WHAT DO ADULT LEARNERS EXPERIENCE IN A TEACHER CERTIFICATION PROGRAM?

Foster Walsh, Jeannette Abi-Nader, and Michael I. Poutiatine

Abstract

The field of teacher education has seen a significant rise in the number of non-traditional students entering teacher preparation programs. Research shows these learners come to teaching with varying attitudes, motivations, and dispositions. This qualitative study examined a population of adult, non-traditional learners who have chosen a 22-month Master of Initial Teaching (MIT) program. The findings suggest that non-traditional MIT students differ from traditional students regarding motivation and learning readiness, expectations of self and university personnel, demands for practical information, time demands, and placement expectations. The implications section makes eight recommendations for teacher education programs who work with adult, non-traditional students.

Introduction

There is ample evidence to demonstrate that the number of adult learners entering teacher education programs is increasing at a dramatic rate. Census and other statistical reports show that the number of returning students, second career, and non-traditional students has

FOSTER WALSH is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Teacher Education at Gonzaga University.

JEANNETTE ABI-NADER is a Retired Professor in the Leadership Studies Doctoral Program at Gonzaga University.

MIKE POUTIATINE is a doctoral student in Educational Leadership at Gonzaga University and adjunct professor of Leadership in the School of Professional Studies.

grown in all fields of study in higher education. Debois (1993) reports that from 1979 to 1983, the non-traditional student population increased by 52%. In 1995, 12.2 million, or 42% of the undergraduate population were 25 years or older (Bendizen-Noe & Redick, 1995). Teacher education has also felt the dramatic increase of non-traditional students (Feistritzer & Chester, 1996; Nespolitan, 1996). These increases include military and business retirees, corporate-sponsored minority students, teacher aides attempting to upgrade their professional status, and other mid-life career changes (Manos & Kasambira, 1998). A 1999 national survey of teacher preparation programs conducted by the Center for Education Information (CEI) discovered that 28% of 1998 teacher preparation graduates began their preparation with at least a bachelor's degree (Feistritzer, 1999). Much of this increase is due to the expanding role of alternative certification, which is a general phrase for non-traditional avenues that lead to teacher licensure.

Between 1990 and 2003 alternative certification programs increased from 70 to 244 within the United States (Feistritzer, 2004). The National Center for Alternative Certification (NCAC) reports that 43 states offer alternative certification programs, compared to eight states in 1983 (2004). California, New Jersey, and Texas have aggressively developed alternative certification programs. In 2002, California's alternative routes produced 18 percent of new hires. In Texas and in New Jersey, 24 percent of new teachers were prepared by alternative route programs. In Texas alone, 52 separate alternative route programs exist (NCAC, 2004).

In 1999, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) conducted a survey of its member institutions to assess how many offered a post-baccalaureate teacher certification program. Respondents included 290 colleges and universities that offered a course of study toward earning a teaching certificate, a master's degree, or both for the non-traditional student. This survey illustrated that alternative-route teacher certification for the mid-career entrant vary, depending on program purpose, duration of program (usually 12-36 months), curriculum, degree and/or credential awarded, program particulars, cost, and state certification requirements (Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996).

Two notable factors are contributing to the increase of alternative teacher certification programs: 1) the changing market for teaching, driven by geographic needs—urban and rural teacher shortages, and subject matter needs—mathematics, sciences, and special education (NCAC, 2004); and 2) the No Child Left Behind legislation. In 2003, Congress appropriated $41.65 million for the Transition to Teaching program to enable mid-career candidates to pursue alternative routes to K-12 certification. The most visible program, Troops to Teachers, support qualified military personnel to acquire state licensure (Center for Community College Policy, 2003).

The incorporation of these non-traditional adult learners, presents both challenges and benefits to teacher educators that are different from those of traditional undergraduate students. Manos and Kasambira (1998) list distinct characteristics of non-traditional teacher education students: relational maturity, higher levels of self-confidence and motivation, workplace experience, family responsibilities, time constraints, financial challenges, and disinterest in college social life. These characteristics are supported by Eilfer and Potthoff's (1998) synthesis of the non-traditional teacher education literature.

The research indicates the need for teacher education programs to make concerted efforts to accommodate the adult preservice teacher, given the changing demographics of teacher education programs (Bendizen-Noe & Redick, 1995). Munby, Russell, and Martin (2001) support a similar conclusion, alluding to both obvious and subtle differences between traditional undergraduates and adult learners within teacher education programs.

Conceptual Framework

Both constructivist theory and cognitive psychology support the importance of experience in shaping learning. To understand the experiences of beginning teachers, especially those who have changed careers or who present other non-traditional characteristics, teacher educators can benefit from knowing the perspectives and experiences of these learners. Eilfer and Potthoff's (1998) synthesis of the non-traditional teacher education literature supports this study's theoretical framework:

that adult learners have different needs, require different personal and instructional approaches, and present additional challenges and benefits over the traditional student.

Purpose of the Study

This study was designed to help deepen the researchers understanding of the experiences and learning perspective of the adult learner in a teacher education program. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to investigate and describe how adult learners in a 22-month Master of Initial Teaching (MIT) program experienced admission procedures, other adult learners, coursework, field experiences, student teaching, university services, and relationships with supervisors and professors.

The Master of Initial Teaching (MIT) at Gonzaga University

Gonzaga's MIT program is designed for post-baccalaureate working adults who are seeking teacher certification and a Master's degree. Entering students proceed through a prescribed sequence of evening classes in a cohort group. The 22-month course cycle includes three 30-hour field experiences, a 40 to 45-credit course cycle, including a culminating school internship.

Methodology

Data Collection

This study's two stage, mixed-method design included an initial quantitative questionnaire, using checklists, rating scales and open-ended response (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005), and a qualitative case study approach. McMillan (2004) advocates using a mixed-method, explanatory design when "the second phase of the research is to elucidate, elaborate on, or explain the quantitative findings" (p. 289). Creswell (2003) states "mixed methods design is useful to capture the best of both quantitative and qualitative approaches" (p. 22). Creswell outlines two ways by which methods (quantitative and qualitative) can be mixed. Researchers can start with a small qualitative sample to explore the

variables within a problem or phenomenon and then go to a larger quantitative sample to expand this understanding; or they can start with a larger quantitative sample and move to a smaller qualitative sample (2003, pp. 21-22). Creswell notes that the later of these two approached is particularly good when the researcher is interested in supporting the quantitative work with "specific language and voices about the topic" (p. 22). This study chose the later approach by first collecting large amounts of data using largely quantitative methods, and distilling that data to provide an initial focus for the qualitative section of the study. This approach brought the study a broad database and a deeper more holistic understanding of the phenomenon in question.

The Quantitative Data

The questionnaire was designed to serve two purposes: 1) elicit perspectives on program particulars and supply demographic information, and 2) to aid in generating interview questions, which focused on MIT experiences and perception. Data collected from the questionnaire were both numerical and anecdotal. The questionnaire was "pilot-tested" (p. 192) on a participant group similar to the MIT study participants (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

The Qualitative Data

A semi-structured interview protocol (Beebe, 2001) was designed to allow participants the latitude to adequately express their MIT experiences and at the same time coordinate data comparison between researchers. The qualitative case study was particularly well suited to this study because of the "holistic and context sensitive" (Patton, 2002) nature of personal responses.

The majority of the interviews were conducted in person, though some were conducted by telephone. The same semi-structured protocol was used for both telephone and in-person interviews. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researchers and two university doctoral students. Most participants were interviewed once, however in some cases an additional interview was conducted to elicit clarification.

Data Analysis

Data analysis of the quantitative data gathered from the questionnaire consisted of simple descriptive statistics followed by open and thematic coding (Creswell, 1998) of the qualitative responses. Data analysis of the qualitative data employed the pattern discovery strategy from both Goetz and LeCompte's (1981) inductive, generative, constructive, and subjective system of data analysis and Stake's (1995) four forms of data analysis: categorical aggregation, direct interpretation, pattern identification, and naturalistic generalizations. Thus, inductively produced patterns grew out of numerous recorded attributions that were coded and conceptualized into consolidated patterns. These patterns emerged from the data and crafted a description that clarified the nature and challenges of the non-traditional, graduate student in a preservice certification program.

Additional supporting data sources: student artifacts, additional interviews with program teachers and administrators, participant confirmations and research team discussions allowed researchers to view the same scene from different vantage points, triangulating the results for enhanced validity (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; McMillan, 1996). The two graduate students involved in interviewing and transcribing joined the researchers in discussing the analysis, adding to the reliability of the findings.

The Study Participants

Questionnaires were sent to 82 student participants who were members of six cohort groups who had graduated or were in the second year of the program. In addition, the director of student teaching, university supervisors, and professors in the MIT program were interviewed as secondary sources.

Forty-eight students returned questionnaires for a 59% response rate to the quantitative portion of the study. Those who returned the questionnaire became representatives of the target population for the qualitative portion of the study. Of those 48 who responded to the initial questionaire, 35 volunteered to be interviewed for the qualitative

portion of the study. Of those 35, 24 participants were purposefully selected to be interviewed, having met the following criteria: 1) second career, 2) between the ages of 25 and 50, and 3) represented a lapse of at least four years since their undergraduate degree. The participants included retired military, bank tellers, school counselors, attorneys, small business owners, housewives, engineers, industrial workers, and clergy.

All of the subjects participating in both parts of the study did so voluntarily. Each subject was informed of their rights to the data and right to withdraw from the study at any time. All data with specific names attached were kept confidential and were not published outside the research team. The participants who agreed to be interviewed all were given a written informed consent document informing them of their rights as study participants and the confidentiality agreement. Each participant signed the informed consent form prior to being interviewed.

Results

Data collected through the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews from the MIT students yielded six findings. MIT students: 1) were responsible, organized, and goal-directed; 2) demanded practical and usable information; 3) endorsed a cohort structure of classes; 4) had high expectations of the program and their professors; 5) experienced a time-intensive life style; and 6) showed signs of inflexibility.

Responsible, Organized, and Goal-Directed

Responses from the interviews indicated exceptionally active and organized learners, capably balancing multiple responsibilities. One said, "I thrive on being busy—that's how I operate. I have learned how to juggle five or six things in the air at the same time." Another student said that the challenges of "working, being a mother and a student have been interesting, but that's life right now. I usually do my best work when I am pressed." These views represented the majority of MIT students.

The need to succeed often led MIT students to be highly organized. They seemed to learn early the importance of looking ahead and planning their time. They shared strategies for meeting their academic responsibilities. One student suggested:

I worked full time. I was busy. The experience was stressful, but every Sunday I sat down to chart my upcoming week. I learned early on that I needed to be organized if I was going to do well. I don't know how anyone could make it work without some organizational skill.

Several respondents were motivated to take learning more seriously—a marked change of attitude from their earlier school experiences. "I have since developed time and life management skills that have served me well in this program." And, "I now know what I want. I see where I have made mistakes in the past and I am committed to not repeating them." These comments were typical of responses to a question about how attitudes and behavior toward learning and studying had changed since their undergraduate experience.

A Desire for Practical Skills

Students spoke of a desire to learn practical content. They had little patience with the theoretical and often asked how what they were learning would help them to be good teachers in the classroom. "It helps me to see the connections. When I know I can use it, I feel like I am not just learning useless facts or concepts, but knowledge I can use." MIT students wanted applicable content and they wanted it now.

When respondents were given the opportunity to discuss the MIT curriculum, they praised the more practical courses. One student said:

The methods classes were very helpful because they gave you lots of ideas of things you could do in the classroom. I am sure the other classes were helpful, but I really don't remember many of them. The methods classes taught me how to do lesson plans and gave me strategies to use in the classroom.

Another student said:

Social studies, music, and art methods were the most helpful. We had to sing in front of class, and when I went to student teach I could do it because I had done it in my methods class. I guess we needed theories and history of education but they were not that important to me.

Many students expressed the value of field experiences and student teaching. "Even though student teaching was stressful and time consuming," one said, "I think there should be more of it. I learned a ton. My master teacher was wonderful, giving me feedback and offering suggestions. It's where my learning started to make sense."

Although fitting the three 30-hour field experiences into a fulltime work week presented a challenge, many students spoke of the benefits.

The three experiences I had to do were tough to get in but I really began to see what classrooms were like. My second field experience was the best because that's when I taught my first lesson. I learned more that day than in weeks of classes."

These first two findings support Knowles' list of four features that distinguish adults from younger students: self-directedness, a rich experience base, the need to address real-life problems, and the need to apply learning immediately (1980, pp. 43-44).

Commitment to the Cohort Structure

Respondents indicated that the cohort structure was an indispensable program benefit. These findings are supported by numerous studies that have focused on masters' level cohorts (Burnaford & Hobson, 1995; Peterson, Benson, Driscoll, Narode, Sherman, & Tama, 1995; Radencich, Thompson, Anderson, Oropallo, Fleege, Harrison, Hanley, & Gomez, 1998; Sapon-Shevin & Chandler-Olcott, 2001).

The overwhelming number of positive comments indicated that a structured community enhanced and supported a rigorous academic program. Although research shows some adverse affects of the cohort structure (Sapon-Shevin & Chandler-Olcott, 2001), the preponderance of positive comments suggests strong support for the cohort structure. Several typical student responses follow: "The cohort led to some strong relationships. We became family. I have a whole new group of friends that will continue after the program. That's been wonderful." Another respondent said, "I spent two years with these folks. We didn't compete. We worked together. It was my first experience with the cohort structure and I wholeheartedly recommend it."

The data show that relationship, camaraderie, friendship, and encouragement are powerful support mechanisms for rigorous academic and field-based work. This finding also supports research indicating non-traditional learners gravitate towards more cooperative and communal learning strategies and environments (Eilfer & Potthoff, 1998). Marge Scherer (2002), although talking about school size, captures the cohort vision by saying, "Teachers and students get to know one another, feel less anonymous, and learn to trust each other and work together" (p. 5). For another respondent, the cohort model became a coping strategy. "I guess one of the strategies I used to balance family, school, and work was my cohort group. We would do assignments together, study together, and would talk about what we were going through." These comments underscore the importance of the affective domain of feelings, attitudes, values and emotions in the learning process and highlight the need to address the affective needs of the non-traditional learner.

Although views of the cohort structure were predominately positive, data reveal four issues that created cohort tension. First, integrating both elementary and secondary education students led to differing perspectives and curricular needs. Second, age disparity caused some fragmentation. Older students were generally more serious, deliberate and communicative than their younger peers. Third, the strong sense of community made it difficult for non-cohort students to feel welcome. Fourth, personality conflicts often persisted, affecting participation and overall class enjoyment.

High Expectations

The participants in this study expressed high expectations of their professors, coursework and support services. Demands for "quality professors," "excellent teachers who know how to teach," "classroom expertise," "teaching competence," "full dedication and approachability," and "effective communication," testify to the expectation that professor competence was a high priority. When MIT students needed to clarify issues, they expected professor accessibility and timely feedback.

In the classroom students expected "engaging lessons," "practical examples," "hands-on learning," "modeled teaching strategies," "clearly defined lesson-planning," and "multiple assessments." One student desired "high quality instruction, use of technology, minimal busy work, exemplary communication, and classroom organization skill." The picture of this population is of a highly engaged group of learners who know what they wanted and expected to get it.

Another expectation for many students was classroom interactivity. Adult learners like high levels of participation and discussion. One student commented, "I expected intellectually challenging classes that stretched my thinking and permitted my active involvement in the learning process."

The data point to the importance of adaptable scheduling in light of a full plate of responsibilities. Childcare, work schedules, outside commitments, and family emergencies were realities for this population of non-traditional students. In responding to the question, "How convenient was the scheduling for you?" one student noted: "When I tell others about the program, I say it allows you to have a life. Meeting at night allowed me to access the program. All the other colleges and universities required you to quit your job. I couldn't do that."

Conversely, when program directors set class times without consulting the cohort, students voiced their objections. Conflicts often centered on class scheduling, workshop dates, weekend seminars, and additional time commitments. Other adult learning studies have cited the time allocation and its effect on the non-traditional student (Eifler & Potthoff, 1998; Manos & Kasambira, 1998; Shiber, 1999).

Signs of Inflexibility

The transition from professional leader to professional learner posed challenges because many MIT students had prior administrative and supervisory positions. Several students adjusted poorly to their diminished role, grudgingly altering interpersonal expectations and their perceived roles. The director of student teaching said,

> MITers can be more difficult to work with than younger students. Sometimes the adult learners are my biggest headaches. They are more demanding and more opinionated. They want to be placed where they want to be placed. They don't understand the nature of the process.

One program professor alluded to the differences between the undergraduate and non-traditional graduate student.

> My adult students expect more. I know I need to have my stuff together when we meet. They will question my assignments and timetable. I seem to always have a few that are hypersensitive to the time consequences of my assignments. Overall, they are wonderful in class, but some can be demanding.

Field experience and student teaching placements, while observed to be the most rewarding part of the program, often were reported as the most challenging for the adult learner. A student teaching supervisor noted that adult learners have a greater potential for adjustment problems when placed with a younger practicing teacher. With a possible age difference of 10 to 15 years, the student teacher is asked to respect, support and learn from a younger professional. One supervisor noted, "He [student teacher] felt he knew more than the teacher. It was a disaster placement. Thankfully we were able to intervene in enough time to pull him. I think he learned a lesson, but long term, this adult needs some diplomacy skills if he is going to make it."

This relational tension is often exacerbated by school site administrators who make placements without regard to mentor/mentee personalities. A student-teacher supervisor observed:

> I am really sensitive to how the cooperating teacher and student teacher are connecting. That relationship is the whole ball game. When I sense a problem, I know I need to address it with the student teacher—they MUST understand that they have to adjust. I tell them that they are a guest and they must abide by the rules of the system. Most of the time I am successful, but when the student teacher can't adjust, then we have problems.

Implications

The following seven implications for teacher education programs have emerged from the data. 1) The findings indicate that non-traditional students show strong preferences for constructivist forms of learning, e.g., social interaction, group learning, alternative assessments, and adaptable scheduling. 2) Multiple field experiences and extended internships (student teaching) were considered the most valuable learning experiences. Practical learning environments were endorsed and expected. 3) Proactive field placements could diffuse potential conflicts, especially for those students who have strong opinions and years of life experiences. 4) Accommodating the difficult scheduling needs of adult learners reduces student frustration and programmatic tension. 5) The cohort model worked well for non-traditional students and offered a supportive, communal learning environment suited to their needs. 6) MIT students demonstrated a need for a responsive program. These adult learners expected timely feedback to their questions and inquires. 7) Professors and adjuncts need to be organized, practical and interactive when teaching adult courses. Adult learners respond to clearly stated expectations, delineated due dates and well-articulated assessment criteria.

Conclusion

Our data corresponds with Eifler and Potthoff (1998) in their conclusion that teacher educators have much to learn when working with adult learners, especially as novice student teachers. These non-traditional students, growing in numbers, often have extensive life experience and needs that require special consideration. How best to recruit, retain, and graduate this population requires more research and discussion. With so few studies targeting this graduate population, the need is paramount to understand this growing group of teacher candidates.

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