Student attrition in early childhood teacher education

Alison Elliott

Faculty of Education
The University of Western Sydney Nepean

PO Box 10, KINGSWOOD, 2747, AUSTRALIA
email: a.elliott@nepean.uws.edu.au

Paper presented at the Australian Association of Research in Education Annual Conference, Singapore, November 24th-29th, 1996

Introduction

Patterns of student retention and attrition have been of increasing interest to the higher education sector in recent years. In a changing higher education climate demographic projections are increasingly important to institutional academic and resource planning. In terms of the professions, especially vocationally oriented professions such as teaching and nursing, enrolling and retaining a supply of potential employees is critical for continuing professional viability and quality.

There has been considerable research into student progression and retention but, with increasingly diverse students bodies, pinpointing experiences most important in facilitating progression and persistence for particular types of students has become increasingly difficult. There have been few attempts to create detailed pictures of persistence and attrition within specific courses and student cohorts, despite McConnell Castle's (1991) claim that situational uniqueness must be
better understood if institutions are to implement effective strategies to increase the likelihood of student retention.

The purpose of the present study was to illuminate the complexity of the attrition process through an in-depth exploration of the experiences of a recent group of students who withdrew from an early childhood teacher education program within their first year of enrolment. The study sought to delve beneath the surface of their decision making to probe the complexity of beliefs, events, and motivations that influenced these women's lives and their subsequent decisions to discontinue self-education.

In recent years, the student body within this program has changed from being predominantly female, Anglo-Australian school leavers under 20 years of age to culturally diverse, predominantly mature women from lower socio-economic backgrounds, with a range of pretertiary experiences and significant family and related responsibilities. At the same time, attrition rates have increased dramatically. Of the 1995 intake of 126 students, half had withdrawn or taken extended leave of absence by the end of the first academic year.

Theoretical framework

The changing higher education climate over the last decade has seen a more diverse, mature and less academically elite student body, decreased and changing university funding patterns, and competition for students between universities and with the more vocationally oriented college sector. A clearer picture of progression and retention patterns and experiences, especially in courses with high levels of attrition such as nursing (Burgum, Martins & Northey, 1993) and early childhood teaching, means that retention efforts can be better targeted to the needs of individual students.

While some studies of student persistence and attrition are atheoretical descriptions of progression and retention patterns most studies are informed by theoretical models of attrition (Kember, 1989). Longitudinal models of attrition view it as a series of changing commitments and experiences in which student background characteristics influence their interactions within the academic environment, which in turn shape their attitudes and educational outcomes ((Bean, 1982; Tinto, 1975). A decision to withdraw from a program is interpreted in the light of both a student's goal orientations and lifestyle, as well as course and support services provided by the institution (Kember, 1989; Stage, 1989).

The major difficulty with most attrition studies is that they don't adequately explore the complexity of attrition experiences for individuals. There is little recognition of the multiplicity and contradictions that construct students', especially women's lives, and particularly, how gender, culture, family status and economic status
interact.

Data sources

The present study is an attempt to create a detailed picture of students' reasons for withdrawing from university within the first year of their enrolment in an undergraduate early childhood teaching degree. Drawing on longitudinal models of attrition six sets of variables were used to guide interviews with former students: (1) background characteristics relating to the individual situation, such as personal well being, family status, socio-economic status, and financial considerations; (2) precollege experiences and achievements; (3) vocational goals and commitment; (4) academic adjustment and expectations; (5) work and home influences; and (6) student culture and environment.

A total of 30 discontinuing students from a recent cohort who had enrolled in an early childhood teaching degree at a major Sydney metropolitan university were interviewed. Questions were open-ended and guided by the constructs outlined above. Most importantly, the interviews sought to delve into the inner decision making processes, beliefs, and motivations that culminated in withdrawal from the course.

Results and conclusions

Analytic induction techniques were employed to identify categories of phenomena and relationships among the categories. This process led to identifying key factors and three overarching themes- economic vulnerability, change and contradiction and family harmony- that seemed to frame the experiences of attrition for this group of students.

As predicted, results of the study revealed a complex web of factors affecting student decisions to withdraw (or take extended leave) from university. Few decisions to leave, other than those made in the first few weeks by school leavers, were straightforward (for example, having chosen the wrong course, course difficulty or attending university because of parental pressure rather than personal interest and commitment).

Analyses of interview data yielded four common factors underlying decisions to withdraw- unrealistic academic expectations, personal illness (including stress related conditions) or family illness, competing family responsibilities, and financial difficulties. Also as predicted, there was a cumulative effect of these factors over time. Further, the interplay of factors and their interactional patterns ensured that the context and experience for each participant was unique.
Students' stories revealed considerable “soul searching”, pain and psychological trauma as they negotiated the circumstances of their lives. Frequently, events and circumstances that appeared to happen by chance or circumstances beyond their control, were largely predictable products of varying combinations of lower socioeconomic status, cultural backgrounds and traditions, gender, and a volatile and depressed community economic climate.

For most students, the actual decision to withdraw involved a web of complex and interacting events and circumstances mediated by a perception that their ultimate role was to support their family and/or partner both psychologically and practically. In the case of two younger students, for example, parent illness required the students to manage an ailing family small business.

For mature students who had waited many years to enrol in a university course combinations of factors proved personally devastating. Interestingly, all students except five, planned to resume university studies once family circumstances changed, although they acknowledged that this might be some years in the future.

Case records have been used to illustrate the contexts of students' decision making, the processes of changing circumstances over time and the conflicting demands that constituted the realities of students' experiences.

The major factors common to most students' stories were situated within three overarching and consistent thematic contexts: economic vulnerability, change and contradiction, and family harmony.

Extracts from case studies and major themes are explored in more detail in a forthcoming version of this paper.

What was most revealing from the data was that each case was unique and each set of circumstances, while containing common elements was complex in itself. Aggregating data for the purpose of categorisation, as common in most empirical studies, runs the risk of devaluing the stories and voices of individuals. Coming across loud and clear in this study was the message that attrition is a multifaceted process that cannot and should not be lost in statistical pirouettes.

There were few indications that factors traditionally associated with persistence such as pretertiary academic performance (Kember, 1989), course difficulty (Schurr, Ellen & Ruble, 1987) or identification with university culture (Bean & Metzner, 1985) were major factors influencing students' decisions to leave the program. Rather, students' decisions to discontinue were based on much rawer, more fundamental issues.
related to illhealth and financial difficulties. Few students seemed to have the “luxury” of making decisions on the basis of their own personal, educational and/or career needs. The cultural and social traditions governing their roles as mothers, wives and daughters proved much more powerful mediators of experience.

As university student populations become increasingly pluralistic their diversity is reflected in the construction of individual student's experiences and stories. Each student's experiences are embedded in a tapestry of social constructions with overlapping systems of customs and traditions. The purpose of this study was to uncover and explicate some of the threads and patterns in this tapestry that influence decision making processes culminating in course withdrawal.

Hopefully, a better understanding of factors contributing to attrition, especially for mature women students from working class backgrounds, will enable more informed institutional planning. Clearly, given increasingly diverse student intakes, economic vulnerability, processes of societal and personal change and family commitments, interventions and support mechanisms must be targeted to the multiple realities of women's lives.

It now time for developing new ways of addressing student needs and thinking through short and long term academic planning decisions. Any quest for simple, tidy solutions to the problem of attrition won't work. Policies guaranteeing equality of access will be meaningless if they amount to merely removing formal barriers to university enrolment. What's needed are enabling policies that will recognise and actively support the contexts of students' identities and experiences.

References


McConnell Castle, R.B. (1993). Minority student attrition research:
Higher education's challenge for human resource development.
Educational Researcher, 22(7), 24-30.


Student attrition

Alison Elliott