
What Makes a Program "Alternative Certification?" An Operational Definition

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This essay presents the background for understanding why defining alternative certification has been made a difficult matter, and proposes an operational definition of the term.

Professionalists vs. Deregulators

Since 1823 when Rev. Samuel Hall opened the first teacher training institution in Concord, Vermont there has been a continuing push-pull between two groups. Each is heterogeneous and comprised of many constituencies. The first are the professionalists; the second the de-regulators. The professionalists believe that teacher education has a substantial knowledge base comprised of sound theory and substantial research. They also believe that in addition to a knowledge of the subject matters they will teach, future teachers need to learn how children and adolescents develop, how they learn, and best practice regarding the nature of teaching, the management of classrooms, and the utilization of learning materials and technology.

To accomplish these goals the professionalists have developed a national system of education schools and departments which offer from 30 to 60 credits in education coursework as part of bachelors degrees leading to teacher certification. In a few states these studies occur at the master's level. Future elementary and special education teachers typically devote two years or one half of their baccalaureate programs to professional courses. Future secondary teachers devote one year to professional studies. In addition to coursework these programs also provide future teachers with field based experiences and student teaching. Over this period of 175 years the professionalists have built a strong political structure. Every state has a department of teacher licensing as part of their state departments of education. These state departments' control who can be licensed to teach by accrediting the colleges and universities in their respective states to offer teacher education programs. Until the advent of alternative certification programs only graduates of accredited college and university programs of teacher education could be licensed to teach.

The professionalists are supported by many subgroups; these include faculty and administrators in education departments and colleges, the administrators and staffs of the 50 state education departments, the NEA and the AFT, the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), and until the year 2000, the United States Department of Education. The professionalists are also supported by a system of federal grants which distributes billions of dollars annually and which, until recently,

would only award grants designed to improve teacher quality to departments and schools of education. In addition to this complex and well-financed structure the various constituents comprising the professionalist group include literally hundreds of professional organizations and lobbying groups. It must also be noted that substantial numbers of legislators and the public are committed to this structure. Professionalists firmly believe that colleges and universities are capable of preparing teachers and indeed are the only organizations capable of doing so. Essentially, the professionalist position is based on the existence of their knowledge base, which they equate with the knowledge bases used to prepare other professionals, e.g. physicians, nurses, lawyers, engineers and others. The stated goal of the professionalists is to limit the power to certify teachers to schools and departments of education in colleges and universities. They are dedicated to the proposition that no one should enter a classroom as a licensed teacher who has not completed a state approved program of professional studies offered by an accredited school of education.

The constituencies comprising the deregulators group hold a range of opposing views. They dispute the claim that there is a professional knowledge base held by teachers which is equivalent to the knowledge bases in the health professions, law and other professions. They believe that what teachers know is not a “professional knowledge base” known only to teachers but common sense known to anyone who is a college graduate, a parent, or anyone in the general public who is willing to think about their own school experiences. The deregulators believe that in place of education courses people learn to teach by actually teaching. They view education courses as comprised of piffle which is actually a hindrance to future teachers since it prevents them from taking more college courses in the subject matters they will be teaching. They do not accept the contention that education faculty are similar to faculty preparing other professionals and point out that those who train doctors can actually treat patients and those who train lawyers can represent clients, while professors of education would not last a week in a substantial number of America's classrooms. The essence of the deregulators' argument is that what is wrong with schooling in America is that the teachers don't know enough of the subjects they teach, and that the whole structure of licensing teachers is a protectionist plot to keep people who possess the requisite knowledge in the cognate fields from teaching children. The specializations most frequently cited by the deregulators are math and science where there is the greatest need for teachers and where the largest number of children and youth are taught by teachers who lack knowledge of these subjects but are highly schooled in education courses. Some of the constituencies comprising the deregulators group include those who support private, parochial, charter, voucher and home schools; the United States Department of Education since 2000; several prominent foundations; many academics in the liberal arts and in fields outside of education; large numbers of the general public and many elected officials. The stated goal of the deregulators is to do away with current state systems of teacher licensing and allow schools to hire knowledgeable teachers in a free market system.

It is often noted that teachers need to establish rapport with children and youth before either their professional or their subject matter knowledge will be accepted and learned by their students. The notion that teachers need to be selected who can relate to students before they are required to take either education or academic courses is

essentially rejected by both groups. Professionalists believe their programs of teacher education are so powerful that they can change the attitudes of their students. The professional journals in teacher education have published literally hundreds of articles which claim to have changed the values of students in their teacher education programs. The deregulators sidestep the whole notion that teachers must first be selected who can relate to children and youth. They argue that the contention is backwards: it is the responsibility of the students to learn to learn to relate to their teachers. It is the teacher's job to impart important knowledge and that if the teachers are truly knowledgeable individuals they will get students' respect.

Muddying the Waters

The battle between the professionalists and the deregulators is not a new one. In the last decade the increased variety in programs of teacher education has muddied the distinction between alternative certification and the university programs to which they are supposed to be alternatives. When I began offering alternative programs forty six years ago the term was considered a pejorative one denoting something second class, outside of the mainstream, and a watered down way to prepare and certify teachers. The more desirable terms were regular, standard and university based teacher education. I can recall attending meetings with colleagues who would brainstorm to find other terms to replace alternative. Indeed, at the early meetings of what is now the National Association of Alternative Certification Programs, I can recall the pleas of members seeking a term other than alternative. They felt the term conjured up only negative connotations. Today, the situation is reversed. Colleges and universities scramble to claim they offer some form of alternative certification program. Indeed, education faculty and deans go further and deny their programs can be described as regular, traditional, or university based. The current politically correct term for university controlled teacher education is "field based" to connote that the candidates take much more than courses and are off campus learning in real world schools.

The reason for this shift is not difficult to understand. Alternative programs bring over 200,000 new teachers into teaching every year and the number is growing. These programs have opened teaching to more mature adults, to people with substantial knowledge in a variety of fields, to individuals with experiences in the world of work, to adults who have raised families, to more minorities, more males and most of all, more people who seek positions in the very schools to which graduates of traditional programs don't even apply. It is typical for an alternative teacher certification program to place one hundred percent of its graduates in positions in struggling schools serving diverse children in poverty, while graduates of traditional programs must be recruited, cajoled, and paid bonuses to take positions in such schools. And even then, more than half of the graduates of traditional programs who deign to work where they are most needed quit or fail in five years or less. To counter the criticism that they are irrelevant, universities and colleges are eager to show that they too can recruit candidate pools of mature adults and describe these individuals as "non-traditional students." In effect, the term alternative certification has been co-opted by colleges and universities to describe programs which retain most of the features of traditional

teacher education thus creating the confusion about just what constitutes an alternative certification program.

Defining Educational Terms

Defining terms in education is never easy. If a definition must be absolute with no exceptions and if there must be complete agreement among all who use the term then we must recognize that the most commonly used terms in education cannot be defined. There is no absolute agreement on the definition of terms such as teaching, learning, or school. Any attempt to define these terms will start a discussion and debate. For example, can behavioral acts be defined as “teaching” whether or not students are learning? Can students be “learning” if they do not demonstrate measurable changes in their behavior? Can a “school” be a library, a computer, a laboratory, a museum? Because our definitions cannot absolutely rule out alternative uses of the same term and because we cannot get everyone to agree on a single definition, we should do what the editors of the Oxford English Dictionary do. They catalogue common usage. They invoke the tests of original or first use of the term and the most common usage of the term. They eschew the notion that in order for a term to be defined there must be complete agreement among all who use the term-- without exception-- and that the way a term is defined must absolutely rule out every other possible use of the term. If absolutist definitions rather than common usage were the standard their dictionary would contain a very small percentage of the present 23 million entries.

The Elements of a “Pure” Alternative Certification Program

The elements which follow are referred to as “pure” alternative certification because they reflect the position of the deregulators who started the first alternative certification programs. These elements may be summarized in the following manner. The essential knowledge base for alternative certification programs is the competence of candidates in the cognate disciplines (#1). This base can be readily assessed by written tests of subject matter (#2). All professional studies are merely skills and information that can be readily learned on the job, through common sense, practice, having a colleague in the school (#4) and an occasional meeting (#5). The basic assumption is that candidate’s learn to teach by teaching (#3) and can do so in the most difficult school situations (#6) if they know their subjects. Finally the determination of who should be licensed is based on performance, including student achievement (#7), and that those most capable of making these decisions are the candidates’ employers (#9 and #10). Some of the most frequently raised questions are listed after each of the elements cited below. These italicized questions show how the expansion of those offering alternative programs inevitably leads to watering down the original intentions and elements.

1. The candidate is a college graduate with competence in a cognate field of academic study and without previous courses in education who is hired into a school district as a fully responsible, paid, teacher of record.

Questions:

- a. *What if a candidate is only hired part time in order to attend courses at a local college? Might part time employment in a school still be an alternative program?*
 - b. *What if an individual was an undergraduate education major who never majored in a cognate field but was never certified? Would they be admissible?*
 - c. *Can competence be defined as an undergraduate major or must the candidate pass a test on the subject matter?*
 - d. *What if the field of study is not taught in the public schools? Many schools have dropped art and music. What about college majors that are not part of the K12 curriculum?*
2. The candidate passes all the state and local district criteria for employment, including written tests, interviews, health and criminal checks. Courses in Education are not included among the hiring criteria.

Questions:

- a. *What if candidates pass the subject matter tests but not the professional knowledge tests?*
 - b. *What if there is a cooperative arrangement with a local university that requires one education course before hiring?*
 - c. *Can the requirement to pass the subject matter test be delayed until the candidate has taught for a while?*
3. The candidate is appointed to a school and assigned the full, regular load of a beginning classroom teacher in the district.

Questions:

- a. *What if a candidate works part of the time under the direction of a licensed teacher and is not “fully” responsible?*
 - b. *What if the candidate has less than a full load in order take a class?*
4. The candidate is assigned a teacher in the same school who will serve as a mentor.

Questions:

- a. *What if the candidate has a supervisor supplied by a local university who is not currently a teacher or is not an employee of the school district?*
 - b. *What if there is no officially assigned mentor?*
5. There are workshops or meetings scheduled to assist the candidates with the problems of beginning teachers such as classroom management, working with parents, completing paperwork and following the procedures of the district. These meetings are directly related to simplifying and facilitating the work of the teacher. They are not credit classes and not part of any degree program. Such meetings or workshops are limited to one per week, or less, since

candidate's time is focused on teaching and the numerous tasks related to the daily work of teaching.

Questions:

- a. *What if a candidate is simultaneously registered in a local university as part of a cooperative agreement with the district and must take courses towards a master's degree in order to be part of the program?*
- b. *What if the candidate is required to complete some course assignments which are not directly related to the daily work of a teacher?*
- c. *What if the state requires a few education courses as part of the program?*
- d. *What if there is an on-line education course required?*

6. Candidates are placed as beginning teachers in schools where there are vacancies. This means they are assigned to some of the most challenging placements and not to professional development centers”.

Questions:

- a. *What if candidates are required to spend part of their training in a professional development school prior to being assigned as a teacher in order to see best practice?*
- b. *What if candidates are assigned only to schools with principals rated as satisfactory or higher?*

7. The evaluation of candidates is based on their actual teaching performance, including children's achievement and not on how well they do in courses or on assignments outside of the classroom.

Questions:

- a. *What if it is a cooperative programs and part of the candidate's evaluation includes their completion of university requirements?*
- b. *What if the candidate does not pass state mandated tests of professional knowledge?*

8. Candidates are not required to enter a university program unless and until they choose to do so.

Questions:

- a. *What if there is a state law requiring the candidates to be in a program that is co-sponsored by a university?*
- b. *What if there are grants that candidates can only receive if they are also in a school of education?*

9. Candidates are retained or dismissed using the district's criteria and procedures of assessment for any beginning teacher

Questions:

- a. *What if the university must agree before a candidate can be dismissed?*
- b. *What if the university can still recommend a candidate for certification after the district has dismissed them?*

- c. *What if the university drops a candidate for non-payment of fees and s/he is an excellent teacher?*
10. The recommendations of candidates' to the state for teaching licenses come from the school district or a regional agency working with several school districts and not from a university.
- Questions:
- a. *What if recommendations for licensure are a joint decision of the university and the local school district?*
- b. *What if there is a state mandate or district agreement that the university make the recommendation?*
- c. *What if a school district does not wish to hire a candidate who has been licensed upon recommendation of the university?*

Alternative Certification in Common Usage

It is clear that there are few alternative programs that can still meet the ten elements used above to define "pure" programs. For example, the New York City schools hire as many as 12,000 alternative certification candidates in a year but they must all be registered in master's degree programs concurrent to their work as teachers and they must complete master's degrees to be recommended to the State of New York by their respective universities in order to become fully certified. Indeed, it is only in a minority of states that we find alternative programs that can be run independent of any college or university. In order to gain the recognition, the access to funding and most of all, to protect themselves against the charge that the teachers they turn out are not succeeding in the schools where they are needed most, the professionalists have started literally hundreds of programs now labeled alternative. Almost all of them contribute to the process of watering down the alternative programs originally proposed by the deregulators.

The Definition of an Alternative Certification Program

The most reasonable response to these issues is to accept the definitions of all those who, for whatever reasons, want to call themselves alternative certification with one caveat. For any program to be a legitimate alternative certification approach the first element must remain non-negotiable. Nine of the ten elements of "pure" ACP cited above may be watered down and altered to varying degrees...and programs will continue to be described as "alternative certification" in common usage. The first point however can never be conceded without giving up the last vestige of the reason alternative certification programs were originally developed. For the term alternative certification program to retain any degree of validity it must refer to a program in which it is possible for a college graduate with competence in a cognate field of academic study and without previous courses in education to be employed in a school district as a paid, fully responsible teacher of record.