Alternative Teacher Certification: The Case for Transition to Teaching

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Alternative certification of teachers recognizes pedagogical experience beyond traditional classroom coursework as a route to teacher certification. This study examines the process and outcomes of the Transition to Teaching alternative certification program. Comparisons of instructional quality along several dimensions show that the Transition to Teaching participants were evaluated as exhibiting slightly higher than average levels of instructional quality across most dimensions compared to traditionally certified teachers. These findings provide further evidence to support the growing interest in alternative teacher certification as a way to generate highly competent teachers.

Campus-based teacher education programs have traditionally been the primary path by which teacher candidates are prepared and certified as classroom teachers. This has not always been the case in the United States, however. In the early days of this country, teachers often had no formal training, and if they did, that training occurred in a variety of settings that today would be deemed non-traditional. Apprenticeships were a common way to acquire the knowledge and skills one needed to engage in a career, as well as attendance at study groups, sermons, and public lectures. "The setting determined the identity of the teacher, who could be any of a number of persons: a parent, a preacher, a master craftsman, an association leader, an adult in the neighborhood, an itinerant tutor, a private contractor, a town official, a corporate employee, or a college professor" (Labaree, 2008, p. 291).

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The development of public school systems beginning in the 1830s precipitated a movement toward more consistent teacher preparation, advocated by education leaders of the day such as Horace Mann and James Carter. Summer teacher institutes were developed and were followed by "normal" schools (which set the norm for good teaching, hence the name) that gave teacher candidates a grounding in the art of teaching—pedagogy—during a one to two year program of study. These normal schools evolved into the college- and university-based teacher preparation programs most widely used today (Labaree, 2008). In fact, the University of Nebraska at Kearney itself began in 1905 as the two-year Nebraska State Normal School to prepare teachers for the growing number of public schools in the relatively young state (University of Nebraska at Kearney, 2005).

During the past several decades, however, a growing need for teachers in hard-to-fill geographic areas (primarily urban and inner-city schools) and subject areas (especially math and science) due to higher salaries in private-sector jobs has spurred the recruitment of potential teachers from sources other than the college campus. No longer are colleges and universities the sole providers of teacher candidates; in California and New Jersey respectively, alternative paths to teacher certification account for thirty to forty percent of new teacher hires. In Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia, the number of alternatively certified teachers trained and hired is growing rapidly as well (National Center for Education Information, 2011).

Our own national history indicates that this trend bears connection to the roots of teacher education in America. Yet just twenty years ago, "the idea that high quality teachers could be recruited from outside established education channels was regarded as avant-garde, if not downright radical" (Feistritzer, 2005, p. 1). Today, state departments of education have responsibility for certifying teachers; every teacher in a public school must obtain teaching certification in the state in which he or she is teaching. All fifty states report having in place some type of alternative path to teacher certification. There are 136 state-defined alternative paths to teacher certification, utilizing nearly 600 supporting programs. One-third of these alternative paths have been created since 2000, and more than half of them have been established

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in the last 15 years (National Center for Education Information, 2011). Approximately one-third of all new teachers now being hired in the United States are following alternative paths to teacher certification (Feistritzer, Gallagher, & Henderson, 2009).

The development of alternative paths to teacher certification received a significant boost in 2001 when grant money became available from the United States Department of Education for the express purpose of developing alternative teacher certification paths and their supporting programs; ninety-one Transition to Teaching grants were distributed in 2002. The Transition to Teaching grant program continues to provide both new and continuation funding to applicants; in 2010, ninety-three continuation awards were given averaging $468,000 per award (United States Department of Education, 2008).

QUALITY OF ALTERNATIVELY CERTIFIED TEACHERS

Alternatively certified teachers possess bachelor's degrees specific to their subject areas of expertise before entering an alternative certification program. Many have amassed several years of employment and thus have real-world experience in careers utilizing their expertise. Nationally, nearly forty percent of alternative teacher certification candidates have a master's degree or higher, and most are recruited for areas where demand for teachers is the greatest—large cities and now rural areas—and in subject areas in greatest demand, including mathematics, science, and special education (Feistritzer, 2005).

An interim evaluation of the United States Department of Education Transition to Teaching (TTT) first full cohort of 2002 grantees was conducted to determine how the program addressed policy concerns raised by No Child Left Behind legislation—namely, recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers into the schools and classrooms that need them most, and developing and expanding alternative paths to teacher certification "under State-approved programs that enable individuals to be eligible for teacher certification within a reduced period of time, relying on the experience, expertise, and academic qualifications of an individual, or other factors in lieu of traditional course work in the field of education" (Ludwig, Bacevich, Wayne, Hale, & Uekawa, 2007, p. 1). Findings from this report indicated that the grantees were indeed highly successful in attracting a large number of applicants for their programs. These transitional teacher candidates reported that their motivation for becoming teachers was driven by their desire to work with young people (64%); most felt well prepared to teach their subject area (74%). Twenty percent of TTT grant participants indicated that they would not have entered the teaching field if the TTT option had not been available (Ludwig et al., 2007).

But does motivation to teach and self-reported satisfaction with preparation to teach translate into good teaching? A final report on alternative teacher certification routes was commissioned by the United States Department of Education and produced in 2009. It sought to address the effects on student achievement of teachers who were trained through alternative routes and to determine what aspects of the alternative teacher certification program may be associated with teacher effectiveness (Constantine et al., 2009). Although supporters of traditional teacher certification programs have argued that alternatively certified teachers are insufficiently prepared and therefore less effective than traditionally prepared teachers, the findings of the report indicated:

- There was no statistically significant difference in performance between the students of alternatively certified teachers and traditionally certified teachers, and
- There is no evidence that greater levels of teacher training coursework were associated with the effectiveness of alternatively trained teachers in the classroom, nor is there evidence that the content of the coursework is correlated with teacher effectiveness or that even an undergraduate major in education is correlated with student achievement (Constantine et al., 2009, p. 69).

This Department of Education study corroborates earlier study results compiled by the American Educational Research Association from 1999 until 2005, where the findings regarding alternative paths also indicated that there was no difference between alternatively and traditionally certified teachers in terms of teacher efficacy or in teaching competence as measured by classroom observations (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). Additionally, the National Center for Education Information reports that actual experience in teaching is the number one variable in developing competence to teach, followed by working with other teachers/colleagues, and that clinical experiences are much more valuable to the alternatively trained teacher candidates than coursework (Feistritzer, 2005). Alternative teacher certification paths, then, appear to be producing precisely the kinds of teachers that No Child Left Behind requires schools to have: teachers who are highly qualified in their subject areas of expertise.

Even the National Council for Accreditation in Teacher Education (NCATE) advocates putting the experiential learning of pedagogy at the center of teacher preparation. In a news release dated November 16, 2010, NCATE experts

> [c]alled for teacher education to be 'turned upside down' by revamping programs to place clinical practice at the center of teacher preparation. This new vision of preparation also will require the development of partnerships with school districts in which teacher education becomes a shared responsibility between P-12 schools and higher education. (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010)

Other recommendations include the attraction of more academically prepared and diverse candidates into the teaching profession—as alternative certification paths have done—and supporting a more clearly defined research agenda to

> [d]ocument and provide evidence of the impact of practices in clinical preparation on teacher effectiveness. The Panel's recommendations are consistent with a recent report of the National Research Council which notes that clinical preparation is one of three areas most promising for potential increases in teacher effectiveness in the classroom. (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010)

ALTERNATIVE CERTIFICATION IN NEBRASKA: TRANSITION TO TEACHING

The Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) was awarded one of the 91 Transition to Teaching grants distributed by the United States Department of Education in 2002. Upon the award of the grant, NDE partnered with the University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK) to implement a Transition to Teaching (TTT) alternative certification program via the establishment of a State Assessment Center within the UNK College of Education. The center's director was hired to recruit to the program mid-career professionals and recent college graduates with baccalaureate degrees who sought to become teachers in the state of Nebraska, particularly in high-need areas (rural) and subjects (math, science, foreign language) unique to Nebraska at grades 7-12.

Having a transitionally certified teacher as the teacher of record requires considerable participation and up-front commitment from both the employing school district and from the university (Feistritzer et al., 2009). Requirements for entry into the TTT program were developed as follows (Nebraska Department of Education Alternative Certification, 2011):

- Applicant must have a baccalaureate degree that includes at least 75% of the course requirements for preparation in a grade

7-12 field or subject endorsement area. The degree and other subject-area coursework may come from institutions of higher education other than UNK.

- The superintendent or governing body of the school system in which the applicant intends to teach must provide a written request to the Nebraska Department of Education for the issuance of a transitional teaching certificate. The request must include documentation that the school system has not otherwise found a fully qualified teacher for the position.
- Assessment of transcripts is completed by the State Assessment Center Director and a plan developed for completion of an approved initial teacher certification program, including passing the Praxis exam. This sequence of professional teacher education coursework must be completed through UNK.
- The hiring school system provides a written plan for mentoring and supervision of the applicant.
- Applicant completes a pre-teaching seminar that includes information and skill development in the areas of diversity, classroom management, curriculum planning, and instructional strategies prior to assuming responsibility for the classroom.
- UNK provides at least one supervisory visit each semester to the school system employing the applicant (University of Nebraska at Kearney Transition to Teaching Office, 2010).

The professional teacher education coursework developed by UNK teacher education faculty for this program is a sequence of three six-credit-hour courses taught online for three subsequent semesters, allowing the now transitionally certified teacher to learn experientially while teaching in his and her own classroom, connecting pedagogical theory to practice on a daily basis—in essence, on-the-job training. The course objectives are designed around the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) requirements for all teachers of reading and writing: teaching competencies, training in human relations, special education coursework, competencies in working with learners of high ability, technology competencies, and competency in the assessment of student learning (Nebraska Department of Education Rule 20, 2008). The eighteen-hour course sequence is complemented by student teaching (assessment of teaching knowledge, skills, and dispositions by school administrators and university supervisors) to fulfill NDE requirements for recommendations for full initial certification. As of the 2010-2011 school year, the student teaching requirement is now fulfilled across the duration of the course sequence, rather than in one semester occurring only at the end of the program as is the case with traditional undergraduate teacher training programs. This allows for more consistent supervision of instruction by UNK faculty and school administrators across time.

Since the fall of 2003, 242 people have become fully certified to teach in the state of Nebraska through the Transition to Teaching program at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. The program has an 81% retention rate, and the subject areas of greatest need that have been met by transitionally certified teachers are—Foreign Language (24%), Science (19%), Vocational Education (17%), Language Arts (12%), Math (10%), Fine Arts (9%) and all other subject areas (11%). Participants come from many backgrounds and experiences. The age range of these TTT participants is 22 to 63, with most in their early- to mid-thirties. Fifty-three percent of TTT participants are female, and 47% are male. Eighty-eight percent of TTT participants are Caucasian and 12% are minority populations including Asian, Hispanic, Native American/North American Indian, Pacific Islander, black, and bi-racial. Sixty percent have been mid-career changers, while others have been new or recent graduates and paraprofessionals.

QUALITY OF TRANSITIONALLY CERTIFIED TEACHERS

At UNK, transitionally certified teachers are evaluated on the same criteria as traditional undergraduate teacher candidates, both at the culmination of student teaching and at the conclusion of one year of employment, and are formatively assessed with the same common assessment tools as indicated in Accreditation Data Tables in the UNK College of Education website (2010). TTT participants were evaluated by university supervisors on their abilities in the areas of lesson planning for desired outcomes and objectives, assessment and evaluation, instructional planning and materials, instructional delivery, classroom management, and teaching dispositions (collaboration, reflection, responsibility) at the culmination of their student teaching experience during a five semester period (Spring 2009 through Spring 2011), as were traditional undergraduate teacher candidates. Table 1 shows the

Table 1. Percentage of Instances that Teacher Candidates Met or Exceeded Standards in Evaluated Areas

Areas evaluated	Transitionally certified teachers (n = 97)	Traditional undergraduate teacher candidates (n = 763)
Lesson planning for desired outcomes and objectives	96.2	93.0
Assessment and evaluation	91.0	89.0
Instructional planning and materials	92.8	88.3
Instructional delivery	92.0	88.8
Classroom management	89.8	88.5
Teaching dispositions	96.3	95.7

Table 2. First-year Employment Ratings Using Likert Scale Averages for Criteria Assessed
(5 = excellent, 4 = good, 3 = average, 2 = fair, 1 = poor)

Criteria assessed	Transitionally certified teachers (n = 85)	Traditionally certified teachers (n = 576)
1. Considers the needs of diverse learners when planning lessons.	4.08	4.03
2. Identifies and adapts to the needs of diverse learners when teaching.	4.04	4.11
3. Creates a positive learning environment for students.	4.38	4.40
4. Provides appropriate individualization of instruction for special needs students.	4.03	3.92
5. Uses a variety of effective teaching strategies in planning lessons.	4.20	3.98
6. Uses a variety of effective teaching strategies when presenting lessons.	4.21	3.98
7. Plans lessons that engage students in all levels of thinking and learning.	4.15	3.91
8. Teaches lessons that engage students in all levels of thinking and learning.	4.08	3.87
9. Assesses individual learners' needs.	4.04	3.94
10. Plans learning activities clearly related to lesson objectives.	4.22	4.20
11. Uses teaching techniques related to lesson objectives.	4.20	4.12
12. Uses teaching techniques related to learner needs.	4.10	3.99
13. Uses available instructional resources.	4.39	4.10
14. Incorporates technology to facilitate student learning.	4.24	3.82
15. Uses technology in planning lessons and/or classroom management.	4.17	3.76
16. Teaches appropriate curriculum in all content areas.	4.38	4.28
17. Assesses the learning of all students.	4.19	4.10
18. Uses assessment results to plan instruction.	3.72	3.79
19. Uses bias-free interpersonal skills with all students.	4.30	4.24
20. Communicates effectively with students.	4.26	4.24
21. Communicates effectively with peers.	4.25	4.19
22. Communicates effectively with supervisors.	4.32	4.23
23. Communicates effectively with parents.	4.03	4.09
24. Makes decisions using professional ethical standards as a guide.	4.37	4.23
25. Uses effective classroom management strategies.	3.96	3.96
26. Participates in continuing education and/or professional growth.	4.20	4.07
27. Communicates appropriately with colleagues via internet.	4.16	4.15

percentage of the time that each area evaluated met or exceeded expectations for each group.

First-year employment ratings are gathered from school district administrators who evaluate their first-year teachers each semester on 27 items, using a 5-point Likert scale (5 = *excellent* and 1 = *poor*). Table 2 shows the average rating for each criterion for transitionally certified teachers and traditionally trained teachers compiled during the seven semester period of Spring 2007 through Spring 2010 (University of Nebraska at Kearney College of Education Accreditation Data Tables, 2010).

These preliminary data would indicate that TTT participant quality is comparable to traditionally prepared teachers at the conclusion of student teaching and their first year of employment. Further study is warranted to determine what variables may contribute to higher skill ratings such as demographic factors (age, gender, ethnicity), subject areas, or specific aspects of the teaching training itself (face-to-face, online).

RECRUITING AND RETAINING TRANSITIONAL TEACHERS

A national survey conducted by the National Center for Education Information and reported in the 2005 Profile of Alternate Route Teachers indicated that of the 35,000 survey respondents, about half (47%) of the individuals entering teaching through alternative paths say they would not have become teachers if an alternate path had not been available. Only about 20% said they would have gone back to a campus-based setting to get a teaching certificate. The data further indicated that the older one gets, the less inclined one is to enter teaching without an alternative path. More than half (59%) of those surveyed who were in their fifties or older when they entered an alternative path said they would not have entered the teaching profession if an alternate path had not been available. Half (50%) of those in their forties, 46% of those in their thirties, and 45% in their twenties said they would not have become teachers if an alternative path had not been available. In addition, the survey data showed that the alternatively certified teacher population has more males, more minorities and more older people than the population of teachers who obtain certification via the traditional route, contributing to a more diverse teaching force (Feistritzer, 2005). Similar observations have been made in the Nebraska Transition to Teaching program, though to a much lesser degree.

Teaching competency, according to alternatively certified teachers, develops best through one's own teaching experiences and life experiences in general and through the input of other teachers and colleagues (Feistritzer, 2005). To this end, the Transition to Teaching program at

UNK puts the actual teaching experience at the core of pedagogical development. Experiential learning, then, becomes the vehicle through which participants connect the content of their professional teacher education coursework with real students in real classrooms. Because participants in the TTT program are scattered all over the state of Nebraska, many in quite rural areas, access to traditional on-campus teacher education coursework is limited and logistically difficult to access. The TTT program accommodates these teachers by delivering the coursework online so that they can maintain residence in the locale where they teach, resulting in high participant satisfaction in the program (McCarty, 2010). In fact, a 2009 study by the United States Department of Education found that students who take all or part of their classes online perform better on average than those taking the same courses through traditional face-to-face instruction (United States Department of Education Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development, 2010).

The depth and breadth of the life experiences that alternatively certified teachers bring to the teaching profession is typically unmatched by their more traditional counterparts. They are often better equipped to answer their students' questions of "Why do we need to know this? How will we use this in real life?" because they have lived the answers. Because alternatively certified teachers are themselves learning by doing, they recognize the value of experiential learning for their own students. Doing so has the potential to improve student learning outcomes, and as such would be viable areas for additional future research. Possible additional research questions include:

> What are the primary teaching strategies used by transitionally certified teachers?
>
> How do they compare to those used by traditionally trained teachers?
>
> How do student learning outcomes compare when examined on the basis of specific teaching strategies used by the teacher?

As in the early days of our country, when "the setting determined the identity of the teacher" (Labaree, 2008, p. 291), today's teachers are both highly qualified and more diverse thanks to the development and growth of alternative teacher certification. Although teacher shortages overall are not currently prevalent, many teachers are lost each year through turnover and early attrition. This puts school districts in a perpetual state of intense hiring pressure when only 60% of traditionally trained teachers actually move directly into teaching jobs, and of those who do, only 50 to 60% are still teaching five years after entering the profession. "Due to low salaries, poor administrative support, student discipline problems, lack of faculty influence and autonomy, and poor student motivation, many teachers change jobs each year and many leave the profession altogether" (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2005). On the other hand, alternatively certified teachers tend to stay in the teaching profession longer after entry. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of the respondents in the Profile of Alternate Route Teachers survey expected to be teaching five years into the future, and states with the highest percentage of alternatively certified teachers reported that 87% of them were still teaching five years after hire (Feistritzer, 2005).

Even though alternatively certified teachers have made a significant commitment to their career change, the retention of transitional teachers, just like traditionally trained teachers, requires ongoing training and support. As Breaux and Wong (2003) note,

> New secretaries do not receive a mentor. They are trained and assisted. Doctors, factory workers, actors and actresses, chefs, electricians, and dental hygienists do not receive a mentor. They are trained and assisted. Even million-dollar-per-year athletes are trained, every day, all year long, every year. In every aspect of the working world, people are trained and assisted. New teachers, on the other hand, often receive no training. Typically, they are thrown into a classroom and left to survive as best they can. (p. 63)

The point is that, "just as it takes a village to raise a child, the success of new teachers is the responsibility of the entire educational community" (Breaux & Wong, 2003, p. 64). The most effective professional development programs are those that allow new teachers to observe others, to be observed by others, and to be part of networks or study groups where all teachers share with each others and respect each other's work (Breaux & Wong, 2003). In Nebraska, transitionally certified teachers come into their first classrooms with expectations that they will be observed, supervised, and mentored through the requirements of their Transition to Teaching program, both face-to-face with their university supervisor and their school administrator, and online through their coursework professor. Continuing this process after completion of the Transition to Teaching program would be consistent with current research on successful teacher induction programs.

CONCLUSION

The schools and classrooms of today are not the schools and classrooms of twenty years ago; therefore, why should teacher prepa-

ration programs of today look like the traditional teacher preparation programs of twenty years ago? Meeting the needs of today's schools means preparing and providing highly qualified teachers in identified shortage areas. Meeting the needs of prospective transitional teachers in Nebraska means using an experiential learning and intensive supervision and mentoring model such as that provided by the Nebraska Transition to Teaching program.

NCATE acknowledges that "clinically based programs may cost more per candidate than current programs, but will be more cost-effective, cutting turnover costs for P-12 schools and yielding educators who enter the field ready to teach" (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010). Though we have all heard "Those who can, do," those doers enter the teaching field through alternative paths and provide their students with real-life examples of what it means to learn experientially. Those who can, also teach—and teach well.

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