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ABSTRACT

By the year 2008, 2.2 million teachers will be needed to fill open teaching positions created by increasing student populations and the rapid rise of retiring teachers. The urgent need for qualified teachers looks to be overtaking the number of available qualified teachers. Despite the efforts of teacher training programs in nationally accredited universities, the gap between qualified practicing teachers and student populations continues to intensify. Many state legislatures are closely examining teacher training and licensing practices in order to upgrade performance expectations. In response, there has been a concerted effort to further provide for this projected need for qualified teachers by implementing alternative teacher certification programs for people who have expertise in related content area. This paper argues that this line of thinking is wrong, suggesting that alternative certification will result in people who are trained in content area but who have no pedagogical experience. It recommends a program design that gives potential teachers the pedagogical skills to survive the rigors of today's classroom. The paper describes Mississippi's currently endorsed model for alternative certification, offering it as an example of why caution and reflection remain a professional necessity. It suggests that Mississippi's model must offer potential teachers experience via at least one semester of structured, supervised practice teaching. The paper lists six issues that a good alternative program must address. (SM)

Alternative Certification: It's Alive, It's Alive...

But It May Not Be Well

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A paper presented at the Mid-South Educational Research Association meeting at Point Clear, Alabama, November 17-19, 1999

Alternative Certification: It's Alive, It's Alive . . . But It May Not Be Well

It's not going away any time soon, folks. The recurring statistics continue to haunt those of us professionally connected to the area of education, in particular those of us directly connected to teacher training. Indeed, these statistics forewarn us that by the year 2008, 2.2 million teachers will be needed to fill open teaching positions created by not only an increased K-12 student population (predicted to be 2 million students over the current student population of 54 million nationally), but also by the rapid rise of retiring teachers (USA Today, December 23, 1998). At an alarming rate that continues to surpass itself year after year, we see the urgent *need* for qualified teachers overtaking the *number of available* qualified teachers. In addition, oft cited reports in the national media continue to both emphasize and lament the inabilities of those newly graduated, aspiring teachers who are unable to meet developed certification tests and/or standards. For example, a lead story in the December 23, 1998 issue of USA Today reported that " . . . nearly 60% of aspiring public school teachers in Massachusetts failed the state-mandated licensing exam this (past) summer." The news story further reported that Pennsylvania officials had established the minimum qualifying score on their teacher licensing test at such a low level that candidates could miss more than 50% of the items and still receive a passing score. Such reports understandably both question and challenge the academic quality of recently graduated university students who have become eligible for teacher certification.

So, despite the well intentioned efforts of teacher training programs in nationally accredited universities, the gap between qualified practicing teachers and the student

population continues to be intensified. Is it any surprise then, that many state legislatures are closely examining teacher training and licensing practices, with the intent of upgrading the performance expectations? In response, a concerted effort has arisen to further provide for this projected need for qualified teachers by designing and implementing alternative certification programs. Thus, the idea of alternative certification for those with degrees in fields compatible with content curriculum has increasingly been argued to be a viable method for combating the growing need for teachers. After all, in order for there to be a teacher in every classroom, a solution must present itself in a timely and reasonable way. Consequently, what better solution exists other than simply recruiting people who have definitive expertise, via a bachelor's degree in academically related content areas and, after minimal training, allowing them to transmit their content related knowledge to this ever expanding number of students? (Although we certainly have out ideas about the impact such types of programs might have on elementary certification, for the purpose of this discussion we are only concentrating on people seeking certification in secondary content areas.) If teacher training institutions are not adequately producing teachers qualified to meet the academic needs nor the growing numbers of our nation's students, then no one can deny that it is time to supplement or even replace the current system with one that requires a different method of certification.

Yet, something is wrong with this line of deduction. Indeed, something is dreadfully wrong, and those of us connected to teacher training can not ignore it in the hope that it will disappear with the same ease that allowed this educational problem to take a life of its own. Although we acknowledge that *something* has to happen as far as producing competent teachers for our schools, we must also argue that alternative

certification can not become a Band-Aid for education, resulting in people, who are trained in a content area yet have no pedagogical experience, being thrust into educational environments in our schools where they must begin to haphazardly attempt to transfer "knowledge" of certain subjects to groups of students. In fact, the gathered statistics in this area do not begin to support this implausible avenue (Huling-Austin 1986; Wise & Darling-Hammond 1991). Nevertheless, rather than ignore it, we obviously have to recognize the permanence of an alternative form of certification and, rather than fight it, we must instead propose a program design that gives these potential teachers, seeking careers through such models, the pedagogical ammunition to survive the rigor of today's classroom.

In short, we have to become advocates for potentially competent teachers. We have no choice in this because we need lots of teachers. We repeat – we need lots of individuals who will not fall into the cracks somewhere in the midst of their first three years of teaching and disappear from this profession. We speak from experience, since nowhere is this problem more acute and debated than in the state of Mississippi. Our state alone faces a 30 - 50% reduction in the teaching workforce due to retirements within the next 2 years (Mississippi Department of Education). What's more indicative of the statewide alarm connected to filling these positions is the fact that our state teacher training universities and colleges are not producing enough certified teachers to even begin to meet these needs. In the midst of this concern Mississippi has, with good and noble intentions (as well as understandable panic) decided to divest itself of its current form of alternative certification, that consisted of three professional education classes. In its place the state has determined to implement another facelift, beginning in August of 1999, when

the current method is put to rest and from its ashes rises another educational phoenix. This time the new phoenix will be in the form of a new degree, i.e., a Masters of Arts in Teaching where the kinks are already apparent, although as of yet relatively unpracticed, thus, statistically unsubstantiated.

What a reader might expect at this point, is an emphatic argument targeted at the weaknesses of any type of alternative certification, but we will instead choose to take a different turn. Indeed, we are even willing to admit that there is a need for some type of alternative certification, since the number of traditionally trained students can not begin to meet the vacant positions. But more than that, we want to explore how, through this particular method of certification, we can provide the essential skills necessary not only for the academic betterment of our students but the retention rates of those teachers entering the field through both offered methods of certification. After all, the alarmingly dismal retention rates of beginning teachers is a harsh yet pivotal reality that consequently creates the need for other means of training and certification (Sandlin, Young & Karge 1993; Feistritzer 1990).

As educators in the profession of training future teachers and administrators, we would like to believe that we offer a traditional method that will create and insure a bounty of competent educators in the field. But, we know that this is not the case. So, accepting that alternative certification has now become a necessity and a route for some future teachers, we will focus our attention on Mississippi's currently endorsed model for alternative certification and offer it as an example of why caution and reflection remain a professional necessity.

Under a newly proposed and recently implemented model from the Mississippi Department of Education, alternative certification can be met by taking 9 specific courses, amounting to 30 graduate credits. The main stipulation for entrance into this degree is that the student must attain a teaching job prior to beginning the summer course. Then, the student will begin in the fall as a full fledged teacher with a 3 hour per semester reflective component with minimal supervision. While, at this point, adoption of this particular model is not being required of our state's teaching institutions, all institutions that have received approval from our state Department of Education have chosen to follow this Pied Piper. The specific course designations and hour credits (in brackets) are: Classroom Management and Organization [3]; Development, Assessment, and Evaluation [3], Dimensions of Learning/Internship [6], Exceptional Child [3], Technology in Education [3], Reading/Writing Across the Curriculum [3], and Teacher as Researcher [3]. The remaining courses are divided by the 2 following tracks. The *Elementary Track* requires 9 additional credits from Methods of Teaching Reading [3], Children's Literature [3], and Elementary Methods [3]. The *Secondary Track* requires 2 additional classes that are Secondary Methods [3] and Curriculum Planning and Organization [3].

We are not against these courses, what we are against is the design and implementation of such programs that put novices into shark infested waters with the expectation that they will be able to navigate and survive, without harming either the students or themselves. We must ask ourselves, are such programs pushing education back to the 1960's when school districts were forced to fill many of their vast vacancies with "certified" warm bodies? Furthermore, we equally fear losing potential teachers of quality, teachers we desperately need and who may have chosen this second profession for

all the right reasons. Again, we are not against an alternative certification, rather we want assurance that prior to entering the classroom, these potential teachers will have had appropriate preparation to ensure their success and not their demise.

As previously stated, in the Mississippi program, students seeking alternative certification are expected, after only 2 to 3 pedagogically focused courses to enter the classroom and, under the guise of an internship (that coincides with their first year of employment), function effectively in a classroom primarily by themselves, although some feedback will be provided by a university supervisor, and possibly an on-site cooperating teacher and a building principal, people who are already over-burdened with taxing schedules and responsibilities. In order to ensure that individuals participating in alternative certification are afforded equal protection for success as their counterparts in traditional certification models, we contend that they need to experience at least one semester of structured, supervised practice teaching before they experience their inaugural, contracted, and paid classroom setting that basically equates to a responsibility-laden, one-person act. Again, the rationale for this skepticism is embedded in our belief that not only do these people deserve the opportunity for success and position retention, but their students deserve the same protection and assurance.

In addition, we hold out the hope that the content of the required professional education courses, coupled with the structured practice teaching experience has to provide for the following:

1. a detailed exposure to various concepts and skills for secondary teacher candidates that address the expectancy that all teachers are teachers of literacy, rather than just teachers of specific content.

2. A sound grasp of various study and communication skill strategies and how they can be infused in content areas to ensure academic success.
3. The knowledge of instructional theory and the skill to translate it into best practice.
4. A commitment to maximizing instructional time into situated meaningful activities.
5. A covenant that assures for a risk-free learning environment, where intimidation, humiliation, and reprisal do not exist.
6. A resolution to ensure that ongoing, varied assessment strategies are appropriately employed.

Naturally, we recognize that many other facets could be listed, but we hold these to be essential in any teacher-training program – including alternative certification.

It is our hope that through these issues, this discourse will stimulate reflection, discussion, and consideration for reasonable change. Our students *and teachers* deserve no less.

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