

# Editor's Perspective Article: Perspectives on Teaching from Alternative Certification Teachers from Diverse Backgrounds

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## *Abstract*

*This article presents an interview with five teachers in an alternative certification program at a university in New York. All of the teachers were from the New York City Teaching Fellows (NYCTF) program, which is an alternative certification program in New York designed to quickly place teachers in high need schools throughout the city. The purpose was to understand the perspectives on teaching from a small group of diverse teachers in the NYCTF program. Black female, Black male, Latina female, and two Latino male teachers were interviewed, and it was found that all of the teachers indicated that their ethnic/racial backgrounds helped them to either connect with students or parents in the schools. Teachers commonly indicated student behavior and lack of resources as particular challenges in their schools, and teachers generally felt the greatest rewards involved student growth and achievement.*

**Keywords:** *alternative certification, mathematics, beliefs, diverse teachers*

The views expressed in this article are the editor's views and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Association for Alternative Certification.

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The purpose of this article was to present the perspectives of five alternative certification teachers mostly in their first and second year of teaching coming from diverse backgrounds. This article is an extension of the work presented on underrepresented groups and female students in mathematics in Evans (2013a) and Evans (2013b), respectively. Black female, Black male, Latina female, and two Latino male teachers were interviewed. Additionally, the Latina female teacher was an adjunct instructor of an elementary mathematics methods course and a special education course at the university in which the interviews took place was also a former Teaching Fellow. She had been teaching for 6 years in the classroom. All of the teachers were in the New York City Teaching Fellows (NYCTF) program as special education teachers. The NYCTF program is an alternative certification program in New York designed to quickly place teachers in high need schools throughout the city. Two of the five were taking a mathematics teaching methods class guided by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) *Principles and Standards for School Mathematics* (2000) with emphasis on teaching mathematics from a problem solving and reform-based perspective. The second and third teachers had not yet taken the mathematics methods course since they had just begun the program. The fifth teacher was teaching a section of the mathematics methods course and a special education course as an adjunct instructor.

Teacher beliefs are important for teacher quality (Charalambous, Panaoura, & Philippou, 2009), and beliefs influence the content and manner in which they teach as well as influence teacher-student interactions (Beswick, 2012; Hart, 2002). Teacher beliefs have the potential to impact student achievement (Cousins-Cooper, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Leonard & Evans, 2008). This article presents a small group of teachers' perspectives on teaching in urban schools as teachers from diverse backgrounds.

### **Alternative Certification Program in New York**

Evans (2013a) and Evans (2013b) presented survey results from teachers in the NYCTF program on their perspectives on teaching students from underrepresented groups and female students, respectively. Evans (2013a) said that “the largest alternative certification program in New York is the New York City Teaching Fellows (NYCTF) program (Kane, Rockoff, & Staiger, 2006), which grew very quickly since the inception of the program in 2000” (p. 18). Additionally, “there are over 8,000 NYCTF teachers in New York, which represents about 11 percent of all New York teachers” (NYCTF, 2012) (Evans, 2013a, p. 18). Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, Rockoff, and Wyckoff (2007) said, “Fellows grew from about 1 percent of newly hired teachers in 2000 to 33 percent of all new teachers in 2005” (p. 10). Further it was said,

The NYCTF teachers enter the program in June and immediately begin graduate coursework in a master's degree program while being immersed in fieldwork. In September NYCTF teachers become the teacher of record in their own classes while they continue their graduate studies in education over the next several years. Teachers receive a provisional Transitional B teaching license in New York and are eligible to apply for initial certification upon successful completion of their program and state certification examinations (Evans, 2013a, p. 18).

Schools in the United States are increasingly becoming more diverse. In 1990 White students represented over two-thirds of school students, but in 2010 White students represented only

slightly over half of school students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012a). However, as of 2008, 83 percent of school teachers were White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012b). To ensure that the demographics of the teaching force more closely matches the demographics of the nation's students, there is a need for a more diverse teaching force, and then subsequently a need to support these teachers well.

The NYCTF program recruits teachers from diverse backgrounds. According to NYCTF, "49 percent of our June 2012 cohort of Fellows identify as black, Latino or Asian" (NYCTF, 2012). While culturally responsive teaching strategies could help White teachers better teach students of color (Leonard, 2008), it should be a goal for school districts and schools/colleges of education to have a diverse teaching force. For example, it was found that Black students attending predominantly Black schools have higher mathematics achievement when they are taught by Black teachers (Barr, Sadovnik & Visconti, 2006).

It is important for school administrators and teacher educators to understand the motivations, perspectives, and challenges faced by new teachers from diverse backgrounds so that these teachers can be supported in their new roles in the classroom. Our students come from diverse backgrounds, and our teachers should as well. We need to support these teachers in order to better diversify the teacher force. The first step in retaining these teachers is to understand their perspectives on teaching in urban environments.

### **First Teacher**

The first teacher interviewed was a self-identified Black female teacher in her second year of teaching with the NYCTF program. She was 34 years old and had previous experience mentoring young people by having them get involved in the community through assisting others with financial responsibility. She teaches grade 12 special education students in Brooklyn, New York. In order to protect her anonymity, she will be called Anastasia. Anastasia started her career with a bachelor's and MBA in business. She worked in the insurance industry but did not find it financially or personally fulfilling. Her mother was a special education assistant, which helped Anastasia gain some experience working with children with special needs. She thought a teaching career, while personally fulfilling, would not be financially viable for her. Surprisingly, she discovered that teaching could be more financially rewarding than her business career and also allow her to follow her passion.

Anastasia felt that being a Black teacher helped her connect with her students, have realistic conversations with them, and better understand the issues they had at home. She felt she could relate to them and be an authority figure for them. She said she believes they might follow her directions more closely than they might another teacher since she has some commonality with them and is able to gain their respect. Anastasia indicated that she has pride in her work in her high need school, and she feels she gives back to the community. Her hope for her students is that they engage in gainful employment, which can be a challenge given that many of their parents and family members do not work. Additionally, her school has a lack of resources and the teachers need to spend their own money so that the students will have materials and supplies. A final challenge is the lack of motivation some of the students exhibit. The reward of teaching is when students understand and succeed. For low functioning students this may be manifested

through learning how to write their own names. Anastasia said she does not believe she will stay in the classroom for more than five years. She thinks she will likely teach internationally, go into administration, or teach at the college level.

Anastasia said she fosters critical thinking and problem solving by connecting mathematics to the real world. She said it was a challenge to help her students think critically because they are low functioning. By connecting critical thinking and problem solving to every day life, Anastasia said she is better able to reach her students. For example, when the class studied India last year, she was able to connect real world mathematics to the unit by connecting currency exchange rates between the India rupee and U.S. dollar. Anastasia's vision for her students is they will become better citizens and have an active role in their community. She believes that if they receive a good education and they learn to value education, they will be better served in every aspect of their lives, and they will be employable. Anastasia said she wants her students to have motivation for bigger and better things in their lives.

### **Second Teacher**

The second teacher interviewed was a self-identified Latino male teacher in his first year of teaching. He was 29 years old and just began teaching when he was interviewed. He had experienced a summer of field and course work prior to having his own classroom in the fall. He primarily teaches technology to grades 9 to 12 special education autistic students in the Bronx, New York. In order to protect his anonymity, he will be called Joseph. Joseph studied computer information systems in college, but worked as a para-professional in special education for 8 years before joining the NYCTF program. He said he wanted to be the teacher of record in the classroom in order to have a bigger impact and make a change for the students, so he knew he would have return to college for teacher certification. Joseph chose the NYCTF program because he said he believed this program would support him more than any other program as a new teacher.

As a Latino male teacher Joseph believes he is better able to relate to the students because they look up to him and see someone coming from the same background and neighborhood as they do. He said the challenges he faces are helping the students go from a lower functioning level to a higher functioning one. He said there is a challenge of finding the time to plan lessons for his population of students. Joseph said his reward from teaching is when he helps a student to do something as small as answering a simple mathematics problem correctly. Joseph plans to make a career in education and stay in the classroom.

Joseph reported that he implements critical thinking and problem solving by asking students many questions and continually checking in with them make sure they understand. His vision for his students is for them to learn the appropriate technology skills they need for their careers and in the real world.

### **Third Teacher**

The third teacher was a self-identified Black male teacher. He was 60 years old and had just started the program when he was interviewed. He had experienced a summer of field and course

work prior to having his own classroom in the fall. He teaches grades 6 to 8 special education autistic students in Brooklyn, New York. In order to protect his anonymity, he will be called Ian. Ian started his career with a bachelor and master's degree in finance and political economy, respectively. He had a career working on Wall Street as a senior analyst. Ian had considered retiring from his position but had always wanted to teach, and he had previous experience tutoring neighborhood children and thought teaching would be a good second career for him. Ian chose the NYCTF program because it was a way to get into the New York City classrooms at a time when hiring for traditionally prepared teachers had been difficult, and he believed the subsidized tuition offered by the program was a great benefit.

While Ian reported that his students are low functioning enough that being a Black male teacher has not helped him connect with them any more so than coming from a different background, Ian said his background helped him relate to the parents, particularly those who share his Caribbean background, which is very important. As a Black male teacher he said he feels he receives very good support from his school and has no trouble securing resources because the school is interested in retaining him. He said he did not find there were too many challenges in his classroom besides expected behavioral problems, but he often asks himself how he could better structure unit and lesson plans to meet the needs of his students who do not understand the material. Ian said he finds working with the parents to be particularly rewarding since parental support for the children is critical. He said he will stay in the education profession, but may go into administration since there are not many Black male administrators in the system and his experiences may prove valuable there.

Ian said fostering critical thinking and problem solving can be difficult given the level of functioning of his students. He said he could assist some of the higher functioning students to begin to think critically, but it can prove to be a challenge. Ian said his goal for his students is to help them grow and leave the special education classroom.

#### **Fourth Teacher**

The fourth teacher interviewed was a self-identified Latino male teacher in his second year of teaching. He was 27 years old and teaches grade 12 special education students in Brooklyn, New York. In order to protect his anonymity, he will be called David. David studied psychology in college, but worked as a para-professional in special education for two years before joining the NYCTF program. He said he had always wanted to work with students with special needs and thought the NYCTF program would be a fast track method of getting in the classroom quickly while pursuing a master's degree.

David said he believed that as a Latino male teacher the students could better relate to him because many of them are Latino/a and he grew up in a similar environment as theirs. He said student behavior issues are the biggest challenges he faced in his teaching. David finds the progress the students have made as they approach graduation to be the most rewarding part of teaching for him. He said he believed he would stay in teaching for a long time, and while he may leave direct classroom teaching one day, he believes he will continue to work with high need students.

David said he implements critical thinking and problem solving by connecting the content to real world problems. For example, if the class is studying current events, David relates this to their experiences in urban neighborhoods. He said he did not teach mathematics last year, but he is teaching mathematics this year and connects this work to his students' experiences. His vision for his students is for them to be as independent as possible as they move toward graduation. He wants them to be able to do as much as possible for themselves as they can.

### **Fifth Teacher: Adjunct Faculty Member**

The adjunct faculty member interviewed was an instructor in an elementary mathematics methods class and a special education class comprised of Teaching Fellows at the university in which the interviews took place. She self-identifies as a Latina female, and she was 34 years old. She had been a Teaching Fellow for six years, and had been an adjunct instructor at the university for less than a year. She teaches middle school grades 6 to 8 special education in Brooklyn, New York. In order to protect her anonymity, she will be called Maria. Maria was also the special education instructor of Joseph and Ian. Maria started her career as a health science major in college and received her bachelor and master's degree in health science. In searching for greater job satisfaction, Maria found the NYCTF program as a way to transition into teaching while earning a subsidized master's degree from the New York City Department of Education. Maria already had experience tutoring children and came to the decision that teaching would be a good career for her.

The majority of Maria's students are children of color, primarily Black and Latina/o students. Maria said she felt that teaching these students helped the community in which she grew up and is a member. She indicated this helps connect her lessons to community life and this informs her own teaching. She chose the NYCTF program because it is oriented toward urban education. Maria indicated lack of resources, behavioral issues, difficulty working with children who have been let down by the schools in the past, and lack of parental support as the major challenges to her teaching. However, her greatest satisfaction comes from overcoming these obstacles and seeing the children succeed despite challenges. While Maria sometimes considers leaving the classroom due to the challenges, the success of her students keeps her motivated. Maria is currently searching for a doctoral program since her goal is one day to be a full time teacher educator at a university.

Maria said she fosters critical thinking and problem solving by using concrete examples and manipulatives in order to help students understand the content. She said she finds that collaborative learning can help students learn to think critically and problem solve because the students challenge one another in their groups. Maria admitted that when she began her career she preferred not to teach mathematics, but after she was assigned to several mathematics classes she began to enjoy the subject and now finds mathematics to be one of her favorite subjects. Maria now teaches mathematics methods as an adjunct faculty member at the university in which she obtained her master's degree through the NYCTF program. Maria said her vision for her students is for them to pass their state exams, leave special education, and demonstrate growth.

Maria was asked if being a Teaching Fellow helps inform her own teaching of new Teaching Fellows. She indicated that the program provided her with immediate strategies and resources



that she could bring to the classroom immediately. She said this helps inform her own instruction for the new Teaching Fellows in her classroom. Even today the NYCTF program has continued to provide her with support.

### **Conclusion**

It is important for teacher educators to understand the perspectives from diverse teachers given that the students in urban schools, such as in New York, come from diverse backgrounds. The teachers in this article were Black female, Black male, Latina female, and two Latino male teachers. Additionally, the Latina female teacher was also the adjunct instructor for the mathematics methods and special education courses. All of the teachers had taught in special education in mostly the middle and high school grades. The mathematics methods course was designed for grades 1 to 6. However, the middle and high school students function at the grades 1 to 6 levels, which makes it important for the teachers to have quality preparation in content and pedagogy for this level.

Three of the teachers can be categorized as career-changers and the other two teachers were para-professionals before becoming teachers of record in their own classrooms. All of the teachers indicated that their ethnic/racial backgrounds help them relate and connect to the students. Ian indicated that his students were low functioning and he did not believe being a Black male teacher helped him directly connect with his students. However, Ian did indicate that being a Black male teacher helped him connect with the parents of his students.

A common theme, although not mentioned in all five cases, was that the biggest challenges faced by the teachers in this article were student behavior and lack of resources. Ian indicated that he had the resources he needed, but he was the only teacher to say this. The teachers indicated the rewards of teaching were when students grow academically and achieve. Again, Ian answered somewhat differently in that his biggest reward was working with supportive parents. Related to the rewards of teaching, the teachers indicated their vision for their students was to have them continue to grow and succeed. Other common themes were student independence and potential employment. Finally, the teachers indicated that their students learned to think critically and problem solve by connecting what they learned to the real world and understand what they were learning. Ian indicated that he found it challenging to foster critical thinking for his lower functioning students, but was able to help his higher functioning students to think critically.

One of the more troubling findings is that while all of the teachers intended to stay in education, only one of the five teachers indicated he planned to remain in the classroom teaching. Other teachers spoke about wanting to go into administration, teaching at the university level in teacher preparation, or working in another area of education. While all of those areas are important places for these teachers to be, it is also important to retain the teachers in classroom teaching. This concern should be further explored.

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