

ROUTES TO SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: DOES CERTIFICATION PATH MATTER?*

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Abstract

This research was conducted to examine how school district superintendents perceive prospective school principals who were initially certified through alternate means. Data were collected through interviews with superintendents in an effort to examine whether the superintendents believed that principals' career and educational paths affected the candidates' ability to secure a principal position and, once employed, to be successful in the principalship. The participating superintendents described their expectations for school leaders, preferred characteristics and backgrounds, and perceptions of the gap between alternate and traditional paths to certification. The superintendents interviewed identified qualities they desired prospective principals to exhibit and actions they wished them to demonstrate.

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2 Sumario en español

Esta investigación fue realizada para revisar cómo supervisores de distrito de escuela perciben a directores futuros de escuela que fueron certificados inicialmente por medios alternos. Los datos fueron reunidos por entrevistas con supervisores en un esfuerzo de revisar si los supervisores creyeron que la carrera de directores y senderos educativos afectaron la capacidad de los candidatos para asegurar una principal posición y, una vez que empleado, para tener éxito en la dirección. Los supervisores que participan describieron sus esperanzas para líderes de escuela, para características y fondos preferidos, y para las percepciones del vacío entre suplente y senderos tradicionales a la certificación. Los supervisores entrevistaron identificaron calidades que desearon directores que futuros de exhibir y las acciones que los desearon demostrar.

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3 Introduction

Individuals who begin their educational careers as alternatively certified teachers may eventually seek to enter the school leadership profession. The prospective administrators may lack the background experiences with which their initially traditionally certified colleagues enter the profession. This dilemma led to the question of how superintendents view prospective principals who were originally alternatively certified teachers and what they perceive to be the benefits or limitations to the principals' previous preparation.

Alternative teacher certification has been defined as “any significant departure from the traditional undergraduate route through teacher education programs in colleges and universities” (Smith, Nystrand, Ruch, Gideonse, & Carlson, 1985, p. 24). By 2007, all 50 states plus the District of Columbia had implemented some sort of alternate certification path; “130 alternate routes to teacher certification now exist in these 50 states and the District of Columbia” (Feistritzer, 2007, para. 3). Alternative certification has served the purpose of transitioning adults with previous work experiences and degrees into the education profession (Hecht, Ashby, Azinger, & Klass, 2000, p. 3).

Alternative certification in Texas began in 1985, in the Houston Independent School District. The unconventional route was originally implemented in the state to “alleviate shortages, but state legislation passed in 1989 eliminated that requirement” (National Center for Education Information, 2008, para. 3). According to the National Center for Education Information, Texas now has 67 programs, “including 21 programs in community colleges and 8 programs conducted by private entities” (para. 2).

4 Background Literature

The definition of alternative certification is somewhat ambiguous in the literature. According to Humphrey and Wechsler (2007), “some states deem any postbaccalaureate teacher education program an alternative program, whereas others consider a postbaccalaureate program the traditional route. Some states use the term alternative certification for programs that place teachers in classrooms before they complete training” (p. 484).

The connotation of alternative certification is positive, however much of the literature on alternative certification is conflicting. Those in favor of alternative certification “insist alternative routes play a critically important role in expanding the pool of teachers, and in particular provide a pathway for unusually capable candidates who otherwise would be lost to the profession,” while those opposed contend that “alternative route programs shortchange both teacher candidates and the students they teach because their preparation, particularly in pedagogy, is inadequate” (Education Commission of the States, 2003, p. 3). Certification literature abounds with discussions on how teacher certification paths impact student achievement, longevity, and instructional methods.

Some teachers who initially enter the education profession via alternate routes seek employment as school leaders. In the critical role of campus principal, a school administrator “at least indirectly affects all aspects

of schooling, including teacher quality and student achievement” (Herrington & Wills, 1995, p. 183). He or she is expected to be “not only...the building curricular expert but...the individual charged with leading and managing the internal operations of the school and the person who represents the school with a variety of external audiences regarding performance, resources and community relations” (Papa Jr., Lankford, & Wyckoff, 2002, p. 1).

Many researchers have studied teachers who have participated in alternative certification programs. There is a lack of research, however, on the experiences of initially alternatively certified teachers who were hired to serve as school administrators, specifically in the role of school principal. As a myriad of alternatively certified teachers continue to enter the education profession, it is necessary to examine how they are viewed as prospective and future school leaders in an attempt to explore the question of whether teachers who one day wish to serve as campus leaders should pursue alternate paths to initial teaching certification.

5 Methods

This study was undertaken to examine how superintendents perceive prospective principals who entered the teaching profession via non-traditional paths. The perceptions of 12 Texas superintendents serving small to mid-sized rural and suburban school districts were examined to discover their views in regard to hiring and supporting principals who first entered the education profession as alternatively certified teachers. The superintendents who participated in this study led the principal hiring process in their respective school systems.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 participating superintendents. Snowball and convenience sampling were utilized to identify potential participants. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. The researchers repeatedly reread and verified the results of each category of coded information and analyzed the data until agreement was reached (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Data were analyzed to determine the themes that emerged.

6 Findings

When asked about whether he would employ principals with non-traditional career entry paths, one superintendent responded, “if they were quality...I would hire them.” The issue then became, what is quality, and, specifically, what qualities or experiences close the experience gap, if one in fact exists? To examine these questions, superintendents were asked about the personal characteristics and prior experiences they desired prospective campus leaders to have. After being asked about the specific degree(s) that he wanted prospective school administrators to have earned, one superintendent expressed the inclusive views of eight of the superintendents: “I don’t put a lot of stock in that...there are some minimum state qualifications that they have to meet, but really it’s more the person and their individual characteristics that are more important to me.”

6.1 Prospective Principal Characteristics

One district leader who was interviewed shared that he did not judge people by what “they’re certified in or how they got to that point,” but instead considered “their personal qualities and what they bring to your district...by far the most important is their attitude toward being a servant to the people they’re leading.” Superintendents shared that they were looking for team players and servant leaders who exhibit high moral character and are willing to be a part of the school family.

A frequently stated requirement was for the prospective school principals to be knowledgeable in the content areas taught on their potential respective campuses. A single principal is employed by one of the superintendents to serve the district’s students in grades K-12. The superintendent said that he wished for someone who “preferably has some experience not only in lower elementary but also in junior high and high school because...somebody that has some knowledge in all areas of education.” Another school district leader preferred to hire a principal who is “well grounded in...beliefs of good quality education, believes in students

and supports the teachers, but also listens to the parents and wants to try to please them when they can...to improve the school.” Each of the 12 superintendents alluded to the necessity of strong communication and organizational skills for all principal candidates. As one leader stated, principals are “no longer doing the day to day with the kids...they have to be able to direct the whole show rather than just be part of it.”

Other qualifications for prospective principals were acknowledged by one superintendent to be virtually unattainable:

6.1.1

In today’s world administrators almost have to walk on water. You have to be complete, you have to be able to do it all almost...someone who has great people skills who also has instructional leadership...I don’t really view it that way. I really try to look for a complete leader who has balance...it’s getting tougher and tougher to be a really great administrator and...finding someone who has the balance of the people leadership skills with the knowledge and expertise in the academics is a tough chore.

In sum, according to one superintendent, an employer cannot judge prospective school principals “by what they’re certified in or how they got to that point, you look at their personal qualities and what they bring to your district...by far the most important is their attitude toward being a servant to the people they’re leading.”

6.2 Prior Career Experience

The superintendents expected prospective campus leaders to have been successful in past positions, but 10 superintendents mentioned only prior education-related experiences. A compilation of the responses revealed that prospective principals should be strong disciplinarians and instructional leaders with specific prior work experiences in the classroom, knowledge of campus improvement, and experience in campus leadership roles. A superintendent summarized the interviewees’ overall expressed beliefs when he indicated that he was not looking for a principal who subconsciously expresses the view that “I’m a classroom teacher and I do my little stuff in my classroom and then send them to the principal if it doesn’t work out;” instead, the superintendent expressed the wish to hire a principal who has “been involved in the school system, either on a discipline committee or someone that’s been involved in other aspects of education, other than just what goes on in the classroom.”

Overall, participating superintendents expressed willingness to consider employing principals with successful prior teaching experiences. In the words of one district leader, “certainly they need to have spent some time in the classroom to know what that is all about.” According to another superintendent, “I want an administrator who has been in the classroom...taught a subject, who’s going to be held accountable and understanding the importance of accountability.” Experience was stated as important, but excellence in experience was even more prized. One superintendent shared,

6.2.1

I think it’s very difficult to be a quality administrator unless you were a quality teacher. And those come in all shapes and sizes with all different kinds of backgrounds and different subject areas. But I think it’s difficult to go from being a poor teacher or less than average teacher to being a really good administrator. I just don’t see that happening very often.

6.3 Extra-Curricular Experience

Leadership experience in leading extra-curricular activities, specifically athletics, was listed by five of the superintendents as desired of prospective principals. According to one participant, “it’s natural for a successful coach to become an administrator because he’s had work experiences more than just a regular classroom teacher.” Another commented directly, “coaches that are quality teachers make the best administrators.” A third superintendent expounded that coaching naturally leads to administration “because of the

pressure. . .and the scrutiny that coaches are put under, the management of time. . .effort. . .getting kids how to respect you as an authority figure” is similar to what principals experience. He sought to hire individuals who have “been under fire” and have an “understanding of. . .what they’re going to have to deal with.”

6.4 Certification Path Perceptions

“Leaders move into leadership roles, both formal and informal, through a series of state and local actions that determine who exercises leadership and what they are supposed to know for this purpose,” wrote Knapp, Copland, Plecki, and Portin (2006, p. 25). The authors continued, “for one thing, recruitment processes, formal preparation, and (re)certification, along with selection, hiring, and assignment arrangements, bring particular individuals into administrative positions in school and district settings” (p. 25). The superintendents interviewed in this study had varying perceptions regarding whether certification paths influenced the hiring practices of their respective districts, but the majority of the superintendents believed that initial certification path was a minor, or even nonexistent, issue.

Certification path was considered. There were four superintendents who shared that certification path differences were considered when making principal hiring decisions. According to one superintendent, “I would have to consider. . .their background. . .the areas that they have worked in, in the teaching position, to see if I thought that there was enough knowledge to be able to step up and become a good administrator.” Another superintendent stated,

6.4.1

It wouldn’t be an ultimately determining factor but it would be something that I would explore. If they’re alternatively certified I would want to double check to make sure that they have sufficient background and experience to do the job. I don’t think it rules a person out but I do think if someone is alternatively certified that it needs to be carefully weighed that they are committed to staying in the business and they are going to be long term.

Certification path was not a consideration. For other superintendents, certification route tended to be a non-issue, and often not considered when screening for prospective school principals. According to one superintendent, “I don’t care how they got certified. . .when you’re certified you’re certified and I don’t go back and either hold that against somebody or not hold that against somebody.” Another superintendent concurred: “I’ve hired lots of teachers on alternative certification—second career teachers, and would not have treated them any differently had they moved on up into the administrative ranks.” The view was echoed fervently by another superintendent: “If I have a principal’s applicant I don’t go back and check if they were alt. I don’t use that as a gauge to determine whether they’ll be qualified or not qualified to be a principal.” Another superintendent who said he was not opposed to alternative certification stated, “what I’m looking into is not necessarily the certification but the qualities they possess to be able to manage a system K-12.”

The progression of alternate path teachers to the role of campus principals was considered natural by some superintendents. According to one district leader: “at a mid-size [school district] a large percentage of your teachers are alt certified and once you get passed that and you’re looking at future administrators, some of those. . .move up into the assistant principal/dean of students rank.” Another superintendent commented,

6.4.2

I’ve hired a multitude of alternatively certified teachers that I think would be very good administrators. . .good people, very knowledgeable, actually chose the wrong profession coming out of college. . .had the heart to be an educator, had planned on being an educator, but chose to go a different route and knew it wasn’t for them and came back to education and were very successful in the classroom.

Favoring alternate paths. Several superintendents made comments about beliefs that alternate certificate paths are sometimes more beneficial than traditional routes. One superintendent shared that “in some cases some. . .pre-teaching experiences may even had made [teachers] better candidates for an administrative

position.” A colleague concurred, “I think alternatively certified people sometimes bring more to the table than anybody.”

Administrative certification was dismissed by another superintendent, who stated,

6.4.3

To me when you go to college and get your certification to be an administrator they don't teach you the skills that you need to know to be an administrator. Having certification does not tell me you're going to be a successful administrator. What's going to determine you being a successful administrator is not your college degree, it's what you have within you to supervise and manage a school system. And I think that's what you have to focus on when you're picking an administrator, is somebody that has the skills that can do the administrative jobs because everybody cannot do it...that's what I look for.

Opposing alternate paths. There were four superintendents who identified limited to moderate concerns pertaining to hiring principals who initially entered the teaching profession through alternate paths. A superintendent posited, “Based on my experience I tend to be a little bit leery of alt cert...my first option is to go to someone that I already have professional and personal experiences with. In that case the alternative certified or the traditional certification really is not an issue.” Another superintendent opposed alternate paths, stating that a prospective principal may experience difficulties in “how to handle students and deal with parents...everyone doesn't realize how in-depth that can be.” The superintendent also cited a lack of educational terminology as a possible deficiency, but ruled out knowledge of curriculum and the content area as possible obstacles. Stated one superintendent regarding certification paths, “the biggest gap I see is the ability to manage...I see more alt certs not making it through the process, not because of content...but they can't manage the time and they can't manage the kids.”

6.5 Teaching Experience Levelled the Playing Field

Authors for the Education Commission of the States (2003) stated that alternative certification research, “provides limited support for the conclusion that there are indeed alternative programs that produce cohorts of teachers who are ultimately as effective as traditionally trained teachers” but added that “on the other hand, because of their limited preservice training, alternative route participants may experience more difficulties than traditionally prepared graduates at the beginning of their teaching assignment” (p. 3). When superintendents were asked about their perceptions of the experience gap between alternate and traditional certification paths, teaching experience surpassed all other responses as the source that led to the elimination of any perceived discrepancies between alternate path and traditional path educators.

Said one district leader, “I think college is real good for preparation but I think it is secondary to real-life experiences and what you learn every day in the trenches. You can have several degrees, but no people skills, and you're ineffective as a leader.” One superintendent said that his hiring decisions for non-traditional path principal prospects “would depend on their experience in the classroom that they've had and the references from their administrators.” Another district leader shared views pertaining to teaching experience:

6.5.1

I think it takes awhile for them to get used to some of the ins and outs of the classroom, managing kids, because if you go straight from college into alternative certification scenarios and you've never really experienced the opposite side of the desk as a teacher or watching from a teacher point of view and all you've ever been is the student, I think there's some transition scenarios that you have to go through from that big picture...once you get in, if you can survive the first year or two, then you're probably going to be okay.

There were four other superintendents who discussed specific ranges of years of teaching experience that they believed it would take for alternate path teachers to entirely catch up with, and even surpass, traditional path teachers. The superintendents believed, in the words of one district leader who was interviewed, “over time...that gap narrows.” The time requirement ranged from 2-3 years to 10-12 years, including two

superintendents who stated that 3-5 years of teaching would close the gap, because, “on-the-job training is...your...biggest strength.”

7 Discussion

A main theme in the study was the need for principal candidates who had a track record for effectively managing students, parents, and faculty members in an educational setting. Superintendents sought school leaders who had the skill sets necessary to effectively fit into the superintendents’ districts. Predominantly, the superintendents were not concerned with how the prospective principals acquired certification or the requirements that the certification routes mandated. Success in the classroom was perceived to be a more important predictor of success as principals than was the way the principals were certified.

Humphrey and Wechsler (2007) wrote that “proponents of alternative certification, who are often opponents of traditional teacher preparation as well, view state certification rules and regulations as unnecessary hurdles and barriers that prevent talented individuals from becoming teachers” (p. 491). The majority of the superintendents believed likewise about alternate path teachers who become principals and shared the perception that experience in the teaching profession by an alternate path teacher may make up for the lack of traditional preparation. Experience, rather than certification path, was the key. According to one superintendent,

if the administrator has been in the classroom long enough...whether they’re traditionally certified or alternatively certified they’ve had the same experiences in that classroom; the difference is an alternatively certified teacher has had more business experience previous to their teaching and that might help in their principalship.

The superintendents perceived that, after obtaining classroom experience, the leadership attributes of possible alternate path principals would surface. Although not described as an absolute necessity, coaching experience was cited as a plus by several of the superintendents interviewed.

School principals are charged with facilitating teachers’ professional learning (Portin, Alejano, Knapp, & Marzolf, 2006). Some researchers have stated that the receipt of certification serves as “credibility that the individual has obtained the knowledge necessary to be a successful principal—whatever that may be” (Herrington & Wills, 1995, p. 186). Other proponents of alternate paths have disputed the requirement and stated beliefs that “good management skills, not necessarily specific to education, are what is needed. Licensure is also heralded as the primary means to maintain the professionalism of the practice of school administration” (Herrington & Wills, 1995, p. 186).

Although many of the superintendents were accepting and even encouraging of alternative certification, when asked about the types of experiences they wanted educators to have had, few references were made to experiences outside of education. One of the two superintendents who discussed work experiences outside of the education profession preferred principal candidates with experience in “some type of position that has put them in control of a group of people;” the other said that it “would not hurt” if they “ran [their] own business at one time; that they have employed other people.”

According to the superintendents interviewed, the answer to the question of whether certification path influences a principal’s ability to lead would overwhelmingly be “it depends,” as the word *depends* was stated 23 different times during the 12 interviews. According to one superintendent,

7.1

I can’t say that going through a student teacher prep program, traditionally, makes you a better teacher. And I can’t say it necessarily makes you a more effective leader because it depends on the person. I know some people...going through...alternative certification...will not be successful. But I know some that would be successful without a program because of their passion with their kids and their ability to learn quickly...it depends on the person.

8 Recommendations for Further Research

This area of education is in need of additional research. A quantitative study could be conducted to collect additional data pertaining to principals' routes to certification from a wider pool of participants. Prospective traditional and alternate route principals enrolled in preparation programs could be interviewed or surveyed to examine their views on their own initial preparation and how they perceive their progress compares to that of their peers who had different initial entry routes to the education profession. Professors of alternate and traditional programs could be interviewed to examine any benefits or deficits they perceive in program preparation. The views of superintendents and principals could also be compared to examine views concerning the employment of alternatively certified teachers.

9 Summary

School districts must hire school principals who are prepared to lead as “it takes an effective principal to make a successful school” (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, 2004, p. 10). The superintendents who participated in this study viewed alternate paths as realities. Some perceived the path to matter; others did not. From whatever certification path prospective principals come, those employing them must work to fill knowledge and skills gaps and battle poor preparation programs. In the words of one superintendent, “I think that the alternative programs...need to be beefed up...give more experiences and more training and more exposure to those individuals.” The superintendent seemed to share the fears of Glass (2009):

Unlike with some professions, the plane may not crash or the patient may not die when teachers are poorly trained, but a society that demeans teaching and degrades education will in time surely see aspirations and hope atrophy and die (para. 14).

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