

Alternative Certified Teachers and Children at Risk

Laura D. Tissington and Amani Grow

ABSTRACT: Special education programs that serve at-risk students are facing very real personnel needs that colleges and universities alone cannot meet. Alternative certification programs (ACP) may help meet these needs. Effective university-school district partnership programs that include critical teaching training components may offer an attractive alternative to traditional teacher training programs. Teacher retention and increased student learning are probable outcomes resulting from quality model ACP.

KEY WORDS: *alternative certification, at-risk, model programs*

TEACHER SHORTAGES ARE a reality that affect all grades and service-delivery areas. Nowhere, however, is this problem more acute than in special education and in programs that serve students who are at risk. Researchers, such as Ludlow, Conner, and Schechter (2005), note that these personnel shortages are due to "increasing demand, inadequate supply, and high attrition rates" (p. 15).

Adding to this issue is the requirement in current legislation, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) 2001 and Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) 2004, that teachers be "highly qualified." This requirement often increases the length of preservice teacher-training programs and forces current teachers to return to university classrooms for additional course work. Evidence suggests that requirement for additional coursework has forced some teachers to leave teaching and has reduced the number of graduates from teacher-training programs, aggravating an already acute personnel shortage (Rosenberg, Sindelar, Connelly, & Kelly, 2004). In addition, some states have placed a limit on the number of children who may be served in a classroom. This requirement has also resulted in an increased demand for teachers.

Exacerbating the problem is the growing number of diverse student learners. This phenomenon seems to be especially true in schools that are southeastern, large, urban, or have high minority enrollment and poverty concentrations (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Special education

was identified as a shortage area across all states (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Ninety-eight percent of school districts nationally reported shortages of qualified special education teachers (Bergert & Burnette, 2001). Henderson and Klein (2005) reported that between 1992–1993 and 1998–1999 the number of children with disabilities nationally grew from 5.08 million to 6.11 million, an increase of 20.3%. Special education and behavioral disorders are cited as the teaching areas with the highest demand in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Special education is a discipline that has been plagued by a shortage of trained teachers and professionals. The teacher shortage for children at risk is likely to rise due to increasing enrollments of students with disabilities and retiring teachers (National Teacher Recruitment Clearinghouse, 2002). Of the graduates from traditional teacher preparation programs who are "fully qualified to teach," 30% to 40% do not go into teaching and approximately one third leave within the first 5 years (Feistritz, 2004). Incidentally, special education teachers are 2.5 times more likely to change positions or leave teaching than are general educators, especially when they work in high-poverty schools (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Therefore, how can the critical need for appropriately trained special education teachers who will want to remain in the field be met?

Clearly, these very real demands have created teacher shortages that university and college training programs cannot fully address and has resulted in the creation of alternative ways for teachers to become certified. This has created urgency for schools to recruit, train, and retain teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary to provide high-quality

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services to students in special education and at-risk settings. However, the creation of these programs has also led to questions about the quality of teacher training through alternative programs that are much shorter and may be less rigorous.

Alternative Certification Programs

In 2003, 46 states and the District of Columbia reported having some type of alternative route for certification. Statistics gathered over a 5-year period indicated that approximately 25,000 people, per year, were certified to teach through alternative routes (Feistritzer, 2003). Although there are various "Alternative Certification Programs" (ACP), Rosenberg & Sindelar (2001) suggested these programs vary from traditional programs in three aspects: (a) length and structure, (b) delivery mode, and (c) candidate population.

ACP teachers are usually offered some type of temporary certification regulated by each state's DOE and complete coursework while training "on the job." Consequently, they may have little or no supervised teaching internship. Therefore, fast-track coursework is generally taught in the summer, on weekday afternoons, or online. ACP candidates are often described as second-career professionals with a bachelor's degree in their chosen content areas and may have their degrees in an unrelated field. However, the intent of alternative routes (Shephard & Brown, 2003) is to allow people with experience and education in their professional areas to teach in their content areas.

ACP programs are typically offered either through in-service school district training or in partnership with colleges and universities. The school district in-service programs may force local schools to create teacher training programs that are costly and difficult to administer. As a result, many school districts have turned to partnership

programs in which they team with colleges and universities to deliver ACP training programs.

Therefore, high quality alternative routes to teacher training may be a legitimate and justified response to market demands (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2001; Rosenberg et al., 2004). However, Henderson and Klein (2005) posited that, although alternative certification holds some potential for addressing teacher shortages, it may be of limited usefulness for special educators, especially teachers of children with emotional disorders (ED).

Application of Alternative Certification for Children At-Risk

So, where does that leave our nation's at-risk children? The teacher shortage proliferates in high need areas, such as math, science, and special education, in both rural and urban areas (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2001). Henderson and Klein (2005) found, in a national study of special educators, ($N = 4,546$) that teacher shortages and high attrition rates seriously limit the availability of special education teachers and those teaching children with behavior disorders, specifically. Moreover, alternative routes to certification were an important source for teachers of children with behavior disorders; and when surveyed, nearly twice as many of these teachers, as compared with other special education teachers, were certified in this manner (Henderson & Klien). These data are displayed in Table 1.

National research studies have yielded mixed reviews regarding quality teacher-preparation programs with traditionally trained teachers or ACP candidates. In an open forum, "Missing the Mark: A Response to Grineski's 'Misidentified Problems and Mistaken Solutions'," Greenman (2005) remarked that "when some traditional and alternative programs are compared, the traditional teacher education programs both prepare teachers better and allow the

TABLE 1. Certification by Teacher Group and Socioeconomic Status (SES)

Teacher group	Certification (%)		
	Standard	Temporary or provisional	Emergency or uncertified
Special Education			
Low SES	78.82	9.37	11.81
High SES	88.41	6.69	4.90
Overall	84.99	7.80	7.20
Other			
Low SES	84.52	6.99	8.49
High SES	88.41	7.27	4.33
Overall	86.95	6.90	6.15

Note. Adapted from *Optimal Instruments in Special Education Teacher Preparation*, by J. Dewey, 2005, p.12.

teachers to feel more prepared upon leaving the program.” But, Greenman also noted that “strong evidence also exists to demonstrate the opposite” (p. 136).

These equivocal statements about the form of teacher preparation and teacher competence match an analysis of research. For example, in research cited about Teach for America (TFA), a type of ACP, TFA teachers outscored colleagues on math achievement and matched colleagues’ average performance in reading (adapted from Decker, Mayer, & Glazerman, 2004, cited in Greeman, 2005). However, other studies showed that students of traditionally trained teachers outperformed ACP teachers (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002).

Wherever one stands on this issue, the need for quality teachers for children at risk is a problem that needs a solution. There is no disagreement that the quality of the teacher, regardless of how they were trained, has a direct and significant impact on the amount and quality of student learning. Fortunately, a great deal of research clearly suggests high quality teacher training programs must have certain critical elements (Rosenberg et al., 2004). The most critical components of high quality teacher training programs include comprehensive pedagogy, internships with mentoring programs, program standards, and state certification requirements. ACPs incorporating these components increase the likelihood that graduating teachers will be able to meet the very real needs of their students, increasing the probability of student learning and successful learning outcomes.

Training Model for Special Education, ACP Teachers

Pedagogy

Researchers have found that alternatively certified teachers have not been as prepared as traditionally trained teachers because the former group lacked pedagogical skills (McDiarmid & Wilson, 1991; Stoddart & Floden, 1995). Darling-Hammond (2002) proposed that special education teachers need the knowledge and skills necessary to organize the curriculum and meet the needs of children with disabilities. Rosenberg et al. (2004) reported that special educators need knowledge and skills in pedagogy, instruction, classroom management, and communication skills that complement verbal ability and content area knowledge.

Candidates trained and certified in nontraditional, special education teaching programs also need content-specific coursework in special education. Although general pedagogy coursework is necessary (such as classroom diagnosis), measurement and evaluation, remediation, and high-incidence disabilities are generally not included. Moreover, critical issues are also needed for educating students with exceptionalities.

Some of the most promising alternative certification programs are in graduate degree partnerships with universities

that use this instructional model. Candidates receive proper pedagogy to make informed, theory-based decisions. In addition, candidates are made aware of other valuable teaching tools, such as school and community resources.

Internship With Expert

Experience, age, and certification appear to make a significant difference in special education teacher attrition rate. However, factors such as teacher qualifications and aspects of work environment are less clear (Billingsley, 2004). The largest portion of teachers who left special education expressed dissatisfaction with their teaching positions because they felt unsupported, unprepared, and overwhelmed (Brownell, Smith, McNellis, & Miller 1997). Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, and Harniss (2001) reported that building-level support, professional development opportunities, satisfaction with current assignment, and commitment to the profession were among the strongest factors identified when examining the relationship between teachers’ intent to stay in special education and other factors. In addition, as the last hired in a school culture where seniority is understood, ACP teachers are frequently assigned the most challenging classrooms with the most disadvantaged students.

Mentoring is critical in reducing teacher attrition and developing quality teachers (Brewster & Railsback, 2001; Tissington, 2005). The critical need for mentoring is especially true of special education ACP candidates who may not have had the benefit of practicum experiences. An internship with a seasoned special education teacher may be the most valuable component of ACP training.

Characteristics of effective mentors have been addressed in the literature. Simmons (1998) described traits necessary for professional role models, voluntary servants, effective communicators, astute diplomats, and self-reliant mentors. Kelley (2004) proposed that mentors should be chosen for their teaching excellence, disposition toward collaboration, commitment to growth and change, and expertise in priority areas such as classroom management and content areas.

All new teachers need ongoing support and ACP candidates who teach at-risk children are no exception. Mentors may include program peers, fellow teachers, administrators, and district specialists. Some of the most valuable advice mentors can offer ACP candidates is knowledge of the school culture (Tissington, 2005). Proximity to mentors is also important for ACP candidates. Classroom management, experiences, lesson plans, and parent communications are some of the practical skills that mentors can offer as well.

Program Approval Standards

There are myriad alternative teaching licensure programs (e.g., local school districts, state education departments, commercial-enterprise programs, and online programs).

TFA, Troops for Teachers (TTT), and university ACP are examples of alternative licensure programs. Some alternative licensure programs require internships whereas others offer on-the-job training with candidates as the teacher of record. University partnership requirements may include, but are not limited to, a bachelor's degree from an accredited college or university, an acceptable undergraduate grade point average (GPA) or grade record exam (GRE) score, letters of recommendation, and a letter of intention regarding a teaching career.

Like traditional teacher training, all alternative teacher licensure programs cannot be viewed as equal in terms of content, duration, rigor, and support for learning how to teach (Berry, 2001). The Council for Learning Disabilities (CLD) urges "caution and restraint in the endorsement of alternative certification programs that do not meet professional standards or have produced high quality special educators" (Rosenberg, et al., 2004, p. 123).

State Requirements

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) and accreditation standards of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) define the standards by which states assess teachers. Typically, potential teachers seek state eligibility from the certification office of the state Department of Education. Successful candidates must complete state teacher exams such as general knowledge, professional knowledge, and subject matter knowledge before they earn teacher certification. States may also require a showcase resumé or professional portfolio to demonstrate teacher proficiency before issuing a teaching certificate. Most states now have reciprocal teacher licensure agreements with other states. Teaching certificates of this type are attractive and sometimes necessary for ACP candidates, especially military spouses.

Appendix A shows suggestions for a model ACP and includes the four components most commonly found in quality alternative licensure programs: (a) pedagogy, (b) internship, (c) program standards, and (d) state standards. Shephard & Brown (2003, p.29) observed that "students who need quality teachers the most are the students with the highest rate of uncertified, out of field, and less qualified teachers." Administrators and policymakers who recruit to retain potential special education teachers for ACP should provide the best possible training. Producing quality teachers for our nation's children at-risk is a legal mandate. Appendix B shows some suggested dos, don'ts, and cautions for model ACP programs.

Conclusion

School districts are facing very real personnel needs that colleges and universities alone cannot meet. ACP programs may help meet these needs. However, ACP programs must be

of high quality and train teachers in a time-effective manner. University-school district partnership programs may offer a very attractive alternative to traditional teacher-training programs, but, to be effective, these programs must include critical teacher-training components. Programs that do so increase the probability of teacher retention and that their highly qualified graduates will be able to effectively deliver instructional programs resulting in increased student learning.

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APPENDIX A
A Comparison Between a University Partnership and Unaffiliated Alternative Certification Programs

Program trait	Alternative certification program	
	University partnership	Unaffiliated
Pedagogy internship	Graduate credit Internship Faculty mentor School site mentor Peer mentors	Short courses teacher of record Assigned mentor
Program requirements	Bachelor's degree GRE score Admissions Recommendations No grade over than C	Bachelor's degree Pass or fail criteria
State standards	State exams Teaching certificate	Eligibility certificate Emergency license State exams Teaching vertificate

Note. Some of the best model alternative certification programs are affiliated with universities. GRE = Graduated Record Examination.

APPENDIX B
Suggested Dos, Don'ts, and Cautions for Model Alternative Certification Programs (ACPs)

Program trait	Dos	Dont's	Cautions
Pedagogy	Provide university course-work in pedagogy and current content	Limit knowledge and skills to fast-track coursework	May need to assist critical shortage of area teachers with scholarships
Intenship	Require and internship under expert teacher	Place ACP teachers out of field	May need to provide several layers of mentor support
Program standards	Screen applicants for program standards	Offer employment to underqualified applicants	May need to outline and review policies and principles
State	Verify all state requirements before teacher licensure	Fail to communicate standards and requirements to ACP teachers	May need to assess teacher performance: formative and summative