

Teacher Candidate Perceptions and Attitudes Towards the Bachelor of Education Program in Ontario: Perception Shifts From Year One to Year Two

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Abstract

This study provides insight into the experiences and perceptions of teacher candidates, and how these may vary between first- and second-year candidates. Forty-seven participants from across Ontario volunteered to participate in this study, with six of those participants completing a semi-structured interview. First, survey data were analysed using data validation, partitioning, and coding. Second, interview data reduction and systematic coding were used to develop themes. The findings identified the most and least engaging aspects of Bachelor of Education programs, emotions evoked throughout, challenges faced, impactful components, and recommendations and modifications that should be made available to future teacher candidates.

Keywords: teacher candidates, practicum, experiential learning, mentorship, adult learning, online learning

1. Introduction

With the sharp increases in demand for teachers in Ontario, the current teacher shortage is assumed to be caused by teachers leaving the profession early in their careers (Molyneux, 2021, pp. 40-41). Additionally, the annual newly certified teacher numbers have significantly decreased in recent years, with Ontario's faculties of education now at approximately half the number who entered the market from 2008 to 2011 (McIntyre, 2021, p. 8). According to the Ontario College of Teachers, the low interest in teacher education seems to have begun with the implementation of the four-semester teacher education program (McIntyre, 2021, p. 12). The first five years of teaching see teacher candidates at their most vulnerable with 40 to 50% of teachers leaving the profession because of stress, burnout, or inadequate preparation (Mansfield et al., 2016, pp. 2-3). Much research has been dedicated to best practices for adequately educating teacher candidates by assessing experiential learning (Allen et al., 2022; Beck & Kosnik, 2002), the use of online learning (Golloher & Middaugh, 2021), and emotional and motivational considerations for these adult learners (Siera & Siera, 2011; Yuan & Lee, 2016). The problem is that little research has been conducted regarding the perceptions of teacher candidates on a program-wide level at different stages of the program to determine factors that may contribute to new teacher attrition.

1.1 Significance of the Study

With the current teacher shortages affecting provinces including Ontario, it has become more important to support teachers from the beginning of their educational journey and as they develop as new teachers. This study uncovers teacher candidate perceptions towards the program to pinpoint effective and ineffective practices throughout the program. Understanding these perceptions and how they change from year one to year two further identifies where potential disconnect, disengagement, and negative experiences happen throughout their training. The current study adds to the literature on teacher candidate perspectives as adult learners.

1.2 Background

As teacher candidates undergo all aspects of their teacher education, they face several lessons, individuals, ideas, and experiences that can influence their attitudes and perceptions towards the program and teaching itself. Theories including humanistic theory and social cognitive theory have directed teacher candidate's emerging knowledge about learning.

1.2.1 Andragogy

In recent times, adult educators, researchers, and thinkers have considered how andragogy, a concept coined by Malcolm Knowles to denote the growing knowledge about adult learning (Loeng, 2018, p. 4), helps us understand and teach these learners. Based on the assumption that adults and children learn differently, andragogical approaches highlight some characteristics that assist in teaching adult learners (Finn, 2011). Approaches that consider the environment, learner's experiences, and the relevance of the instruction are crucial for the design of adult learning experiences (Finn, 2011). There are six widely accepted principles for teaching adult learners, which we understand as adults being self-directed, being able to

draw from life experiences, being ready to learn as it is related to their social roles, being problem centered, being internally motivated, and being focused on the need to know the “why” for learning (Finn, 2011, pp. 36-37). As adults mature, their dependent personality and learning styles move towards a more self-directed persona (Finn, 2011). From a pedagogical perspective, learners are dependent of external motivators, and from an andragogical one, learners are autonomous and self-directed through mostly internal motivations (Hagg, 2020).

1.2.2 Emerging Adulthood

Varied previous education and individualized pathways that lead to the program result in learners who have come from different backgrounds, are different ages, or have lived different experiences. Considering this, some teacher candidates are adult learners, and some are still in emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood can be defined as the stage of life between adolescence and young adulthood, lasting from about age 18 to age 25 (Arnett, 2006). These late adolescent learners differ from adult learners based on experience, where they have not had the opportunity to amass as many experiences as their older peers (Smith Davis, 2013). Thus, young adults are not necessarily ready for methods of adult education (Meier, 2020).

Recent exploration highlights how early-career educators experience imposter syndrome feelings (Sims & Cassidy, 2019). Imposter syndrome is defined as the belief that one’s success is due to luck and that others will discover your lack of competence (Clance, 1985). LaPalme et al. (2022) suggest that this feeling of a lack of worthiness or competence in job performance is negatively associated with educator well-being. With the systemic ages of new educators and high burnout rates, the researchers summarize that imposter syndrome is a contributing factor (LaPalme et al., 2022). Little research can be found on the demographic factor of age as it correlates to imposter syndrome. Considering that students enter the faculty of education at a variety of ages from early twenties to sixties (Brackenreed & Barnett, 2006), many early-career educators are members of the emerging adulthood stage. With fewer experiences in emerging adulthood, these learners suffer from an increase in negative emotional experiences associated with feeling like an imposter (LaPalme et al., 2022). Consequently, research suggests that strategies for emotional regulation can mitigate the negative influence of these feelings of incompetence (LaPalme et al., 2022). Miller and Flint-Stipp (2019) discovered that many teacher candidates who did not take the time for self-care had negative effects on their well-being, leading to feelings of uncertainty regarding their desire to teach. One participant in the study expressed the negative impacts of burnout during this difficult stage, stating that “we were in really difficult placements, and they gave us more work than anticipated. My health really suffered” (Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019). This literature points to how these difficulties, if left acknowledged, will impact teacher candidates’ desire and capabilities to teach.

1.2.3 Self-Directed Learning

Self-directed learning, as a fundamental pillar of adult learning theory, enriches our understanding of how to teach adults and modify our practice (Merriam, 2001, p. 11). Transformational learning encompasses the same ideals of engagement, meaningful learning,

and enhanced experiences throughout teacher education programs. Additionally, the development of experiential learning through practice teaching has been a supported implementation for teacher candidates to develop their pedagogical knowledge and skills (Lee, 2019, p. 353). While this concrete learning is beneficial for most, some have negative experiences (Beck & Kosnik, 2002, p. 90), which may impact their perceptions on their overall learning. It is reasonable to expect that negative experiences could accumulate over time, such as across a program of two years.

1.2.4 Motivators and Emotions

Specific components of teacher education programs such as online learning, practicum, and associate teachers were assessed. Research shows that these components can impact the way teacher candidates view their program, themselves, and a career as an educator (Cherubini, 2009; Golloher & Middaugh, 2021; Teng, 2017). Further, researchers who have studied motivation, identity, and emotions in teacher candidates report varied results when it comes to teacher candidate feelings, before, during, and after the program (Finlayson et al., 2021; Siera & Siera, 2011; Yuan & Lee, 2016). Understanding these factors and emotions, whether they stem from the teacher education program, the practicum experience, or the external life circumstances, can support program developers in refining their approaches and help novice teachers prepare for the common challenges faced at the beginning of their careers.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

Currently, in Ontario, teacher education is a two-year (four semester) program. Using a mixed-method research design, this study investigated the differing perceptions of teacher candidates in the first year of the program compared to those in second year to determine perceptions of practices are most effective, ineffective, and where the potential disconnect may stem throughout teacher education preparation. Educators, new teachers, and program developers may directly benefit from the current study as it provides information and perspectives about teacher education and the andragogical practices that could be implemented to improve the learning environment in this post-secondary program. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a Research Ethics Board.

Survey research has been reported to be a very common research design within teacher education research (Sleeter, 2014, p. 3). Consequently, educational researchers have reflected on the value of additional qualitative methods. Explaining these methods can address and help us understand concepts in ways that quantitative studies cannot (Kennedy, 2008, p. 345). For these reasons, survey research and web-based video interviews are used together to describe adequately and explain teacher candidate perceptions of their BEd in a more nuanced manner.

2.1.1 Survey Research

Survey research is typically used to collect quantitative, numbered data using questionnaires to describe trends among participants (Creswell & Hirose, 2019, p. 2). Educational

researchers can also combine a mix of quantitative, closed-ended questions, and qualitative, open-ended short answer questions, within the same research framework (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009, pp. 265-266). In the present study, a mix of both types of questions were utilized; we used Qualtrics and shared via social media such as Facebook groups and Instagram pages for teacher candidates across Ontario. This recruitment method allowed for the spread of the survey across Ontario, that word of mouth could not achieve. Social media posts appeared for timeframes from 24 hours to the end of the recruitment period, based on permissions from the account administrators. Additional posts were made on the researchers' social media. A new survey comprised of 28 questions was created for this study, taking approximately 20 minutes to complete. Using open-ended questions in addition to quantitative questions allowed participants to voice their experiences and the researcher to explore major and minor themes that emerged in the research (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

2.1.2 Web-Based Semi-Structured Video Interviews

This additional research stem was prudently chosen for its ability to unveil the more detailed, personal experiences and perceptions of teacher candidates. Semi-structured interviews are mostly based on open-ended questions, but still have a general agenda for discussion topics (Karatsareas, 2022, p. 100). Interviews were approximately 60 minutes in length. This design allows the researcher to stay focused on the interview topic, while also leaving the opportunity to ask questions spontaneously that are not in the protocol following interesting dimensions uncovered during the interview (Karatsareas, 2022, p. 100). For triangulation of the data, participants could engage in the post-survey interview to further explain their perceptions was deemed necessary.

3. Results

3.1 Participant Demographics

Recruitment was done through social media using a voluntary sampling design. At the time of the study, there were seventeen accredited teacher education programs in Ontario. The participants in phase one of the study studied at institutions across Ontario, with participants currently at institutions in all five geographical areas in relation to Ontario. 42.6% of participants' institutions were in Southern Ontario; 21.3% were in Central Ontario, 17% were in Eastern Ontario, 14.9% were in Northern Ontario, and 4.3% were in Western Ontario. The sample size for this study is 47. All questions were optional, so the response weight varied from question to question. From the sample (n=47), 17 participants were in year one of their Bachelor of Education and 30 participants were in year two from various Faculties of Education across the province. Out of those participants, six teacher candidates opted to complete the semi-structured web-based video interview, three first-year candidates and three second-year candidates. Both male and female teacher candidates were interviewed. Selected participants for phase two represented four different teacher education programs in Ontario.

3.2 Overview of the Analysis of the Results

The survey data were analysed using the model presented by Kitchenham and Pfleeger

(2003). First, data validation was issued. Then, the responses were partitioned into two sub-groups of first- and second- year teacher candidates, followed by an analysis of the responses, which allowed for the comparison of responses. Data coding was implemented for two types of data, ordinal and nominal, to decipher statistics and themes. Next, interview data were analyzed beginning with data reduction. The transcripts were merged into one digital document to facilitate systematic coding. The literature review guided the researcher to develop an extensive list of possible themes. Themes, sub-themes, similarities, differences, and surprises were then discovered in the transcript by the researcher. Finally, the researcher used data from both phase one and phase two of the study to confirm evidence, clarify responses, develop additional themes, and validate the information collected. Interpretation and understanding of the data were validated through triangulation methods and theory linkage. The three main steps used to analyze and interpret the variety of data used in this study were data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions and validation (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Kitchenham & Pfleeger, 2003).

3.3 Research Question One - What are teacher candidates' attitudes towards their teacher education?

The participants in the survey conveyed their attitudes towards their Bachelor of Education in their responses to several questions/prompts. One prompt stated, “I am interested in the things I learn in the Bachelor of Education (program)”. Teacher candidates expressed their engagement on a Likert Scale, choosing among *Always*, *Often*, *Sometimes*, and *Seldom*. Fifty-three point eight (53.8%) of participants were only sometimes interested in the content they learned within their program. These results were similarly weighed between year-one and year-two teacher candidates. Furthermore, “sometimes” was also the most common response, with 48.7% of teacher candidates when asked if they looked forward to going to class.

Another question in the survey asked respondents, “What emotions have you felt throughout your journey as a teacher candidate? (select all that apply)”. First year students felt significant amounts of determination, empathy, excitement, frustration, joy, and stress with over 75% of respondents selecting these emotions. For second year participants, determination, excitement, frustration, and stress were all emotions that 70% of the teacher candidates shared. In the dialogue, participants expressed primarily positive emotions when it came to practicum such as excitement, empathy and sympathy for students, joy and pride when it came to teaching, determination to succeed during practice teaching, and being reassured after practicum. When it came to negative emotions, many of them were a reaction to the in-class portion of the program. Many participants vocalized frustration when it came to not being taught applicable content, a lack of current field experience among professors, disillusionment from in-class ideas presented, and redundancy of assignments.

3.3.1 Peers as a Support System

Many participants expressed enjoyment, support, and determination in the Bachelor of Education program primarily due to their peers. This support system began with a welcoming environment of like-minded teacher candidates coming into the program to a small

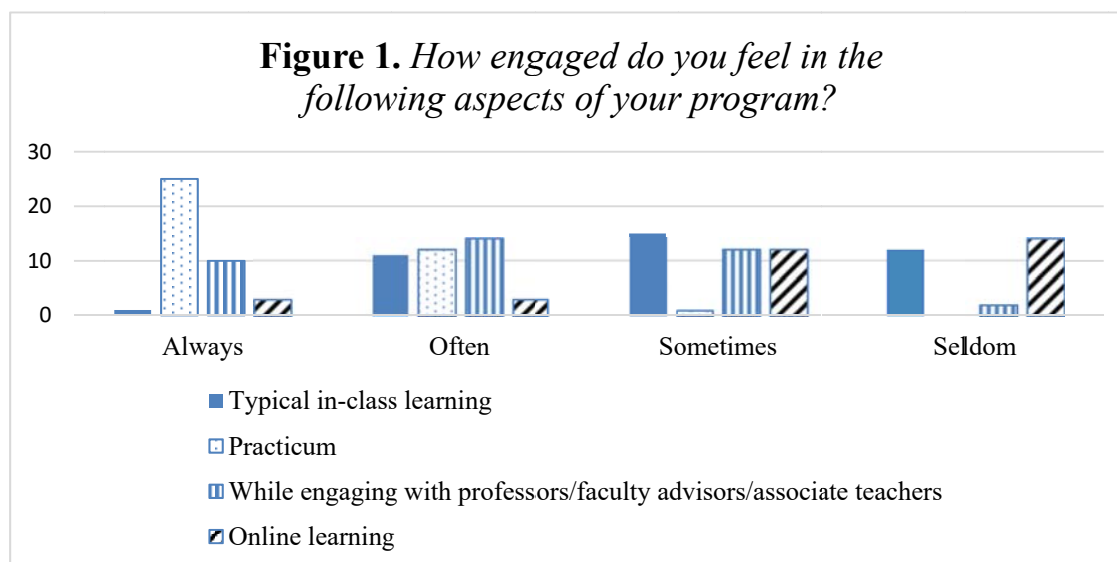
community in a welcoming cohort.

3.3.2 Practicum

All six interview participants expressed the value of practicum and the benefit that it brought to their teacher education experience. Generally, they had a very positive attitude towards practicum because of their associate teachers, the true experiential learning they acknowledged during each session, and the knowledge they gained throughout it. The general attitude is that practicum is one of the best parts of the program and the most beneficial. Contrarily, many participants also expressed negative attitudes towards practicum, due to other educators in the classroom being severely negative about the profession itself. This unexpected recurring theme arose in nearly all interviews. The experience of practicum is consistently shown to be a beneficial part of the program, but the attitudes of teacher candidates are being influenced due to the negative, cynical opinions of current educators at their practicum schools.

3.4 Research Question Two - What motivates teacher candidates to engage meaningfully in a Bachelor of Education program?

Participants were asked, “How engaged do you feel in the following aspects of your program?” Teacher candidates expressed their engagement on a Likert Scale, choosing among *Always*, *Often*, *Sometimes*, and *Seldom*. This question raised clear distinctions about the perceptions of the most and the least engaging aspects of the program and the differences presented between year-one and year-two teacher candidates (Figure 1).



When it came to typical in-class learning, 38.5% of participants expressed sometimes feeling engaged. This means that sometimes, they felt engaged in class, rather than always, often, seldom, or never feeling engaged in class. A higher amount of second year candidates shared this level of engagement at 41.7%. Figure 1 illustrates how practicum elicits the highest level of engagement among teacher candidates, with 65.8% of participants always feeling engaged during this experiential learning session, with an even higher percentage (70.8%) when it

came to year two candidates. Participants expressed different frequencies of engagement when it came to interacting with professors, faculty advisors, and associate teachers. The data shows that 36.8% of participants often feel engaged. Finally, online learning is the aspect that participants expressed least frequently feeling engaged, with 43.8% of participants seldom feeling engaged, and 37.5% of participants sometimes feeling engaged.

3.4.1 Overcoming Trials

Discovering the causes for joining the program and examining participants' self-efficacy, self-determination, and motivational factors helps to highlight what makes these adult learners put effort into their learning for meaningful engagement. Participants in both the survey and the interview were asked the challenges or difficulties that they were met with throughout the program and what motivated them to overcome these trials. Interestingly, this uncovered many root motivators for teacher candidates to stay engaged throughout the program.

3.4.1.1 The End Goal

Some participants expressed difficulties with staying engaged in class on campus. However, responses showed that focusing on the bigger picture of teaching was key. For example, one response states, "I keep reminding myself that placement will be a great learning experience and the in-class portion is a means to an end." Interestingly, many candidates expressed being in the program solely because they must "push through" and they "refuse to give up now." This demonstrates how many teacher candidates are struggling for meaningful engagement, only seeking practice teaching and the end of the program by their second year.

3.4.1.2 Engaging Professors

When asked about their relationships in the Bachelor of Education, survey respondents often shared conflicting ideas that some professors were great, impacting their identity as teachers, and some were not, expressing how they were rarely helpful, or simply okay. One response explained how, "Some instructors demonstrate high levels of interest in us, making my drive in the course more efficient." The relatability and connection helped learners stay engaged and find more value in the in-class portions of the program. The professors currently teaching would have current applicable content, being the most beneficial and engaging according to most participants.

Contrarily, the professors who did not engage students and were perceived that they often had little care for the teacher candidates. One professor who was currently working on PhD work was understood to be "intense". One participant described the classroom environment.

Like, in the way he asks a question, it's already a difficult question. People are brave, they put up their hand? No. He will shut them down. If you're wrong, he doesn't even try to maneuver it. So, instantly, I'm not participating in that, and I participate in everything, because I don't want to be embarrassed, and he loves to embarrass.

The hostile environment directly discouraged teacher candidates from participating.

3.5 Research Question Three - What aspects of the program are most meaningful to teacher candidates?

When asked how much effort participants expend towards different aspects of the Bachelor of Education programs, responses showed that practicum was the aspect that participants put the most effort into, and online learning is where participants put the least (Figure 2).

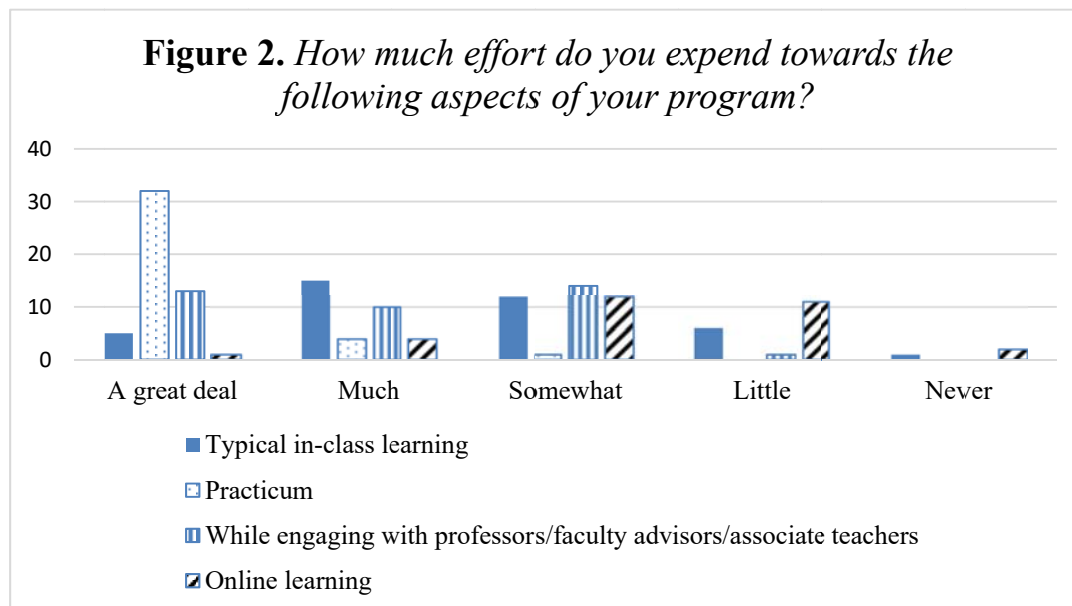


Figure 2 illustrates how practicum yields a great deal of effort from participants, while online learning is the component where teacher candidates do not expend as much effort.

3.5.1 Connections

Connections were the most common theme brought up in participant responses when discussing the most meaningful aspects of the program. While these connections vary from peers, associate teachers, professors, and overall networking, having a support system in place during the program was perceived to have a strong impact on teacher candidates.

3.5.2 Practicum

As expected, practicum proved to be a very meaningful and impactful aspect of the program. Several participants responded “practicum” with no explanation. Others gave more thorough details, appreciating the opportunity to “practice different styles and strategies”. This practical experience shows value to teacher candidates, explained to give teacher candidates “the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge in diverse, real world classroom settings”. It must be noted that being immersed, having a variety of classrooms, and being guided through this transformative learning experience were key points that participants highlighted as being benefits from practicum components of their program.

3.6 Research Question Four - How do teacher candidate perceptions change from year one to year two?

The current study was conducted from November until January. At this time, teacher

candidates in the study would have been in class for a sufficient time to be able to create a perception about their interest levels of the things they learn in their Bachelor of Education program. Many participants, in both year one and year two, shared the interesting content subjects, notably special education, differentiated instruction, universal design for learning, and the importance of getting to know the learner. Teacher candidate responses concerning the things they learned within the Bachelor of Education were used to better understand the varying interest levels among participants and uncover the reasons for them.

3.6.1 Year One

Year-one teacher candidates stated that they had not yet learned much in the program. Survey responses showed that in terms of content, there is not significant new information being shared. One participant shared, “I don’t feel as though I am learning much but rather applying knowledge that I already have into lesson plan creation and assessment planning.” Further struggles were expressed by Angus. He shared that the program was a different pace than the professional program he expected, explaining how nothing felt meaningful. He explains, “And I honestly, I absolutely hated the in-class portion. I struggled to stay present. It felt very draining.”

3.6.2 Year Two

The participants shared reasons for the levels of interest in things learned in the Bachelor of Education, which varied when it came to second year teacher candidates. Many participants mentioned the value in learning about law in education, including OCT and Union rules and guidelines, and assessment. It is important to note that one response even mentioned that the required law course and the required assessment course should be yearlong as opposed to rushed through topics, due to their value. There is a common theme of second-year teacher candidates finding some course content repetitive, making the teachings not as interesting for these adult learners.

3.6.3 Overcoming Challenges

In the survey, participants were asked to react to the following statement, “When I run into a challenge in the Bachelor of Education, I do everything I can to figure it out in its entirety.” Responses showed that first year teacher candidates work on overcoming challenges always, or often, at a higher rate than second year teacher candidates. Year two teacher candidates only sometimes, seldom, or never tried to overcome these challenges as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Putting Effort to Overcome Challenges in the BEd (Phase One)

Frequency	Total (n)	Total (%)	Year 1 (n)	Year 1 (%)	Year 2 (n)	Year 2 (%)
Always	14	35.9	6	40.0	8	33.3
Often	17	43.6	8	53.3	9	37.5
Sometimes	4	10.3	0	0.0	4	16.7
Seldom	3	7.7	1	6.7	2	8.3
Never	1	2.6	0	0.0	1	4.2

Challenges encountered within the Bachelor of Education were abundant. Participants shared challenges with disorganization, the unknown, classroom management, a lack of skill, fear of failure, overwhelming amount of work on top of professional requirements, discrimination, practicum, and more. The reasons, methods, and willingness to overcome these challenges varied from year-one to year-two candidates.

3.6.3.1 Year One

First year teacher candidates appear to have a lot of personal motivation to surpass challenges and solve them. One participant shared that the thing that motivated them to figure out challenges in their entirety was “personal motivation.” Another response was similar, stating, “I am motivated by the fact that by doing this I will be a teacher.”

3.6.3.2 Year Two

The second-year teacher candidates in the current study expressed exasperation at this point in the program. While first-year candidates had personal determination, second-year candidates seemed to rely on themselves to overcome challenges but with little motivation. When discussing challenges, one respondent explained the biggest one as, “the lack of attention to preparing students to become teachers. I’ve resorted to teaching myself.” Some students explained how they are barely motivated, and only overcoming challenges to get to graduation.

3.6.4 Imposter Syndrome

Imposter syndrome is defined as the belief that one’s success is due to luck and that others will discover your lack of competence (Clance, 1985). LaPalme et al. (2022) suggest that this feeling of a lack of worthiness or competence in job performance is negatively associated with educator well-being (p. 3). For this reason, imposter syndrome was assessed in question eleven of the survey, asking participants to share the frequency at which they felt the following statement applied to them. “Sometimes I am afraid others will discover how much knowledge or ability I really lack.” It appears that year-two teacher candidates always, and

often feel this statement at higher rates than first-year teacher candidates. This means that imposter syndrome is higher among second-year teacher candidates (Table 2).

Table 2. Afraid Others Will Discover How Much Knowledge or Ability I Really Lack in BED (Phase One)

Frequency	Total (n)	Total (%)	Year 1 (n)	Year 1 (%)	Year 2 (n)	Year 2 (%)
Always	6	15.4	1	6.7	5	20.8
Often	8	20.5	1	6.7	7	29.2
Sometimes	13	33.3	5	33.3	8	33.3
Seldom	9	23.1	6	40.0	3	12.5
Never	3	7.7	2	13.3	1	4.2

When asked about entering the profession, first year teacher candidates generally felt positive emotions about themselves and their capabilities. The majority of first year responses showed positive emotions towards entering the profession. These emotions were described as excitement for the profession. Four out of eleven first year participants' responses shared negative emotional experiences associated with imposter syndrome such as not being equipped, worried about their abilities and the field, and feeling overwhelmed. Furthermore, second-year respondents, when asked about their feelings towards entering the teaching profession, shared both positive and negative emotions, highlighting the potential for feeling like an imposter by the end of the program. Fourteen out of twenty-one second year responses claimed generally positive emotions towards entering the profession. However, ten of the twenty-one responses shared negative feelings associated with imposter syndrome such as apprehension, anxiety, under-preparedness and worries about abilities to do the job.

3.6.5 Feelings Towards Entering the Profession

With the hypothesis that feelings of imposter syndrome could be present within the sample of teacher candidates, the root of these feelings was addressed within the study by assessing preparedness and feelings towards entering the teaching profession.

3.6.5.1 Year One

Survey results showed that many first-year teacher candidates feel excited to enter the teaching profession. Many candidates simply stated their excitement, but one stated that they can bring fresh energy into the current educational system. Several candidates expressed nervousness and uncertainty towards entering the profession.

3.6.5.2 Year Two

The majority of second year respondents expressed their feelings towards entering the

teaching profession as excitement and nervousness in some regard. For example, various responses stated “anxious, but excited”; “I’m excited and ready to get into my role. Feeling a little unprepared but hoping my next two placements will help fill the gaps,” and “I’m really excited but worried that the BEd program did not prepare me for some aspects of the teaching profession such as report cards, facilitating exams, and the true realities of finding a permanent teaching position.” While many candidates are eager to jump into the world of teaching, they seem to still have doubts after two years in the program. It is unclear whether the excitement, joy, and determination or the under preparedness, dread, and anxiety overpowers second-year candidates’ perceptions of a future in teaching.

4. Discussion

4.1 Attitudes Towards Teacher Education

The majority of respondents enjoy their Bachelor of Education program, while still had qualms when it comes to certain aspects from the program such as faculty and content. Emotions were diverse but feelings such as frustration and determination were common. These attitudes help demonstrate the overall perceptions of the program, stressing the heightened emotions that teacher candidates may have, as well as general strengths and weaknesses in their program.

4.1.1 Interest in Learning in the Bachelor of Education

From an andragogical perspective, adult learners must know why they need to learn what they are learning and have it be personally relevant (Finn, 2011). Many participants in the current study were left wondering the reasoning behind learning the things they are being taught in the BEd, and searching for the relevance when it comes to teaching in current education systems. Contrarily, most participants expressed great enjoyment for practicum. Several studies have validated the benefits of experiential learning (Beck & Kosnik, 2002; Hägg, 2020; Jay & Miller, 2016; Lee, 2019). Lee (2019) reported that experiential learning introduces new ways to enrich professional competence in teacher candidates. Participant responses in the current study showed that teacher candidates look forward to practicum for several reasons; being able to practice and gain knowledge in this environment proved to be very beneficial. As such, there was a great disconnect between the things that participants learned in-class at their institution versus the things they learned on practicum. Experiential learning is supposed to help create a bridge between theory and practice (Samuel, 2021), yet many teacher candidates in the study expressed difficulty with creating this connection.

4.1.1.1 Determination.

Often, first year candidates expressed higher levels of determination, primarily due to their personal determination. Aligning with self-determination theory, these teacher candidates seemed to have a lot of autonomous motivation, associated with high levels of motivation (Kaplan & Madjar, 2017). These candidates seemed to want to succeed for the satisfaction, empathy, and excitement regarding practicum, while still being eager to learn, connect, and grow as a professional learner. Autonomous motives lead to self-determined behaviour and a satisfactory level of well-being (Fernández et al., 2024). It may be that first-year teacher

candidates have high levels of self-determination in the program, enhancing positive attitudes towards it, accompanied by a greater effort expended to learn and achieve.

Second-year teacher candidates also had high levels of determination when it came to their education program, but this determination appears to be controlled, where external influences impact behaviour (Kaplan & Madjar, 2017). Second-year teacher candidates expressed their determination to be inspired by the desire to graduate, the need to pass a course, and the encouragement from peers and professors. As Ryan and Deci (2020) explain in their research, learners who are externally motivated to engage in an activity may not find the learning experience enjoyable. These motivators do not produce meaningful engagement and are often associated with emotional exhaustion and negative feelings, which could lead individuals to drop out of their studies or to continue in the profession out of controlled motivation (Kaplan & Madjar, 2017).

4.1.2 Motivation for Meaningful Engagement

4.1.2.1 Instructional Methods

Drive is often “manifested in their willingness, desire, or commitment to perform tasks that will lead to goal attainment” (Boyer et al., 2014, p. 3). This motivation for learning is thus intrinsic. Noted as the most engaging aspect of the program for teacher candidates, practicum appears to be a driver for teacher candidates, where they are willing and committed to perform the tasks of being a teacher candidate. This could have to do with the identity and sense of self-efficacy that teacher candidates gain during practicum. This sense of excitement and anxiety may instill a sense of competence and confidence in candidates, impacting their self-image as a teacher (Yuan & Lee, 2016). Hoy and Spero (2005) suggest, “the most powerful influences on teacher self-efficacy begin with mastery during student teaching” (p. 2). In turn, new teachers can develop confidence and thus may develop the desire to solve problems in difficult situations.

Adult learners have been shown to thrive in learning environments where they can be internally motivated (Finn, 2011), yet some teacher candidates in the current study reported to put a lower level of effort towards online learning than other aspects of the program, and were only sometimes or seldom engaged in online learning (See Figure 1). While this format is becoming more prevalent in higher education today, including within teacher education programs, there were negative responses to this instructional method. Redmond et al. (2023) suggest that interactive and practical activities in online learning are the most effective for the engagement of learners. For example, practice exercises and tutorials where they can engage with peers are good techniques for engaging online learning practices. Adult learning theories may not have been adequately applied to the online learning environment in teacher candidate instruction, as suggested by many researchers (Arghode, 2017; Korte, 2006).

4.1.2.2 Professors

An overwhelming amount of teacher candidates reported the significant impact that their professors had on them throughout the BED. The most valuable professors who assisted in creating an environment to foster meaningful engagement were described by participants as

those who had interest in teacher candidates, are current teachers who chose to teach in the program, understand teacher candidate needs in the current education system, foster relationships with teacher candidates, and share applicable content. Consistent with the literature regarding humanistic theory, a professor or mentor should be a facilitator or partner in the learning process (Loeng, 2020). This type of professor successfully encourages teacher candidates to engage meaningfully in class.

4.1.3. Meaningful Aspects of the Program

The findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data in the current study highlight various aspects of teacher education that have meaning for teacher candidates. By assessing the effort expended towards various aspects and valuable components of the Bachelor of Education programs, participants clarified the most meaningful and beneficial parts of their education. These aspects contribute to the learners' perceptions of their identity, success, development, and confidence in the profession.

4.1.3.1 Social Connections

The participants emphasized the importance of the social connections built throughout the program, noting them as a support system, a community, and bringing in new learning perspectives throughout the Bachelor of Education. Teacher candidates appreciated how they could learn from each other's experiences, bounce ideas off each other, and discuss their struggles together. According to social learning theory, learning occurs when interacting with others in social context, through modeling, observation, and imitation (Bandura, 1971). Teacher candidates can interact with peers and develop attitudes and perspectives based on these interactions.

Whether positively or negatively, teacher candidates develop attitudes based on the interactions they have on campus and on practicum. Many participants in the study shared that the educators surrounding them on practicum either gave them excitement and joy about the profession or thrust a perspective of cynicism about the profession onto them. Bandura (1971) explains, "Most of the behaviours that people display are learned, either deliberately or inadvertently, through the influence of example" (p. 5). Thus, teacher candidates may act based on the influence of the displayed behaviour of other educators around them.

4.1.3.2 Mentors

Teacher candidates in the current study shared a great appreciation for positive mentors in their journey to become educators. As a key component of experiential learning, practicum provides learners with the guidance and assistance of an associate teacher (Samuel, 2021). A positive relationship with a supportive associate teacher can lead to a sense of teaching self-efficacy and confidence in teacher candidates (La Paro et al., 2020), further emphasizing the meaningful impact that these mentors have on teacher candidates.

Participants also highlighted the meaningful impact that their professors had on them. They reported that professors who are currently teaching in an elementary or secondary classroom while teaching at the university had the greatest impact on them. The relevant content that

comes from instructors who are still practising is meaningful and beneficial for teacher candidates. This type of mentor could be identified as a contributor to transformative learning. Mentors bring forth outside perspectives to inform, grow, and empower learners to engage in transformational learning. These mentors create a safe, open, and trusting environment for participation, collaboration, exploration, and critical feedback (Taylor, 2000, p. 154, as cited in Baumgartner, 2001, p. 20). While the literature discusses people who act as mentors, well informed instructors with previous classroom experience were perceived to be strong teacher candidate mentors.

4.1.3.2 Practicum

The findings confirmed that practicum was perceived to be one of the most meaningful and impactful components of the Bachelor of Education programs. While many teacher candidates expressed fear and under-preparedness prior to practicum, it ended up being very valuable for these learners. These research findings align with much of the existing literature on practicum as experiential learning. Lee (2019) emphasizes how many teacher candidates are underprepared, stating, “The demands of the necessary training experiences for planning and delivery have been seriously underestimated by universities” (p. 354). Therefore, this supervised practice reduces the gap that exists between on-campus education and what they need to be successful in the profession. This leads the researcher to question why we spend so much time doing in-class traditional learning when the experiential learning during practicum has the greatest impact and meaning for teacher candidates.

4.1.4 Perception Changes from Year One to Year Two

4.1.4.1 On Campus Learning

Many participants found the content to be common sense, draining, and lacking significant value. Especially in second year, the content was perceived to overlap the content presented in first year. Some of the key assumptions related to andragogy is that adult education must be problem centered and learners need be able to know the “why” for learning (Finn, 2011, pp. 36-37). Teacher candidates in both first and second year should have an adult-friendly learning climate (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020), yet some participants noted an infantilization within the teaching approaches in the program.

Consistent with the literature on self-directed learning, it can be difficult to foster this learning environment in higher education because it contrasts with the traditional content-centered learning environment. Teacher candidates, as adult learners, must have the opportunity to feel confident in taking initiative in learning and develop autonomy through self-directed learning practices (Loeng, 2020). Primarily in year two of the program, teacher candidates need education based on andragogy as a framework.

4.1.4.2 Overcoming Challenges

In the current study, findings showed that first-year teacher candidates put effort into overcoming these challenges at a much higher percentage than second-year teacher candidates. It can be assumed that these differences could have to do with teacher candidates’

sense of self efficacy. Defined as a teacher's confidence in his or her ability to affect and promote student learning (Bandura, 2007; Dembo & Gibson, 1985; Hoy, 2000, as cited in Black, 2015, p. 81), self-efficacy has been suggested to impact the effort that teacher candidates invest in teaching (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Students reported they were exasperated in their second year of the program, with many learners feeling as though they are teaching themselves. Teacher candidates need educators and supervising teachers to make them feel good about their competence in teaching (Black, 2015). By teaching themselves, they are missing this positive support from an experienced educator to grow and develop a sense of self-efficacy.

With this in mind, we may reflect on whether learners are in an adequate transformative learning environment for developing the self-confidence and competence that they need for the process of perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1991). In a transformational learning environment, feelings of confidence and competence are developed, allowing the learner to employ a new, transformed perspective (Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2020). Considering many teacher candidates, especially in their second year, found the content to be repetitive and not as useful as it could be, as well as their professors to be too distanced from the profession, they may not have had these transformative opportunities in the learning process.

4.1.4.3 Imposter Syndrome

The findings of the current study led the researcher to believe that the second-year teacher candidates had higher rates of imposter syndrome than first-year teacher candidates. Defined as the belief that one's success is due to luck and that others will discover your lack of competence (Clance, 1985), second-year teacher candidates appeared to have less belief in their own self-competence and developed more of the negative emotional experiences associated with feeling like an imposter. The existing literature emphasized how in emerging adulthood, imposter syndrome is a contributing factor for new educator burnout rates (LaPalme et al., 2022). The current research uncovered findings on imposter syndrome, emphasizing how teacher candidates in their second year, as they get closer to officially joining the profession, develop more of these negative emotional experiences. Imposter syndrome may be present for these learners and if left unacknowledged, may impact their desire and capabilities to teach.

4.2 Limitations of the Study

Having more teacher candidates than 47 may have provided further data and perceptions about this educational experience. However, the data collected from these participants were exceptionally diverse, rich, and thought provoking. The challenge of finding teacher candidates who are not overwhelmed with schoolwork and practicum and are willing to share their personal/professional experience is difficult, so finding more participants would require additional resources and time. Voluntary response sampling is non-random, meaning that there is self-selection of participants. This could lead to a sample that is not representative of the broader population of teacher candidates, potentially skewing the results. Considering the recruitment for participants was done through social media platforms, there may have been teacher candidates who were not aware of the opportunity to participate. This study's focus

on teacher candidates in accredited teacher education programs across Ontario restricts its transferability to other regions or jurisdictions. Finally, data collection for the current study was conducted from November 2025 until January of 2026. As a result, the researcher could not get a full scope of teacher candidate perceptions throughout the different phases of the year.

4.3 Recommendations and Implications for Professional Practice

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations based on participant perceptions are put forward: practical and applicable content, more experiential learning, better online learning practices, clear and fair expectations program wide, professors who are in touch with the realities of the classroom, capable and positive associate teachers, and financial support (mainly to travel to areas across a school board during practicum). By implementing these recommendations in concrete ways, teacher candidate perceptions about their teacher education and towards the profession may change in positive ways. This may enable them to be meaningfully engaged, positively impacted, better prepared, and develop stronger perceptions of preparedness for teaching.

4.4 Future Research

The current study of teacher candidate perceptions towards their Bachelor of Education program and towards entering the teaching profession, and how these perceptions differ between year one and year two has highlighted several key themes that raise important questions for future research. These questions stem from the positive and negative perceptions, emotions, and attitudes that teacher candidates have when engaging within the program, the experiences they go through, the challenges they face, and the preparedness they feel throughout the program. The findings call for further exploration into how to support teacher candidates best throughout their teacher education and once they enter the profession, and how to provide a better foundation for future teachers across Ontario. Investigation about teacher candidate perceptions on a longitudinal scale, the role of connection in shaping teacher candidate identity, the use of self-directed learning practices in teacher education, and the perspectives of other individuals involved in teacher education should be considered for future research.

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