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## **Lessons Learned from Graduates of an Alternative Certification Program: The Case of the Stanley British Primary School**

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The purpose of this article is to review the essential features of the Stanley British Primary School (SBPS) and its Alternative Teacher Certification Program (ATCP). Attention is given to the surveyed reactions of the first wave of graduates from the program, particularly those completing the licensure program between 1994 and 2000. Many areas were examined during the survey—including the demographics of the sample; the nature of effective recruitment strategies and reasons given for selecting the ATCP; graduates' evaluations of the SBPS ATCP components; and teacher retention. At the article's conclusion, major findings are discussed in the form of lessons learned.

**A**lternative teacher certification programs and their effects continue to be controversial (e.g., see Alternative choices, 2005; Brewer, 2003; Descamps & Klingstedt, 2001; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2003; and Zeichner & Schulte, 2001). A great source of data bearing on these issues, are graduates of alternative teacher preparation programs, as they are in an excellent position to evaluate both their preparation experiences and their resultant life as a teacher. Here we describe the Stanley British Primary School (SBPS) and its Alternative Teacher Certification Program (ATCP), as well as a survey of its graduates. Results from the survey, as well as lessons learned, are described in detail below.

### ***Stanley British Primary School***

The Stanley British Primary School began as a community preschool in 1971 in a church basement in Denver. Enthusiasm for this constructivist preschool grew, and in 1984, parents and other supporters purchased Stanley Elementary School, and remodeled it to house the Stanley British Primary School (so named as it had adopted features of the English Infant, or Primary, School in vogue in Great Britain during the 1960s and 1970s). The building purchased had been part of the Denver Public Schools and was named for Stanley, the famed explorer (i.e., Dr. Livingston, I presume) who traveled through Denver as the school was being built early in the 1890s. SBPS has since moved its main campus to what had been Lowry Air Force Base in central Denver. Now a K-8 school, SBPS has an affiliation with a like-minded preschool, Paddington Station, at its former site; the former building also houses the offices and main classroom for the alternative teacher preparation program itself.

The philosophical base for the constructivist orientation at SBPS comes from

Plato, Rousseau, Froebel, Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky. Stanley is committed to developmentally appropriate and highly participatory student learning, student and parent empowerment, diversity, and public outreach. Children are active originators of many of their educational activities, and choices for children are common. Play, particularly for younger children, is viewed as an essential way for them to make sense of their world. The well-equipped classrooms are laboratories of learning where children can initiate and discover. Student projects integrate learning across different subject areas and foster cooperation. Family or vertical grouping is used, whereby children remain with the same teacher for three years in a multi-age classroom (e.g., K-2, 3-5, 6-8); this grouping pattern reduces same-age comparisons that hinder slower-to-develop children, and increases the opportunities available to higher-achieving children. Other distinctive concepts of the SBPS approach include: respect for the child; child autonomy; learning communities; socialization emphasis; integrated day; academic standards that subtly influence the curriculum; a focus on students' learning; and limited formal assessment.

The majority of the families and children served by the school are White (74%) and represent all socioeconomic levels. Children of color make up the balance of the students (24%), with Black/African American children comprising the largest single group. While a private school, SBPS's tuition falls well below the average costs of other private schools in Denver. SBPS maintains a strong commitment to diversity, perhaps most evident in its tuition scholarships used to increase enrollment of children from lower socioeconomic homes; over 30% of Stanley's families receive financial aid. The SBPS commitment to public outreach also is illustrated by its partnership with local public schools and its teacher preparation program. Active parental participation is another hallmark of the SBPS approach. Parents assist in the classrooms and in the office, raise funds, serve on the school's committees and board of trustees, and provide their special abilities in service to the school.

In summary, the program brings an innovative and productive approach to teaching into the schools. Through a challenging, experiential program, Stanley students develop basic skills as well as the higher order abilities of creativity, problem-solving, and cooperative teamwork. The approach results in a lively, exciting school with enthusiastic and joyful students and teachers. The learning environment and a tradition of active parental involvement create a dynamic and inclusive learning community. Life in such a school appears to create in students a love of learning now and for the future.

### ***Stanley's Alternative Teacher Certification Program***

In 1991, the SBPS teacher preparation model was approved by the State of Colorado as an Alternative Teaching Certification Program (ATCP), resulting in an early education or an elementary school license (most interns have selected the latter). The following year, SBPS contracted with the Denver Public Schools to initiate British Primary classrooms in two public elementary schools. The School of Education (SOE) of the University of Colorado at Denver (UCD) became the third player in this unique private-public partnership in 1994 after being selected as Stanley's higher education partner. The SOE has contributed to the SBPS teacher preparation program in two

main ways. First, the Division of Educational Psychology at UCD assists with the teacher-training curriculum. Second, along with receiving their teacher certification, interns can transcribe courses through UCD and complete additional course work in order to receive a Master's degree in Educational Psychology or Early Childhood Education (and originally also with a Curriculum and Instruction option). About 60 to 70% of the interns have sought the Master's degree option, with the percentage increasing of late.

This innovative teacher preparation program has attracted high-achieving students nationwide (as well as a few international interns), immersed these students in a developmentally-appropriate approach to teaching, and placed many of its graduates in local public schools, thereby helping to address the shortage of qualified public school teachers. The SBPS preparation program has received a large number of applicants from top-tier schools nationwide (e.g., Bowdoin, Brown, Colorado College, Harvard, Michigan State, Princeton, and Stanford). Those emerging from the rigorous application/interview process demonstrated academic strength, rapport with children (prospective interns "try-out" by presenting an activity to children during their interview), and commitment to education. Cohorts have varied in size from about 18 to 30, with an average size of about 25 interns annually.

The SBPS program features a field-based apprenticeship model. Interns spend four days each week for the entire school year in the classroom with experienced mentor-teachers and on the fifth day complete the 225 hours of instruction required for a state license recommendation. Faculty from the School of Education (SOE) at the University of Colorado at Denver (UCD) and other instructors, often skilled practitioners, provide sessions for the Stanley interns. A majority of the interns spend one semester at SBPS, and one at a public elementary school, thus gaining both private and public school experience. Interns were given ever-increasing responsibilities in the classroom.

Interns receive a salary that pays for the ATCP and also leaves them with a modest take-home amount each month; the cost of the articulated Masters degree is separate, but reasonable relative to other graduate programs. Many of the student interns, upon completion of the certification program, are hired as teachers in the schools where they were prepared. Thus, the partner schools often have first choice in hiring the highly qualified students recruited by and prepared in the SBPS program. In 1996, the Educational Psychology Division of the UCD SOE received a five-year Colorado Commission on Higher Education Program of Excellence grant in part to enhance this unique private-public partnership for teacher preparation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Survey Design***

An initial survey was drafted based on existing instruments that had been used with some interns in earlier years. Four central sections were included: demographic information (e.g., age, teaching experience); recruitment for, and selection of, the program; evaluation of program components (e.g., placements, mentoring, the 225 hours of instruction, and overall evaluation of the BPS program); and respondents'

retention in teaching and future plans. To increase the comprehensiveness of the questionnaire, the initial draft was reviewed by the SBPS Head, the Director and also the Coordinator of the SBPS ATCP, current mentors and interns, and the faculty liaison to the program from UCD. Input received resulted in refinements of existing questions plus the addition of questions related to intern recruitment and teacher retention/attrition. The final questionnaire contained 103 questions, 23 of which were open-ended questions eliciting comments.

### ***Sample***

All interns who had completed the SBPS ATCP from 1994 to 2000 were identified as the potential sample. Of the 180 interns who had completed the program, 18 subsequently were excluded: 9 could not be located; 3 sets of parents at permanent addresses reported that their children had not been in the program; 3 graduates indicated that the program they attended did not match the survey; and 3 were out-of-country and not reachable. These deletions left a possible sample of 162 interns.

### ***Implementation***

The survey was mailed to the 162 program graduates identified. Each survey packet also included a cover letter with a personal salutation in blue ink, a stamped and addressed return envelope, and a detachable half-sheet of paper on which respondents were asked to print their names. These half-sheets permitted the targeting of follow-up mailings while maintaining respondent anonymity. Of the 162 graduates, 74 (45.7%) responded to the first mailing in December 2000; 48 (29.6%) replied to the second mailing in January 2001 (now with a short handwritten plea in red ink); and 16 (9.8%) responded to the final mailing in March 2001 (now with a longer plea penned in red ink). Overall, 138 of the 162 former interns returned the survey for a response rate of 85%.

## **RESULTS**

### ***Demographics of the Sample***

All respondents had completed the SBPS ATCP between 1994 and 2000 and most had received a Colorado provisional elementary school license (a few opted for the early childhood provisional license). The respondents were divided fairly evenly across the seven years, that is, about 20 per year. About three-quarters of the interns were Colorado residents as they entered the program. Just over half of the sample reported having had some teaching experience prior to entering the SBPS program; oftentimes, such experience was less formal in that it occurred in summer camps, church settings, preschools, Head Start, the Peace Corps, and the like. While the average age of the interns when entering was just over 27 years, the range was 21 to 50 and the majority of the interns were between 22 and 25 years old.

Interns were placed in 12 different schools. A majority of interns completed at least one of their semesters at Stanley. Those few interns who did not have a semester at Stanley often stayed on at an affiliated site for the entire year to provide continuity

for the children when the mentor teacher had to leave due to pregnancy or due to relocation out of Denver. About 25% of the interns had at least one semester in one of two Denver public elementary schools. Other placements were spread among a charter school and seven affiliated private schools.

Of these 138 respondents, 87 (63%) had pursued the Masters' degree option at UCD. Just over half (51%) had selected the Educational Psychology MA, 36% opted for Curriculum and Instruction, and the remainder picked the Early Childhood MA. At the time of the survey, 62 of the 87 (71%) had completed the Masters degree, 13 (15%) were in process, and 12 (14%) had either left the Masters program or were "resting."

***Recruitment Channels and Attendance Decisions***

Respondents were asked how they heard about the SBPS ATCP. Channels that led to their recruitment appear in Table 1. As can be noted, over half of the graduates learned about the program from a friend who had been an intern.

**Table 1**  
**Percent of Interns Learning of SBPS Program via Different Recruitment Channels**

<u>Recruitment Channel</u>	<u>Percent of Interns</u>
Friend/Former Intern	54
Personal Link with an Affiliated School	22
College Career Placement office	18
Family Member	6

Just over a fifth of them found out about the ATCP via their participation with 1 of the 11 schools affiliated with Stanley. College/university placement offices served as the recruitment avenue for just under a fifth of the respondents, while the remainder of the graduates learned of Stanley's program through family members.

Of course, an important question remaining was why the graduates decided to attend the SBPS program. While multiple factors likely came into play for each individual intern, graduates were asked to identify the single most important reason for deciding to attend the Stanley program (from a list of 10 possible reasons). The two elements selected most often were the program's emphasis on actual classroom/field experience (34% of the graduates) and its distinct philosophy (27%). Smaller numbers of graduates picked as most important the opportunity to get a Masters degree (10%), the accelerated pace of the program (9%), encouragement from a friend (7%), its cost relative to other programs (5%), and its location in Denver (4%). Also chosen were the opportunity for both public and private school experiences, and the encouragement

from a college advisor (each noted by 2% of the graduates). Less than 1% selected the program's emphasis on mentoring as the most important reason. In addition, 37 interns wrote in "other important reasons." Two such responses, each made by three former interns, were the program's reputation and the impressive interview/selection process.

While most interns did not view the relative cost of the SBPS program as the primary reason for deciding to attend, cost still affected their decisions. Indeed, 64% of those responding indicated that they probably would not have entered the program if there had been no stipend. The stipend may well have helped the interns stay out of debt—66% had no debt as they finished the program, 18% were in debt for less than \$5,000, and 16% graduated with a debt of more than \$5,000. Note, too, that in a separate question, nearly two-thirds of the graduates (63%) said that when they entered the program, they were very interested in obtaining a teaching license in order to teach in the public schools; another 28% were somewhat interested.

### ***Evaluation of SBPS Program Components***

In all, five components of the SBPS program were evaluated by the graduates—the program philosophy, the time split of 80% in the field and 20% for in-class instruction, the 225 hours of instruction, the mentoring, and the program overall. In terms of the program philosophy, nearly all (96%) of the graduates reported that their grounding in the BPS philosophy had been helpful. At the same time, responses to open-ended questions made it clear that a number of respondents had experienced challenges related to the philosophy. In general, if the graduate ended up in a school like SBPS, transfer and implementation of the BPS model was viewed as easy, while challenges were numerous if the graduate had landed in a school championing direct instruction with little student choice. Most respondents reported a mix of successes and challenges in enacting the BPS philosophy. Challenges included: more formal school structures and environments; higher student-teacher ratios; school emphasis on testing and grading; little appreciation of the BPS philosophy among teaching colleagues and administrators; and the different learning needs of children from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Successes derived from the BPS approach involved: fostering creativity; using hands-on activities; listening closely to children; and drawing from a variety of teaching strategies. Closely related to the successes were responses to the question about those aspects of the BPS philosophy that graduates took with them and applied, such as choice time, emphasis on building learning communities, child-centered classrooms, and an appreciation of the individual child and unique learning styles. One graduate in a non-BPS-like school wrote: "It is difficult to be so out of synch with the rest of the world, but positive too as so much of the BPS philosophy is great for kids."

The time split of 80/20 between being in classrooms with children (that is, in the field) and receiving instruction themselves one day each week typically was seen as appropriate. Most respondents (88%) were positive, and most of these were extremely positive, about the 80/20 split.

Comments on the split were only 8% negative and 2% mixed; the remaining comments were positive.

Evaluations of the 225 hours of instruction received were also quite positive. In terms of satisfaction, 25% were very satisfied, 49% were satisfied, and 25% were

somewhat satisfied. Just one graduate was not at all satisfied. In terms of content of the instruction, no topic area was perceived as receiving too much emphasis. Enough coverage in the once-a-week sessions was reported for: child growth and development; science; curriculum units and sharing ideas; BPS philosophy, philosophy, and history of education; and planning age-appropriate activities. Several other topics approached having enough emphasis in the graduates' view, such as: theories of/approaches to learning; diversity; working with parents in the classroom; school law; job hunting; school administration; math; art; classroom management; educational standards; literacy; and public school expectations. Finally, those topics selected as receiving too little emphasis included: motivating unmotivated students; special education; student assessment; technology/computers; and social studies. In a separate query, those topics considered most useful when teaching included: classroom management; literacy; planning age-appropriate activities; child growth and development; program philosophy; and theories of/approaches to learning.

Graduates' views of the mentoring they received as interns generally were quite positive. Almost half of the respondents (47%) indicated that they were very satisfied with the mentoring, over an additional quarter (28%) were satisfied, a fifth (19%) were somewhat satisfied, while the remainder (6%) were not satisfied at all. Survey respondents also were asked to indicate the extent to which their mentors fulfilled four different roles: professional (e.g., informing and working with the intern on district policies, procedures, and structures); personal (e.g., providing moral support and friendship); instructional (e.g., demonstrating lesson planning and discussing classroom management strategies); and coaching (e.g., observing in the classroom, conferencing, providing feedback). The former interns used a four-point scale, where 1 = not at all to 4 = a lot, and provided two ratings for each role for the two mentors that most of them experienced (that is, different mentors in the fall and in the spring). Their average estimates of how well their mentors performed the four roles across the two terms are presented in Table 2. Note that mentors most often fulfilled the personal and instructional roles, with the coaching and professional roles receiving somewhat less attention (in the interns' perceptions).

**Table 2**  
**Interns' Average Rating of Mentors' Role Fulfillment by Semester**

<u>Mentoring Role</u>	<u>Mean Fall Rating</u>	<u>Mean Spring Rating</u>
Professional	2.77	2.88
Personal	3.36	3.26
Instructional	3.17	3.15
Coaching	2.99	2.98

Note: Scale used by respondents: 1 = not at all; 2 = very little; 3 = somewhat; 4 = a lot.

Interestingly, when satisfaction with mentoring was correlated with the perceived fulfillment of these roles, all of the correlations were positive and statistically significant. Thus, the more the interns saw their mentors as fulfilling these roles, especially the instructional role in the fall, the more satisfied they were with their mentoring. An open-ended question asked respondents how their mentoring experience might have been improved. The most common recommendation was to provide more time for observation, discussion, and feedback. A small number of graduates were fairly critical, suggesting that mentors have more teaching experience and mentor training, that more stringent criteria be used when selecting mentors and that better matching of mentor and intern was needed. Some interns believed that they would have benefited from having more responsibility in the classroom.

When considering the overall program evaluation, satisfaction with the program was very high. Over half of the graduates (55%) reported being very satisfied, while an additional third (34%) reported being satisfied. The remaining graduates (11%) were somewhat satisfied, and no graduate said they were not at all satisfied. Virtually all of the former interns (99%) said that they would recommend the SBPS program to prospective interns, and most (87%) indicated that they already had. Evaluating their preparation for teaching, a third (32%) reported being very well prepared, and almost another half (45%) said they were well prepared. Another 22% considered themselves fairly well prepared, while 2% reported being not prepared at all.

### ***Retention in the Field of Teaching and Future Plans***

Teacher retention was assessed through several questions. Graduates who received certification through the SBPS program had taught from zero to seven years. On average, graduates had taught just over three years at the time the survey was completed, and almost half of this teaching was in public schools. Over three-quarters (78%) of the respondents were teaching in Colorado. Of the 138 respondents, 95 (or 69%) reported that they were currently teaching.

Only 43 graduates reported that they were not currently teaching. Among these 43, the most common activity was raising children (35%); in addition, many who were not teaching were still working in the field of education (30%). Smaller numbers of respondents had entered other helping professions (14%), business fields (12%), or were pursuing higher education (9%). When asked about the possibility of returning to teaching, 40 of the 43 replied. Almost a third of them (30%) indicated they planned to return, while another 22 (55%) said they might return. Only six former interns (15%) did not plan to return to teaching. In terms of reasons given for leaving the profession, two moved into new careers (child therapist and beauty salon operator), two left to raise children, one left because of low pay and burnout, and one reported that s/he “grew up.” Finally, graduates were asked what career they expected to have in five years. More than half (54%) expected to remain in teaching, while another sizeable group (23%) expected to be in education, but not teaching. Smaller numbers expected to be raising children (15%), in other helping professions (6%), or in higher education pursuits (3%).

## DISCUSSION OF LESSONS LEARNED

The survey of the graduates of the SBPS ATCP included those who had completed the program across seven years. We were quite surprised by the rich data that resulted—data especially valuable in multiple ways. We discuss results in terms of the lessons that were learned. While we note great diversity in alternative teacher certification programs (e.g., see Dill, 1996; Dill & Stafford, 1996), and also controversy about their merit (see the examples at the start of this article), we are hopeful that these lessons can apply to a number of other ATCPs. We also believe that these survey results helped identify much about the SBPS ATCP that was meritorious.

**Lesson 1:** Graduates of an alternative certification program are a veritable gold mine of key evaluative data for program improvement. In this case, the cohesion of the SBPS ATCP, with its apprenticeship format, gave former interns a common known quantity to evaluate. For example, the graduates' beliefs with regard to topic areas where they were better or less well prepared constituted crucial input in evaluating the 225 hours of instruction they received, as well as other ATCP elements. Follow-up surveys of graduates, while time consuming and costly, pay immediate dividends.

**Lesson 2:** Using a survey methodology that increases response rates in turn increases your confidence in the accuracy of the data generated. This survey used three spaced mailings, with personal handwritten appeals to professionalism, that resulted in an 85% response rate. Many other varied strategies might have been used—the key point is that a large response lends stability and credibility to the aggregated data.

**Lesson 3:** Encouraging former graduates and affiliated schools to be personal ambassadors likely is an effective strategy for program recruiting. Of course, this strategy works better if the former novices and the partner schools truly believe that they have experienced a high quality alternative certification program. In the case of the SBPS ATCP graduates, over three-quarters had learned of the program through a friend/former intern or via a partner school. Then, after completing the ATCP, virtually all of the graduates said they would recommend the program to others (and 87% noted that they already had). Thus, sending current program materials to former graduates to enhance their role as recruiting ambassadors has merit, and they might in turn approach promising candidates or their former colleges' career placement offices. Programs clearly benefit from having an abundance of applicants when forming ATCP cohorts.

**Lesson 4:** When recruiting, emphasize those program elements that past novices found compelling as they made their decisions to become involved. In Stanley's case, the emphasis on field experiences (four days each week in the classroom) and on a distinct philosophy were important elements leading many prospective interns to apply. While not noted as the primary reason for selecting the SBPS ATCP, the availability of some monetary support was also important. With other programs, different elements might be identified by graduates as salient reasons for attending.

**Lesson 5:** Using a thorough selection process will enhance the quality of the intern cohort selected. As noted, Stanley used a try-out procedure whereby prospective interns conducted an activity with children in a Stanley classroom. This was observed by teachers who would mentor interns the following year; these likely mentors also were on teams that interviewed the candidates. One way to ATCP improvement is to start with a strong intern cohort—good interns make (and at times insist on) better programs.

**Lesson 6:** Having a positive working relationship with a higher education partner provides important options attractive to many interns. Such options might include advanced graduate degrees, memorable instructional experiences, and the like.

**Lesson 7:** Graduates who are teaching are in an excellent position to evaluate the adequacy of the topics addressed in their ATCP (in Colorado, this pertains to the 225 hours of required instruction). The corollary to this lesson is that ATCPs must be willing to examine the many topics offered and make changes when necessary.

**Lesson 8:** All four roles identified for mentors—professional, personal, instructional, and coaching—are important. Those teachers selected to mentor should in turn be supported and given the resources and ideas necessary to perform all four roles well. The importance of high quality mentors, and the many differences in what constitutes mentoring, were been well explicated (e.g., Dill, 1996; Ganser, 1995).

**Lesson 9:** An important barometer of an ATCP's value is the percent of graduates who continue teaching. Follow-up data on this issue are important as they speak to both the quality of the novices selected for the program and the quality of the program itself. In the case of SBPS, the teacher retention data revealed many more graduates continuing to teach rather than leaving the profession and thus were particularly encouraging. The alternative teacher certification program retention studies summarized by Zeichner and Schulte (2001) revealed a pattern of good retention rates for program graduates.

**Lesson 10:** Program elements that lead to program satisfaction may not be the program elements that attract interns initially. A good case in point here was the lowly status of “emphasis on mentoring” as a primary reason for selecting and attending the SBPS ATCP; less than 1% of entering interns saw mentoring as primary. Still, overall program satisfaction closely correlated with overall satisfaction with mentors.

While we could continue to list lessons learned from this graduate follow-up, we are not certain how well the lessons would generalize to other alternative programs. Indeed, many of the 10 lessons identified above might generalize to some alternative programs and not to others. Still, the process of following-up with graduates and listening closely to their messages will generalize to all alternative certification programs. Further, the information obtained can be instrumental in fueling program improvement.

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