Common Problems Experienced by First Year Alternatively Certified Teachers: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The teacher shortage throughout the United States, especially in areas considered "at-risk," has reached an alarming level. Novice teachers often decide not to return after one year of service, with the number of teachers not returning doubling at five years. One possible means of overcoming these two problems is alternative certification programs. In order to better understand these problems, six first-year teachers who had received their Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) degree were interviewed using a qualitative case study design. This study focused on: (a) the challenges beginning MAT teachers faced, (b) the MAT teachers' perceptions of their training program, and (c) their attitudes toward their teaching careers. Among the six participants, five wanted to quit teaching in the near future, with only one, an older second-career teacher, deciding to remain in the profession. The information gleaned from this study could help teachers and their administrators understand the challenges beginning teachers face.

Key words: *alternative certification; Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT); teacher retention; teacher shortage*

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School districts across the country are faced with a number of challenges. One of particularly high importance centers on teacher recruitment and retention (Berry, 2008; Enwefa, Enwefa, Jurdan, Banks, & Buckley, 2002; Holmes & Herrera, 2009). Research has shown that beginning teachers tend to experience critical challenges during the first few years of teaching (Hogan & Rabinowitz, 2009; McCarra, 2003; Riley, 2004; Veenman, 1984), especially when compared with their more experienced colleagues, which may cause them to leave the profession. Novice teachers are 2.5 times more likely to leave the profession than their more experienced counterparts (Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005) with approximately 25% of all first year teachers leaving the profession after the first 12 months and approximately 50% leaving after five years (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Fry, 2009). Angelle (2002) reported that American school systems would need to hire an average of 200,000 K-12 teachers each year over the next 10 years in order to solve the teacher retention problem.

Several states introduced alternative certification (AC) programs in the mid-1980s as a means to solve this problem. Since their inception, AC programs have proliferated across the nation as a response to the projected shortage of certified teachers (Washburn-Moses & Rosenberg, 2008). Approximately 20% to 30% of all new teachers are certified through AC programs in the United States (National Research Council, 2010). The National Center for Education Information (NCEI) (2010) reported that 48 states and the District of Columbia had at least one type of AC program and over 600 sites offered alternative certification through 136 different alternative routes. However, each AC program is different in the course work, supervision, and training periods from state to state. Even with the proliferation of AC programs, the United States has a shortage of teachers. According to a recent report released by the U.S. Department of Education (2012), 49 states and the District of Columbia still have pressing teacher shortages, particularly in STEM areas.

AC programs also vary considerably across the nation in their intent and format (Chait & McLaughlin, 2009; NCEI, 2010). Ruckel (2000) investigated different AC programs in several states and found a number of differences. The amount of pre-classroom training as well as the amount and type of continued training/supervision and length of internship vary widely (Chait & McLaughlin, 2009; Johnson, Birkland, & Peske, 2005). Many AC programs generally consist of the following components: (a) a bachelor's degree in the subject to be taught along with a passing score on a certification test; (b) a supervised internship coinciding with assumption of full teaching responsibilities, as well as additional hours of training and substantial supervision; and (c) certification recommendation by the employing district (Baines, 2010; Chappelle & Eubanks, 2001). Numerous AC programs have similar content knowledge expectations of their teacher candidates, but each state has its own unique pedagogical approach.

In Florida, Suell and Piotrwoski (2006) conducted a survey study comparing confidence in teaching ability, as determined by the Florida Educator Accomplished Practices. A group of first-year graduates from an AC program was compared to graduates from a traditional certification (TC) program in which the tested areas included

communication, critical thinking, diversity, ethics, human development, knowledge of subject, learning environment, planning, the role of the teacher, and technology. No significant differences between the two groups were noted.

In a recent study, Georgia State University economist Tim Sass (2011) found alternatively certified teachers scored one standard deviation higher (100 points) on the SAT than did traditionally certified teachers. In addition, alumni of the alternative-route American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE) scored 150 points higher. While roughly 66% of traditional teachers passed the mathematics section of the Florida teacher licensure exam, practically all ABCTE teachers did. However, one problem hindering Sass's review was that the sample size of alternatively certified teachers was limited to 100 individuals. The question of which certification route (traditional or alternative) produces the most competent teachers may be unresolved (Evans, 2010).

Mississippi has several alternative route programs to alleviate its high teacher shortage rate. Programs for the State Alternate Routes to Teacher Certification are: (a) Master of Arts in Teaching Program (MAT), (b) Mississippi Alternate Path to Quality Teachers, (c) Teach Mississippi Institute, and (d) American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE) (NCEI, 2010).

Each specific AC program possesses differences and similarities in several aspects such as having varied course work, supervision requirements, and training periods (Humphrey, Wechsler, & Hough, 2008). The curriculum is designed to provide non-education majors with the knowledge and training they need to become certified teachers (Mississippi Department of Education, 2010). The Master of Arts in Teaching Program (MAT) in Mississippi is designed for individuals with a bachelor's degree in a content area to become teachers. The program consists of 36 semester hours of graduate-level course work and qualifies individuals for certification in a secondary teaching area.

One noteworthy concern regarding AC programs is that they could be perceived as a short-term solution to a long-term problem (Heiling & Jez, 2010; Townsend & Ignash, 2003). During the 1980s and 1990s, some state legislatures focused their efforts on teacher quantity without equal concern for teacher quality, leading some educators to worry that AC programs would ". . . fix the quantity problem temporarily but make the quality problem worse" (Hunt & Broad, 1999, p. 34). Another issue voiced by opponents is that AC teachers lack sufficient pedagogical knowledge skills (Kane, Rockoff, & Staiger, 2008; Oliva, 2005), which could lead to poor teaching.

The challenges faced by all individuals, regardless of the teaching program, upon graduating from college have been studied extensively. Likewise, the reasons teachers leave the profession after only a few years have also received considerable attention. Little research has been conducted concerning how new educational policies, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), contribute to novice teachers' perceptions of potential challenges (Jones, 2009). Do these challenges vary depending upon educational policies

established and implemented into teaching practice, such as NCLB? To what extent do these challenges affect alternate route beginning teachers' career planning?

The importance of perceived problems faced by beginning teachers was addressed by Veenman (1984) in which a meta-analysis was conducted on 83 studies concerning problems that different countries have for beginning teachers' perceptions. Issues included: reality shock, behavior and attitude change, situational and individual differences, principals' views, job satisfaction, teacher education, and in-service support. The perceived problems were classified based on their importance and rank order. At the end of the study, Veenman (1984) ranked the top five perceived problems as: (a) classroom discipline, (b) motivation of students, (c) dealing with individual differences among students, (d) assessing students' work, and (e) relations with parents (p. 143).

McCarra (2003) investigated the issues raised by Veenman (1984) and addressed the following about new teachers: (a) a sense of being overwhelmed, (b) time, (c) students' needs, (d) dealing with slow learners, (e) teacher salaries, (f) the relationship with students' parents, and (g) administrative issues. McCarra documented the top eight problems: (a) relations with parents, (b) accountability, (c) relations with principals/administrators, (d) discipline/classroom management, (e) training issues (pre-service), (f) inadequate guidance and support, (g) relations with colleagues, and (h) professional growth (p.8).

In addition, Kee (2012) examined information from the 2003-2004 Schools and Staffing Survey and focused on first year teachers' education and preparation to gauge their feelings about their preparedness. Kee (2012) found alternatively certified teachers tend to feel more nervous about their preparation in contrast to teachers trained in the traditional programs. The results indicated first year teachers trained in AC programs had both less coursework and shorter field experiences contributing to a feeling of being unprepared for being a teacher.

The primary impetus for the present study was to understand the challenges faced by beginning teachers who graduated from the MAT program at Mississippi State University. Secondly, another purpose was to interpret the collected data to aid in understanding teachers' challenges as well as MAT beginning teachers' perceptions of problems in Mississippi. The information gained from the study might aid MAT educators with a better understanding about students' needs concerning teacher training. Likewise, this study might help to increase teacher retention. The goal of this present study is to document: (a) the challenges that these beginning MAT teachers face, (b) the MAT teachers' perceptions of their training program, and (c) the attitudes toward their teaching career.

Method

A case study with six participants from the MAT teachers was conducted to provide insight into the challenges they faced during their first year of teaching, their perceptions regarding their MAT training program, and their attitudes toward their

teaching careers. The case study was conducted through interviews, observations, and document analyses.

Participants

Participants in this study were beginning teachers who had graduated from an MAT program at Mississippi State University. According to the data available through the university's Office of Clinical/Field-Based Instruction and Licensure, and the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, only six beginning teachers had graduated from the MAT program and were currently employed as full-time classroom teachers.

These six participants (see Table 1) were chosen as a convenience sample since they were the only graduates of the MAT program at the time this study was conducted. All names presented are pseudonyms. The group of MAT teacher candidates was 100% Caucasian, and 33% were male and 67% were female (see Table 1). However, their career paths, educational backgrounds before entering the MAT program, and life experiences were diverse. Since all teachers were Caucasian, this sample is not representative of the individuals receiving a MAT in Mississippi.

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Information

Participants	Race	Gender	Age	Teaching Subject	Undergrad Major	Certification
Alex	Caucasian	Male	20s	Special Education	Economics	Social studies Business Technology Special Education
Bill	Caucasian	Male	20s	Mathematics	Communication	Mathematics
Cindy	Caucasian	Female	40s	General Science	Medical Tech	Biology General Science
Debra	Caucasian	Female	20s	English	English Literature	English Special Education
Elan	Caucasian	Female	30s	History	Communication	History Communication Speech English
Flora	Caucasian	Female	20s	English	Communication	English

Procedures

Each individual was interviewed twice, face to face, and all interviews were conducted in each participant's classroom. The researchers observed each participant teaching his or her students during the two times he or she was interviewed. During the observations, participants' instruction, classroom interactions, classroom management, and behaviors at special events were noted. Detailed field notes included verbal descriptions of the school environment, the students, and the activities. Likewise, the

comments were documented as observation notes and integrated into the interview transcript.

Relevant documents, such as lesson plans, teacher evaluations, and notes sent home, were collected with the purpose of providing perspective and further helped the researchers gain insight into the program. The entire procedure was completed within six months.

Data Collection

Interviews

The first interview was semi-structured and lasted approximately one and a half hours during which time the researcher asked each participant to answer questions that had been formulated in an interview guide. The second interview was unstructured, lasting approximately 45 minutes. The researcher asked participants a series of questions related to what was observed in the classrooms (see Table 2).

Table 2. Research and Interview Questions

Research Questions	Interview Questions
1. What are the challenges beginning MAT teachers face?	1. Describe your teaching environment in detail. 2. Describe the most common challenges you face in detail. 3. In addition to what you just mentioned, how would you describe the challenges you face in areas such as classroom discipline, motivation of students, and relationships with parents? 4. Do these challenges affect your job satisfaction, and, if they do, in what way? 5. What kind of support do you receive from your principal? 6. What kind of support do you receive from your colleagues?
2. What are beginning MAT teachers' perceptions of their training program?	1. How has the MAT program prepared you to face the challenges? 2. How has the MAT program prepared you to meet the requirement of "No Child Left Behind"? 3. Compared to teachers from traditional teacher training programs, how do you perceive your training? 4. Describe the positive and negative aspects of the MAT program. 5. What kind of mentor and supervisory support do you receive from the MAT program? 6. If you had the chance to make recommendations to the MAT program director, what would you recommend?
3. As a beginning MAT teacher, what is your attitude toward your teaching career?	1. How does your education background influence your teaching? 2. How does your previous job experience influence your

teaching?

3. How do your personal characteristics, culture, and life experiences influence your teaching?
4. If you had a choice again, would you enroll in the MAT program? Why or why not?
5. What was your expectation of teaching before you attended the MAT program at MSU?
6. What do you expect to be doing 5 years from now?

Observations

Each participant was observed twice and during those times their instructional method, classroom interaction, classroom management, and behaviors that occurred at special events were noted. The field notes included verbal descriptions of the school environment, the people who were involved, the students, and the assorted activities within the classroom.

Document Analysis

The relevant documents collected provided another view and further aided in gaining insight into the study. The documents clarified several interview questions, including the first research question: "What are the challenges beginning MAT teachers face?" Notices sent home to teachers, such as minutes from PTA meetings and students' grade records, offered another source of evidence. Background information regarding such topics as the participants' undergraduate coursework, courses taken during the MAT program, and a description of employment before entering the MAT program was also collected.

Data Analysis

As Merriam (1998) suggested, data analysis begins with the first interview, first observation, and the first document read. Thus, in this study, researchers started data analysis as soon as the data collection process began. The data were analyzed through beginning MAT teachers' stories or scenarios that were recounted in order to give in-depth descriptions concerning the research questions that were under investigation.

In terms of coding, Merriam (1998) suggested that two data analysis approaches are appropriate for case study: description and category construction. The first approach used was description, which requires thinking through what should be included and what should be left out from the hundreds of pages of data collected. This approach helped to compress data and link it in a narrative that conveyed the meaning derived from studying the phenomenon. The second approach used was category construction. This approach compares one unit of information with the next in looking for recurring regularities in the data. These approaches were used to scan each set of data, such as interviews, transcripts, field notes, and documents.

Audiotape interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy against the original recording. Each case was primarily based on participants' verbal transcripts (interview raw data), along with observational data and related documents. When necessary, direct quotations were included to make a statement. Each participant, the name of the school where he or she taught, and its location within the specific school district were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. Each case was presented by the participants' first name, and the name was given based on the order of the first interview. Once data analysis was completed, a "three lenses" strategy was used to enhance the level of trustworthiness: the lens of the participants, the lens of the researcher, and the lens of people external to the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Results

MAT teachers reported the types of challenges they faced from a classroom perspective and the impact of educational policy on them, with the central policy being NCLB. While discussing challenges encountered in their teaching, they also discussed the type of support they received from their respective administrations and colleagues.

Challenges

Three central themes emerged when the participants discussed their daily challenges. The list order was arranged based on the number of participants that perceived it as a challenge: (a) students' low motivation, (b) NCLB-accountability, and (c) lack of parental support. Each teacher faced several challenges to a certain extent in their daily teaching with all six reporting that students' low motivation was a key challenge. For example, Bill said, "The majority of students have very little internal motivation." While discussing the type of challenges they perceived, each participant was also asked to address how prepared they were at meeting the NCLB requirements, such as accountability. All revealed fear of not being "well prepared," with all stating that NCLB was a challenge to their teaching.

Three teachers, Bill, Elan, and Flora, mentioned they were not prepared for NCLB, and that accountability was a great challenge for them. Bill's administration held him responsible for his students' performance, and if his pupils scored badly on standardized tests he was questioned concerning why they did not do better. Elan did not feel the MAT program had prepared her to meet the NCLB requirements, which caused her great stress. Like Bill, Elan's administration held her accountable for her students' scores on state tests resulting in strong criticism from her principal. Elan said, "Administrators criticized my teaching because my students scored under state level. I hate No Child Left Behind policy!" Flora also stated the MAT program did not prepare her for NCLB.

In contrast, Cindy was confident that the MAT program prepared her for NCLB. She also reported the policy had not influenced her because it was the first year that her students took the State Curriculum Testing, and she had no idea how they would perform. She did state, however, that she felt a little "anxious" about her students' scores. She felt

that good teachers did not need NCLB to make them accountable for student performance.

Debra stated it was unfair to judge a teacher's effectiveness based solely on his or her students' test scores. She also pointed out NCLB does not consider "reality." As a special education teacher, Alex reported it had no impact on him. He said NCLB did not affect his teaching because his role was more like that of a facilitator. However, he believed students should be primarily responsible for their performance, and administration should not place blame or accolades solely upon the teacher.

Overall, different teachers faced different challenges, but similarities did exist. The students' generally low academic ability level was an area that all six educators identified as challenging. Every teacher reported student motivation as challenging, while lack of parental support was a problem for three teachers. Two male teachers reported lack of trust as a major issue. Participants also reported discipline/classroom management as a major challenge. The remaining challenges were lack of resources from the school, different academic levels between students, lack of support from administration and colleagues, and lack of teaching materials.

Beginning MAT Teachers' Perceptions of their Training Program

All the participants in this section discussed his or her self-perception of teacher training, and his or her attitude toward the MAT program.

Self-Perception of Teaching Training. First, all six participants reported they were confident about their preparation for becoming teachers but each was insecure in different areas. Secondly, all participants compared their alternate route training and spoke about the differences between their training and traditional teaching programs. All participants shared two themes: AC programs should allow MAT students greater opportunities to teach while earning their degree and should offer more courses that would increase teacher preparation.

Bill said that when he first started teaching, he had to learn such basics as how to write lesson plans and document students' grades, and that he found the experience stressful. Furthermore, he insisted student teaching would eliminate some of the stress for novice teachers. Cindy and Debra mentioned they had very strong content knowledge when compared to traditionally trained teachers. Cindy said, "My content area is very strong, especially. I have more than 20 years of working experience in the medical science field." However, Elan reported the downside of her training was the lack of content knowledge. Flora expressed that the program had prepared her to handle different educational issues, and admitted one primary reason for her confidence was her one year of student teaching and one year of internship. The other MAT-trained teachers only had a one-year internship.

Attitude toward MAT Program. Each participant expressed both positive and negative aspects of the MAT program. In terms of positive features, four themes emerged: (a) helping MAT teachers to gain licensure, (b) diverse courses and training, (c) a collegial relationship with other MAT students, and (d) employment opportunities. All six participants mentioned that the single most important aspect of the MAT program was that it provided the opportunity for them to gain their teaching license.

Diverse courses and training were also considered highly positive aspects of the program, as mentioned by Alex, Elan, and Flora. Each participant said the MAT courses prepared him or her to become an effective teacher. However, all reported negative features as well such as a need for (a) more specificity about program requirements, (b) more content knowledge courses, (c) the assignment of a mentor to each student, (d) an easier certification process, and (e) more applicable training. Alex and Elan believed there was a need for the MAT program to offer more courses. In Elan's case, she believed that if the program had provided more content knowledge courses, much of her stress would have been alleviated. Alex would have appreciated one or two semesters to take courses like a practicum and/or dimension learning to acquire more "real" classroom situations.

MAT Teachers' Attitude toward their Career

All participants discussed how the following factors both influenced their teaching and future career choice: (a) educational background, (b) job experiences, (c) personality and culture and life, and (d) future career plans.

Education Backgrounds. All six participants reported their educational backgrounds had influenced their teaching. Four of the six teachers (Alex, Bill, Elan, and Flora) were licensed and taught subjects completely different from their undergraduate major. Some found that when they integrated their previous educational training into their teaching, they realized that their mode of teaching was influenced greatly by their prior education. Three teachers (Bill, Elan and Flora), whose undergraduate majors were in communications, decided to become licensed secondary education teachers. As a result, their communication backgrounds affected their teaching styles.

Job Experience. Since the alternate route was primarily designed to attract second career seekers, the majority of MAT teachers had originally chosen other occupations after graduating from college. Meanwhile, they had similar experiences with some form of teaching, such as tutoring or substitute work, prior to enrolling in the MAT program. Among the six participants, Debra was the only one who chose teaching as her full time job immediately after graduating from college, while the rest were second career seekers.

Personality, Culture, and Life Experiences. All participants reported how their personality, culture, and life experiences affected their teaching experience. Three themes emerged in this section. The first theme was that a different value system existed between MAT teachers and their students. Three teachers (Alex, Bill, and Flora) revealed they came from families that greatly valued education, whereas their students seemed to not

value education. A second theme was how MAT teachers integrated their life experiences into teaching methods/activities. Debra expressed that when she was in college, she traveled to Europe and brought that specific life experience into teaching the English language. A third theme was about teaching students with similar backgrounds and/or cultures. Cindy was the only participant who described her own culture as being close to her students, and she stated that the similarity made her teaching environment quite enjoyable. She described her culture as "Southern, middle class, and rural which makes me feel connected to my students and the teaching environment."

Future Career Plans. Among all six participants, only one individual (Cindy) declared teaching would be her life long career. However, she also was older than the other participants and had stayed in her first career for more than 20 years. Three participants (Debra, Elan, and Flora) revealed they had no intention to remain in teaching in the future, whereas Alex and Bill reported that if they stayed in teaching, they wanted to work with a different student population (e.g., "students that cared more about learning").

Discussion and Conclusion

This study reported that all participants supported MAT programs as the best choice for second career seekers wishing to gain teacher licensure. It also revealed that the type of alternative route training program had a certain level of impact on how beginning MAT teachers perceived challenges, and how they planned for their teaching career. The type of program was also tightly linked to MAT teachers' perception of challenges. Although the MAT program in this study has the potential for producing effective teachers, improvements could be made. The MAT program allowed teachers to be licensed in more than one content area and this had both a positive and negative impact. Teachers could seek positions in more than one subject, but MAT teachers were not required to take more content area courses for extra licensure. This means if one MAT teacher candidate wanted to be licensed in more than one area, he or she did not need any further coursework (Cohen-Vogel & Smith, 2007).

While the current study provided no evidence indicating whether teachers from AC programs were as effective as those from TC programs, the study revealed that the type of AC training programs was a key factor regarding teachers' perceptions. The inconsistency between teacher candidates' undergraduate major, certification subject area, and current teaching major might also explain some of the challenges MAT teachers perceived.

MAT teachers' personal characteristics and life experiences influenced their teaching philosophy, but not enough to draw any conclusions regarding teaching effectiveness. However, it is possible that older second career seekers who possess long-term work experience will be more likely to have stronger content knowledge if they taught the subject they had studied as undergraduates or had worked in the field after graduation. In other words, MAT teachers may possess stronger content knowledge when compared to their TC program counterparts if their subject was the same or highly related to their undergraduate major and/or job experience.

Practical Implications

The present study suggests that a well-designed MAT program, providing appropriate pre-service training for teacher certification, could be used as a method to attract and recruit more teachers into the teaching profession. The teacher shortages could be lessened greatly if alternative route teachers would stay in the teaching profession (Hawley, 1990). It is essential for alternate route teacher candidates to feel prepared for handling any challenges they might encounter. The study lends empirical support to suggest what AC programs should do to shape their training requirements.

Cultural issues were mentioned by several MAT teachers, yet none addressed how their cultural competency would assist them in working with their culturally diverse students. If there is a cultural gap between teachers and students, this could create communication barriers between teachers and parents, which could indicate a need for the MAT program to provide multicultural training with the purpose of helping teachers increase their cultural sensitivity.

AC program graduates experience challenges that could prevent them from remaining in the teaching profession. In order to alleviate these challenges, school environments and training programs need to provide more supportive systems and more effective training.

Supportive administrators and colleagues could help beginning novice teachers feel less stress. This support can be varied, such as school districts providing mentoring for newly hired teachers, or colleagues sharing teaching materials. Specific training, including student teaching, needs to be provided to teacher candidates in order to prepare effective teachers.

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