# PARTNERING WITH SECONDARY SCHOOLS TO PREPARE HIGHLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS: ALTERNATIVE CERTIFICATION THROUGH A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SCHOOL MODEL

**Susan D. Myers**
*Assistant Professor*
*Texas Tech University*

**Sally McMillan**
*Assistant Professor*
*Texas Tech University*

**Margaret A. Price**
*Associate Professor*
*Texas Tech University*

**Connie Wilson Anderson**
*Assistant Professor*
*Texas Tech University*

**Helenrose Fives**
*Assistant Professor*
*Montclair State University*

*Recruiting Educators through Alternative Licensure (Project REAL) is funded through the Transition to Teaching grant initiative. Project REAL is designed to enable university faculty and classroom teachers to work collaboratively within a professional development school model in order to provide secondary pre-service teachers with a high quality, fast-track, alternative certification program. Not only does this article document our implementation of a unique project design, but it also analyzes our pilot cohort's perceptions of those characteristics that are necessary for effective teacher preparation and instruction. Emergent issues described within this article include those raised by others as to the quality of alternative certification programs. Data sources collected from the pilot semester suggest that establishing "mentoring mosaics," expanding field experiences, and collaborating with professional development schools hold the potential to ensure that any certification program—even of the fast-track variety—can be of high quality. Implications for further studies are also discussed.*

The true professional prepares for each day as if he or she will be appearing before a court, going into surgery, or walking onto a stage. The art is in the performance and the professionalism is in the preparation. (John, written response, May, 2004)

Programs providing alternative routes to teacher certification have increased steadily during the past two decades. In 2005, 47 states in the United States have reported implementing Alternative Certification (AC) programs in response to providing a fast-track solution to placing highly qualified teachers into classrooms (National Center for Education Information, 2005). Nationally recognized programs, such as Teach for America and Troops to Teachers, have documented success at recruiting teachers from minority populations for urban areas. A review of AC programs available within the United States revealed that program delivery and structure vary so widely that it is difficult to locate two similar programs for purposes of comparison (Zelchner & Schulte, 2001). Critics of AC programs argue that alternative certification routes degrade the professional status of teaching because they fail to instill integral pedagogical knowledge typically garnered via traditional teacher education programs (Shen & Palmer, 2005).

A perpetual challenge in any program involved in teacher certification, whether an AC route or a traditional program, is how to provide participants entering classrooms with quality practical teaching experiences and continual professional development support. Beginning teachers who leave the profession within five years after becoming certified frequently report perceptions that they were not prepared to perform daily classroom tasks (Shen & Palmer, 2005; Spooner, 2005). Although demonstrating competence in subject matter is critical to positively impacting student learning, the ability to facilitate and manage learning environments and administrative tasks can be overwhelming to new teachers (Ingersoll, 2001; Tickle, 2000).

While some studies indicate AC programs are effective in recruiting career changers and under-represented populations into the profession, other researchers reveal that schools in urban areas (where poverty levels are higher and student achievement remains at critically lower levels) continue to face challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers (Ingersoll, 1999; Johnson et al, 2001). This latter finding has led to an increase in national initiatives targeting teacher preparation through alternative certification routes. In spite of the fact that researchers, legislators, and school administrators disagree as to the effectiveness of AC programs, it appears that states will continue to utilize alternative routes as one mode for responding to our increasing need for highly qualified teachers and preparation venues (National Center for Education Information, 2005; Zelchner & Schulte, 2001). Not only do studies conducted after 2000 indicate that there is an increase in alternative and less restrictive paths to teacher certification, but the number of teacher preparation entities and school districts who are partnering in an effort to blend best practice-oriented course work with practical teaching opportunities is also increasing (Spooner, 2005; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998). Such collaborations are particularly encouraging in light of the fact that, although teacher support through induction and mentoring is mandated in most states, for the most part it remains unfunded (Feiman-Nemser, Schwille, Carver, & Yusko, 1999; Shen & Palmer, 2005).

Significantly, whatever certification path pre-service teachers choose to take, current evidence supports the view that, when the amount of time that students spend with mentor teachers increases, they experience a smoother transition into the classroom, which results in an overall higher retention rate of beginning teachers (Dickar, 2005). Therefore, the concept of improving the practical teaching experiences and incorporating sustained mentoring from veteran teachers provided the impetus for our decision to design and to initiate a school-based partnership for post-baccalaureate, pre-service secondary teachers.

Within this article, we document key experiences within our 2004 pilot program, which we designed for the purpose of offering alternative certification students an effective and comprehensive fast-track teacher preparation program. Our documentation of this pilot program is based upon qualitative data collected from participating mentor teachers and certification students. After analyzing data, we explore two emergent themes that we then connect to research literature dealing with issues raised by others concerned about the quality of alternative certification programs (Darling-Hammond, 2002; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Spooner, 2005; Tickle, 2000; Zelchner & Schulte, 2001). In accordance with qualitative research practices, we also note the research assumptions informing our analysis of participants' perceptions. We conclude with a discussion of how this data informs the future direction of the partnership among this program's participants, mentor teachers, and university faculty members. However, before documenting the pilot teaching and research project of the program, we will provide a description of this initiative, its unique context, and our research methodology.

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Having been awarded a federally funded five-year Transition to Teaching Grant from the United States Department of Education, the focus of our Recruiting Educators through Alternative Licensure (REAL) project is to recruit and to retain new secondary teachers for schools identified as "high need." Two key characteristics of our program design include providing pre-service teachers with extensive experience within high school classes and in-depth mentorship from veteran teachers. Another feature of our program is that students are able to complete all five required certification courses as a cohort within one semester. Additionally, a core objective of the program involves the creation of mentoring networks and resources for participants during

their enrollment within Project REAL and when they begin as new teachers.

Our secondary program integrates the practical components of teacher certification in part by drawing heavily from professional development school (PDS) and mentoring literatures. Project REAL incorporates field experiences through partnerships with two local secondary professional development schools. What is particularly advantageous to drawing from the PDS concept is that we are able to utilize both the talents of university faculty who are grounded in theory and that of practicing teachers who are grounded in practice, which allows both groups to serve as mentors (Abdal-Hagg, 1998; Mullen, 2005).

While the PDS situation provides Project REAL participants with definite advantages, it also requires them to exercise a degree of commitment, as well. Students must not only agree to teach within high need schools for three years after earning their certification, but they must also commit to participating in daytime classes and fieldwork assignments with mentor teachers at the two professional development schools for four days a week (Monday- Thursday). Project REAL participants receive approximately one half of the scheduled class time, or six hours each week in public schools assigned to mentor teachers in their content areas. The PDS courses include curriculum planning and development, multicultural perspectives, educational psychology, instructional methods, assessment of student learning, and content area literacy, which the mentor teachers are able to reinforce within their actual classrooms. The cohort's immersion during one semester ensures that they will observe teaching methods relevant to their own content areas-- a service provided to them by classroom teachers within both professional development schools. In addition, veteran teachers identified as clinical faculty serve as a vital link between the schools and the university faculty involved with Project REAL. Assistance in assigning mentor teachers with our pre-service teachers, organizing mentor meetings, and establishing venues of

communication are just a few of the many roles clinical faculty undertake each week. Each clinical faculty member also arranges a time to present selected topics to the pre-service teachers.

Additional incentives for the Project REAL participants include our grant-funded ability to pay for their books and certification tests, offer a minimum stipend of $500 to help purchase supplies and materials for their first classroom as teacher of record, and provide them with extended mentorship support opportunities. However, in spite of these professional / academic, and financial advantages, the majority of alternative certification students at our university are not a part of the Project REAL cohort. Students who opt for this latter choice do so mainly because of financial reasons or personal scheduling challenges, or are ineligible for the program according to the guidelines established in the grant.

Apart from Project REAL, the teacher certification program for post-baccalaureate students currently offered by our college is characterized in the literature as a traditional program. Students enroll in educational pedagogy coursework delivered on the university's campus. It is currently possible to complete the five required courses during two summer sessions, with limited or no opportunities to work with a veteran teacher or students within a classroom setting.

Although student teaching is widely encouraged for all post-baccalaureate students (regardless of whether they are part of the Project REAL cohort or the general night and summer classes), students from either group who can locate and secure a year-long internship are free to make this choice. Those who select this option almost always do so because of financial reasons, in that internships are paid positions. While interns are hired as teachers of record, their teaching certificate is probationary and they are not eligible to apply for full certification until they have successfully completed the internship (Texas State Board for Educator Certification, 2004). For the purpose of this article, the term internship is defined as a one-year, on-the-job, university-supervised, paid teaching experience in lieu of a student teaching experience.

## GENERAL CONTEXT OF THE SCHOOLS AND REGION

The public university described in this article is located in the southwestern region of the United States, in a city with a population of over 200,000 and a student enrollment of approximately 29,000. While the city is considered urban, surrounding areas are characterized as rural and predominately agricultural. The college of education at the university prepares teachers to teach at the elementary and the secondary level. Approximately 200 students are enrolled each semester in programs that culminate in students who are recommended for a state teaching certificate.

Currently within the state represented in this article, 75 programs offering alternative routes to teacher certification are reported (National Center for Education Information, 2005). Program configurations vary widely from what is considered to be a more traditional approach, to those where teacher candidates are hired as teachers of record taking certification courses simultaneously during their first year of teaching (Texas Education Agency, 1995).

In addition, an increasing number of our university's post-baccalaureate students are selecting to secure a year-long, paid internship experience rather than a traditional, supervised student teaching semester. University records document that during the 2004-2005 school year, 51 teaching interns were hired as teachers of record from this institution. While interns are monitored by periodic visits from university supervisors, they typically have limited in-class cooperating teacher assistance unless it is provided by the hiring school district. Furthermore, their assigned mentor may or may not be in the same building, teach the same subject, or have a compatible time schedule for effective mentoring and induction. Project REAL, then, was designed to offer best practice-oriented coursework within a professional development

school context in order to provide alternative certification students with more effective preparation for the classroom.

The two secondary schools selected for participation in Project REAL are identified as high-need, due to having a higher enrollment of students who qualify for free and reduced lunches as well as additional school data (Academic Excellence Indicator System, 2004). One of the schools has been involved in a professional development school partnership with the College of Education since 1999 (Myers & Price, 2005). The addition of the second campus to the Project REAL initiative in 2005 expanded the PDS partnership, allowing for five certification courses to be delivered on site collaboratively by five university faculty members and eight (four from each of the partner schools) clinical faculty members.

## PILOT COHORT

We enrolled our first cohort of Project REAL participants in January 2005. The initial group was comprised of five participants, two men and three women. Two of the participants were Hispanic and three were White. The participants were either recent college graduates or mid-career changers, and possessed a degree in a high-need content area: social studies, mathematics, science, English, or foreign language.

## METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

The participants from Project REAL's pilot semester were provided multiple opportunities during the semester to share their perceptions, both orally and in writing, regarding their experiences in classrooms and in working with mentor teachers. An advantage to the reflective nature of many of their course assignments was that as the semester progressed, students exhibited an increasing degree of comfort and proficiency in expressing their ideas within the dialogic framework of narrative reflections. Therefore, at the end of the semester, students were asked to write reflections based upon

their field experiences within their mentor teachers' classrooms, in which they were asked to discuss what characteristics they had found to be necessary for effective teaching. Drawing from ethnographic (Geertz, 1973; Goodenough, 1981; McMillan & Wilhelm, 2006) and reader response theories (Rosenblatt, 1978; Holland, 1975), we then culled students' reflections for emergent themes. After locating two recurring motifs within the student cohort's narratives, additional closer readings were exercised in order to ensure that the way in which the themes were categorized was appropriate. We then employed a triangulation process involving a follow-up interview with three of the five students.

In addition to availability, the three interviewees were selected according to the degree to which their written responses either clearly represented or provided unique insights into the two recurring themes. The two organizing motifs included:

1.) An emerging comprehension of the day-to-day aspects of teaching, or what we refer to as preparedness;

2.) An increasing value placed upon the mentoring relationships being forged by the pre-service and the mentor teachers.

Although our qualitative approach was based upon grounded theory, we were, of course, aware of the ways in which current research focusing on issues relevant to AC programs, professional development programs, and effective teacher education coursework informed our analysis of students' oral (interviews) and written reflections.

Student interviews were informal and dialogic in nature; however, like our analysis of their written reflections, our interview discussions were also informed by the following research-based queries and assumptions:

●In what ways would Project REAL participants perceive that their intensive field experiences within high need secondary schools had prepared them for their future classrooms?

●In what ways would Project REAL participants perceive that their mentoring relationships had prepared them for their future classrooms?

●What do these pre-service teachers' perceptions of what is required for effective classroom instruction imply about what is necessary for high quality teacher certification programs?

●Which program characteristics, if any, can compensate for the brevity of fast-track certification routes?

In as much as the explicit mission and objective of Project REAL is to immerse post baccalaureate preservice teachers into the daily lives of students and teachers, it was clear that it would also be beneficial to explore mentor teachers' perceptions of such emergent themes as mentorship and preparedness, as well. Therefore, we also interviewed three of our mentor teachers regarding what they perceived to be the most beneficial characteristics of the Project REAL experience / program design. Significantly, much of what they said complemented themes emphasized by the cohort of pre-service teachers and provided insights regarding the direction of our future studies.

In the following discussion of the results from the data analysis, selected excerpts are included that illustrate the themes of preparedness and mentoring relationships. The participants in this article have been given pseudonyms for the purpose of anonymity.

## PERCEPTIONS OF PREPAREDNESS

Providing practical experiences for pre-service teachers has been reported as a significant factor involved in equipping beginning teachers with the insights and skills required for working with diverse populations of students (Brown, 2004). In particular, both the pre-service teachers' written reflections and the subsequent interviews reveal their growing awareness of the complexities involved in learning to teach. After experiencing intensive fieldwork and mentorship (and complementary course work), it was evident that to our student cohort, teacher preparation had become much more than a straightforward matter of knowing how to plan a lesson. Positive teaching dispositions such as flexibility, relationship building, and commitment were now at the forefront of certification students' awareness.

Project REAL participants identified aspects of teaching, such as devoting adequate planning time each day, exhibiting enthusiasm for teaching and for content areas, and promoting student engagement as key characteristics of preparedness for teaching effectively. Interestingly, two of the students also implied that effective instruction is performative in nature. One young woman stated:

> I was surprised by the amount of energy that most of the teachers exhibit. The teachers are in a constant performance mode. The workload is awesome! I couldn't believe how many tasks aside from teaching that teachers do each day. (Sharon, personal communication, April, 2004)

A second student also implied that teacher preparedness not only involves an enormous time commitment, but it also involves an active, whole-hearted type of commitment. Much like the first student, he arrived at the independent conclusion that effective instruction is performative. He summarized his perceptions in the following statement:

> The art and profession of being a teacher is not just getting up every day and standing in front of a group of high school students. The true professional prepares for each day as if he or she will be appearing before a court, going into surgery, or walking on a stage. The art is in the performance and the professionalism is in the preparation. (John, written response, May, 2004).

What is interesting about these students' depictions of teaching as performance is that it not only acknowledges that preparation for effective instruction requires great amounts of planning time and sustained enthusiasm for content and instruction, but that it also implies that sound teaching is an art that requires the active participation of the whole self.

Rooted in thorough preparation, meeting secondary students' academic needs, then, became something that must also be lived out in the moment. Being well versed in instructional strategies that could help their future students to connect with texts and content was of key importance to our cohort. As one student explained:

> I learned a lot about how to connect my content area to current topics, making curriculum relevant to the students. I was surprised at how many students struggled with the textbook. It will be important to use the strategies I learned this semester to help students understand the material. (Angela, written response, April, 2004)

John also experienced an epiphany regarding student understanding and engagement. His comments during the class discussion following his classroom visit reveals how he became aware a student was struggling with the lesson content:

> I just kept talking and talking to her[the student] about this concept they were studying in history. I finally looked in her eyes and realized she didn't have a clue about what I was trying to convey. It was then that I knew I had to talk differently, rephrase, and find something she couldconnect with before she would understand. (John, field notes, February, 2004)

That effective instruction was an ongoing, open-ended learning process was also a newly prevalent perception of the students. One pre-service teacher shared the following:

> . . . even a great teacher makes mistakes and somehow everyone survives. I just need to make the best of each teaching and learning opportunity. (Kerry, written response, March, 2004)

In light of the students' awareness of the relational complexity (student-to-teacher, student-to-text, teacher-to-student-to text, etc.) and process-oriented "nature" of effective teaching, it is not surprising, then, that mentorship was also a recurring theme within their reflections about effective teaching.

## MENTORING SUPPORT

Students' reflections demonstrated their growing appreciation for the ways in which their interactions with their mentor teachers equipped them for the performance facets of teaching and enabled them to develop a professional stance of their own. One student encapsulated common perceptions regarding the mentoring component of Project REAL as follows:

> Working with my mentor teacher has given me the opportunity to teach and become a better teacher. Ms. A taught me from the very first day how to present myself in a professional manner. She showed me how to start [the year] with authority. I felt I could ask her anything and it would not be a silly question.(Kerry, personal communication , May, 2004)

The pre-service teachers were not the only ones who expressed their perceptions regarding the mentoring process. The mentor teachers involved with the cohort also articulated how they perceived their roles as mentors. When asked in an interview, "So, how do you define mentoring?," Ms. A waved

her hand inclusively around the space where we were talking and responded,

> This. . . this is what I call mentoring. Being able to spontaneously share ideas and respond to questions. So many things come up during our time together. Kerry always has a list ready for me each week, but so many incidents happen during a day that we can talk about them as they occur. (Ms. A, field notes, March, 2004)

Another teacher expressed how important it was for her to have additional time with her mentees. Her thoughts also reflected what the other participants observed about the extensive amount of preparation necessary for each class. Ms. B articulated the value of developing mentoring opportunities in the following excerpt:

> Once the bell rings, it is non-stop teaching. I don't have one minute to spare to be able to complete all of the content. I need to cover for that class period. That is why I like having extra time with the Project REAL students during other times during the day, such as before school or during my planning period. I can spend more time talking with them and answering their questions. (Ms. B, field notes, April, 2004)

These comments reflect the value both teachers placed on relationship-building and how the mentoring process is as individual as the mentor or the protégé. Additionally, while the university faculty members expressed concern that the extra time required for mentoring expected from the classroom teachers might be intrusive upon their time, it appeared they perceived this aspect as one of the most valuable components of the program.

## IMPLICATIONS

Although mentoring has been shown to be a valuable support for new professionals, the reality is that districts often do not possess the resources necessary to provide the incentives or mechanisms for the intensive support necessary to sustain these initiatives (Tickle, 2000). Literature on mentoring practices provides numerous accounts of the challenges of providing adequate support to those new in the profession (Odell & Huling, 2000). Mandated induction programs often result in mentors being assigned by school administrators. Mentor training may be very limited and expectations of the mentorship role vary widely (Danin & Bacon, 1999; Feiman-Nemser, Schwille, Carver, & Yusko, 199).

However, both the perceptions and the current track record of our Project REAL cohort indicate that sustained, collaborative mentorship involving regular feedback and co-teaching can play a significant and positive role in the preparing these new teachers of record for a successful transition into the classroom. The five participants enrolled in the initial cohort successfully completed the intense semester of coursework. One participant decided to complete a semester of student teaching and is currently placed at one of the participating partner schools. The remaining four participants have been hired as interns and began in the fall of 2005 as teachers of record.

Having indicated that they perceive mentorship relationships valuable for their ongoing preparation as teachers, our pilot cohort appears to be invested in continuing participation in mentoring opportunities. Once participants from Project REAL become teachers of record, they will have access to a website for threaded discussions, scheduled chats, and other electronic communications to facilitate the continuation of sustained mentoring relationships. Additionally, personal contacts and visits from Project REAL faculty members, and scheduled summer professional development activities will also be provided for the participants. This network of peer and mentoring support establishes what Mullen

describes as a "mosaic of mentoring" (Mullen, 2005, p. 85), where new teachers select from a variety of resources and mentors. Certainly, the role that an extended mentorship "mosaic" can play within a new teacher's sense of preparedness, effectiveness, and retention will be an important venue for our further study.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Teacher preparation programs offering alternative routes to certification have provided many teacher candidates with an opportunity to achieve teacher certification in an expedient fashion. Although abbreviated, our pilot program's students indicate that such initiatives do not have to abandon program quality. Within the context of a PDS, sound coursework coupled with extended time for structured classroom interactions increased Project REAL students' awareness of the complexities of teaching and of their positive perceptions of their own preparedness for their roles as teachers.

What was unique about the Project REAL students' perceptions of the complexity of learning to teach was that they emphasized the importance of the performance aspects of effective instruction and preparedness. Integrated with preparation is active, wholehearted commitment. Having recognized the importance of often time-consuming planning, enthusiasm for teaching and their content areas, and for promoting student engagement, our cohort had come to know that positive dispositions are part of the mix required for long term, effective instruction. Aside from the practical information and instructional modeling shared within mentorship situations, the students' affective insights also shed light as to why mentoring relationships are of such importance to new teachers.

Our documentation of the pilot cohorts' reported perceptions and successful behaviors also explicitly suggests that engaging teacher candidates in early classroom practice and in the first stages of mentoring mosaics (once they enter the classroom), appears to increase the probability that they will continue to engage with mentoring supports. Significantly, such supports aid new teachers in developing the capacity to meet the instructional needs of students in high-need settings, which is vital in the retention of new teachers (Mullen, 2005 Odell & Huling, 2000; Tickle, 2000).

Therefore, continued study of the partnership between Project REAL and these two professional development schools will add information to the body of knowledge regarding what factors increase the quality of alternative certification programs, and how to construct effective mentoring practices for the purpose of retaining teachers.

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