Alberta Journal of Educational Research, Vol. 65.1, Spring 2019, 1-21

Access and Equity in Ontario Teacher Education: Teacher Candidates' Perceptions

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Access, equity, and equitable representation are ongoing challenges in teacher education. While many Canadian teacher education programs identify equity and diversity as key values, these values do not always result in rates of representation that reflect the student population. Minoritized teacher candidates also experience our programs in unique ways, creating gaps between university equity statements and the lived experiences of our students. This study therefore examines the perspectives of 13 teacher candidates who self-identify as members of various underrepresented groups. Participants' experiences offer key insights into the challenge of achieving equitable and diverse representation. The presented findings will be of interest to teacher educators and other stakeholders committed to addressing the complex task of increasing equity and access for underrepresented groups in their programs.

L'accès, l'équité et la représentation équitable constituent des défis constants en formation des enseignants. Alors que plusieurs programmes de formation des enseignants identifient comme valeurs fondamentales l'équité et la diversité, l'adoption de ces valeurs ne mène pas toujours à des taux de représentation qui reflètent la population des étudiants. Les candidats minoritaires au programme de formation à l'enseignement vivent l'expérience du programme différemment, ce qui crée des écarts entre l'énoncé de l'université sur l'équité et le vécu des étudiants. Cette étude porte sur la perspective de 13 étudiants candidats au programme de formation à l'enseignement qui s'auto-identifient comme membres de divers groupes sous-représentés. Ces expériences offrent des aperçus essentiels sur le défi d'atteindre une représentation équitable et diverse. Les résultats sauront intéresser les formateurs d'enseignants et d'autres parties prenantes qui s'engagent à aborder la tâche complexe qui est celle d'augmenter l'équité et l'accès à leurs programmes pour les étudiants sous-représentés.

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Although a diverse teaching force supports both student outcomes and teacher retention (Farinde, LeBlanc, & Otten, 2015; Solomon, 1997; Villegas & Irvine, 2010), various groups—including first-generation students, students with disabilities, students of Aboriginal descent, and other racialized minorities [1]—remain underrepresented or poorly tracked in many teacher education programs (Holden & Kitchen, 2018). Moreover, although many teacher education programs articulate a commitment to equity (Crocker & Dibbon, 2008), less is known how students from underrepresented groups experience equity issues in our programs (see James & Taylor, 2008; and the Ontario Alliance of Black School Educators [ONABSE], 2015 for important exceptions). These gaps reinforce concerns that teacher education programs are comprised of predominantly white, middle-class, able-bodied, heteronormative students (DeLuca, 2015; Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005). Continuing to strive for equitable,

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accessible teacher education goes beyond remedying participation gaps: we must also consider how minoritized students experience our programs and work to ensure that our programs align with the goals of equity and inclusion that we so often articulate (Association of Canadian Deans of Education [ACDE], 2014; Farinde et al., 2015).

This is a good moment in time to address issues of equitable representation: Ontario's teacher education programs have recently participated in a series of studies examining equity practices and rates of representation (Holden & Kitchen, 2017b; Holden, Kitchen, Petrarca, & Lesage, 2016), and are responding to calls for increased access and equity in our programs (see Petrarca & Kitchen, 2017). In this study, we sought to understand how students from underrepresented groups perceived access and equity efforts now that Ontario's teacher education programs have doubled in length and are admitting half as many students (Holden et al., 2016; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013). Although a decrease in the number of admitted students does not necessarily mean a decrease in program diversity, some programs have reported reduced diversity since the change to four-semester programs (see Holden & Kitchen, 2017b). With the Ontario College of Teachers ([OCT], 2016) forecasting the end to Ontario's teacher surplus, we would do well to consider how representative and accessible our programs are to students from underrepresented groups. Longer programs mean increased tuition costs for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and come with increased opportunity costs for students who may be concerned about delaying their entry into the job market. Although few of Ontario's faculties of education revised their equity policies during this transition (Holden et al., 2016), teacher educators are now well-positioned to examine their approaches to equity and accessibility within newly revised programs made up of relatively fewer students.

This is an important area of study for teacher educators: as Kotzee and Martin (2013) contended, "universities have a moral and political obligation to work in ways to ensure that traditionally excluded groups have opportunities to contribute to the development of knowledge and understanding" (p. 638). In order to critically examine how to meet this obligation, teacher educators need to understand how students are affected by our program decisions. Indeed, teacher educators recognize that all students benefit when we work to improve the equity and accessibility of our programs (see Petrarca & Kitchen, 2017). As Childs and colleagues (2016) note, these considerations are also an important part of addressing underrepresentation in the teaching force. By examining how access and equity efforts affect students from underrepresented groups, teacher educators and other stakeholders will be better positioned to support these students' needs and ensure that our programs reflect the diversities of the classrooms that we ultimately serve.

Access and Admissions Literature

This study draws on two related but distinct areas of research: (a) access to postsecondary studies and (b) teacher education admissions. Access studies are typically concerned with whether students are able to participate in higher education (Bowen & Bok, 1998), whereas admissions studies tend to investigate how the decision of participation is made (Childs & Ferguson, 2016). Related to both is the notion of equitable representation—the idea that, in striving for greater access to higher education, programs and admissions processes should be designed in such a way that members of underrepresented groups are equitably represented, and that admissions and access barriers should not disproportionately affect these groups (Stead, 2015).

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Questions of access and equity necessarily include the admissions process because, although each teacher education program admits students in different ways (Holden et al., 2016), most Ontario teacher candidates are admitted through processes that are rooted in longstanding academic standards like academic averages and competitive admissions (see Thomas, Alexander, & Eckland, 1979). Indeed, "despite decades of talking about equity, diversity, and inclusion" (Henry et al., 2017, p. 302), many such practices remain relatively unchanged in teacher education (see Thomas & Kane, 2016). Every Ontario university uses academic averages as a measure of cognitive skills, and most institutions rely on written statements and references to measure non-cognitive suitability (Holden & Kitchen, 2016). Such processes have been criticized for creating barriers for underrepresented groups who would otherwise contribute to a diversely representative teaching population (Archibald et al., 2002). Looking at equity specifically, 12 of Ontario's 15 teacher education programs articulate explicit equity admissions policies. [2] As Holden and Kitchen (2016) note, however, most of these policies "follow Guinier's (2003) contest and sponsored mobility models, where the structure of program admissions may reinforce the selection of over-represented groups" (p. 19). Such statements have also been criticized as amounting to "no more than well-worded mission statements and cosmetic changes" (Henry et al., 2017, p. 300). To move beyond these criticisms, it is necessary to move beyond minor adjustments to otherwise traditional approaches, and consider how students from various backgrounds may be better supported in their journey to teaching.

Access and equity are uniquely important to teacher education because of the implications for Canada's classrooms. As Villegas and Irvine (2010) note, teacher diversity advocates find "it unacceptable for a pluralistic society to expose public school students to an overwhelmingly White teaching force" (p. 177). That is, if our programs are accessible and equitable, then Canadian students should be taught by skilled teachers from a range of backgrounds. As Solomon (1997) notes, underrepresented teachers "bring to their pedagogy characteristics and experiences which create a positive learning environment. This environment contributes significantly to the academic success not only of students of colour but also of all other students" (p. 395). Although a diverse teaching force is not a panacea for student success, "teachers who are familiar with the lives of [underrepresented students] are better able to build these bridges to learning for those students" (Villegas, Strom, & Lucas, 2012, p. 287). Put simply, striving for access and equity aligns with Canadian goals for education (ACDE, 2014) and offers benefits for underrepresented students and majority students alike.

Underrepresented Groups in Ontario Teacher Education

Rates of representation differ between disciplines and institutions, between provinces, and across international contexts (Black, Cortes, & Lincove, 2015; Cortes, 2010; Finnie et al., 2011b). In Ontario, groups that are underrepresented in postsecondary education (PSE) include students from low-income families, rural or remote students, students from single-parent families, first- and second-generation immigrants, students of Aboriginal ancestry, [3] students with disabilities, first-generation students, visible minorities, and racialized minorities (Falkenberg, 2015; Finnie et al., 2011b; Wang & Shulruf, 2013). These groups participate in PSE at noticeably different rates from the general population. For example, although 45.5% of all Ontarians access university by the age of 21, only 35.2% of youth from low-income households do so. Similarly, youth who are the first in their family to attend PSE enrol at a rate of 25.7%, although 22.1% of youth with disabilities participate. Only 17.8% of Aboriginal youth in Ontario

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access university by the time they are 21, the lowest participation rate for Aboriginal groups in Canada (Finnie et al., 2011b). Although some immigrant and visible minority groups participate in PSE at higher rates than the general population, this is not consistent across population groups (Finnie, Childs, & Wismer, 2011a; 2011b).

Similar variations are found for representation in Ontario teacher education. For example, the OCT (2016) reports that 2.9% of Ontario teacher education graduates identified as Indigenous in 2015, although 2% of newly certified teachers are internationally educated. Although some teacher education programs report higher levels of Aboriginal participation—4.51% of Lakehead's studies identified as Aboriginal in 2013—"most universities reported proportions lower than the Aboriginal share of the population" between 2012 and 2016 (Holden and Kitchen, 2018, p. 18). Likewise, ONABSE (2015) notes that "while racialized people represent 26% of Ontario's population, they make up only 13% of the province's [teachers]" (p. 12). Rates of representation for visible minorities and racialized persons are higher in large urban programs (25.85% at York, 24.72% at Ottawa; Holden and Kitchen, 2018), in part because such programs are in racially diverse communities (ONABSE, 2015; Statistics Canada, 2016). Representation for students with disabilities is similarly varied: representation at Lakehead and York regularly meets or exceeds the proportion of Canadians aged 15-24 with disabilities (4.4%, per Statistics Canada, 2015), although other programs regularly report participation rates around 1% (Holden and Kitchen, in press).

These rates of representation provide useful context for examining access and equity in teacher education. Having a representative program is not the same as having an accessible and equitable program, however. As James and Taylor (2008) caution, "marginalized students who gain entry to university do so at a great cost since they are likely to experience racism, classism, sexism, marginalization, and discrimination" (p. 223). Beyond measuring who is in our programs, teacher educators must also examine how underrepresented groups experiences those programs once they have been admitted. We must work to "identify and remove discriminatory barriers" (ONABSE, 2015, p. 61), particularly because some underrepresented students continue to doubt teacher educators' commitment to articulated equity goals (McNinch, 1994; Thomson et al., 2011). The purpose of this study, therefore, was to examine how teacher candidates who self-identify as members of underrepresented groups perceive access and equity within their programs, to provide teacher educators and other stakeholders with current information on the experiences of such students in our programs. The following sections detail the methods used for gathering and analysing these data.

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Method

Research Design

As Richardson (1997) notes, "individuals create their own understandings, based upon the interaction of what they already know and believes, and the phenomena or ideas with which they come in contact" (p. 3). Thus, this study gathers the perceptions and experiences of 13 minoritized teacher candidates from three universities in Ontario, with qualitative interviews from each participant contributing to an instrumental multi-case study as described by Stake (2006). This reflects Smits' (2010) position that "we ought to take very seriously … the lived experiences of [our students]" (p. 53), and draws on past studies exploring teacher candidates' perceptions of their experiences (Kitchen & Bellini, 2012; Kosnik & Beck, 2009; Soleas; 2015).

The study's multicase design draws on each participant's experiences in order to contribute to a fuller understanding of equity and access issues from multiple teacher candidate perspectives (Stake, 2006). These case perspectives also complement the descriptive statistics we have explored elsewhere in our investigations of teacher education admissions (Holden & Kitchen, 2018), contributing to a clearer understanding of how we can best achieve goals of access and equity in our programs. In the following sections, we identify how participants were selected and what procedures were used to collect and analyse the resulting data.

Participants

Thirteen participants were selected using convenience sampling (Creswell, 2014) from three teacher education programs (four campuses) across Ontario, each of which agreed to forward a letter of invitation to teacher candidates currently enrolled in their programs. Multiple institutions were approached in order to provide a broader perspective when analysing participants' overall responses, particularly so that teacher educators in other contexts might consider which strengths and limitations were also true of their own programs. Although teacher candidates were invited to participate if they self-identified as members of underrepresented groups, we did not use what Stead (2015) describes as "predetermined lists of group identities," as such lists are "far less equitable than a process that invites minoritized individuals to name their own group affiliations" (p. 323). Instead, teacher candidates were invited to participate if they identified with any underrepresented group such that their experiences might offer unique perspectives on access and access supports in Ontario teacher education. Thirty teacher candidates responded to the letter of invitation, with 13 students ultimately available to participate in the study during the data collection period. Interviews took place in February and March of 2017.

Table 1 provides a summary of participants' programs as well as the underrepresented groups that they chose to identify with. Interestingly, participants' self-identified groups vary noticeably from the groups which are tracked by Ontario faculties of education. For example, nine of Ontario's 15 teacher education programs track the number of Aboriginal applicants (Holden and Kitchen, 2018), but none of the responding participants identified as Aboriginal. Although participants included students with disabilities and first-generation students, these groups are more frequently tracked in Ontario than the participant pool might suggest (Holden & Kitchen, 2018). Participants most commonly identified as visible or racialized minorities, yet only three Ontario faculties track applications from these groups. Participants also identified with groups that are not tracked in the province: no Ontario faculty of education tracks the participation of parents, religious minorities, or immigrants and first-generation Canadians (Holden & Kitchen, 2018). It is also difficult to compare the participant pool to actual participation rates. For example, although visible and racialized minorities are well-represented in some programs (e.g., York, Ottawa), they are underrepresented elsewhere in the province. A lack of consistently available data further complicates such comparisons (Holden & Kitchen, in press).

Procedure and Analysis

Participating teacher candidates each completed a qualitative individual interview between February and March 2017. Interviews lasted between 20 and 70 minutes, based on participants'

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Table 1

Participants' Programs and Self-Identified Groups

Participant	Program[a]	Underrepresented Groups							
		Disability	First Generation	Immigrant or FGC[b]	Low-Income	Mature Student	Parent[c]	Religious Minority[d]	Visible / Racialized Minority
Andrew	Concurrent					√			
Anita	Consecutive			√					√
Carrie	Concurrent					√	√		
Jason	Consecutive					√	√		√
Kayla	Consecutive			√				√	√
Lena	Consecutive	√				√	√		
Miranda	Consecutive		√	√	√	√	√		√
Morgan	Concurrent			√					√
Mujib	Consecutive			√				√	√
Paula	Concurrent		√						
Samirah	Consecutive							√	√
Sherry	Consecutive	√				√	√		
Tiffany	Consecutive								√
	Totals	2	2	5	1	6	5	3	8

[a] In Ontario, teacher candidates complete their Bachelor of Education program either alongside (concurrent) or after (consecutive) their accompanying undergraduate degree. We have not included which semester of the program participants were enrolled in, as some participants identified that this level of detail could be used to identify them as participants in the study. Several participants were in their final semester of their programs, although several others were enrolled in the second semester of their program. Concurrent participants were all at least four semesters into their programs.
[b] First-Generation Canadian. Immigrants are those students who were born outside of Canada and have immigrated to Canada some time before entering teacher education. First-Generation Canadians are those students who were born in Canada, but whose parents were born outside of Canada.
[c] Although parents are not described as an underrepresented group in the literature, we have included parents as a separate group in this table because several participants identified challenges and barriers unique to students with caregiving obligations, including scheduling and finances. Although all of the participating parents are also mature students, participants' responses suggest that mature students' needs are not identical to parents' needs.
[d] Like parents, religious minorities are typically not included in lists of underrepresented groups in Canadian teacher education. As multiple students identified as a religious minority, however, we have chosen to include this category.

responses to a semi-structured interview protocol that asked participants to reflect on their experiences applying to, and participating in, their teacher education program. In particular, participants were asked to identify the supports, challenges, barriers, and opportunities available to them as a member of an underrepresented group, and to consider how teacher educators might enhance access and access supports for students from underrepresented populations.

Data analysis consisted of multiple, iterative cycles of coding. Initially, descriptive and structural coding were employed simultaneously to label data segments (Saldaña, 2013). These

approaches use topic- and content-based identifiers, informed by the interview questions and the research literature. Second Cycle methods, then, presented opportunities to reorganize data, and to provide more in-depth analysis (Saldaña, 2013). This provided a firmer sense of the categories and themes within the codes. Focused coding was used to further the analysis process, so that participants' experiences could be compared with other cases in the data. As Saldaña (2013) describes, this approach connects the labels into categories, with the codes being used to explore combinations of elements in the experiences of the participants. These categories were constructed from the (re)organization of the data, rather than from pre-existing lists. This analysis process also allowed participants' responses to be compared with "established theory in social science" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 14), that is, access, equity, and admissions literature. To assist with the organization and analysis process, a qualitative analysis program (NVivo 11) was used during coding and data analysis. The resulting categories and themes were examined using Stake's (2006) multi-case perspective, such that individual participants' experiences contribute case perspectives, with the collection of cases (or quintain) contributing to the emergent themes and discussion points raised across the data. That is, although each individual students' experiences are valuable for understanding their own perspectives, as a collection of cases, the data provide insights into the participants' broader experiences of equity and access issues as students apply to and participate in our teacher education programs.

Results

As we have described, participants' responses provide a qualitative perspective as part of our broader investigation of access and equity in teacher education (Holden & Kitchen, 2017b; 2018). Participants' responses were arranged into discussion categories and corresponding themes, identifying shared successes and struggles across participants' varied contexts. Table 2 provides an overview of these themes, including frequency counts for the four most frequently mentioned categories based on participants' responses. In the following sections, we present results for each of these categories, and highlight key ideas raised by our participants.

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Table 2

Participants' Perceptions of Access and Equity in their Teacher Education Program

Discussion Categories	Corresponding Themes
Experiences of the Admissions Process (208)[a]	Accessibility; Challenges; Perceptions; Experiences included in equity statements
Experiences in the Program (431)	Formal program supports; Informal program supports; Self-advocacy; Positive opportunities; Teaching equity mindset
Challenges and Barriers (295)	Discomfort; Finances; Geography; Isolation; Lack of support; Mental health challenges; Program length; Race and racism
Accessibility of Teacher Education Programs (119)	Overall accessibility; Factors that help or hinder access; Ways to increase program access

[a] These numbers denote the number of times each category's themes arose in the data.

Experiences of the Admissions Process

Most participants reported that the admissions process was accessible, and several participants explained that they did not feel troubled by their university's equity admissions efforts. Anita, 4 for example, recalled focusing on "show[ing] off what I could offer and why I should be considered," and only later wondered if she might have been judged because of her Hispanic name. This was not always the case, however. Jason, for example, was concerned that self-identifying might disadvantage him as a candidate. He explained, "Sometimes with those questions, when it comes to jobs, sometimes I fear … that it's a screening tool to screen me out." Although Jason emphasized that his experiences in the program quickly assuaged his fears, he shared the following anecdote:

> There have been many times in my life where … [I'll] get a phone interview. I get email correspondence saying that they're interested in me. And then when I show up to the interview, I see their face drop. It's like they're like, "Ugh." So I was afraid of that with [the university as well].

This example connects the admissions process to broader social contexts: Jason's university was not using this question as a screening tool, nor did his program rely on interviews during admissions. Yet, Jason was concerned that his answers might be used to "screen him out" because of first-hand experiences with discrimination during other selection processes. It is unsurprising, then, that Jason was worried about how these equity questions might be used.

Morgan offered an alternative perspective. As a visible minority, he shared that "there's a lot of challenges that someone who isn't White is going to have to deal with. There's a lot of different challenges, different perspectives that challenge—what does it mean to be a teacher?" For Morgan, the opportunity to self-identify was a way to acknowledge these challenges and begin a conversation about professional identity. Kayla shared a similar sentiment: for her, self-identifying was a way to "[give] understanding to what's going on in your application." That is, like Morgan, Kayla appreciated the opportunity to provide a context to her experiences. Participants also noticed when such opportunities were absent. Samirah, for example, said that "I feel like [the equity section] was more for First Nations students. I don't know if it necessarily applied to me." Although Samirah identified as a visible and religious minority, she did not believe that the university's equity and access section was relevant to her. Essentially, she believed the university's self-identification process was only relevant for students of Aboriginal descent. Since most Ontario institutions only track Aboriginal participation rates (Holden & Kitchen, 2018), this perspective is understandable.

Participants who did not identify as visible minorities shared similar sentiments: of the five students who did not identify as visible minorities, only Andrew and Sherry included information in the equity section of their applications. Anita, similarly, noticed that the LGBTQ community was not included in her university's equity section. That is, students may respond differently to equity questions during the admissions process depending on what groups are included, and how such inclusion is communicated.

Experiences in the Program

Sources of support. After discussing their experiences of the admissions process, each participant reflected on their experiences in the program itself. During their interviews, most

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participants identified a range of support services available to teacher candidates and, in some cases, to members of underrepresented groups. These included English Language Learning centres, financial aid offices, personal counselling, accessibility services, and prayer rooms. Several participants also explained that their program sent regular "check in" emails or automated phone messages, offering points of contact for students who may be struggling. Anita noted that, in some cases, community organizations were able to offer more supports than her university. She explained, "there's a lot of community centres that really, really, really try to reach all of the Hispanics, all the Filipinos, all the Syrian refugees, [more so] than [the university] does." These campus and community supports sometimes intertwined. Miranda, for example, noted that her university partnered with a local organization to provide personal counselling support for students enrolled in the program. As a mature student, Miranda particularly appreciated this support as a way to reduce the stress she felt retuning to post-secondary school and adjusting to the demands of the program.

Participants also recalled a variety of informal supports they received while they were in the program. Sherry's associate teacher, for example, modified her classroom practices to accommodate Sherry's learning disability. She also shared that she was able to approach each of her professors and receive both formal and informal supports that reflected her learning needs. Lena, similarly, was pleased to report that despite her frustrations with the university's formal supports, individual professors were "absolutely accommodating" when she needed to be absent from class to take care of her daughter.

Several participants identified an unexpected type of support for students from underrepresented groups: self-advocacy. At times, participants explained that they relied on self-advocacy because they needed support they weren't already receiving. As Tiffany explained, "if you don't speak up for yourself, people are not going to recognize that there's a need." Participants also discussed self-advocacy as a preventative strategy, to ensure that they had full access to resources. Mujib, for example, said that "I do my own research and figure out, here's where I'd go if I wanted that support." Importantly, participants had mixed views on self-advocacy as a support strategy. Jason, for example, found his program highly receptive: "Whenever [my colleagues] had an issue, it was [taken care of]. They just had to ask." Other participants worried that relying on self-advocacy alone would leave students feeling unsupported. Anita, for example, commented, "When it comes to the Faculty of Ed, sometimes it feels like 'it is what it is.' … It comes to a point where people start being afraid to ask for help." Although participants recognized self-advocacy as a potential strategy, these comments suggest that self-advocacy may be more successful in contexts where students already perceive a high level of support.

Teaching an equity mindset. Reflecting on their experiences as members of underrepresented groups, most participants discussed the ways their instructors included equity issues in the program. Many of their reflections revolved around the notion of teaching an equity mindset, both for themselves and their future students. As part of this equity mindset, participants expressed an appreciation for learning how to support the needs of diverse learners in their classrooms. Anita, for example, shared that her program unpacked "the adversities that students face and how these adverse experiences can emotionally affect them, and socially affect them, and then, as a result, affect their achievement in school."

Importantly, participants argued that a meaningful equity mindset needs to go beyond simply mentioning equity issues, and should include a willingness to challenge troubling perspectives. Morgan in particular emphasized the need to challenge notions that inequality was

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a "high brow" issue that happened in other spaces. He explained that, when his program hosted an event on White privilege, "some school boards actually declined an offer from [the university] to 'Come send your teachers here, to hear these perspectives,' because there wasn't really a major race problem, wasn't really a major cultural problem in [the school board.]" Morgan was concerned that teachers and school boards did not understand the issues being discussed, and wondered if they saw equity as a non-issue "because we're in Canada as opposed to the States." Mujib shared a similar experience. He recalled,

> [We were reading] an article that talks about students who arrive from Syria, and they go through this one day program, and the professor says, 'Oh, that's great, they'll fit into the community right away.' But I said, 'One day is nothing compared to the transition to the new environment and new country. If you've left everything you own back in your home country, one day is not enough.'

Thus, participants' experiences in the program were not limited to being taught about equity issues: by actively challenging ignorant comments, participants also served as advocates for diverse perspectives in their programs.

Challenges and Barriers

All thirteen participants discussed challenges and barriers that they encountered as members of underrepresented groups. Although the type, frequency, and intensity of these "hurdles" varied between participants, each recognized that they faced a variety of obstacles in their efforts to enter and complete the program. We have chosen to present these challenges separately from the previous sections to highlight issues that the participants identified despite their universities' commitments to equity and access.

Lena's challenges are particularly noteworthy. Lena was the only participant who chose not to formally self-identify with her university because of challenges she encountered during the admissions process. As a student with General Anxiety Disorder, Lena was required to provide documentation for her disability, including "medical records, and psych records, and school records." The university also required current documentation, including a current doctor's note. As a mature student, however, Lena did not have recent documentation: the medical records from her undergraduate degree were from the late 2000s. Lena questioned, "why discredit documentation that I have from previous years? The whole point of going through treatment … was so that I could deal with it on my own." Ultimately, Lena shared that the self-identification process was "too ridiculous for me to jump through. I just felt that it wasn't an easy process to declare myself as [having a disability], so I just gave up. Told them to just cut it."

Although these processes are overseen by accessibility offices outside each university's faculty of education, teacher candidates with disabilities nevertheless must meet these requirements to receive formal support while they are in our programs. If students find these requirements inaccessible, they may, like Lena, choose to not self-identify in the application process, reducing their access to formal supports and affecting their perception of the institution as welcoming to students with diverse needs. In this way, Lena's challenges resonate with many of the barriers identified by other participants in the study. Although these barriers are not always created by faculties of education, they nevertheless affect students' experiences in the teacher education program and run counter to goals of access and equity.

Two particularly common challenges participants described were discomfort and isolation.

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Initially, participants described isolation in a statistical sense, recognizing that they were a minority within the program or the school community. Andrew and Carrie, for example, both noticed that they were significantly older than most of their peers in the concurrent program. Jason, similarly, commented that "I am the only Black male—I'm the only one. … Even of the first years' [students entering the program], there are no Black males." These experiences of isolation often contradicted teacher education's espoused values of equity and diversity. Tiffany described this isolation as being part of an "invisible" group. She explained, "these issues are everyday realities for people … it's not visible to the rest of the world, but it's the whole world to someone. The school doesn't really acknowledge that from a genuine place." Other participants echoed Tiffany's concerns. Mujib reflected, "in the back of our minds, we know man, we know. You are kind of out of place." Jason, likewise, said "walking the halls and not seeing anyone else like myself, it can mess with your head."

Beyond statistical underrepresentation, participants also mentioned specific situations that contributed to this sense of isolation. Miranda, for example, noticed a socioeconomic difference between herself and her peers during a program presentation:

> He asked at one point, 'Put up your hands, how many of you have either a spouse or a parent or an immediate person who is a teacher?' And I would say the majority of the students there … put up their hand, and I felt at that moment, … the impact of being underrepresented.

Although intended as a common moment among teachers, this exercise showed Miranda that many of her peers had access to supports and cultural capital that were not available to her. Kayla had a similar realization during a class activity on recognizing privilege. She explained, "most people were like, 'Two family home? Oh, yeah. Multiple cars? Oh, yeah.' Great, privileged backgrounds. And it kind of made me realize … it's hard for someone to get where I am, coming from a less privileged background."

Such isolating experiences sometimes made participants uncomfortable. For Kayla, this discomfort was language-based: "Sometimes I feel like I have somewhat of a smaller vocabulary than people who just have regular Canadian upbringings, and so this kind of explains why maybe I don't sound as intellectual as other people who are applying." We were surprised by this comment: despite Kayla's articulate responses, she was concerned that other students would be perceived as more "intellectual" or more reflective of a traditional teacher. Morgan, too, shared a discomfort with having to fit into traditional teacher norms for practical reasons. He explained, "I don't agree with this, but my boss who is White does [it] this sort of way, and I want to get a job." Although participants like Jason and Morgan were able to compartmentalize these concerns, this may not be the case for all minoritized students.

Participants also cited finances and geography as key barriers. Miranda, for example, explained that although she is now able to afford the program, she could not have afforded tuition and the many related costs in the 1990s even though she felt "very well prepared for teacher's college." Miranda also emphasized that many of her financial concerns were unique to teacher education. She explained, "[there's] a lot of transportation [costs], and just be[ing] able to maintain a car. A lot of these costs, an inner-city person would absolutely not be able to afford." Lena, who did not work while she was in the program, explained that she could only afford the program because her husband was employed: "if I didn't have him for financial support, I wouldn't be able to do this." Participants who commuted between cities or who had to make childcare arrangements shared similar concerns. Driving to courses and practicum sites

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were difficult for participants with dependents and participants who lived farther away. Although some such issues may be beyond a program's control, as Miranda notes, geographic accessibility may limit which students will see teacher education as a possibility [5].

Perhaps the most substantive challenges participants identified were those related to issues of race and racism. Several participants who identified as visible or racialized minorities shared instances of intolerance or overt racism, tainting their perceptions of their peers or instructors. Anita shared,

> It's not uncommon to hear peers say, 'You know what? Asians are not friendly. They're not very good teacher candidates. They just don't really know how to talk to students.' I remember saying, 'I'm Asian,' and they're like, 'Well, not your kind of Asian. You're different. You're friendly.'

Mujib recalled a similar incident from a class discussion on niqabs in Canada. He explained,

> There was a student in our class, where she said something like, 'They're coming to our country, so they should dress the way we dress, and if we go to their country, we would dress like them.' And that kind of, you know. Ruffled some feathers. We, again, discuss the idea of free speech versus hate speech—where do you draw the line?

Samirah and Tiffany offered similar examples. Despite their programs' commitments to diversity, several participants were able to easily identify troubling incidents from their experiences in the program.

One participant also shared how longstanding racial tensions can have lasting implications for how universities are perceived by underrepresented students. Jason, who was deciding which university to attend in the early 1990s, recalled controversy surrounding a university professor who contended that different races' academic potential was genetically inherited—in particular, that Black students were less likely to be successful than White or Asian students simply because they were Black. Although Jason recognized that universities should be spaces for discussing controversial issues, he also explained that "I wanted nothing to do with [that university] because of this." He shared, "It made me feel very sensitive. I was angry at [the university]. I was angry with [the city]. And I swore, I'll never attend that school. And I left and went to [another university], and I swore never to come back." Jason repeatedly emphasized that the experience was central to his development as an educator. Most interestingly, Jason ultimately returned to that university to attend their teacher education program. He recalled wrestling with "old ghosts" as he worked to reconcile the university's history with his own experiences. Importantly, Jason reflected positively on his experiences, and recognized that the university's past, although unfortunate, did not define its future: "Honestly, I can't say enough good things about the faculty. They've all been good to me. My classmates, it's been a great experience. It's been very positive." For Jason, the university "lives up to its reputation as being one of the best universities, if not in Canada, at least in [Ontario], that I know of." This reputation shift is powerful, both as an example of an underrepresented student specifically avoiding an institution because of race-based reputations, and as an example of how a student's perception of a university can shift when a program demonstrates a meaningful commitment to diversity and equity. That is, although the challenges raised here are worth addressing, they are not insurmountable.

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Accessibility of Teacher Education Programs

A chief purpose of this study was to examine how teacher candidates who self-identify as members of underrepresented groups perceive access and access supports for their program. Participants varied in their perception of program accessibility. Several participants did believe that teacher education is accessible to the general population and to members of underrepresented groups. Sherry, for example, contended that "[the university] does a pretty good job being accessible," Andrew, similarly, said "I think if you want help you can get it." Yet, echoing the concerns raised in the previous section, participants identified a number of factors that hindered accessibility for students from underrepresented groups. As Paula shared, "it's accessible [in the sense] that it's all at our fingertips. It's all available to us and we can get there. But I think the process is the hardest part, or even knowing it's there." Lena was perhaps the most vocal critic of accessibility. When asked if she found the program accessible, she responded, "For a parent, a mature student, someone that needs income? Not accessible. … I find it … it's incredibly tough. If there's not two of you. I don't know how you'd be able to do it, if there's just one person." Paula's concerns about costs are particularly relevant now that Ontario's teacher education programs have doubled in length. This diverse range of responses reflects both the participants' unique experiences and the reality that a program can be both accessible for some students and inaccessible for others.

In addressing access strengths and challenges, participants also highlighted ways that teacher education programs might improve access for members of underrepresented groups. For Anita and Jason, that meant focusing on access efforts that begin before students enter the program. Anita explained, "it's worth exploring and giving additional questions to people who identify as visible minorities," such as "what kind of things can we do to support you while you're here, and what would you be interested in doing with school?" She contended that such questions could help programs to better understand students' needs as they entered the program, providing them with an understanding of the incoming cohort's perspectives. Indeed, although most Ontario programs articulate a commitment to equity and ask students to self-identify with particular groups (Holden & Kitchen, 2016), we are not aware of any Ontario program that uses admission data in this way. Jason offered a similar idea, focusing on underrepresented students who had not yet applied to the program. He explained, "Go out and talk to them. Go out to these targeted groups." He suggested, further, that individual graduates could support this targeted outreach: "Have teachers who graduated the program, from underrepresented groups … call on us to go out there, and represent, and talk. Because I think, maybe the high school students are not seeing us. Definitely they're not seeing us." By seeing and hearing from a graduate who overcame adversity, Jason suggests, students might be able to begin charting a path for themselves to enter the program.

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Discussion

The findings from this study of access and equity in Ontario teacher education build on previous research in the literature. Although many universities have identified equity and diversity as key values (Crocker & Dibbon, 2008), there are concerns that Ontario's teacher education programs do not reflect the diversity of the student population, creating gaps of representation for first-generation students, students with disabilities, students of Aboriginal descent, and other racialized minorities (Childs et al., 2011; Childs et al., 2016). This section discusses how the

present study—which investigates how students from underrepresented groups perceive such issues—intersects with broader discussions in teacher education admissions and access literature. In particular, we highlight the experiences of our 13 participating teacher candidates, and consider the ways these students and other researchers have suggested we might improve access in our programs.

Participant Perceptions of Admissions

Participants tended to view the admissions process as accessible and welcoming to diverse identities. Jason, for example, shared that "We want to have different perspectives. So I thought [my background] may help me because they may say, 'Hey, we could use a middle-aged Black male perspective,' because I'm bringing something to the table in discussions." Several participants also reported that they had the opportunity to share their perspectives during admission, either about their own experiences or about their goals as educators. Indeed, most Ontario teacher education programs include statements of experience and questions specifically focused on access for members of underrepresented groups (Holden et al., 2016). Consistent with these responses, Finnie and colleagues (2011a) suggest that PSE admissions in Ontario are "relatively meritocratic," arguing that "those who are more qualified are more likely to go to university, [and] overall attendance rates are less affected by family income" when compared with other regions of Canada (p. 1). We recognize, however, that since all of our participants were accepted to at least one program, they may be more likely to perceive such programs as accessible. Members of underrepresented groups who apply but are not accepted—or who receive an offer of admission but choose not to accept—may perceive admissions processes differently.

Indeed, there is limited data specific to teacher education that suggest current admission rates reflect the diversity of the population (Holden & Kitchen, in press). Access rates also vary noticeably between faculties of education (Holden & Kitchen, 2017b). Therefore, although participants often reflected positively on the admissions process, their concerns are also relevant. Some students, for example, did not see themselves reflected in the lists of minoritized groups some universities provide, echoing Stead's (2015) concern that such lists may be restrictive. Other participants reinforced concerns raised in the literature about perceived racism, stereotyping, and prejudicing (Childs et al., 2011; Oloo, 2007). Carrie and Jason both wondered if they would be disadvantaged during the application process, although Anita and Mujib expected that their non-Anglo-Saxon names would make them stand out from other applications. Teacher educators would do well to consider how applicants respond to specific aspects of the admissions process (see Thomson et al., 2011), and work to address both perceptions of inequity and any systemic biases affecting students from underrepresented groups (see Childs et al., 2016).

Program Accessibility

As we have discussed, participants tended to believe that teacher education was accessible to the general population and to members of underrepresented groups. Several participants also suggested a common way to improve access for members of underrepresented groups: help them to see themselves in the program. As one participant reflected, "if you can't see it, you can't be it." This is similar to Finnie, Wismer, and Mueller's (2015) notion of cultural compatibility:

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that is, if a student is raised to believe that they would belong and succeed in a program, they are more likely to apply. We would be particularly interested in a study of K-12 students' perceptions of the teaching profession, and whether students from underrepresented groups felt they could be part of the teaching profession.

Several participants were concerned about the extent of their programs' accessibility, however. Participants appreciated when their programs articulated a commitment to equity, but shared concerns raised by Brown and Scott (2014), suggesting that "their programs did not make a special effort in this regard or they were unaware of such efforts" (p. 6). At times, participants' concerns about program accessibility reflected criticisms that higher education advantages students from White, middle class, educated backgrounds (Childs et al., 2011; Guinier, 2003; Searle, 2003). Miranda described her program as having "a very middle class feel," and Jason commented that "teachers' college in general feels like a bit of an elitist program." Here, we agree with Searle (2003): to achieve equity for students from underrepresented groups, we must do more than "[treat] people equally" (p. 290). As our participants have shared, not all students can afford to take two years away from the work force; not all students have access to a support network of current and former teachers; and not all students can participate in our programs without feeling isolated or Othered by their peers or instructors. We must therefore acknowledge and address such challenges, both within and across our programs.

Challenges and Barriers in Equity-Conscious Programs

The challenges our participants encountered do not mean that participants' teacher education programs are not concerned about equity. Rather, they suggest that despite these programs' commitments to equity issues, students from underrepresented groups nevertheless face challenges in teacher education. Lena's attempts to self-identify as a student with a disability are an example of such challenges. In wondering why her university would "discredit" her documentation, Lena gives voice to Thomson and colleagues' (2011) concern that students may doubt our commitment to ensuring access and equity in our programs. Such experiences also serve as evidence of Arcidiacono (2005) and Dickson's (2006) observation that equity practices directly affect members of underrepresented groups. As Dickson (2006) suggests, addressing barriers like the ones our participants encountered would enhance access for underrepresented students, without negatively affecting the number of applications from students in majority groups.

Participants' insights shed light on challenges not often explored in Canadian teacher education research (see Bowen & Bok, 1998). Participants' descriptions of isolating experiences, for example, is not included explicitly in the Canadian literature. This isolation, however, may not be surprising, given the rates of representation in Ontario teacher education (Holden & Kitchen, 2017b), along with the overall low rates of representation for some underrepresented groups in Ontario PSE (Finnie et al., 2011a; 2011b). This is troubling, since there is substantial evidence that "students of colour accrue academic benefits when taught by a same-race teacher or when exposed to a teaching force that is racially/ethnically representative of the student population" (Villegas & Irvine, 2010, p. 180). If underrepresented students benefit from a diverse teaching force, and if the teaching force is not currently diverse, then it should come as no surprise that some participants expressed concern about being underrepresented in largely homogeneous schools. Participants' concerns about geographic barriers are similarly

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underrepresented in Canadian access literature (see Smith & Peller, in press).

Participants also offered a number of insights that align with existing research. Kayla's vocabulary worries, for example, reflect ongoing concerns in the literature about the use of specific admissions tools and how they might advantage students from dominant groups (Finnie et al., 2011a; Jencks, 1998). That is, not all non-cognitive tools are objective (Holden et al., 2016; Holden & Kitchen, 2017a), and such tools may disadvantage students like Kayla if not properly designed. As Jencks (1998) observes, "in effect, [underrepresented students] have to pay for the fact that social science is better at measuring the skills they lack than the skills they have" (p. 58). Although Ontario remains "relatively meritocratic" for some underrepresented groups at the postsecondary level (Finnie et al., 2011, p. 1), teacher educators and policymakers would nevertheless do well to consider how they might mitigate the effects of admissions criteria on members of underrepresented groups (Black et al., 2015).

Participants' insights on race and racism add a much-needed Canadian perspective, as most references to race and racism in PSE occur in an American context (see Black et al., 2015; Bowen & Bok, 1998). ONABSE (2015), for example, note that few Canadian studies "explore the experiential realities of Black educators" (p. 1), suggesting that some stakeholders "continue to resist any suggestion that racism exists" (p. 2). In the context of admissions, most Ontario programs do not track visible minority participation, and only two explicitly include "racialized persons" in their equity admissions tools (Holden et al., 2016). Yet, in this study, eight of 13 students participated in this study in part because they felt underrepresented as members of these groups. Thus, we contend that despite not being included consistently in Canadian access literature, visible minorities and racialized persons are nevertheless important to consider when discussing issues of access in teacher education. As Harper, Patton, and Wooden (2009) contend, "colourblindness leads to misconceptions concerning racial fairness in institutions, tends to address only the most blatant forms of inequality and disadvantage; and hides the commonplace and more covert forms of racism" (pp. 390-391). We encourage our colleagues to consider such issues in the context of their respective programs.

Conclusions and Implications

As our participants' responses suggest, there are many indications that teacher education programs are working toward equity and access both at and after admission. Our participants also highlighted, however, that more can yet be done to address criticisms that Canadian teacher education is largely homogeneous—particularly if students continue to report feelings of isolation in programs that see diversity as a strength. Teacher educators should therefore be mindful not to "tinker at the edges" in their efforts (Thomas & Kane, 2016, p. 165). Instead, we should investigate the effects of specific policies, and identify how equity and access initiatives will address challenges and barriers that members of underrepresented groups face in our programs (see Childs & Ferguson, 2016; Childs et al., 2016). We encourage our colleagues to look to other programs that have implemented successful access initiatives, and consider how others' successes could be adapted to our contexts.

In this study, we have examined the experiences of teacher candidates from multiple institutions. Despite the challenges of specific contexts, programs, and institutions, we believe that the teaching profession will be better positioned to address access and equity issues if we listen to students' diverse perspectives about the challenges they face. As Turcotte, Nichols, and Philipps (2016) observe,

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> Many [postsecondary] staff are working in good faith to develop strong practices and protocols for managing these [programs]. But their efforts are often unfolding in isolation, due in part to reputational and privacy concerns and also a lack of obvious venues to coordinate the sharing of knowledge and experience … As a result, we observed an unfortunate amount of duplicated effort. In a world of finite administrative resources, it makes sense to promote more coordinated sector-wide efforts to promote awareness and strengthen institutional capacity on this front. (p. 53)

That is, rather than struggling to develop equitable admissions practices and access initiatives in isolation, teacher educators should collaborate with one another and draw on the range of expertise available across the province and in other Canadian contexts (see Kitchen & Petrarca, 2015; 2016). Giving serious consideration to students' perspectives will also increase our ability to "build on programs and services … and help make [underrepresented students] feel at home in what can sometimes be an alienating environment" (Holmes, 2005, p. 56). Indeed, given our participants' comments about isolation, discomfort, and troubling incidents, such considerations seem entirely appropriate.

Further research is also needed to understand how students from underrepresented groups perceive teaching as a profession. If teaching is perceived as a largely homogenous profession (DeLuca, 2015), we would do well to better understand these perceptions and whether students from underrepresented groups are choosing not to enter the profession because of such concerns. Increased understanding of students' needs, perceptions, and challenges at every stage of their journey to the profession is essential if we are to achieve articulated access and equity goals.

Acknowledgements

This study was funded by the Ministry of Advanced Skills and Educational Development (MAESD) through the Ontario Human Capital Research and Innovation Fund (OHCRIF).

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Notes

1 These populations are among the most commonly discussed underrepresented groups in Canadian postsecondary research (Finnie, Childs, & Wismer, 2011b; Holden & Kitchen, 2018). Importantly, however, different students identify with these groups in different ways, and strict identity categories may not align with students' own identities (Lovett, 2013). See Stead (2015) for further discussion.
2 A full discussion of these equity policies can be found in Holden et al., 2016 and Holden and Kitchen, 2016.
3 In this article, "Aboriginal" refers to the diverse Aboriginal identities across Canada, including self-identifying First Nations, Métis, and Inuit applicants, students of Aboriginal descent, applicants who are Registered or Treaty Indians, as well as applicants with membership in a First Nation or Indian band (Statistics Canada, 2017). As Cherubini, Hodson, Manley-Casimir, and Muir (2010) aptly note, "the use of the all-inclusive word 'Aboriginal' in this article does not signify or imply any form of generic, one-size fits-all approach to the realities of Aboriginal [peoples]" (p. 331). Indeed, we recognize that students identify with different groups in different ways.
4 All participant names are pseudonyms.
5 See Smith & Peller (in press) for an extended discussion of geographic access in Canadian teacher education.

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