may change after graduation as participants move into their first jobs.

Another area of future research would be to conduct a longitudinal study where students are followed throughout their four Blocks at the university and into their first years working within the education field. Following students from their initial teacher education course to their first few years working in the education profession may provide a better understanding of how agency develops and is sustained. A longitudinal study may also provide researchers with more information about how preservice educators carry their perceptions of agency into their classrooms and what factors may affect the continued development of agency after leaving the university.

A third area of future research is replicating this study with different types of teacher education programs. This study was limited to a traditional four-year university model where students started their education classes in their junior year and ended with a semester-long student teaching experience. However, conducting studies using the same methodology with various teacher education program types may provide a deeper insight into how preservice educators perceive agency development as they progress through the various program models and carry out their agency in the classroom after graduation.

Implications of the Study

Through this study, the researcher explored preservice educators' perceptions of agency development as they progressed through their teacher preparation program. After analyzing and evaluating the study results and comparing them to the current literature, the implications for practice became apparent.

An analysis of the data revealed that preservice teachers perceive that connections with others positively influence agency development. Participants in each Block shared that they felt that their peers, students in their field experiences, mentor teachers, and professors positively influenced their agency development. Additionally, participants found it beneficial to talk about agency with their peers in the focus group interviews. Therefore, the university's teacher education program should continue to provide support and advice to the preservice educators in both curriculum and instruction. Support and guidance are especially critical for preservice teachers, who bring fresh ideas and excitement; however, they often seek advice on interweaving their ideas with the mandates of the program and grade-level placements (Kauffman et al., 2002).

Professors may consider providing opportunities for preservice educators to meet with peers from other cohorts or Blocks to discuss the program's challenges, which can help build

preservice teacher agency. Although the Block 4 study participants felt prepared and ready to continue, research has found that many student teachers report feeling inadequate when they leave school and secure their first teaching positions (Bezzina, 2006). Kazeni and McNaught (2020) found that student-teachers often benefit from collaborative focus groups that work through the challenges and learning experiences accompanying student teaching. However, the results of this study suggest that preservice educators in all Blocks may benefit from these same collaborative discussions, learning how to navigate the teacher education program, embrace the expectations, and learn how to link their new learning with the expectations of the classroom.

According to Coker (2017), teaching programs should cultivate a culture that promotes valuable and confident educators who can develop and retain agency. The data suggest that professors in Block 1 should take more time to explain the lesson plan format, the significance of the expectations, and how it may enhance their agency development as they progress through the program. Although participants perceived that their agency continued to develop as they progressed through the teacher education program, all participants felt that the lesson plan format was too rigorous in Block 1. Throughout the focus group interviews, participants felt that the Block 1 lesson plan format prevented them from controlling what was taught or how it could be taught. Participants could not explain why the lesson plan format was rigorous or how it aided their agency development. Most participants admitted that if they had to do "Block 1 lesson plans" for the remainder of the teacher education program, they would be "burned out already before even graduating."

Although participants recognized that agency comes more naturally in different grade levels (lower elementary and upper elementary), overall, participants enjoyed their field placements and experiences. Therefore, the university should continue to place preservice

educators in various grade levels for their field experiences so they can understand how agency may develop in different grades. These opportunities may open doors for preservice educators to determine what grade levels they are comfortable enacting agency with and may find success after graduation. Kengatharan (2020) found that teachers who perceived having a more significant influence on what happens in their classrooms felt increased job satisfaction. Providing preservice educators with various grade-level placements may give them a sense of which grades they will feel more comfortable enacting agency, which may positively influence their job satisfaction.

Lastly, schools and district administration could use these findings to continue agency development within their schools for the new teachers coming out of the teacher education program. As educational systems throughout the United States continue to focus their time and attention on accountability measures, educators are finding themselves losing control over educational decisions (Ingersoll, 2011; Wright, 2020), which diminishes teacher agency (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Lamb, 2008; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Therefore, creating a mentor program for new teachers may prove valuable so they can continue to build upon and develop their agency (Eren, 2020; Lipponen & Kumpulanien, 2011; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). A mentor program is also a way to continue to provide support and advice to new educators amid the negativity surrounding the educational system. A mentor program may also provide the connections to build autonomous motivation to continue the profession. This program may provide new educators a continued sense of agency, their relatedness with others, and an opportunity to build their competence to control their situations (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Dissemination of the Findings

After mentoring three student teachers, the researcher decided to focus this study on preservice educators' perceptions of their agency development throughout their educator preparation program with hopes of learning more about retaining these educators in the profession. The researcher strongly believes that her work with practicum and student teachers has left a lasting impression on her growth as an educator. The researcher intends to share the findings of this study with the university's Teacher Education program, colleagues who may be mentoring a preservice educator, and Hull and Uematsu (2020), the researchers who developed the preservice educator's Perceived Agency Survey. This study will also be available in the Columbus State University's dissertation database. Lastly, the researcher would like to attempt to publish the results in a peer-reviewed journal.

Conclusion

Research states that the influence of a teacher on their students relies heavily on the presence of teacher agency (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2010; Lennert da Silva & Molstad, 2021). The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to examine the agency development of preservice teachers as they progressed through an undergraduate educator preparation program at a university in southwestern Georgia. Examining the literature and data from the Perceived Agency Survey (Hull & Uematsu, 2020), focus group interviews, and individual interviews allowed the researcher to explore preservice educators' perceptions of agency development as they progressed through their teacher preparation program. The results of this study should prove beneficial to teacher education programs, professors, mentor teachers, and school districts as they can capitalize on any approaches that may contribute to building agency within preservice educators and retaining these educators in the profession.

An analysis of data revealed that preservice educators perceive connections with others as positively influencing their agency. Therefore, university education programs should continue to provide support and advice to preservice teachers on advocating for their agency through lessons and field experiences. Additionally, providing opportunities for preservice educators to meet with other cohorts may foster a continued sense of community, growth, and agency building. However, this sense of community and connection should not stop after graduation. It would benefit schools and districts to create a mentor program that provides a continued support system amidst all the negativity surrounding the American educational system. A mentor program may also provide the connections one needs to build autonomous motivation to continue in the profession.

The data show that approximately 50% of educators leave the profession within the first five years of their teaching career (Ingersoll et al., 2018). Therefore, the results of this study lead to recommendations for universities, mentor teachers, professors, and school districts to continue to provide support for preservice educators as they build their agency within the teacher education program and retain it in the classroom after graduation.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Email Communication with Researchers: Perceived Agency Survey

November 2021

Good Morning, Mr. Hull and Mr. Uematsu,

I hope this email finds you well and enjoying your fall semesters. My name is Tracy Stockdale, and I am a graduate student at Columbus State University. I am currently working on my dissertation and am just getting started on my methodology section. My dissertation explores how preservice elementary school educators feel about agency development as they progress through their education classes and student teaching experiences at a local university in southern Georgia. As I was researching, I found your work on agency development in preservice physics educators exciting. I was particularly drawn to the fact that the survey was explicitly written for preservice teachers. This was the first survey that I was able to find that was written with preservice teachers in mind, as most are designed for practicing educators.

As I was reading through your work, I found you had mentioned a contribution to current literature, stating that "although our survey is specific to physics, the questions themselves can readily be modified for use in other contexts." As mentioned, a few of the questions would have to be modified to ensure they fit elementary educators. Therefore, I am requesting permission to use your survey to gather data on the preservice educators who participate in my research.

With your permission, I would modify the few questions that were specific to physics teachers to ensure they fit elementary educators. I would then use the survey results to guide my focus groups and individual interviews, which would be used to glean more in-depth information about the survey results.

I thank you very much for your time and consideration of my study. If this is something you are willing to permit, I will follow up with a more formal letter outlining my study, so you are aware of the changes. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Thanks in advance for your time and help.

Tracy Stockdale

Response from the Researchers: Perceived Agency Survey

Hello Tracy!

Thanks so much for reaching out and letting us know about your thesis. It sounds very exciting! Feel free to modify the survey; no formal letter of permission is required, so long as you cite our work for the original survey and describe the changes that you made to it in the thesis itself. I think it is great that you will also be conducting interviews with the survey respondents. That will give you a way to ensure that the modified prompts are being understood as intended.

I am excited about this project you are doing, but I have not yet completely understood your research subject group. They are future elementary school teachers? But they will be doing student teaching at a local university? Is this a microteaching/mock lesson atmosphere, where classmates play the role of elementary school students? Will you also be following them as they go into elementary schools to teach actual children?

Also, if you don't mind my asking, can you tell me how you learned of our work? I was pleasantly surprised to receive your e-mail together with several other e-mails from researchers at different institutions, all within 48 hours of each other. I wonder what happened last week… ? ;)

Cheers,
Mike

Appendix B

Institutional Review Board Approval

Institutional Review Board
Columbus State University

Date: 7/8/2022
Protocol Number: 22-071
Protocol Title: Agency Development of Preservice Teachers Progressing Through an Undergraduate Education Program
Principal Investigator: Tracy Stockdale
Co-Principal Investigator: Jan Burcham

Dear Tracy Stockdale:

The Columbus State University Institutional Review Board or representative(s) has reviewed your research proposal identified above. It has been determined that the project is classified as exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations and has been approved. You may begin your research project immediately.

Please note any changes to the protocol must be submitted, using a Project Modification form, to the IRB before implementing the change(s). Any adverse events, unexpected problems, and/or incidents that involve risks to participants and/or others must be reported to the Institutional Review Board at irb@columbusstate.edu or (706) 507-8634.

If you have further questions, please feel free to contact the IRB.

Sincerely,

Sammy Kanso, Graduate Student
Institutional Review Board
Columbus State University

*** Please note that the IRB is closed during holidays, breaks, or other times when the IRB faculty or staff are not available. Visit the **IRB Scheduled Meetings** page on the IRB website for a list of upcoming closures. ***

Appendix C

Letter to Elementary Education Professors

Date: _______________________

Dear _______________________,

My name is Tracy Stockdale, and I am a doctoral candidate at Columbus State University. I am conducting research as part of my dissertation. My study will be exploring agency development of preservice elementary teachers as they progress through an undergraduate education program at a university in southwestern Georgia. The information gleaned from this study will be shared with participants and university education department members. I am interested in this study because current research has found that many teachers leave the profession within the first five years. Although there are several reasons why teachers choose to leave the profession, an analysis of the attrition data showed that teachers often leave due to perceptions of low classroom agency (Ingersoll et al., 2018) and lack of administrative support (Chambers et al., 2019).

I am writing to request your support in sharing my study with the students currently enrolled in your elementary education class or classes. I would like to take the last five to ten minutes of your class (insert class here) to share my study objectives and recruit your students to be participants in the study. If you agree to share your teaching time as an opportunity to introduce my study to the students enrolled, I will follow up with an email outlining the study objectives and asking students to complete an informed consent form. After I visit your class to introduce the study to the preservice educators enrolled in your class, I would greatly appreciate your support by sharing the email I sent to you with those in attendance. After sharing the initial email with your students, further communication between the participants and myself will occur outside your class and via our emails.

I appreciate your time and help in sharing the information about my study with your students. I truly believe this study could provide information that will be helpful to all of us and possibly lead to improving teacher retention. If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Tracy Stockdale
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix D

Study Invitation for Preservice Elementary Educators

Date: ______________________

Dear Preservice Elementary Educator,

My name is Tracy Stockdale, and I am a doctoral candidate at Columbus State University. I am conducting research as part of my dissertation. My study will be exploring agency development of preservice elementary teachers as they progress through an undergraduate education program at a university in southwestern Georgia. The information gleaned from this study will be shared with participants and university education department members. I am interested in this study because current research has found that many teachers leave the profession within the first five years. Although there are several reasons why teachers choose to leave the profession, an analysis of the attrition data showed that teachers often leave due to perceptions of low classroom agency (Ingersoll et al., 2018) and lack of administrative support (Chambers et al., 2019).

I am writing to request your consideration to participate in my study. The first phase of my study involves a preservice educators' Perceived Agency Survey. The survey will be completed via Google Forms to gather demographic information and information about how you currently perceive agency. The Google Form should take you no longer than 10 to 15 minutes to complete. All personally identifiable information will be removed, and results saved on a password-protected computer. After completing the survey, your name will be entered for a drawing to win a 10-dollar gift card to a local coffee shop.

If you are willing to participate in the initial phase of my study, please click on the attached Google Form. The consent form is embedded into the Google link. Once you have digitally signed the Google Form, you will be directed to complete the Perceived Agency Survey. If you decide not to participate, please click no, and the Google Form will log you out.

Your participation in this study is not connected to your acceptance into the teacher education program or your current classes, and choosing to participate or withdraw will not affect your class grades.

I appreciate your time and am hopeful you will agree to participate in my study. If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by responding to this email.

Sincerely,

Tracy Stockdale
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix E

Informed Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a research project conducted by Tracy C. Stockdale, a doctoral candidate in the Teaching, Leadership, and Counseling Department at Columbus State University. Dr. Jan Burcham, Associate Dean of the College of Education & Health Professions, is supervising the current study.

I. Purpose:

The purpose of this project is to explore agency development of preservice teachers as they progress through an undergraduate education program at a university in southwestern Georgia.

II. Procedures:

Data will initially be collected through the Perceived Agency Survey, a five-point Likert scale survey. The survey will be administered using Google Forms and should take between 10-15 minutes to complete.

Focus group interviews will be conducted with selected individuals to gather more in-depth information regarding agency development and perceptions. The focus groups will last between 45-60 minutes and will be conducted at an agreed-upon location and time. Each focus group will have four participants.

Individual interviews will be conducted with three participants. The individual interviews give the researcher an opportunity to explore agency development and participants' perceptions of agency in more depth. The individual interviews will last between 30-40 minutes. Each interview will be conducted at an agreed-upon location and time.

The data collected from the Perceived Agency Survey, focus group interviews, and individual interviews will only be used for this dissertation.

The time requirements for participation will vary depending on the participants' involvement in the study. Participants who agree to fill out the Perceived Agency Survey will be involved for approximately 15 minutes. Participants who complete the Perceived Agency Survey and agree to participate in a focus group interview, which will last for approximately 45-60 minutes, will be involved with the study for approximately three to four weeks (this includes the active time involved and the inactive time between phases of the study). Participants who complete the Perceived Agency Survey, a focus group interview, and are selected to participate in an individual interview, which will last approximately 30-45 minutes, will be involved in the study for approximately five to six weeks.

III. Possible Risks or Discomforts:

There are no risks identified that may be associated with this study.

IV. Potential Benefits:

The findings of this study may benefit preservice teachers, professors, teacher education programs, student teaching coordinators, cooperating teachers, and other individuals who may work to foster the agency development of preservice educators. The study results could also suggest possible changes to the undergraduate educational program or student-teacher placements, capitalizing on approaches that may positively nurture the continued development of agency within preservice educators.

V. Costs and Compensation:

There is no cost to participate in the study. Participants who complete the Perceived Agency Survey will be entered for a drawing to win a 10-dollar gift card to a local coffee shop. Participants who agree to the focus group interviews will be compensated with a 5-dollar gift card to a local coffee shop for their time. Participants who agree to participate in the individual interview will also be compensated with a 5-dollar gift card to the local coffee shop for their time.

VI. Confidentiality:

The researcher is the only individual who will have access to the data. All survey data will be given a unique generated code. The data and the key to the codes will be stored on a password-protected computer, only accessible to the researcher. Pseudonyms will be used for all focus group and individual interview data. The interviews will be transcribed using the Microsoft 365 transcription application. All focus group and individual interview transcripts will be stored on a password-protected computer, only accessible to the researcher. The researcher will be reaching out to participants who have completed the focus group interviews and the individual interviews to member check for the accuracy of the transcripts. All transcripts will be shared via a password-protected PDF, with the password sent in a separate email. At the end of the study, the data will be deleted one year after a successful defense of the dissertation.

VII. Withdrawal:

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time, and your withdrawal will not involve a penalty or loss of benefits. Your participation in this study is not connected to your acceptance into the teacher education program or your current classes, and choosing to participate or withdraw will not affect your class grades.

For additional information about this research project, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Tracy C. Stockdale, at 706-573-9957 or stockdale_tracy@columbusstate.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact Columbus State University Institutional Review Board at irb@columbusstate.edu.

I have read this informed consent form. If I had any questions, they have been answered. By selecting the *I agree* radial and *Submit*, I agree to participate in this research project.

- ○ I agree.
- ○ I do not agree.

Submit

Appendix F

Preservice Educators' Perceived Agency Survey

Although the survey was created to gather data on preservice physics educators, the specific physics questions were modified with permission from Hull and Uematsu (2020) to fit elementary preservice teachers. The current researcher stated the original questions and presented the modifications if made. The survey was administered using Google Forms.

Demographic Information:

1. What is your gender?
   Female
   Male
   Nonbinary

2. Which of the following best describes your race/ethnicity?
   Asian or Pacific Islander
   Black or African American
   Hispanic or Latino
   Native American or Alaskan Native
   White or Caucasian
   Multiracial or Biracial
   A race/ethnicity not listed here

3. What is your age?
   18-24 years old
   25-34 years old
   35-44 years old
   45-54 years old
   55 years and older

4. In what elementary education block are you currently enrolled?
   Block 1
   Block 2
   Block 3
   Student Teaching

Original Item	**Modifications Made if Needed**
Item 1: I will consider carefully what physics textbook to use in my classroom.	I will consider carefully what textbooks to use in my classroom.
Item 2: If the principal of my school tells me to teach in a certain way, I will do my best to teach that way, even if I don't really want to.	No modifications needed
Item 3: If my physics students do not understand what they are learning, I will take	If my students do not understand what they are learning, I will take more time with the

more time with the material, even if that means that some planned topics are not taught in class.	material, even if that means that some planned topics are not taught in class.
Item 4: I prefer curriculum that tell the teacher exactly what to do, so that I don't risk making the wrong decision.	No modifications needed
Item 5: I will just use whatever physics textbook the teacher before me used. If it was good enough for him/her, then it is good enough for me.	I will just use whatever textbook the teacher before me used. If it was good enough for him/her, then it is good enough for me.
Item 6: It might be the case that at my school where I am teaching, a more experienced teacher will not want me to use research-based pedagogy but to instead stick to traditional ways of teaching. Nevertheless, I will keep trying to introduce curriculum that I think will be the most effective.	No modifications needed
Item 7: Once I choose a physics textbook, I will just use it, at most, as a guide. I will not hesitate to skip sections or point out to students which parts I think are poorly-worded, confusing, or wrong.	Once I choose a textbook, I will just use it, at most, as a guide. I will not hesitate to skip sections or point out to students which parts I think are poorly-worded, confusing, or wrong.
Item 8: Teaching is just a job so I can get a paycheck – there is no benefit to me beyond that.	No modifications needed
Item 9: Outdated equipment at my school is not an excuse for a poor lesson. I will just have to rely more on creativity!	No modifications needed
Item 10: It doesn't really matter whether I do my part in helping students learn or not—they will meet plenty of other teachers.	No modifications needed
Item 11: I feel that I have control over what I teach and how I teach it.	No modifications needed
Item 12: I will provide quality education to my students, even if I need to spend more time preparing for class than my colleagues do.	No modifications needed
Item 13: Once I choose a physics textbook for my classroom, I will follow it carefully.	Once I choose a textbook for my classroom, I will follow it carefully.
Item 14: I think I have influence over the progress of my students.	No modifications needed
Item 15: I will teach in the way I think is best, regardless of what my principal or other teachers might think.	No modifications needed

Item 16: Curricular resources are, at most, a guide for teachers to use or modify creatively, as the situation requires.	No modifications needed
Item 17: My students will have taken many classes before taking my class, and they will have an idea of how a class "should go". I need to teach in that style too, otherwise it will be too strange for my students	No modifications needed
Item 18: Parents should not tell me what or how to teach – I am the expert, not them.	No modifications needed
Item 19: I will use the curriculum the teacher before me used at the schools where I will teach, even if it is ineffective, because I don't want to cause any trouble.	No modifications needed
Item 20: Generally, someone else decides what and how I teach.	No modifications needed
Item 21: In my physics class, I will combine textbooks and other materials, taking the best from each source.	In my class, I will combine textbooks and other materials, taking the best from each source.
Item 22: I find personal value in teaching.	No modifications needed
Item 23: The content I teach and the way I teach it are not something for me to decide.	No modifications needed
Item 24: I feel responsible for doing my part in helping my students learn.	No modifications needed
Item 25: I will not work more than my colleagues in preparing lessons, even if the quality of my lessons suffers.	No modifications needed
Item 26: I think the progress of my students is independent of anything I as a teacher might do.	No modifications needed
Item 27: In some schools, teaching may suffer because the equipment in the physics classroom is outdated. There is nothing I can do about that as a teacher.	In some schools, teaching may suffer because the equipment in the classroom is outdated. There is nothing I can do about that as a teacher.

Appendix G

Focus Group Participant Invitation

Date: ____________________

Dear ____________________,

Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in my study. I appreciate you taking the time to fill out the preservice educators' Perceived Agency Survey. You were selected to participate in the focus group discussion based on participation in the initial survey. As part of the next phase of my study, I am conducting focus groups to discuss participants' perceptions of agency development in more depth. Please respond to this email if you are willing to sit down with a small group and me to discuss agency and your perceptions. Additionally, please let me know days and times that might work best for you, as well as some location suggestions. I will follow up with an agreed-upon date, time, and location to talk at that time. The focus group will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes.

You have already completed a study consent form, which I have kept on a password-protected computer. The focus group discussion will be recorded and transcribed using Microsoft 365 transcription services. I will be reaching out to you later to check the accuracy of the transcript. As stated in the consent form, you can leave the study at any time.

You will receive a five-dollar gift card to the local coffee shop as an incentive to participate. I chose the local coffee shop since it is close to the university's education department. I have no affiliation with the coffee shop.

I appreciate your time and hope to sit down and talk with you soon. If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by responding to this email.

Sincerely,

Tracy Stockdale
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix H

Focus Group Interview Protocol

Location: _________________
Date/Time: ________________
Pseudonyms of Participants: __________________
Researcher's Name: Tracy Stockdale

Hello!

My name is Tracy Stockdale, and I will be conducting today's interview. I am very excited to talk to you today about your perceptions of agency development. This study explores agency development of preservice elementary teachers as they progress through an undergraduate education program at a university in southwestern Georgia. The information gleaned from this study will be shared with participants and university education department members.

You were selected to participate in the focus group interview based on participation in the initial survey. You have already completed a study consent form, which I will keep on a password-protected computer throughout the study. Today's interview will be recorded and transcribed using Microsoft 365 transcription services. I will be reaching out to you later to check the accuracy of the transcript. As stated in the consent form, you are free to leave the study at any time.

You will receive a five-dollar gift card to the local coffee shop as an incentive to participate. I chose the local coffee shop since it is close to the university's education department. I have no affiliation with the coffee shop.

Do you have any questions?

If there are no further questions, let us get started with the first question.

Question Sequence	Questions
Introductory Questions	Throughout the focus group interview, how would you like to be addressed? What block are you currently enrolled in? What made you want to become a teacher? Or go into education? Is there anything else you would like us to know before moving on?

Key Questions	What comes to mind when you think about the word "agency"? What are your thoughts on mandated textbooks? Do you feel the need to change up the material used to benefit the students? Explain. You are enrolled in Block _______. How have your experiences differed with making educational decisions during your time in the education program? Have you noticed any changes in your agency as you have progressed through your classes? Describe your perceptions. What grade bands have you worked with during your time in the educational program? What have been your experiences with agency as you have worked with different educational grades? Throughout your time in the teacher education program, you have collaborated and worked with many different individuals, such as parents, principals, cooperating teachers, and professors. How would you describe your experiences with others influencing your teaching/educational decisions? What do you think has the most significant impact on your agency? Why?
Closing Questions Closing Statements	Is there anything that you would like to add? If you could summarize your experiences with agency during your time in the educational program with one word, what would that word be and why? ** I thank you very much for your time and willingness to sit down and talk with me about agency and your experiences. I will be reaching out again very soon to allow you to member-check your focus group transcript to ensure I have transcribed all your thoughts correctly. As I mentioned initially, all your personally identifiable information will be protected by using pseudonyms and saved on a password-protected computer.

Redirecting Questions Open-Ended Probes	If needed: I heard you mention ____ earlier in the interview. Can you tell me a little more about that? Can you tell me more about that? Is anyone else having the same thoughts or ideas? I am hearing various perceptions/thoughts about ______. Would anyone like to elaborate?

Appendix I

Individual Interview Participant Invitation

Date: ____________________

Dear ____________________,

Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in my study. I appreciate you filling out the preservice educators' Perceived Agency Survey and participating in the focus group discussion. You were selected to participate in the individual interview based on participation in the initial survey. As part of the next phase of my study, I am conducting individual interviews to discuss participants' perceptions of agency development in more depth. If you are willing to sit down with me for an individual interview, please respond to this email. Additionally, please let me know days and times that might work best for you, as well as some location suggestions. We will set up an agreed-upon date, time, and location to talk at that time. The interview will last approximately 30 to 45 minutes.

You have already completed a study consent form, which I have kept on a password-protected computer. The interview will be recorded and transcribed using Microsoft 365 transcription services. I will be reaching out to you later to check the accuracy of the transcript. As stated in the consent form, you are free to leave the study at any time.

You will receive a five-dollar gift card to the local coffee shop as an incentive to participate. I chose the local coffee shop since it is close to the university's education department. I have no affiliation with the coffee shop.

I appreciate your time and hope to sit down and interview you soon. If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by responding to this email.

Sincerely,

Tracy Stockdale
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix J

Individual Interview Protocol

Location: _________________
Date/Time: ________________
Pseudonym of Participant: __________________
Researcher's Name: Tracy Stockdale

Hello!

My name is Tracy Stockdale, and I will be conducting today's interview. I am very excited to talk to you today about your perceptions of agency development. This study explores agency development of preservice elementary teachers as they progress through an undergraduate education program at a university in southwestern Georgia. The information gleaned from this study will be shared with participants and university education department members.

You were selected to participate in the individual interview based on participation in the initial survey. You have already completed a study consent form, which I will keep on a password-protected computer throughout the study. Today's interview will be recorded and transcribed using Microsoft 365 transcription services. I will be reaching out to you later to check the accuracy of the transcript. As stated in the consent form, you are free to leave the study at any time.

You will receive a five-dollar gift card to the local coffee shop as an incentive to participate. I chose the local coffee shop since it is close to the university's education department. I have no affiliation with the coffee shop.

Do you have any questions?

If there are no further questions, let us get started with the first question.

Question Sequence	Questions
Introductory Questions	It is nice to meet with you again. How are you doing today? Do you have any reservations about the interview? Any questions? Has anything changed that you want me to be aware of since the last time we met during the focus group interview?

Key Questions	You are currently enrolled in the Teacher Education program in Block _______. What specific experiences with agency have you experienced during this Block or previous blocks? During our focus group, you mentioned that you did/did not feel comfortable steering away from the mandated textbooks. Can you elaborate on why you feel that way? How do you feel about using all the materials supplied by the district as a teacher? Do you feel that you can make changes? Explain. Last time we met, you talked about some of your practicum/student teaching placements. Tell me in more depth about your observations of your mentor teachers' behaviors. What did you observe regarding your mentor teachers' compliance or making changes in what they taught and how they taught? How do you think their perceptions affected you? In what ways? If you could choose any grade level to work with, which grade level would you choose? Why do you think you prefer that grade level? Do you think agency has anything with your choice? Preservice teachers often continue in the field when they are motivated and have agency. Can you share some of your experiences with motivation when thinking about going to class? Field experiences? Teaching? Making decisions? Explain. Is there anything you would change in the teaching field to help you become more motivated?
Closing Questions Closing Statements	Where do you see yourself in five years? Do you think your experiences with agency impacted your answer? Is there anything that you would like to add? ** I thank you very much for your time and willingness to sit down and talk with me about agency and your experiences. As I mentioned initially, all your personally identifiable information will be protected by using pseudonyms and saved on a password-protected computer. I will be reaching out again very soon to allow you to member-check your interview to ensure I have transcribed all your thoughts correctly.

Redirecting Questions Open-Ended Probes	If needed: I heard you mention ____ earlier in the interview. Can you tell me a little more about that? Can you tell me more about that? I am hearing various perceptions/thoughts about ______. Would anyone like to elaborate?

Appendix K

Member Checking Participant Email

Date: ____________________

Dear ____________________,

Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in my study. I appreciate you taking the time to participate in the focus group and/or individual group interview. As mentioned during the interview introductions, all interviews were recorded and transcribed using the Microsoft 365 transcription services. Your interview transcription is now complete, and I am returning the transcript to you for member checking. Member checking is crucial to check the accuracy of the transcript. I have attached the transcript as a password-protected PDF. I will send the password in a separate email. Once you receive the password, please check to ensure that the transcription of your data is accurate and reliable. Please send me an email to let me know if everything looks correct or if any changes need to be made.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out. I have included my personal contact information at the bottom of this e-mail.

Again, I appreciate you taking the time to ensure the accuracy of your interview transcript.

Sincerely,

Tracy Stockdale
Doctoral Candidate

Contact Information:
stockdale_tracy@columbusstate.edu
706-XXX-XXXX

Appendix L
Member Checking Participant Email- Follow-Up with Password

Date: ____________________

Dear ____________________,

Thank you again for taking the time to member check the transcripts for accuracy. The password for your protected PDF is ______________.

Please email me to let me know if everything looks correct or if any changes need to be made.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out. I have included my personal contact information at the bottom of this e-mail.

Again, I appreciate you taking the time to ensure the accuracy of your interview transcript.

Sincerely,

Tracy Stockdale
Doctoral Candidate

Contact Information:
stockdale_tracy@columbusstate.edu
706-XXX-XXXX