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**Pursuing Equity in and Through  
Teacher Education Program Admissions**

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**Abstract:** This case study investigated equity in teacher education admissions. Through document analysis and structured interviews with ten past or current members of the admissions committee in a large initial teacher education program in Ontario, we developed an understanding of equity in teacher education admissions as encompassing two foci: equity in admissions—that is, equity of access for applicants to the program—and equity through admissions—that is, equity of educational opportunity and outcomes for the children in the schools where the teachers trained by the programs will eventually teach. Our analysis illustrates the importance of recognizing both foci and the tensions between them.

**Keywords:** teacher education programs; admission criteria; educational opportunities.

### **Buscando la equidad en (y a través de) la admisión a programas de formación docente**

**Resumen:** Este es un estudio de caso de los procesos de equidad en la admisión a programas de formación del profesorado. A través de análisis de documentos y entrevistas estructuradas con diez miembros del comité de admisiones (pasados y actuales) en un programa de formación de docentes en Ontario, desarrollamos un entendimiento de la equidad en el acceso a la formación de docentes que involucran dos focos: la equidad en la admisión (es decir, la igualdad de acceso de los candidatos para el programa) y la equidad a través de la admisión (es decir, la igualdad de oportunidades y resultados educativos para los niños en las escuelas donde los maestros capacitados en los programas enseñaran. Nuestro análisis muestra la importancia de reconocer los problemas y las tensiones entre esos focos.

**Palabras clave:** programas de formación docente; criterios de admisión; oportunidades educativas.

### **Buscando equidade na (e através da) admissão aos programas de educação de professores**

**Resumo:** Este estudo de caso investiga a equidade na admissão aos programas de educação de professores. Através de análise documental e entrevistas estruturadas com os últimos e os atuais dez membros da comissão de admissão em um amplo programa de educação de professores em Ontário, desenvolvemos um entendimento da equidade da admissão na educação de professores envolvendo dois focos: equidade na admissão- isto é, equidade de acesso para candidatos ao programa- e equidade através da admissão- isto é, equidade de oportunidade educacional e resultados para as crianças nas escolas onde os professores treinados pelos programas irão lecionar eventualmente. Nossa análise ilustra a importância de se reconhecer os focos e as tensões entre elas.

**Palavras-chave:** programas de educação de professores; critérios de admissão; oportunidades educacionais.

## **Introduction**

Pursuing equity has different meanings at different levels of education. In elementary and secondary education, discussions of equity typically focus on access to educational opportunities and/or on educational outcomes. In higher education, the focus is usually limited to access to educational opportunities. How applicants are admitted to programs is an important part of access in higher education, where demand for spaces often exceeds supply. In elementary and secondary education, in contrast, attendance is legislated and children are typically assigned to a school because it is geographically near to their home; for these children, equity of access requires ensuring that the schools have the resources to serve the children who attend them.

Initial teacher education programs are unique among higher education programs in that, in addition to considering equity for the applicants who are applying to be trained as teachers for elementary and secondary schools, they must also consider the role those applicants will

ultimately play in determining the educational opportunities for the children in those schools. In short, they must consider both equity for the applicants (that is, equity *in* admissions to the initial teacher education program) and equity for the children in the schools where the graduating teachers will work (equity *through* admissions to the initial teacher education program). These two foci may lead to different admission decisions, creating a tension that must be recognized before programs can hope to develop responsive and fully equitable admissions policies and procedures.

This understanding of equity in initial teacher education program admissions as having two foci emerged through the analyses of the evolving admissions policies and procedures of a large initial teacher education program in Ontario—in particular, investigation of the tensions among the admissions policies and procedures. Before presenting the case, we will briefly describe how initial teacher education is delivered in Ontario, as well as the contexts for equity in higher education and elementary and secondary education. We will also discuss approaches to higher education admissions.

## **Teacher Education in Ontario**

Certification as an elementary or secondary teacher in Ontario requires both a non-teaching undergraduate degree (e.g., Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Sciences) and a teaching degree (e.g., Bachelor of Education). Most teacher education programs are one-year programs in which students who have already earned a non-teaching Bachelor's degree can earn a Bachelor of Education degree. A few programs are five-year concurrent programs that lead simultaneously to a non-teaching degree and a teaching degree. In either type of program, the requirements for the Bachelor of Education degree include coursework on learning, development, and teaching methods, plus at least 40 days of supervised practice teaching.

The teacher education programs at Ontario's publicly-funded universities are funded by Ontario's Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. Because the Ministry sets the number of subsidies available to each university, it in effect determines the number of pre-service teachers who can be accepted into each program each year. The one-year program that is the focus of this case study receives funding for about 1,300 pre-service teachers each year. Because it typically receives between 4,000 and 7,000 applications and must offer admission to about 1,800 applicants to produce a class of 1,300, the program must decide which of the applicants will receive offers of admission.

## **Equity for Applicants to Higher Education**

Although no research is available on equity of access to Ontario's initial teacher education programs, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) has investigated access to all post-secondary education in Ontario (Educational Policy Institute, 2008). HEQCO found that Aboriginal people and other racialized minorities are underrepresented in Ontario's post-secondary institutions. Further, HEQCO points out that applicants from underrepresented groups may have less access to information about admissions standards and processes and, if they do apply, may encounter prejudice concerning their ability to succeed in higher education. Indeed, the limiting of educational opportunities can have intergenerational effects, so that children whose parents did not have a post-secondary education are also less likely to pursue post-secondary studies (Drolet, 2005; Knighton & Mizra, 2002).

Inequities in educational opportunities are not unique to Ontario or Canada. As Clancy and Goastellec (2007) report, countries as varied as South Africa, Vietnam, Indonesia, France, Ireland, and the United States have developed policies to promote equity of access to higher education, with the focus in each country determined by the dimensions that have historically determined access to education: in the United States, South Africa and Vietnam, ethnicity or race; in Ireland, socio-economic class; in Indonesia, geographical region; and in France, socio-professional group.

What can university programs do to ensure equity of access to higher education? The equality guarantees of Canada's *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, part of Canada's constitution, explicitly permit positive action to overcome the effects of discrimination:

15(1) Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

15(2) Subsection (1) does not preclude any law, program or activity that has as its object the amelioration of conditions of disadvantaged individuals or groups including those that are disadvantaged because of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

Subsection 15(2) makes it clear that public institutions, including universities, have the right to create programs explicitly to overcome disadvantage (Brodsky & Day, 1989). The protection in the Ontario Human Rights Code, which applies to private actors as well, contains a similar guarantee of equality and permission for programs to take actions to overcome historical disadvantage (ss.1 & 14).

### **Equity for Elementary and Secondary Education Students**

Based on their review of the research, Little and Bartlett (2010) conclude that the educational opportunities and outcomes available to elementary and secondary students may be affected by teachers' academic preparation, whether teachers' social identities mirror those of the students, teachers' preparation to work with diverse students, and teachers' preferences for where and whom they teach. In Ontario, the second and third of these factors—teachers' social identities and their preparation to work with diverse students—have received particular attention.

Why is it important to train teachers who represent the diversity of the students? Recent reports about school safety and student retention (Ferguson et al., 2005; McMurtry & Curling, 2008; School Community Safety Advisory Panel, 2008) have emphasized the need for teachers who reflect the diversity of Ontario's students. In fact, the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) identified the lack of representativeness as a possible contributing factor to the disproportionate suspension and expulsion of racialized students and students with disabilities. Consequently, in its 2007 settlement with the OHRC, Ontario's Ministry of Education committed "to proposing that post-secondary institutions that provide teacher training and certification actively promote, advertise and recruit teachers and teaching candidates from racialized communities and disabled persons and other under-represented groups of persons within Ontario" (OHRC, 2007).

These calls for greater representativeness acknowledge that the proportion of teachers from racialized groups is much lower than the proportion of students. Based on an analysis of Statistics Canada census data, Ryan, Pollock and Antonelli (2009) found that 9.5% of Ontario's teachers (including school counsellors) in 2006 were "visible minorities" (a Statistics Canada term which Ryan et al. critique), compared to 22.8% of Ontario's population (the percentages in Toronto are higher: 18.6% of teachers and 42.4% of students). They note that the percentage of Ontario students from racialized groups is likely higher than 22.8%, as the majority of recent immigrants are from racialized groups and the immigrant population is on average younger than the general population.

Little research on the effects of teachers' social identities on students' educational opportunities or outcomes has been performed in Canada. However, research studies in the United States suggest that teachers who are members of racialized minority groups provide important role models for all students, have higher academic expectations of racialized minority students, and are more likely to be willing to work in urban schools, where there is a chronic shortage of qualified teachers (see Clewell & Villegas, 1998, for a summary). More recently, Villegas and Davis (2008) showed how teachers' expectations affect students' opportunities to learn and suggested that teachers of colour "protect students of colour from the potentially pernicious effects of negative stereotyping and low expectations" (p. 600). Research by Dee (2004) also suggested that "the mere presence of a [B]lack teacher may encourage (students) to update their prior beliefs about educational possibilities" (p. 195). This is not to say that race is the only aspect of teachers' social identity that matters. However, little research is available on the effects of other aspects of teachers' social identities, such as socio-economic status, religion, sexuality, and geographical origin.

Initial teacher education programs have also worked to ensure that all the teachers they train, whatever their social identities, are prepared to work with diverse students. Nieto (2006), for example, called for teacher education programs to develop new teachers who have "a sense of mission; solidarity with, and empathy for, their students; the courage to challenge mainstream knowledge and conventional wisdom; improvisation; and a passion for social justice" (p. 463). This can involve providing relevant coursework during the program (Zeichner & Flessner, 2009) or developing relevant requirements for admission to a program (Irvine, 2008; Villegas, 2007).

The goals of representing the diversity of the students and of developing teachers who are prepared to work with diverse students are not independent, of course. Individuals' social identities may affect their understandings of and commitments to learn about their students' cultures. In addition, the other pre-service teachers in an initial teacher education program can affect a pre-service teacher's development. As Harvard University's former president, Derek Bok (2006), reminds us, students learn from each other as well as from their instructors. The University of Michigan's Law School argued this compellingly before the US Supreme Court in 2003, resulting in the court finding that a critical mass of racialized minority students is important to overcome stereotypes, including the stereotype that "minority students always (or even consistently) express some characteristic minority viewpoint on any issue" (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, p. 2341). Research by Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin (2002) at American universities showed that students who reported interacting more with students of other races and ethnicities during university also reported greater intellectual engagement and citizenship engagement, even when controlling for differences in background and prior experiences. While Canada has not had similar court cases, partly because of its different constitutional framework, these benefits of diversity in higher education surely apply in Canadian higher education, as well.

In the context of teacher education, this means that, as Zeichner and Flessner (2009) argue, “diverse cohorts of teacher education students and diverse faculty are needed to create the learning conditions needed to educate teachers to be successful in today’s public schools” (p. 298). In other words, learning to be culturally responsive and equity minded is facilitated by exposure to instructors and peers who have different perspectives and funds of knowledge based on their different social identities and experiences. Preparing the teachers that our elementary and secondary schools need, therefore, requires admitting pre-service teachers who are representative of the diversity of the children in the schools, because both the children in the schools and the pre-service teachers in the teacher education programs benefit from this diversity.

### **Admissions Approaches**

Guinier (2003) provides an analysis of approaches to higher education admissions that is particularly relevant for initial teacher education programs. She emphasizes the opportunities for underrepresented groups to access higher education programs—to be socio-economically “mobile.” “Contest mobility,” the most common approach, is based exclusively on general academic criteria, such as marks and standardized test scores: The applicants with the highest marks or scores are offered admission. In initial teacher education programs, the contest mobility approach is seen in programs that consider academic credentials alone or in combination with scores on tests such as the Praxis I: Pre-Professional Skills Test. Advocates of this approach argue that any applicant, no matter their background or social identity can access higher education by performing well in their previous schooling and on the tests. They point out that the approach is easy to use and easy to explain to applicants. However, the contest mobility approach can perpetuate patterns of advantage and disadvantage—for example, it has no way to take into account historical discrimination that may have affected students’ earlier educational opportunities and thus their test scores and marks.

A second approach, used by many programs that are striving to be more equitable in their admissions decisions, is “sponsored mobility.” In this approach, admissions decision makers, recognizing that the admissions criteria may mean that some applicants do not have an equitable opportunity for admission, make exceptions to the usual criteria for individual applicants. In other words, the admissions officers sponsor individual applicants, in an attempt to make the results of the process more equitable. In initial teacher education admissions, this may involve admissions officers applying different criteria for applicants whose social identities are underrepresented in the schools. The main criticisms of this approach are its lack of transparency and the possible abuses of the discretion upon which it relies.

As an alternative to these approaches, Guinier proposes a third approach, which she calls “structural mobility.” In this approach, which Guinier acknowledges is difficult to design and implement, the admissions process itself takes into account potential sources of inequity. As she writes:

A commitment to structural mobility means that an institution's commitments to upward mobility, merit, democracy and individualism are framed and tempered by an awareness of how structures, including the institution's own admissions criteria, tend to privilege some groups of people over others. (p. 159)

Guinier argues that admissions decisions should be based not only on applicants' individual merit, but on "democratic merit," which includes the needs of the broader society. That is, programs should seek to "identify qualified students in relation to the greater role of higher education in the political, economic and social structure of community" (p. 159). Accordingly, Guinier believes that admissions decisions should take into account applicants' social identities (she argues for considering not only race but also other sources of historical disadvantage such as family poverty and geography). This should be a formal—and transparent—part of the process.

For initial teacher education programs, the structural mobility approach could mean developing a system in which policies and procedures explicitly address the persistent effects of historical discrimination, the importance of providing students with a learning environment in which they encounter and learn to address diverse groups, and the pressing community need for a more representative and culturally responsive teaching profession. Instead of, as in sponsored mobility, admissions officers selecting a few additional applicants to make up for underrepresentation of particular social identities among the applicants who would otherwise be offered admission, structural mobility might involve using criteria aligned with the admission priorities, such as requiring applicants to demonstrate cultural responsiveness. It might also incorporate clear decision rules that would, from among applicants with indistinguishable qualifications, offer admission first to those whose social identities are underrepresented in the schools. The principal distinction, then, between sponsored and structural mobility is not in the goals or results but in the transparency of the process.

## **Method**

We chose a case study approach to investigate what equity meant in the admissions policies and procedures of a large initial teacher education program in Ontario. The impetus for the study was the realization that, although the program had been making many changes to its admissions procedures in response to the admissions policies' calls for equity, a clear operationalization of equity was proving frustratingly elusive. Was it possible that there were inherent contradictions in the pursuit of equity?

The sources of data are structured interviews with ten past and current members of the admissions committee, and a systematic review and analysis of available documents from 2002-03 to 2009-10, including each year's application forms, instructions to applicants, training manuals for application readers, and notes and minutes from meetings of the admissions committee. The admissions committee was created and initially chaired by the Associate Dean for Initial Teacher Education and was later chaired by the Executive Director for Initial Teacher Education. Each year, the committee included the program's Registrar and Assistant Registrar, coordinators of parts of the program, and five or six faculty members. The ten committee members to be interviewed were selected to represent both the time period included in this study and a range of roles on the committee; all consented to be interviewed.

The use of multiple sources of data allowed us to examine not only explicit policies and procedures, but also the processes by which changes were made and how changes were understood by the admissions committee. The case study was also informed by reviews of the literatures on the organizational context of admissions policies and procedures, the Canadian legal and political context, and the effects of teachers' social identities and commitments to equity on students' opportunities and outcomes.

The questions in the structured interviews addressed (1) the interviewees' role in the initial teacher education program and their past and current involvement in the admissions process, (2) their understanding of the organizational processes through which the admission policies and procedures were developed and implemented, and (3) what they believed to be the program's goals in relation to equity and how those goals had changed over time. The interviews were conducted in early 2009 by a member of the research team, who took notes during the interviews and later created a summary and selective transcript for each of the interviews based on these notes and on review of audio recordings of the interviews.

After gathering the required documents from the program's Registrar and from members of the admissions committee, we constructed a chronology of policy changes, changes in the admission materials provided to applicants, and changes in procedures and internal documents. This chronology allowed us to see how, for example, changes in application materials related to changes in policies. We next analyzed the text of the policies and the questions applicants were required to answer, in order to understand the meanings of equity that were implicit in the materials and the changes in implied meanings over time. Finally, the interviews provided important contextual information about the changes and unexpected insights into how control of admissions decisions had shifted over time.

We have chosen to present the case study chronologically, rather than by the meanings of equity that emerged in our analyses, to aid the reader in understanding the many changes in policies, procedures, and practices. This approach has the disadvantage, however, of making the changes sound more deliberate and deliberated than they were. In retrospect—as a direct result of the analyses we performed in this case study—we are able to see clearly that some changes are best characterized as motivated by a focus on equity for the applicants and others by equity for the children in the schools. At the time of these changes, the admissions committee did not make this distinction, with the result that many of the changes were experienced as frustratingly difficult to integrate into a whole and, even, possibly contradictory. Indeed, several of the interviewees in this study expressed frustration that the committee continued to struggle to make the processes more equitable.

The first two authors were members of the admissions committee during much of the period covered in the case study. They acknowledge that their familiarity with the policies and procedures, while doubtless helpful in compiling the data for this study, may have influenced their interpretation of the data; for the interpretation, therefore, the other authors were critically important. The other authors were not members of the committee and brought a wide range of perspectives to this study: two were current students in or recent graduates from another initial teacher education program and all four were graduate students focusing on educational administration or equity studies.

### **One Program's Experience of Pursuing Equity**

Much of our analysis will focus on changes in the initial teacher education program. However, two important things did not change during the time period covered by this study. The first is the beginning of the Admissions Policy Statement, printed in the front of each year's handbook for applicants:

[I]n keeping with the policies and principles for admission to [the university], [the program] is dedicated to admitting qualified candidates who reflect the ethnic, cultural and social diversity of Toronto, Ontario and Ontario schools.



Applications are encouraged from visible minority group members, persons with disabilities, women in non-traditional subject areas, Aboriginal persons and native speakers of French.

The minimum academic and language requirements for admission also remained largely unchanged between 2002-03 and 2009-10, the period of this study. To be eligible for admission, applicants must meet academic requirements (at least a completed three-year undergraduate degree and at least a “B range” average in 15 full-year university courses, plus, for some teaching subjects, a minimum number of courses in relevant specialty areas) and provide evidence of proficiency in English (either English as a first language, university studies conducted in English in a primarily English-speaking country, or a passing score on an approved test). In addition to meeting the academic and language requirements, applicants have also been required to complete what the program calls a profile, consisting of several questions to which applicants provide short essay responses. As we will describe, the profile questions have changed several times during the period of this study.

We have chosen to begin the case study with the application for admission to study in the 2002-03 academic year, but the materials and processes were largely unchanged for several years before and for both 2003-04 and 2004-05. In 2002-03, applicants were required to describe three recent volunteer experiences of at least 100 hours each in Canadian (preferably Ontarian) classrooms with groups of children of the same age that they hoped to teach. Applicants were also asked to “explain how you might contribute to the education of students in today’s schools” and “What additional experiences, qualifications or other information relevant to your potential as a teacher do you wish the Admissions Committee to consider?” A few applicants used these questions to reflect on how their social identity or their experiences would affect their work as a teacher or how they might work to promote equity for students, but most did not. The question about additional experiences and qualifications was often used by socio-economically advantaged applicants to describe experiences such as music lessons or travel.

### **2005-06: Committing to Equity and Removing Barriers**

In preparation for the admissions cycle for the 2005-06 academic year, the admissions committee made several important changes. The committee expanded the Admissions Policy Statement to include a commitment to equity for applicants that was in the process of being adopted across the university’s education programs. The new Admissions Policy Statement began:

[The institution of which this program is a part] is strongly committed to social justice in everything it does. This means that we are committed to the just treatment of each individual member of our community and the communities we serve. It also means that we are especially vigilant to ensure that differences are not treated in ways that produce direct or indirect forms of discrimination. Our commitment to social justice also means that those with whom we work and live who experience individual or systemic discrimination, for whatever reason, are provided with the means to overcome social and physical disadvantages, to the best of our ability. It should be understood that equitable treatment sometimes involves similar treatment and at other times involves differential treatment in order to bring about an equality of results.

This statement refers to considering historic discrimination when determining equitable treatment. While it does not specify how access to the initial teacher education program will be determined, it implies the possibility of considering historic discrimination when making admission decisions.

The committee also decided to address equity more directly in the questions. The question asking applicants to “explain how you might contribute to the education of students in today’s schools” was replaced by the repetition of the first four sentences of the new Admissions Policy Statement, followed by:

Discuss the importance of diversity in teaching and learning environments. We are particularly interested in knowing/understanding about the ways in which you see yourself making a contribution in your future role as a teacher.

This question can be read as inviting applicants to discuss how their social identity would relate to the diversity of the students, although it was also possible to answer the question by discussing the importance of teachers understanding diversity.

One of the most significant and contentious changes the admissions committee made was in the previous experience required of applicants. In preparation for the 2005-06 academic year, the admissions committee reviewed the possible effect of continuing to require applicants to have three recent experiences of 100 hours each in Canadian schools. The committee worried that this requirement could be a barrier for applicants who did not have contacts with and so easy access to Canadian schools or the economic security to afford the time for extensive volunteer work. As one of the committee members who argued for changing the requirement explained, “The notion of all of this volunteering is a nice middle class idea that one can ‘work for free.’ It’s a laughable notion for many people. It is economically a pipe dream!” This committee member provided specific examples of otherwise well-qualified applicants from educationally and economically disadvantaged backgrounds who wanted to become teachers but had been unable to meet this requirement. After much debate, the committee revised the question to invite applicants to present other types of experiences as a basis for their “understanding of teaching and learning.” The intention was not only to broaden the types of acceptable experience, but also to remove the requirement that each of the three experiences be at least 100 hours.

The change to the experience requirement necessitated changes in the program. The previous requirement meant that individuals entering the program were already familiar with Canadian schools; that could no longer be assumed. The program partnered with local schools to provide opportunities for those teacher candidates who were not familiar with Canadian schools to observe classes before they began their first practice teaching placement. Those needing more support could postpone their first placement and spend more time observing. Seminars about Ontario schools and youth culture were also made available to all teacher candidates.

The admission process in 2006-07 was similar to the process in 2005-06.

### **2007-08: Clarifying the Questions and Committing to Transparency**

Although the requirements for amount and type of experience changed in 2005-06, expectations about what the applicant would have learned from the experiences did not immediately change: Applicants were still required to demonstrate a familiarity with pedagogy for the age group with which they intended to work. For 2007-08, the admissions committee

reconsidered the purpose of the question about experience and concluded that the most important requirement related to experience was not that an applicant already have knowledge of pedagogy—after all, they would learn about that during the program. The most important requirement was more fundamental: skill in learning from experiences. This skill is often referred to as reflection or reflexivity and is essential to applicants' development as teachers both during and after the program. As Shulman (1998) points out, all professions emphasize “the importance of experience in developing practice, hence the need to learn by reflecting on one's practice and its outcomes” (p. 516). This skill allows teacher candidates to learn from their practice teaching experiences during an initial teacher education program. It is also a critically important capacity throughout a teacher's career: As Bransford, Darling-Hammond and Page (2005) observe, teachers need “the capacity to reflect on, evaluate and learn from their teaching so that it continually improves” (p. 3). The question about experience was, therefore, changed to ask for evidence of reflection.

For 2007-08, the question about equity was also changed to make its relevance clearer. The new question read:

(A) Please describe one or more of your life experiences (within or outside of a school context) that have been significant in helping you understand issues of equity, diversity and social justice. (B) From those life experiences, identify specific lessons that you have learned about what it would mean for you to be a teacher committed to equity, diversity and social justice.

Also for 2007-08, the admissions committee expanded a section of the profile in which applicants were invited to voluntarily provide information about their race, dis/ability status, and parents' education (in 2008-09, a question about sexual orientation was added).

In addition to continuing to revise the questions, for 2007-08, the admissions committee made an explicit commitment to transparency. This included creating a handbook for use by the more than 100 instructors and other educators associated with the program who read the applicants' profiles. In the handbook, the admissions committee described its commitment to transparency:

All applicants have the right to clearly understand the profile questions and how their responses will be evaluated. All profile readers and other participants in the admissions process have the right to understand how their ratings will be used. This handbook is one part of our commitment to both fairness and transparency.

This commitment included, as one admissions committee member noted, making sure that the profile questions and instructions the applicants read and the rubrics the readers used were exactly parallel. It also meant providing information to unsuccessful applicants about the ratings they received and the rubrics that were used. As another member pointed out, the program needed to remember its responsibility to those applicants who met the admission requirements but did not receive offers because there are not enough spaces.

In addition to providing instructions for reading the profiles, the new profile reading handbook defined important terms, explored the assumptions behind each question, explained changes in the questions and the reading processes, and described how the ratings were used. Perhaps not surprisingly, as the terms and assumptions became less ambiguous, differences between some individual readers' beliefs and the premises of the profile also became clearer.

This led to productive, though sometimes difficult, debates about the admissions process. As a former admissions committee member commented, when reflecting on the decision to drop the requirement for 300 hours of volunteer experience:

My sense was that there really was a space [for discussion] but that there were a lot of people who found the process difficult and didn't get it and didn't want it. When you have a long history of doing something a particular way, you will have people holding onto the core of those ways. Their willingness to change turns out to be around the edges and the change we were trying to make was in the core.

While the admissions committee was revising the questions, other changes occurred in the process of reading and rating the applicants' responses to the questions. Previously, program instructors and a few teachers and administrators from partner schools had met to read and discuss applicants' responses; each application was read by two readers, who assigned a consensus rating after discussing the responses. The readers were largely free to choose which profiles to read and with whom to discuss the profiles.

For the 2007-08 academic year, the applicants answered the questions in an electronic system delivered through the Internet. With responses available electronically, it made sense to move the reading of the responses on-line. This required the admissions committee to make numerous decisions about the details of the profile reading process. For example, the admissions committee decided that each profile should be randomly assigned to two readers. Where there are significant discrepancies in the ratings, a third reader would be assigned. Whereas the paper versions of the application had allowed readers to see an applicants' name, address, and demographic information as well as their responses, the on-line version presented only the responses (this was a deliberate—and disputed—decision: some readers argued that they needed this contextual information to read profiles with appropriate sensitivity, while others pointed to comments made at previous years' reading sessions that suggested some readers believed they could judge applicants' suitability for teaching based on their names and neighborhoods). The admissions committee also created question-specific rubrics to replace the previous holistic rating system. Each question was rated on a scale of Insufficient Evidence, Pass, and High Pass (a rating of Low Pass has since been added).

Finally, the admissions committee set a minimum requirement for the profile: to be admissible, the applicant could not receive a rating of "Insufficient Evidence" on any of the three questions. The applicants who met all minimum requirements for the profile, academic qualifications, and language proficiency were grouped into four bands based on their ratings on the three parts of the profile and their academic qualifications. Applicants in the first and second bands were those who received High Pass on at least one part of the profile, had at least a 4-year undergraduate degree and, unless they also had a graduate degree, had an A undergraduate average. The third band contained (a) all remaining applicants who received at least one High Pass (those with a 3-year degree or with a B average in a 4-year degree) and (b) those with Pass on all three parts plus a graduate degree or an A average in a 4-year degree. The fourth band contained all remaining applicants who received three Pass ratings. The program was able to offer admission to all applicants in the first and second bands and the majority of applicants in the third band. Applicants within the third band were selected according to decision rules that gave priority to applicants specializing in particular subject areas (mathematics, physics, chemistry and French) or those who self-identified as Francophone or Aboriginal or as a racialized minority (identification as a racialized minority was based on applicants' responses to

the new voluntary demographic form; information from this form has not been included in the decision rules in subsequent years at the request of the university) and also took into account practical program limitations (e.g., the number of new science teachers who can be trained was limited by the availability of science lab space). The decision rules, which were set by the admissions committee, had the effect of limiting the discretion of the program's admissions officers, who could no longer make exceptions for individual applicants. One of the interviewees reflected on the frustration this could cause when an applicant from an underrepresented population failed to meet only one of the minimum requirements.

### **2008-09: Clarifying the Goals of Admission**

As the admissions committee struggled to clarify the questions and to make the process more transparent, it realized it also needed to clarify the program's goals. In preparation for the admission process for 2008-09, the admissions committee identified three commitments for admissions: (1) Attracting and admitting teacher education candidates with the potential to become excellent teachers and educational leaders, and who will draw upon their unique and diverse background experiences to do so; (2) admitting students who show an openness, willingness and/or commitment to work towards equity in diverse classrooms and schools; and (3) admitting a diverse student body that reflects the diverse student body in Toronto and Ontario classrooms and schools.

The articulation of these commitments was an important step toward defining what was meant by equity in the admissions process. All three of these commitments refer to what we came through the analysis of this case study to call equity through admissions—that is, the mission of initial teacher education programs to prepare teachers who will serve children in the schools. The third commitment refers to representation of diversity—selecting applicants who reflect the diversity of the children in Ontario schools. The first commitment's reference to applicants' diverse backgrounds relates to the equity goal of remedying historical discrimination in selection of teachers, which is relevant for both equity in admissions and equity through admissions. That is not to say that the difference in demographics between teachers and students is solely due to past discrimination—some of the difference is because immigration to Ontario has accelerated in the past two decades. However, inequity in access to teacher education and in access to the prerequisite higher education has undoubtedly contributed to the differences. The second of the commitments refers to applicants' "openness, willingness and/or commitment to work towards equity in diverse classrooms and schools." This second commitment, in particular, has guided the development since 2008-09 of questions on the applicant profile specifically related to equity.

In 2008-09, the question about equity was replaced by two questions: one about equity and the other about the applicant's understanding of her or his own social identity. Building on the statement of commitments, the admissions committee tried to clarify what it meant by equity. The first of the new questions read:

The differences that characterize teachers, students and their families (differences that include, but are not limited to gender, race, socio-economic status, sexuality, religion, geographic region, ethnicity, and dis/ability) can be linked to experiences of advantage and disadvantage. Describe a time when you or someone you know was advantaged or disadvantaged because of those differences. What was the impact of the experience? What did you learn from this experience that has

prepared you to work with students and families who have experienced advantage or disadvantage?

The other new question was:

Teachers and the students and families with whom they work in schools differ in many ways including, but not limited to gender, race, socio-economic status, sexuality, religion, geographic region, ethnicity, and dis/ability. Please discuss how your own social background and other life experiences either inside or outside of school have prepared you to work with diverse students and families in schools.

The intention of this question was to determine the kind of self-knowledge that applicants bring, and their ability to recognize the strengths and limitations of their own social location and its relationship to work with students in schools.

### **2009-10: Greater Transparency**

For 2009-10, the admissions committee added an introduction to each question. For example, the introduction to the question about experience emphasized that question's purpose as an opportunity for applicants to demonstrate their ability to learn from experience: "This question is an opportunity for you to show that you have learned about teaching and learning through reflecting on your experiences." The question about social identity began "This question is an opportunity for you to show that you understand that who you are will affect your work as a teacher." The final question began "This question is an opportunity for you to show that you understand that you will have a responsibility to support equity and social justice through your work with students and families." The criteria used by the readers were also outlined in the text of the question (in previous years, this information was provided in a separate document). These changes were intended to increase the transparency of the application process; it was also hoped they might reduce the advantage of applicants who are more "application savvy" or who might have access to experienced educators or family members who could help them discern the intention of the questions. The committee recognized that lack of clarity in the questions (or, indeed, the entire application process) could act as an unnecessary barrier to admission.

## **Equity in and through Admissions**

One of our goals in undertaking this case study was to better understand equity as it relates to initial teacher education program admissions. As we analyzed this case, it became clear to us that one reason for this frustration was that there were not one, but two important foci of equity in initial teacher education admissions—what we have called, in this article, equity in admissions and equity through admissions. In retrospect, these two foci can be seen in the wording that was added to the Admissions Policy Statement in 2005-06, particularly in the phrase, "just treatment of each individual member of our community and the communities we serve." They can also be seen in the three commitments articulated by the committee in 2008-09.

An admissions process focused on equity in admissions would concern itself only with the qualifications, social identity, and experiences of the applicants. It might take into account the effects of historic discrimination on the applicants in evaluating their applications, but would

not consider the representativeness of the teachers who are already in the schools. A focus on equity in admissions would not necessarily consider whether applicants were prepared to work with diverse students in schools; the sole concern would be providing applicants equitable access to the opportunity to receive initial teacher education. In contrast, an admissions process focused on equity through admissions might give priority in admissions to applicants from groups that are underrepresented in the current teaching force and also to applicants who are prepared to work with diverse students, whatever their own social identities, but might not consider the effects of historic discrimination on the applicants themselves. To pursue both equity in admissions and equity through admissions requires acknowledging that these two foci may not always lead to the same decisions. The admissions committee sought to resolve this tension in part by setting minimum requirements on the profile questions (applicants had to receive at least a low pass on all questions, which included demonstrating a commitment to working with diverse students) and by removing admissions requirements that were barriers to groups underrepresented in the teaching profession. As the committee members acknowledged, however, this is only a partial resolution.

The two foci—and the tension between them—emerged in our analysis of this case, but so too did an approach the program adopted to address this tension. Throughout the study, we were reminded again and again, both in the documents and the interviews, of the admission committee's explicit commitment to transparency. This seems to us an important part of the committee's efforts to address the tension: If applicants were told how their applications would be read and how admission decisions would be made, they could make an informed choice about whether to apply and, if they did apply, how to present their qualifications. In addition, a transparent process could be scrutinized and questioned by members of the community, as well as by educators both inside and outside the program. In effect, the admissions committee seems to be attempting to move from what Guinier (2003) would describe as an admissions process based on sponsored mobility to one based on structural mobility. The committee would not find it surprising that Guinier describes this as the most difficult type of process to design and implement.

## **Conclusion**

In writing about this case study, we chose the title "Pursuing equity" to acknowledge that the tensions among the equity goals, and within the ever-changing social and educational contexts, mean it is unlikely the admissions committee will ever be able to stop critically examining and revising its policies and processes. The profile questions will undergo further revision in an effort to provide ever greater clarity for applicants. To support greater agreement among readers, the rubrics used to evaluate profile responses will continue to be refined. The program is also concerned about outreach to and retention of a diverse population of teacher candidates. To that end, research has begun with candidates who have not persisted in the program in order to determine if programmatic elements created barriers. Outreach efforts are being given greater attention with more varied and creative approaches. As well, program responsiveness and inclusion are being recognized as increasingly important as the program admits teacher candidates who bring a wealth of different backgrounds, experiences, funds of knowledge and understandings.

With these changes, there has also been a recognition that the effects of the policies and procedures should be evaluated. As mentioned above, with the 2007-08 academic year, the program began asking applicants to voluntarily provide demographic information. Only for the

2010-11 academic year, however, did a high enough percentage of applicants answer these questions to permit analyses, such as how representative the applicant pool is of the wider population, and how representative those who receive offers of admission are of the applicant pool. It is our hope that the understanding of equity that emerged from this case study will facilitate such evaluations by helping to clarify the goals of the admissions policies and procedures.

We recognize that the specific context and history of the initial teacher education program that was the focus of this case study are unique, but believe that the concerns about equity in admission policies and practices are not. It is our hope that this study supports other programs in their pursuit of equity in and through admissions.

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