
Nontraditional Students in a Pre-kindergarten Teacher Education Program: The Challenges and Successes

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Being a nontraditional student comes with its own set of challenges and issues such as time management, financial constraints, and family commitments. A majority of the students that are pre-kindergarten education majors at a Midwestern university are considered to be nontraditional. Most of them have families and full-time jobs; they attend school on a part-time or even a full-time basis. If you combine these factors with the numerous field and observation hours required, you can have an overwhelmed college student. However, the students in this associate degree program are getting their degrees for a reason -- their passion for working with young children. Findings from various studies in this investigation suggest that in order to support these nontraditional students in teacher education programs, universities and colleges must provide resources and design programs that take into account their unique situations and needs.

Nontraditional students returning to a college environment come with a distinct set of skills and experiences. According to Knowles (1984) there is a specific set of principles that characterize adult learning. Several of those principles focus on the fact that adult learners, or nontraditional students, possess extensive life and work experiences which may serve as a critical component in the learning process (Knowles, 1984). For example, most adult learners have many years of work-related experience in their professions and seek a degree to reflect their knowledge and expertise. Oftentimes, life experiences can produce a more mature and focused learner, whereas a traditional student may not yet be able to manage their time and multiple commitments effectively. In regard to teacher education programs, these experiences can be applied effectively to classroom discussions and peer interactions. Classroom dialogues, in turn, become richer because of these real life situations.

Adult learners who are considered to be marginalized may not always receive the support they need to succeed in a college environment

due to numerous cultural and financial barriers (Crozier, Reay, Clayton, Colliander & Grinsted, 2008). This, in turn, may impact retention rates. Many nontraditional students attending Midwestern university regional campuses come from a variety of culturally and economically diverse backgrounds. In order to be adult-centered and improve retention rates, programs must address the barriers faced by these non-traditional students. In addition, course schedules should reflect the fact that most non-traditional students may need evening, weekend, or online course options. Knowles (1984) also acknowledged that most adult learners often come to college ready to learn and are motivated to do well. This drive to succeed may be a protective factor as adult learners begin their college experiences.

The theoretical framework that guided this investigation was Role Theory. This theory will drive this study, due to the multiple roles that nontraditional students face. Role Theory addresses the perspective that individuals manage multiple roles and learn ways to cope with these obligations and expectations (Turner, 1968). Being categorized as a nontraditional college student implies that people may be juggling a variety of roles such as employee, parent, and spouse. Role Theory asserts that these individuals will begin to prioritize and organize their self-perceptions based on these obligations (Kim, Sax, Lee & Hagedorn, 2010). As a result of these multiple roles, stress may increase without the proper coping and time management skills.

In a study examining the roles of non-traditional college students Kim et al. (2010) found that college students who are also employed had the highest level of aspirations and were more likely to start an assignment the day before it was due. College students who are also parents were the most likely to speak during class conversations, have a strong belief that faculty encouraged them in their education, and typically completed all homework assignments (Kim et al.). These results indicated that college students who have jobs and families may be some of the most determined and well-rounded students sitting in college classrooms.

If colleges and universities are to meet the needs of the growing nontraditional student population, programs must be accessible and supportive. Blair (2010) found that faculty play a key role in this process. If students perceived that they are supported by faculty inside and outside the classroom, they are more likely to be successful with their college education (Blair). Newbold, Mehta and Forbus (2010) also reported that nontraditional students tended to develop more meaningful relationships with faculty and

value the interactions more than traditional students do. This may be due to nontraditional students being better able to focus on their long-term career goals and valuing the interactions with their instructors more than traditional students. These authors indicated that relationships with faculty play a key role in the success (or failure) of nontraditional students. Therefore, when selecting or hiring faculty to teach education courses the candidate's interpersonal skills and abilities related to students should be taken into consideration by colleges and universities. These examples of positive faculty interactions may also play an important part in the success of adult learners returning to college.

Challenges of Nontraditional Pre-kindergarten Pre-Service Teachers

Going to college can be challenging for any student, but non-traditional students may have especially difficult challenges. According to Bendizen-Noe and Redick (1995) there is a great need to accommodate and create education programs built around the concept of addressing the needs of the adult learner. One Midwestern university offers a Pre-kindergarten associate of applied science degree which also allows candidates to obtain their Ohio Department of Education Pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) teaching license for children ages 3 to 5. This is a very attractive degree for those currently working in the childcare or preschool education profession to return for their associate degree. Many of these individuals work full time to subsidize their family income, so leaving a job to return to school is not an option for most. Along with a job, many of them have young children and families to support. Juggling all of these responsibilities takes determination and creativity.

In the world of childcare and preschool education, good paying jobs can be hard to come by. High turnover rate with directors and staff can also affect job satisfaction and morale. In order to climb the "corporate" ladder in this field, some may choose to receive their Pre-kindergarten associate degree which can lead to higher pay and possibly a promotion with their current employer. This degree also gives individuals more education and knowledge about child development and the young children they teach. Lastly, it may provide an opportunity to obtain a better paying job in another childcare or preschool childhood program.

Time management and financial stress can be especially challenging when returning to college after many years (Forbus, Newbold & Mehta, 2011). A college education is certainly not cheap. Everything from tuition,

books, and gas money must be considered for those going back to school. Nontraditional students with children may also have to find childcare for their young children while taking classes. For many 18-22 year old traditional students, college is typically the primary focus. However, as a nontraditional student, college academic work becomes one of the many obligations that must be accomplished each day. Children must be taken to extracurricular activities, lunches must be made, and homework assistance must be given. These are all just a few of the many commitments that nontraditional students may face each and every day. For those with poor time management skills, this can be stressful and even overwhelming. Several obstacles were identified by Goncalves and Trunk (2014) in their study of nontraditional college students. Isolation and not fitting in resonated with many of the nontraditional students that were interviewed for this study. Lack of access to resources such as computers and expensive technology items are often a challenge for those without the financial means to purchase their own. Course times and availability were also obstacles for those students with family and job commitments.

One Midwestern universities' data indicated the following trends in the Pre-kindergarten Associate degree program. The total number of students that declared their major as Pre-kindergarten prior to 2013 was 337. Of those students only 114 (34%) graduated with a Pre-kindergarten Associate degree. Forty-six (14%) graduated within two years of beginning the program and 56 (17%) graduated within four years. The remaining 12 students that graduated took more than four years to graduate. This data is not very encouraging and leads to the questions of why students are taking so long or why they are not finishing the program at all. These challenges have also forced the department to consider different teaching formats to address the low numbers (i.e. online or hybrid teaching formats).

Many of the current students in this study's Pre-kindergarten Teacher Education program are those who have switched from another major (i.e. nursing, special education). These students had an initial goal of earning a Bachelor degree, but after several semesters, the reality of their endeavor takes its toll. Finances are also one of the many factors that drive students to a Pre-kindergarten degree. It is not uncommon to hear students say that they just want to be out in the workforce working with children and earning a paycheck. With appropriate support and encouragement, nontraditional students in teacher education programs can achieve their goal of becoming a teacher and working with children.

One of the additional challenges is to locate community programs that provide quality experiences with a wide variety of diversity. There is an increasing demand for pre-service teachers to have extensive knowledge and experience working with children from diverse backgrounds, which also includes children with developmental delays in inclusive settings. Collaboration between community agencies that serve diverse populations of children and families and Teacher Education programs should be a priority (Lim & A'Ole-Boune, 2005). As of fall semester 2014, one Midwestern university regional campus established numerous community partnerships that have been quite successful with their Teacher Education program. The students taking the EDT 190 course (Introduction to Education) observed and worked with a number of diverse local school programs including: Summit Academy (K-12), The Legacy Program at Sonny Hill Community Center (after school program K-5), MUM Tots (childcare and preschool), Madison Elementary (K-5, special education, Title 1 and technology), and Middletown High School (9th-12th grade math tutor and mentor assistant). These opportunities provided these regional students with a choice of working in various grade levels and special interests within the community.

The university Pre-kindergarten Program Coordinator designed a similar partnership with a local program serving children ages 18 months to 8 years old with significant behavior issues. The young children in this particular program have been expelled or suspended from area preschools and child care programs. This unique program also provided counseling to the parents of the children receiving services. The Pre-kindergarten students were required to complete between eight to ten hours throughout the semester observing this program during one of their Preschool Integrated Curriculum courses. With so many children exhibiting aggressive or difficult behaviors in the classroom today, these observations can give the students a first-hand experience with young learners who are facing these issues. It is also an invaluable way to observe research-based methods that will teach children the positive behaviors which will replace the negative ones.

Successes of Nontraditional Pre-kindergarten Pre-Service Teachers

In a study done on teacher education programs, researchers found that data indicated field experiences and student teaching were two of the most valued aspects of their college education (Walsh, Abi-Nader, & Poutiatine, 2005). Nontraditional students often crave real life education

experiences. Even though these field experiences may provide extra scheduling conflicts, many feel it is well worth it. It is also important to give students a variety of experiences in a number of different types of programs. For example, students should have experiences in childcare, preschool and Head Start programs so that they can make an informed decision when looking for future employment. If students have knowledge and experience in a wide variety of early childhood programs throughout their college education, they will have an advantage as they begin to search for employment opportunities.

Cohort models also helped to create supports for nontraditional students in this same study (Walsh, Abi-Nader, & Poutiatine, 2005). Nontraditional students appear to value support by others going through the same experience. The cohort approach to teacher education programs seems to promote caring and a genuine concern for helping others meet their goals. This, in turn, may create a higher graduation rate if students feel supported. Exposito and Bernheimer (2012) challenged higher education institutions to create a supportive framework and instructional practices for nontraditional students in teacher education programs throughout the country. One method of achieving this goal would be to launch an orientation meeting for new students entering early childhood education programs. Students would also be assigned a mentor and an advisor to provide guidance and support. The aim would be to establish a supportive community that would welcome and support new students into the program. Since a common concern by many non-traditional students is a lack of support, this concept would address this need.

There are a multitude of reasons that nontraditional students may choose to enroll in a teacher education program. Flexible entry requirements and the potential for stable employment are two common reasons (Snell, 2008). In addition, education programs may be seen as easily accessible for those students who want to work while getting their degree. If students feel that a degree is accessible, they may be more likely to complete it. The university Pre-kindergarten Program faculty were very cognizant of the fact that a large percentage of the students enrolled do have outside commitments including families and jobs. When scheduling observations and field experiences for these students, every effort is made to accommodate work schedules and time conflicts that may arise. Many of the courses in the Pre-kindergarten Program are moving toward being

offered in either an on-line or hybrid format for those students that may not have the ability to be on campus often.

Not surprisingly, college success has been found to be closely related to such factors as attendance, effort, and studying (Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan & Towler, 2005). In other words, the more engaged students become in their programs the better the outcomes. This is good news for those students who believe that the amount of effort put into their learning will result in a more valuable educational college experience. Meeting encouraging people and supportive professors were also mentioned as factors that contributed to a positive experience on campus for many non-traditional students (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014).

In a study focusing on a nontraditional teacher's experience with student teaching, Garuvso (2007) discovered that journaling and reflective practices both played a key role in the quality of the student teaching experience. These reflective practices helped to recognize the fact that a teacher's role should not simply center around getting children ready for the next grade, but focus on the individual characteristics of each child. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009) position paper stated that pre-service teachers must engage in continuous, collaborative learning. Pre-service teachers must also integrate knowledgeable, reflective, and critical perspectives on early education in order to be effective early childhood professionals (NAEYC). These teacher preparation standards drive the field of early childhood professional programs and encourage future teachers to reflect and analyze their teaching methods and interactions, which, in turn, will produce quality relationships with children and families (NAEYC).

Success may be defined by many college students as finding employment immediately following graduation. The expectation is typically to find a job in the surrounding community, and creating partnerships with local preschools and childcare programs has the potential to lead to employment for some students. Internships, student teaching, and observations can provide valuable information to Pre-kindergarten education students about the different types of programs in which they may want to be employed in the future. For example, a Head Start program looks very different from a traditional private preschool in many ways. Head Start programs are federally funded comprehensive programs that provide health, nutrition, and education services to low-income children and families. Traditional preschools are typically half day programs that may be

used as an educational supplement for children and families. Traditional preschools often are located in churches or community buildings. Philosophies and curriculum will also vary greatly from program to program. These field experiences are an excellent way to get to know the community better by observing and teaching in local programs.

Winklestein (1992) designed a long-term community partnership between a university early childhood program and a local Head Start program in an effort to determine the effectiveness of this model. It was concluded that this partnership resulted in reciprocal benefits for both the university and the community program. The Head Start program staff felt that the students added much knowledge and experience to their program and the quality of the curriculum seemed to improve. Therefore, this relationship was seen as a win-win partnership for both the university and the Head Start program.

Conclusions

Rather than asking what the needs of nontraditional students are, Goncalves and Trunk (2014) argued that we need to take a pro-active approach and begin implementing and measuring the success of special programs geared to increase student engagement and retention. By creating classroom environments that support a community of learners, non-traditional students are encouraged to develop relationships with peers. These relationships can help to empower and support students (Mello, 2004). Teacher education programs have the important task of preparing individuals to teach the next generation of young learners. This may seem like an overwhelming charge, but a new approach to creatively engaging non-traditional students is warranted in the field of education. Students in teacher education programs can only learn so much from a textbook; therefore, it is recommended that program faculty provide a variety of rich experiences with young children and families to enhance the knowledge and areas of expertise of every student. This can be achieved by developing community partnerships with quality education and child care programs. There are many unique differences between traditional and nontraditional students entering a teacher education program. However, all of these students do have at least one thing in common--their passion and eagerness for teaching young children.

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