



Received: 20 October 2015
Accepted: 28 February 2016
Published: 21 March 2016

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TEACHER EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

It takes a toll on pre-service teachers and programs: Case studies of teacher candidates who withdrew from a teacher education program

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Abstract: Previous studies have examined patterns of withdrawal from initial teacher education (ITE) programs and have found that pre-service teachers are more likely to withdraw if they are male or older than the typical pre-service teacher. This study presents case studies based on semi-structured interviews with older male pre-service teachers who withdrew from a large one-year post-Bachelor's ITE program. To better understand the experiences of these pre-service teachers and the reasons they withdrew, we present each case as a unique narrative before examining the similarities and differences in their expectations and why they withdrew from the program. We discuss possible interpretations of and approaches to preventing withdrawal for stakeholders of ITE programs.

Subjects: Higher Education; Initial Teacher Training; Qualitative and Mixed Methods; Teachers & Teacher Education

Keywords: teacher education; pre-service teachers; withdrawal

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Recently, researchers have shown an increased interest in pre-service teachers' withdrawal due to the fact that it is costly and unpleasant for both the pre-service teacher and for the ITE program. This study set out with the aim of understanding the experience of older male pre-service teachers in a teacher education program and the reasons for their decision to withdraw from the program. Our results show that it is a challenge to effectively communicate with applicants all the details related to the demands, expectations, and reality of ITE programs and the teaching profession before they apply to or decide to attend a program. However, given the toll that withdrawal takes on pre-service teachers and on programs, we believe it is worth the effort to address those concerns through the collective efforts of stakeholders (e.g. program administrators, instructors, and the students) throughout the application, admission, and teacher training processes.

1. Introduction

A pre-service teacher's withdrawal from an initial teacher education (ITE) program is rarely easy and often costly for both the pre-service teacher and the program. For the pre-service teacher, there is the financial cost of books, supplies, and tuition (although a portion of tuition may be refundable depending on when the student withdraws), and, if the individual would otherwise be working, lost wages. There is often an emotional cost for the individual and his or her family, as he or she struggles to decide whether to continue in the program. For the ITE program, there may be a loss of government funding for that pre-service teacher and loss of a space that could have been offered to another applicant. For the program's instructors and other pre-service teachers, the withdrawal may be difficult and disruptive.

Because of these costs, both to the ITE program and to the pre-service teachers, ITE programs try to avoid having pre-service teachers withdraw. This may involve providing academic, psychological, and/or financial supports for individuals while they are in the program. For example, the one-year post-Bachelor's degree ITE program where this study took place in 2010 provided opportunities for pre-service teachers who were not familiar with Ontario schools to spend extra time observing classrooms before they began the first in-school practicum, provided coaching for those who needed help with academic writing and study skills, provided counseling for those who were struggling psychologically, and offered a small number of bursaries for those who struggled to pay tuition. Equally important, however, may be helping prospective pre-service teachers understand what the ITE program requires and what it is like to be a teacher in Ontario classrooms, so that they can make fully informed decisions about whether or not to begin the program.

We present case studies of two pre-service teachers who withdrew from a large one-year post-Bachelor's ITE program in Ontario in 2010. Both of the pre-service teachers described in these cases were male. One, in his mid-30s, was preparing to teach the Junior/Intermediate grades (grades 4–8); the other, in his 40s, was preparing for the Intermediate/Senior grades (grades 7–12). These cases were selected because, as males and older than the typical pre-service teachers, they share two characteristics that have been found in past research to be risk factors for withdrawal (Calder Stegemann, 2013; Lewis, 2002; Sands, 1993; Thornton, 1999). Our purpose in this study is to better understand the experiences of these pre-service teachers in an ITE program and the reasons they withdrew.

2. Review of the literature

2.1. Who withdraws?

In a study of a small two-year elementary ITE program in British Columbia, Calder Stegemann (2013) examined the records of all pre-service teachers who had withdrawn from the program since its establishment in 1990 and compared them with 240 recent students who had successfully completed the program without having to repeat any teaching practica. They found that those who withdrew were disproportionately male and 30 or older.

Much of the research on withdrawal from ITE programs is from the UK. For example, Chambers and his colleagues at the University of Leeds have conducted several recent studies. Hobson, Giannakaki, and Chambers (2009) compared the questionnaire responses of pre-service teachers who did not complete their programs ($n = 135$) with the responses of those who did complete the programs ($n = 2,982$) and found that the following factors significantly predicted withdrawal: (1) male, (2) in secondary-level divisions, (3) over 35 years old, and/or (4) in a less structured program, such as school-centered ITE at the primary level or flexible university-administered post-graduate programs at the secondary level.

In an earlier study of an ITE program in England, Sands (1993) observed withdrawal rates that ranged from 4.4 to 12.3% from 1988 to 1992. Sands found that the withdrawal rates were significantly higher for those who were over age 40 (17%) than for those ages between 25 and 39 (8.0%) or under age 25 (2.7%). Moreover, males had a slightly higher withdrawal rate than females (8.6 vs. 5.9%).

2.2. Why do pre-service teachers withdraw?

In this study of withdrawals, Sands (1993) reported that the major reasons for withdrawal were pre-service teachers' lack of commitment to teaching and lack of confidence in their ability to be a teacher. These reasons were also associated with other issues, including the amount of course work, the environment of workplaces, and the salary. There were also some pre-service teachers who left the teacher education program due to personal reasons such as pregnancy, illness, and the death of a close friend or relative.

Chambers, Hobson, and Tracey (2010) investigated the reasons three female pre-service teachers gave for withdrawing from ITE programs. These mature students (two were in their early to mid-30s and one was in her mid- to late 20s) were in different programs (undergraduate or postgraduate) and seeking to teach in either primary or secondary schools. What they had in common was that for each of them, the decision to withdraw was based on more than one of the following factors: heavy workload, financial pressures, personal circumstances (e.g. raising young children and health conditions), and lack of support from mentors in their placement schools. The pre-service teachers emphasized that the combination of factors, such as a heavy workload along with health problems, was important in the decision to withdraw.

The reasons for withdrawing from a program may be somewhat different for older than for younger pre-service teachers. As Tigchelaar, Brouwer, and Korthagen (2008) observe, many older pre-service teachers may have had a previous career. These pre-service teachers may have experience in raising children and may have made a more carefully considered decision to enter teaching than younger pre-service teachers.

However, there are obstacles for career changers as well. Some researchers have found that second-career teachers were frustrated by the heavy workload and long working hours required of teachers as well as expected decreases in income (Freidus, 1994; Novak & Knowles, 1992; Powers, 2002). Furthermore, career changers' knowledge and skills acquired from previous careers may not be transferable to successful teaching (Eifler & Potthoff, 1998).

Looking across the research on pre-service teachers' withdrawal from ITE programs suggests six principal reasons for withdrawal: (1) a heavier workload than expected in the ITE program, making it difficult to continue to work part-time or full-time while in the program (Basit et al., 2006; Bielby et al., 2007); Chambers et al., 2010; Chambers & Roper, 2000; Hobson et al., 2009); (2) extrinsic motivation (e.g. job security) for pursuing a career in teaching (e.g. Bielby et al., 2007; Hobson et al., 2009); (3) the pre-service teacher's perception that he or she had insufficient subject knowledge, pedagogical skills, or classroom management skills (e.g. Basit et al., 2006; Challen, 2005a, 2005b; Chambers, Coles, & Roper, 2002a; Chambers & Roper, 2000; Chambers et al., 2010; Roberts, 2012); (4) health problems, pregnancies, or family responsibilities (e.g. Chambers & Roper, 2000; Chambers et al., 2002a, 2010; Hobson et al., 2009; Roberts, 2012); (5) a perceived lack of support from mentors and placement schools (Bielby et al., 2007; Chambers et al., 2002a, 2010; Lewis, 2002; Roberts, 2012); and (6) the decision to pursue a different career (e.g. Chambers et al., 2002a, 2010; Hobson et al., 2009).

3. Method

The two pre-service teachers who are the cases in this study were enrolled in a one-year post-Bachelor's ITE program at a large university in Ontario in September 2010. This ITE program is highly competitive; it often received between 4,000 and 7,000 applications and filled approximately 1,300 spaces each year (Childs et al., 2011; Thomson et al., 2011). To be certified as a secondary or elementary teacher in Ontario requires both a non-teaching undergraduate degree (Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Sciences) and a teaching degree (Bachelor of Education or an equivalent degree obtained overseas). The requirements for the Bachelor of Education include courses related to student learning, teaching methods, development, and supervised practice teaching. Our study was approved by the university's Social Sciences, Humanities and Education Research Ethics Board.

The participants were informed that their data was kept strictly confidential and were free to withdraw at any time. All participants signed the informed consent and kept a copy for their files.

Of the 1,186 people who began the program, 20 (1.7%) withdrew between 9 September and 9 December. Of these 20, 2 withdrew before the first class meeting on 13 September, and an additional 11 withdrew after classes started but before they began their first teaching practicum in mid-October. The remaining seven withdrew during or after the teaching practicum.

We compared all those who withdrew from the program with those who remained to see if there were any patterns. A higher proportion of those who withdrew (45.0%) were male, compared to 28.6% males in the program; however, the relationship of gender with withdrawal was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1) = 2.69, p = .10$. Although a larger percentage of pre-service teachers were training to teach the Intermediate/Senior grades (grades 7–12; 2.1%) than the Junior/Intermediate grades (Grades 4–8; 1.3%) or the Primary/Junior grades (kindergarten to Grade 6; 1.1%), these differences were also not statistically significant, $\chi^2(2) = 1.47, p = .48$. The pre-service teachers who withdrew were, however, significantly older ($M = 31.01, SD = 8.04$) than those who persisted in the program ($M = 26.71, SD = 6.08$), $t(19.4) = 2.41, p = .03, d = .54$. These patterns are in line with previous research findings (Calder Stegemann, 2013; Lewis, 2002; Sands, 1993; Thornton, 1999), suggesting that older and male pre-service teachers are more likely to withdraw from the ITE programs than their younger peers.

All 20 people who withdrew were contacted by email and invited to participate in confidential semi-structured interviews. A \$15 gift card for Tim Hortons (a chain of fast food restaurants specializing in coffee and donuts) was offered to encourage participation. Six responded to the email invitation and these six were interviewed at times and places of their choosing (some interviews were performed by phone). Each interview included a set of questions, addressing: (1) how the person got relevant information about the ITE program, how they made the decision to apply to the program, what previous experience they had in elementary and secondary schools, and what their expectations were about the program; (2) what surprised them about the program, (3) why they decided to withdraw from the program, (4) what suggestions they might have for the program, and (5) what plans they had for future education or work. The interviews lasted between 30 min and an hour, and each interview was conducted by one of the authors. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Then, a thematic analysis was conducted to identify themes in the responses. A thematic analysis is a commonly used approach for analyzing and synthesizing the data, as well as describing and identifying the observable patterns in rich detail. This qualitative method allows us not only to seek for answers, but also to situate the issue of withdrawal in a broader teacher education context and obtain a deeper understanding of the reasons for withdrawal. We followed the six phrases suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Rennie (2012) to conduct the thematic analysis of the interview data. Throughout the six phrases of our thematic analysis, we firstly transcribed our data, read and reread the data, systematically coded the data, and paid close attention to interesting features of the data. Codes were further collated into several possible themes and we mapped relevant data onto each most relevant theme. We further reviewed the identified themes to make sure they faithfully reflected parts and the entire set of data. We defined and named each theme after refining the themes within the data. Finally, we related the themes back to our research questions and previous research by reporting and discussing the analysis and results of the two case studies.

While conducting the thematic analysis, we also paid close attention to the validity of inferences drawn from the data. We reviewed and searched through the entire set of data for evidence that confirmed or disconfirmed the preliminary themes we identified (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Mays & Pope, 1995, 2000; Morrow, 2005; Shenton, 2004; Tuckett, 2004). This reviewing process allowed us to examine different perspectives of the themes as well as to compare the similarities and differences of two cases through a cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2009). In addition, we provided a thick description that authentically portrayed both cases in rich detail (Cho & Trent, 2006; Creswell and Miller, 2000; Holliday, 2004; Nastasi & Schensul, 2005; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007; Ponterotto & Grieger, 2007;

Shenton, 2004; Tracy, 2010). Through the lens of readers who read the rich descriptions, the authenticity, trustworthiness or validity of interpretations, and inferences drawn from the data can be established. This approach is valid as Creswell and Miller (2000) indicate that, “[w]ith this vivid detail, the researchers help readers understand that the account is credible. Rich description also enables readers to make decisions about the applicability of the findings to other settings or similar contexts” (p. 129). Both approaches that we employed to maintain the validity in qualitative inquiry are based on a constructivist paradigm that the credibility is established through the lens of researchers or readers.

Closer analyses of the two cases, Cade and Adam (pseudonyms), reported in the following section were conducted. A cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2009) was conducted to draw out the common and different features of the two cases. These two cases were chosen from the six pre-service teachers who were interviewed because as older male pre-service teachers, they have two risk factors for withdrawing that have been consistently identified in our quantitative data analysis and the literature (Calder Stegemann, 2013; Lewis, 2002; Sands, 1993; Thornton, 1999) as particularly at risk of withdrawing. We found that the reasons why the other four interviewees withdrew from the program were very similar to the existing literature (see the following section). Although these themes reaffirm the reasons that pre-service teachers gave for withdrawing from ITE programs, we decided not to present detailed descriptions of these four cases in the present study.

4. Results

We found that the following themes derived from the six interviews were consistent with the existing literature:

- Expectations of the ITE program: Half of the interviewees stated that the ITE program met their own expectations and they were satisfied with the program; however, the other three interviewees were surprised by the workload and time demands of the program. These results are consistent with previous studies, such as Hobson et al. (2009).
- Commitment to teaching: All but one of the interviewees emphasized that they were committed to teaching—and might be interested in pursuing it later. This finding was consistent with previous studies on pre-service teachers’ commitment to teaching (e.g. Rots, Aelterman, Vlerick, & Vermeulen, 2007).
- Financial Issues: Half of the interviewees were confronted with financial issues, often related to the difficulty of working while attending the program. Financial problems have been identified in numerous other studies (Chambers, Coles, & Roper, 2002b; Chambers & Roper, 2000; Chambers et al., 2010; Hobson et al., 2009; Roberts, 2012).
- Frustration about withdrawal: All of interviewees expressed their frustration about their withdrawal decisions and most said they might consider reapplying later.
- Personal issues: Two interviewees had special circumstances (medical condition and/or pregnancy) that caused them to leave the program.
- Negative learning or teaching experiences: One interviewee revealed that he had a traumatic learning experience in childhood. Two interviewees stated that they have negative teaching experiences, such as responsibility for teaching an unfamiliar subject and difficulties with classroom management.

To maintain the integrity of two pre-service teachers’ own thoughts and explanations with regard to the causes of their withdrawal decisions, we present the stories using their own words to illustrate their perspectives and relevant experience. We believe that presenting the two cases separately can help portray each unique story in an authentic way. After presenting the cases, we will highlight the similarities and differences in the following sections.

4.1. Case 1: Cade

Cade, a white male in his mid-30s, had been teaching young children and adults learning English as a second language in his ESL class for three years in Japan before he joined the ITE program at the Junior/Intermediate level (grades 4–8). When he applied to the ITE program, he had just returned from Japan. He had intended to apply to other teacher education programs in the area, but completed only the application to this program. He did not persist in finishing all the applications and seemed to give up when there were even a few obstacles. He recalled that:

I started to apply to [another university], but [it] wanted too many signatures. They wanted me to get other teachers' signatures, about usually when you apply they want to know, have you had any experience teaching before, where did you volunteer. [The university from which he withdrew] didn't want me to actually get signatures from other teachers but [the other university] did so—I applied to [it] but then halfway through I stopped applying, so I applied through, I forget the name, ..., I applied through [the cross-university application center]. You send your application in and then you start to get mail from the university, and halfway through I stopped. [This university] was the only one that I was, I continued my [application].

Cade admitted that he did not prepare well and did not feel that he was ready for attending the program at the time he applied and even after he received the school admission:

[I]t was sort of a last minute decision. I said okay I'm gonna apply now, but I should probably try because the deadline is coming soon. I wasn't 100% prepared. I really had to write essays really quickly to try to get in, and to tell you the truth I didn't think I would get in—I was pretty surprised when I got in.

[W]hen I got in, when I got accepted I was surprised and I was half hoping, half of me was saying, "no, you're not ready yet."

Although Cade felt that he was not yet ready for school, he decided to accept the admission because of the prestigious reputation of the ITE program and because it was also the university where he did his undergraduate study.

I knew it was the best, my friends told me it's got the best reputation ... and [is] well recognized.

Another reason why Cade decided to accept the admission was because it was not easy to get into the ITE program and so he did not want to miss this opportunity:

[T]he number one reason why I said yes, and I finally accepted was that [this university] is difficult to get into ... I heard ... a lot of people get rejected ... because it was so difficult to get in and ... I decided, okay, I can't refuse something that's difficult to get in, so I said yeah ... the main reason is it was difficult to get in so I shouldn't say No.

Cade explained the biggest shock for him was the courses. It was apparent that he assumed that the ITE courses would be like his undergraduate experience, and, therefore, he was surprised at the practical teaching approaches that were used in his classes. That is, he expected that the ITE courses would also be theoretical rather than practical:

The biggest surprise was ... the comparison of undergrad. In undergrad it was, of course, you're studying English and History, it's all theoretical, you're reading books and writing essays and researching and what not—what surprised me is how ... it was more practical but teetering—making you feel like you're an elementary school student. Like I was in Junior/Intermediate ..., so what surprised me was how we would be the student as well as actual teacher like ... what a teacher teaches in elementary school, so for example let's say we have to cut something out and make a box or ... print our name on it, so that's what you would be doing with the little kids, but that's what our professor would do to us.

Cade linked his classroom experience with his personal negative episodic memory of his childhood in elementary school. He felt he was traumatized by his early schooling experience and he believed that this contributed to his decision to withdraw. He revealed:

That's why I dropped out. For me, I hated it because I was actually—I really went through a lot of bad experiences in elementary school, I was traumatized by you know, I was from a single parent family so I was a trouble-maker. I always got sent to the principal's office and ... I would be one of those kids who didn't like school so much ... it brought back kind of memories when I was doing that ... it just almost traumatizing memories of elementary school.

He thought that he needed the support from psychological or academic counselors when he felt “depressed and out of place” at that time; however, he avoided meeting with a counselor. “I think I wanted to talk to her [the counselor] and I really did make an appointment and then I just ... avoided going,” he said.

He felt confused and did not feel a passion about teaching:

I dropped out after one month. It was very quick, and I started feeling depressed right after one month. I didn't want to wake up in the morning, I felt, wow, what am I gonna do now? what am I gonna do with my life now. I don't know what to do now.

In addition to his expectations about ITE courses, he was also shocked by the course workload because it was far more than he had in his undergraduate study which only required “two hours of class some days.” He felt the lack of time contributed to his financial problems. “[O]ne of the reasons I left was not to just shock you—but I really didn't have a lot of money in my bank account. So you know ... there's always more than one reason.” The financial problem is the “big reason” because he and his partner tried to seek for jobs to support themselves. Cade was disappointed at the fact that he could not find extra time for part-time jobs due to his tight class schedules. Eventually, Cade explained that he had not repaid the provincial loans he received for his undergraduate studies and this was the reason he could not apply for further loans of a student bursary. Furthermore, he commented on the ITE courses and believed that some courses related to diversity and equity were not necessary for him, and he would be able to earn extra income if those courses were not required:

I think most people who become teachers, who go into teaching, they're not the type of person that would hate a race, or hate gay people, but I just felt like ... I'm sitting here all day listening to somebody who speaks on behalf of gay rights and all-black schools ... I felt it was just wasting our valuable time. There was just too much that could be cut ... The program could easily go from 9 to—if they wanted to go all day, every day, Monday–Friday, 9–2. Or nighttime, 3 h at night, 2 h at night.

I'm sure there are a lot of people going to the program that are not financially secure—we would never be able to work, we would never be able to get a part-time [job], unless we want to be dead tired, and a lot of it was excess.

As a result, he firmly believed that financial support and flexible course schedules would be helpful to him.

It seems that getting the teacher qualification or getting a teaching position is what he wanted to get out of the program. He believed that:

[Studying in the ITE program] is just what you have to do to get your license—after that, your teaching style will be your own style.

He assumed that he would learn how to teach from the days working as a teacher rather than from the courses in the program:

[The teachers who already attended ITE programs] said the exact same as me They said ... you don't really learn until you teach. You really don't learn how to be a teacher until you become a teacher.

Finally, he wanted to be either an ESL teacher or a high school English teacher who teaches only one subject—English—because his major is English and taught ESL children for three years in Japan. He regretted applying for the Junior/Intermediate level and wanted to switch to the Intermediate/Senior level, but it was too late to do so. The main reason why he felt like he was the “wrong fit” was because of his poor knowledge and skills in mathematics and he really did not have confidence in teaching Junior or Intermediate mathematics. This is another major reason that he decided to withdraw from the program:

I'm an English teacher, and I'm primarily an ESL teacher, and now I'm gonna be doing an algebra lessons and, ... I dropped out of math after Grade 10. Once I got into high school I already knew I'm bad at math.

4.2. Case 2: Adam

Adam was in his mid-40s and was married with one son when he began his ITE program at the Intermediate/Senior level (grades 7–12). He held a Bachelor of Science degree and a chartered accounting qualification, and, therefore, he was very passionate and felt confident in becoming a business or accounting teacher:

I felt that I could do a really good job at it, I would be able to impart ... a really good business or accounting education to my students, I think that's probably the main reason, and also I think I would have enjoyed it as well ... it's something I thought about for a long time, and I think I would have really liked to do. So probably both those reasons.

Adam's positive volunteering experience motivated him to pursue a teaching career. He had volunteered in schools and a professional institute of chartered accountants, for example, presenting at a workshop on chartered accounting for middle school students and he found “the whole environment exciting.” However, Adam did not have prior teaching experience. He explained that, “I just never had the opportunity [to teach in schools].”

In his mind, the ITE program consists of great instructors, students, and staff and also offers rich resources including both face-to-face and online learning. He believed there were “very positive aspects of the program.” However, he was shocked by the workload and course schedules, even though he thought he was informed beforehand:

I had heard from other people it was ... gonna be a lot of work and everything but I really had no idea as to how much that was going to be ... Although there were no exams, there was a lot of work, a lot of paperwork, a lot of reading, ... so I think something that would be an indicator to prospective students to really make it clear ... not just to, you know, that they hear second-hand that it's a lot of work, but that they actually have some concrete idea of what that actually means—I think would be very useful.

This reality shock was further complicated by personal issues. He was running a small business at home with his wife. After he began the program, he found out that it is difficult to find a balance among his studies, home business, and family life:

It's just I couldn't physically fit in all that work, plus my business and my family responsibilities in the same twenty-four hours a day.

Consequently, his decision to withdraw from the ITE program was made due to his struggles with the workload and his priorities. He remained upset about his withdrawal decision:

[O]bviously I couldn't give up my business and my family so—I gave up the program, and I'm not happy about that, I'm very unhappy ... [Teaching is] something I really wanted to do. Otherwise I wouldn't have applied in the first place. I'm quite upset about having to do that but I didn't see any other choice at the time.

In addition to the workload, Adam also expressed his concerns about the contents of courses in the ITE program. He indicated that there was a mismatch between his learning needs and course contents. As an older student with practical working experience, he felt he was “mature and age-wise,” and, therefore, he felt he already knew about educational theories and about social justice, although these might be important for younger students. Instead, he believed courses should focus on practical teaching techniques related to his profession, accounting:

[A] course ... where you're reading about social justice—I'm well aware of that kind of stuff, ... so if there's something [related to] basic accounting ... on how to teach accounting rather than strictly on theories of education ... I think that would be useful.

Due to this mismatch, he urged that ITE courses should be tailored to address older students' needs:

[J]ust like when you're teaching students, you have to tailor your approach, your material, to the different abilities or levels of your kids, I don't know why that couldn't or shouldn't apply to people in the program.

He did not agree with using the same approach to apply to all students in the program:

I thought it was exciting, and I think the people were really passionate—the students and the instructors ... I think the only thing that surprised me was ... the work and sort of the rubber stamp approach to every student ... to tailor a one-year program to different levels of students might be a difficult thing to do but nevertheless ... that's how I felt about it.

He expected that the program should consider the workload, course exemptions, part-time, or extended time for students who may be in a similar circumstance:

[Y]ou could be done ... on a part-time basis or ... over a year-and-a-half or two years, or a year plus a summer.

4.3. Comparisons of case studies: similarities

4.3.1. Financial concerns and workload

One of the major concerns that Cade and Adam had was money. For Adam, he planned to run his business at home while attending the ITE program; for Cade, he still wanted to do part-time jobs on or off campus to increase his income, and, therefore, tight course schedules and all the hours that had to be invested in each school day made them feel that they had no options except to leave the program. Their financial concerns were intertwined with what they perceived as an onerous workload. What these two mature male pre-service teachers reported was consistent with the previous research on withdrawal decisions (e.g. Basit et al., 2006; Bielby et al., 2007; Chamber et al., 2002a; Chambers et al., 2010; Chambers & Roper, 2000; Hobson et al., 2009; Lewis, 2002).

4.3.2. Course demands

Cade's undergraduate courses were lecture-style with limited class participation, and this experience had given him unrealistic expectations about the ITE program. It is interesting to see that the undergraduate class experience has such long-term effects on Cade's assumptions about ITE's classes since that he had graduated from university more than a decade before. Adam was shocked by the reality of the demanding courses which did not allow him to follow his original plan and he could not find a good balance between his work, study, and family. The mismatch between

individuals' expectations and other teacher education programs was also documented in previous research (e.g. Basit et al., 2006; Bielby et al., 2007; Challen, 2005a, 2005b; Chamber et al., 2002a; Chambers et al., 2010; Chambers & Roper, 2000; Hobson et al., 2009; Lewis, 2002), although the causes of the mismatch may vary from case to case.

4.3.3. *Mature students' perceived needs*

Both interviewees, Cade and Adam, suggested that courses related to diversity and equity issues (e.g. racism and homosexuality) are not necessary for them because they felt they are "age wise" and mature enough to understand these issues. This result resonates with previous studies that second-career mature students' needs are different from those of their first-career counterparts (e.g. Eifler & Potthoff, 1998; Richardson & Watt, 2005; Tigchelaar et al., 2008). On the one hand, their idea of removing these courses very likely was related to the pressure of the course load, and, thus, they wanted to reduce their load by cutting off what were to their minds unnecessary courses. On the other hand, we do not know whether or not this idea reflects their resistance or reluctance to engage in difficult issues of diversity and equity. This finding was rarely reported in previous studies and deserves our attention to investigate this question in depth in future research to understand these mature students' perceived needs.

4.3.4. *Information about the ITE program*

Cade and Adam both reported that they got general information about the ITE program from the Internet, such as information about application and admission, and course schedules. However, they also relied on information from their friends who are teachers or graduates of ITE programs. Adam heavily relied on "word of mouth." On the one hand, he seemed to be encouraged to be a teacher; on the other hand, he received unrealistic and less accurate impressions about ITE from his friends. It would be worthwhile to investigate the causes of the misperceptions of course demands, pre-service teachers' curriculum needs, and the information about ITE program from various media.

4.4. *Comparisons of case studies: differences*

4.4.1. *Previous teaching experience*

It seems that pre-service teachers or ITE applicants who have relevant school experience working with students are considered by some programs to be ideal (Reid & Caudwell, 1997). Bielby et al. (2007) indicate that one of the strategies for improving general retention and recruitment is to expose potential applicants to positive real-life teaching experience. Some researchers also suggest that second-career teachers may be able to transfer their previous working experience, knowledge, and skills to their teaching (e.g. Chambers, 2002; Chambers et al., 2002a; Eifler & Potthoff, 1998; Richardson & Watt, 2005). However, this strategy may not directly apply to the situations of our interviewees: Cade taught overseas for three years before beginning the ITE program, but his expectations of the ITE program were very restricted by his previous teaching experience. For example, he believed that the ITE program would not help him learn how to teach or cultivate his teaching style, even though he thought the ITE program had a high reputation. His ideas sound contradictory to each other. It is very likely that he assumed that he was already an experienced private school teacher who just needed to obtain his teacher qualification to enter the public school systems. Adam, in contrast, had no teaching experience but volunteered in schools before joining the ITE program. His perception of the teaching profession appeared to be informed largely by his experience as a volunteer or a guest speaker at workshops rather than more typical teaching experience, and, thus, he seems to have a "rose-tinted view of teaching" (e.g. Chambers et al., 2002b, 2010) which may have caused his unrealistic expectations of the ITE program. However, without any formal teaching experience, Adam was more positive and enthusiastic about teaching than Cade was. As Chambers et al. (2010) stated, "ensuring that trainees have prior experience in schools does not necessarily guarantee such knowledge [understanding the demands of ITP and teaching profession]" (p. 125). It would be important but challenging for stakeholders of ITE programs to revisit the criteria of admission associated with applicants' previous teaching experience and the validity of the selection process.

4.4.2. Reason for wanting to be a teacher

Previous research has found that some pre-service teachers' lack of commitment to teaching and their motivation by extrinsic factors may lead them to leave ITE programs (e.g. Bielby et al., 2007; Chambers & Roper, 2000; Chambers et al., 2002a, 2002b; Hobson et al., 2009; Sands, 1993). In the present study, we also found that pre-service teachers' motivation and level of commitment may be related to how pre-service teachers deal with unfavorable circumstances (e.g. workload and financial concerns). Adam appeared to possess extrinsic motivation toward teaching: he chose to attend the ITE program because of the reputation of the university. Compared with Cade, Adam was also much more intrinsically motivated and enthusiastic about teaching as he enjoyed working with students and was willing to share his accounting knowledge and skills with his prospective students. He was really upset about his withdrawal decision, but his intrinsic motivation and commitment to teaching did not help him win this battle at the end. It would be important to further investigate in future research the relationships among resilience factors including the level of commitment and intrinsic motivation of pre-service teachers who persist and who leave programs.

4.4.3. Previous classroom experiences

Cade disclosed that traumatic school experiences also held him back from continuing his studies. He had opportunities to talk with instructors about his issues, but did not seek help before he withdrew from the program. The effects of childhood experiences were not examined in previous studies. In addition, his fear of secondary-level mathematics made him reluctant to stay in the Junior/Intermediate level and he wanted to switch to the Intermediate/Secondary level, where he would not be expected to teach all subjects. It is obvious that the phase of education and ITE route were not a good match with his situation.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper has sought to understand the experience of two older male pre-service teachers in an ITE program and the reasons for their decision to withdraw from the program. As we noted in the Introduction, withdrawal is costly and unpleasant for both the pre-service teacher and for the ITE program. An important question is the extent to which ITE programs should seek to retain all pre-service teachers, perhaps by modifying the organization of the program. Or should programs seek to reduce withdrawal by helping applicants better understand the program to which they are applying, so that they can make more informed decisions about whether to attend? Given that males and older students are disproportionately represented among those who withdraw, the latter approach might result in discouraging male and older applicants from applying, which is not a satisfactory solution to the problem of withdrawal.

The two cases suggest that either or both approaches are unlikely to be successful in every case. Adam described a commitment to teaching and interest in learning to apply his accounting and business experience in the classroom. He had planned to continue to work in his business and spend time with his family while completing the program and withdrew when he found that to be impossible. A program that spread its requirements over a longer period might have been more feasible for him, as he suggested. Alternatively, if he had fully understood the structure and demands of the program before beginning it, he might have chosen not to apply or not to register.

For Cade, it is harder to imagine how the program might have fully accommodated his needs. What was most striking about Cade's interview was the large number of reasons he offered for withdrawing from the program. These included financial difficulties, fear of mathematics, trauma from his own elementary school experiences, the heavy workload in the program, a wavering interest in teaching, and, perhaps related to some of the other reasons, depression. It is also unclear the extent to which Cade consulted the information that was available about the program.

Although there is unlikely to be a "one size fits all" solution, we offer the following possible approaches for stakeholders of teacher education programs. Please note that our cases were older

male students who withdrew from the program prior to the teaching practicum, and, thus, discussions about the issues related to placement school or mentors are out of the scope of this study.

Admission criteria of teacher education programs often require that applicants have teaching experience or relevant experience in schools prior to applying to the programs. Prior teaching experience is clearly important; however, it may not provide enough information about applicants' motivation and commitment to teaching. The admission and selection processes may seek to identify applicants with intrinsic motivation and a high level of commitment to teaching. Such applicants are more likely to persist in the ITE program, enter the teacher profession, and choose teaching as their career. The assessment or measurement tools used for selection should be sensitive to these aspects.

It may be beneficial to advise pre-service teachers about which level of education (Primary, Junior, Intermediate, and/or Senior) is likely to be appropriate for them (Basit et al., 2006; Chambers et al., 2010; Hobson et al., 2009). For pre-service teachers who may have had negative classroom experiences in the past, psychological and academic counseling may be a support as they struggle about whether or not to leave the programs.

It is clear that what mature and second-career pre-service teachers believe they need may not be the same as for young graduates (e.g. Eifler & Potthoff, 1998; Richardson & Watt, 2005; Tigchelaar et al., 2008). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the experience, knowledge, and skills they bring to the ITE programs are valuable (Chambers et al., 2010; Hobson et al., 2009). It is also important for ITE programs to help such students understand where they may indeed have gaps in their knowledge and could benefit from what they see as unimportant courses.

The heavy workload is one of the biggest complaints that withdrawers had in the present and previous research (e.g., Basit et al., 2006; Bielby et al., 2007; Chamber et al., 2002a, 2010; Hobson et al., 2009; Lewis, 2002). While programs should ensure that the work required of pre-service teachers is relevant and useful, it may not be possible to reduce the workload. Allowing pre-service teachers to extend their program over a longer period of time could be especially important for older students.

We acknowledge that it is a challenge to effectively communicate with applicants all the details related to the demands, expectations and reality of ITE programs, and the teaching profession before they apply to or decide to attend a program. However, given the toll that withdrawal takes on pre-service teachers and on programs, we believe it is worth the effort to address those concerns through the collective efforts of stakeholders (e.g. program administrators, instructors, and the students) throughout the application, admission, and teacher training processes.

In this study, we employed a constructivist approach that contextualizes both cases studied. It allows readers to make decisions about the generalizability and applicability of our findings to other similar cases or contexts; however, we acknowledge that these two cases might not be generalizable for other cases in different teacher education programs. It is recommended that larger samples be used in future because they could provide more conclusive evidence. In addition, our interviewees' narratives were self-reports based on their conscious or unconscious beliefs or perceived needs that may or may not tell the entire story. We encourage further research to investigate the underlying assumptions and ideologies to reaffirm, clarify, or reshape the ideas from the self-reports.

Funding

The authors received no direct funding for this research.

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Citation information

Cite this article as: It takes a toll on pre-service teachers and programs: Case studies of teacher candidates who withdrew from a teacher education program, Pei-Ying Lin, Ruth A. Childs & Jingshun Zhang, *Cogent Education* (2016), 3: 1160524.

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