

Non-Traditionally Certified School Leaders' Self-Perceptions of Background Knowledge and Needs

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Abstract

Many teachers enter classrooms via alternative means. Alternatively certified teachers often are hired immediately before, or after, school begins. The teachers often miss crucial induction and mentoring. Building-level leaders who began their educational careers as alternatively certified teachers are often similarly disadvantaged. To examine the professional needs of originally alternatively certified administrators, 15 leaders participated in qualitative, semi-structured interviews. Data were coded and themes emerged. The interviewees believed that their alternative routes introduced an external perspective to their profession; however, they perceived initial negative stereotypes about alternatively certified educators who enter the education business. The administrators described the need to participate in additional training and seek assistance from other educators to compensate for missed traditional education classes. Leaders cited the need for assistance, but many were leery to ask for help out of concern that their questions would cause supervisors to doubt their ability to manage new leadership roles.

Keywords: alternative certification, school leadership

1. Introduction

New, traditionally certified teachers frequently participate in induction training to help facilitate their transition into full-time teaching (Moskowitz & Stephens, 1997). Alternatively certified teachers often experience a different situation (Johnson, Birkeland, & Peske, 2005). Because many alternatively certified teachers are hired immediately before, or even after, school begins, they often miss crucial induction activities. Building-level administrators who begin their educational careers as alternatively teachers are often similarly disadvantaged. The administrators interviewed participated in induction programs but felt that their lack of traditional preparation negatively affected their induction experiences. Approximately one-third of the new teachers in the United States enter the profession through alternative certification routes (National Center for Education Information, 2010). A percentage of the alternatively certified teachers transition to school leadership positions (Rodriguez-Campos et al., 2005). Those who make the move to administration generally participate in the same induction experiences as new traditionally certified administrators, however, according to those interviewed, alternatively certified administrators often have different needs than those who were originally traditionally certified.

2. Background Literature

The goal of alternative certification is to bring those people with degrees in fields other than education into the teaching profession (Feistritzer & Chester, 1995). Alternative teacher certification was defined by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) 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). Alternative certification “allows individuals who typically—but not always—possess an undergraduate degree in a field other than education to participate in a shortened training and/or on-the-job learning experience that leads to full certification” (Legler, 2002, para. 1). According to the United States Department of Education (USDE),

Instead of drawing primarily from the traditional pool of teacher preparation candidates that consists mainly of college students and recent graduates, alternative route programs cast a broader net, making efforts to attract older, nontraditional candidates who come to the program already well-versed in the content they want to teach. (USDE, 2004, p. 1)

Researchers from the National Center for Education Information (2010) reported that 48 states and the District of Columbia had at least one type of alternate route to teacher certification for a nationwide total of 136 routes. According to Honawar (2007), “in 2004-05, states issued teaching certificates to some 50,000 candidates who had entered teaching through alternative routes. Those individuals made up a third of all new teachers hired that year” (para. 2). Johnson, Birkeland, and Peske (2005) stated that frequently those persons who pursued alternative certification programs “were attracted. . .by the intended incentives: brief, inexpensive, convenient, and practical training. Candidates reported that they wanted to move quickly to classroom teaching positions, thus avoiding the tuition and opportunity costs of longer pre-service training in traditional preparation programs” (p. vi). According to Legler (2002), alternative certification programs are,

intended to provide a different path into the field of teaching from the traditional one that includes a degree in education, supervised internship, and acceptable scores on tests of basic skills and knowledge of pedagogy. Alternative certification programs have been created to address perceived shortages of teachers, and offer a path into the field of education that does not require individuals with undergraduate degrees to become full-time college students again. (para. 9)

Alternative certification has a myriad of meanings. Humphrey and Wechsler (2007) wrote that “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 to describe programs that place teachers in classrooms before they complete training” (p. 484). The researchers added that, “some differentiate between the terms alternative certification...reduced training for entry into teaching, and alternative route...pathways other than 4-year undergraduate or 1- or 2-year postbaccalaureate programs that enable candidates to meet the same standards” while “others use the terms interchangeably” (p. 484). Owings (2006) added that alternative certification programs are,

generally defined as pathways to a teaching certificate that fall outside the full-time, 4- or 5- year traditional teacher preparation programs. Although components vary widely, ACPs typically involve a period of intensive, condensed academic course work, or training, and an interval of supervised, on-the-job training in which new teachers are expected to learn their teaching skills in the classroom. (p. 103)

According to Baines (2006), there are currently two types of flourishing alternative certification programs: “those delivered by agencies not affiliated with an institution of higher education (sometimes called NUCPs for Non-University Certification Programs) and pared-down degrees delivered over the Internet by universities and corporations specializing in ‘for-profit’ educational endeavors” (p. 326). Lockwood (2002) wrote that, “alternative certification offers new ways for prospective teachers to enter the profession. . .Nontraditionalists applaud this notion. . . .Traditionalists, however, see alternative routes to certification as ‘short cuts’ around the system that has been devised to maintain quality and regulate the profession” (p. 10). In the words of Rod Paige, “creating alternative routes to certification is not a silver bullet—and it is not the entire solution to our nation’s teacher quality challenge. But it is an important part of the solution” (USDE, 2004, p. vi).

3. Methods

Interviews were conducted with school administrators who were formerly alternatively certified teachers. According to Hickey-Gramke and Whaley (2007), alternative programs “provide an opportunity for individuals to begin the principalship without formal administrative preparation. During the alternative licensing training period, individuals participating in such programs can earn salaries and obtain the same rights and responsibilities of traditionally trained principals” (p. 20). Tallerico and Tingley (2001) reported that “some states are opening doors to prospective educational leaders without previous professional experience in the schools” (para. 7). According to the researchers, this meant “sometimes. . .developing or changing state policies to promote fast-track routes to administrative certification. Other times. . .waiving existing policies requiring teaching experience or educational administrative certification for particular hiring situations” (para. 7). In contrast, participants in this study were school administrators who were originally alternatively certified teachers, and then progressed to school leadership positions via transitional means.

3.1 Procedures

Fifteen school administrators whose original teacher certification status was alternative were included in the study in an attempt to address the differences in preparation between future administrators who were traditionally and alternatively certified. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant.

Snowball and convenience sampling were utilized to choose volunteers to participate. Prospective respondents were contacted and asked to participate in a research study pertaining to the transition of alternatively certified teachers to the position of school administrator.

3.2 Interview Questions

Participants were asked a combination of questions, including questions about the process they went through to obtain alternative teacher certification, their educational and professional backgrounds, what they believed had assisted them in becoming successful teachers and administrators, and who they turned to when they needed assistance. The participants were also asked about mentoring, career barriers, experience gaps, professional development, and others' awareness of their original alternative teacher certification status.

4. Data Analysis

Interviews with the alternatively certified administrators were audio-taped and transcribed. Following the semi-structured interviews, data were analyzed to determine themes that emerged. Initial categories were established and amended as responses were coded. The interviews were verified, transcriptions were reread, and the results of each category were analyzed until agreement was reached (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Relying on Moustakas's (1994) description of data analysis, the researchers followed four steps: epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. Epoche is the process of recognizing presupposed ideas about the phenomenon being studied, bracketing them, or setting them aside, and revisiting the phenomenon. Phenomenological reduction required the authors to examine the data for statements about how participants experienced success in their administrative positions following initial alternative teacher certification. Statements were identified from the interview transcripts that reflected how participants experienced the phenomenon and a list was developed from those statements. Imaginative variation allowed the authors to identify all possible meanings or divergent perspectives related to the phenomenon. We then looked for clusters of meanings in the data by grouping key phrases to allow for the emergence of themes. From these clustered meanings we developed a textual and structural description of the phenomenon. The researchers selected verbatim quotes from the transcripts that captured the meaning for participants. Finally, the experiences were synthesized to capture the essence and present themes, which transcended all participants. This composite description is organized around themes that emerged from the data.

5. Findings and Discussion

Of the school leaders interviewed, two-thirds were currently serving in secondary school administrative positions and one-third were elementary school administrators. Eight of the 15 were principals; the remaining seven were assistant principals. All participants had earned a master's degree and/or doctorate in educational administration. Only three participants had work experiences after college that lasted more than one year; seven went straight from the role of undergraduate student to the position of teacher. The participants taught a mean of 5 years before entering school administration and had been serving as school administrators an average of 9 years.

5.1 Past Experiences and Background Knowledge

Participants said they owed their success in school leadership to mentoring, internship, organizational skills, networking, and past work experiences. Although most had very limited previous work experience, almost all of the participants credited their past careers with helping lead them to the school administration profession.

According to one participant, "understanding people and being involved in supervising numerous people at once and being able to empathize with people and their individual situations." The same administrator shared that people who worked for him understood that he would support them, due to their knowledge of his past business experiences.

One participant said that his previous position made him "feel the need to go into education; the interaction with clients helped with parent interaction." Another participant stated that one year of professional experience helped her refine skills necessary for teaching language arts, stating that "a lot of proofreading helped with honing the skills necessary to the teaching process" and sharing that working as a Sunday school teacher and teaching gymnastics helped with her transition to the classroom. An administrator who worked extensively in the business world said that training new employees and teaching continuing education assisted in the transition to public education, and that this opportunity created a desire to teach and administrate.

Business people often enter the teaching field due to their “ability to incorporate very specialized, practical, and real world knowledge into their instruction; possession of effective interpersonal skills; and possession or management and organizational skills” (Salyer, 2003, p. 21). Another participant credited a past degree in psychology for assisting her to work with teachers “to identify students that may need anger management classes.” One participant stated that his age brought respect, stating that he was “stable in...life due to age and prior business career,” which kept him grounded in his community. He also shared that he had served on the school board and married a teacher, which led to additional education-related discussions at home. Several participants stated the ability to connect with students; one participant said her success was partly due to “being able to build relationships with students...working with high minority populations.”

All but three participants shared that their alternative certification status had not affected their pedagogical skills. One school leader shared that his initial status has made him more aware of looking for “sound practices in pedagogy” and the need to focus on these skills. Most participants agreed that their supervisory skills were not affected by their initial alternative certification status. One participant felt that a business background helped him more than classroom experience. The administrator shared, “it has made me feel the need to stay on top of learning new skills.”

5.2 Internships and Mentor Relationships

Participants cited internship opportunities as especially useful to their administrative career development. According to Tallerico and Tingley (2001), “Without broad, consistently available access to full-time, regular-school-year internships, the best and brightest from universities' leadership preparation programs cannot gain the kinds of meaningful, entry-level experiences that will help them become the next generation of educational leaders” (para. 20). Humphrey and Wechsler (2007) wrote that, “because alternative certification participants learn on the job, they learn not only from their program but from their colleagues and administrators as well” (p. 514).

The participants described mainly positive working relationships with other administrators. In fact, when in need of assistance, the school leaders shared turning mostly to fellow administrators with the school and district as well as to administrators from other districts. Other participants also asked for help from former university instructors. Each of the people turned to served as continuous mentors throughout the participants' careers thus far. According to Humphrey and Wechsler (2007), “Proponents of alternative certification consider mentoring to be a key component of on-the-job training and point to its power to teach alternative route teachers real-world skills,” however those in opposition to alternative certification “agree with the importance of mentoring for all new teachers, but do not view it as a substitute for preservice training and clinical practice” (p. 518). Humphrey and Wechsler (2007) stated that,

Mentoring is a key component. . .however, programs rarely take care to guarantee the quality and effectiveness of that mentoring support. It is the fortunate alternative certification teacher who enters the classroom with a solid set of teaching skills, a reasonable teaching assignment, and high-quality mentoring. (pp. 519-520)

The majority of the participants concurred, and described themselves as being fortunate with mentoring relationships.

5.3 Effects of Alternative Status

All but three participants stated that other school personnel in their building were aware of their original certification status, but one participant shared that while “going through teacher evaluation training, some people made comments about alternatively certified teachers,” but once he made his situation known, “their ideals and attitudes changed.” Several other participants shared that fellow educators had made positive comments regarding their initial alternative certification status. When asked whether they felt that their alternative teacher certification status had affected the information or stories that related to interns, residents, or beginning teachers, approximately half of the participants responded in the negative and half in the positive. One participant shared telling new educators why he entered the education field. Another participant shared that she “knows what it feels like to be the alternatively certified teacher during their first classroom experience with no support or help,” and was therefore “more conscious to their needs” as compared to the needs of traditionally certified teachers. Most of the participants stated that their previous alternative certification status had not affected relationships with others on their school campuses or served as a barrier in their current or former positions.

Several did, however, recognize negative perceptions of their previous alternative certification status. One participant recognized the difference, stating that “there is a stereotype about being alternatively certified,” but that he “tries to combat that on his campus. . . .tries to keep a balance on his campus with alternatively certified and traditionally certified teachers on staff.” Another stated that she tried to “learn a great deal more than the traditionally certified teacher to overcome the stereotype.” One school leader shared that his previous business experiences helped him build his knowledge. Several administrators stated that the former certification status has never been an issue; “no one has ever questioned or looked down on it.” Additional education past the bachelor’s degree assisted other participants. Several participants shared that receiving additional education via master’s degree programs helped fill their knowledge gap.

5.4 Professional Development

All but two participants shared that they did not feel that their professional development needs differed from traditionally certified educators. One participant shared believing that her alternative certification program was more strenuous than a traditional program. Another participant said needs were not difficult because she “did so many other things to overcome the perception that she had about the gap between alternative and traditionally certified teachers.”

School-based professional development opportunities assisted the school leaders in their administrative endeavors. According to Humphrey and Wechsler (2007), district-driven training provides,

more opportunity for coherence between school-based professional development and the alternative certification training exists in programs sponsored and created by districts, which by design focus both their professional development and alternative certification training on preparing graduates to work with the district curricula. Thus, what participants learn in their alternative certification program and what they learn in their school-based professional development reinforce each other. Although beneficial in its coherence, this focused approach is limiting to teachers who may some day work in another district or with a different curriculum. (p. 514)

5.5 Relationships with Other Alternatively Certified Faculty

The school leaders interviewed all shared their support for alternatively certified teachers in their buildings. They stated the importance of making certain the teachers were mentored, supervised, and participated in induction. Humphrey and Wechsler (2007) wrote that the type of climate that exists determines the type of on-the-job learning that will take place. “Some participants experience rich and supportive environments in which they thrive and learn their new profession; others experience chaotic and unsupportive environments that not only prevent them from learning how to teach, but also drive them from the profession” (p. 515).

One administrator shared that he ensured alternatively certified teachers in his building were “in a mentor program” and participated in “monthly meetings to test the waters.” He offered advice to “help them in any way...and get them to talk with other teachers; don’t let them feel alone.” Another administrator shared that he offered support just like to any new teacher, but no “different type of support” than to a traditionally certified teacher. The same participant shared that he believed that no experience gap existed between alternatively and traditionally certified educators and that “it makes no difference, as first year teachers are as needing of support and guidance, whether they have come out of a college-based program or an alternative certification program.” In contrast, most participants cited differences. According to one participant,

other alternative certification programs seen do not require classroom observation hours, some come straight from the business world into the classroom without ever being in the classroom at all...most alternative certification programs are not effective or sound; once in education, the gap is closed.

Another participant shared that it, “depends upon the alternative certification program they went through and...on the professional development they have chosen to endure, and what brought them into education in the first place.” Several shared the views of one participant, that “the experience is a little different due to the student teaching that a traditionally certified teacher goes through.”

6. Conclusions

The interviewees shared that they thought highly of their chosen alternative certification programs, but appeared to overcompensate for their lack of traditional training. Each interviewee explained that he or she thought there was a huge negative stereotype about people being alternatively certified and coming into the education business.

Once the initial year of service was completed, however, the negative views often subsided and the alternative certification status became a moot point. According to Lockwood (2002),

While it is tenuous at best to try to “prove” that the type and quality of teacher preparation leads inevitably to improved teacher quality, school administrators have looked to the traditional credentialing process of teachers as a key indicator of quality. And traditionalists have reinforced this belief in the traditional credentialing process. (p. 12)

The administrators described the need to undergo many classes of professional development to compensate for the time they missed in education classes.

The originally alternatively certified teachers turned administrators interviewed cited the need for additional information but many were leery to ask for help as they felt that their questions would cause district supervisors to doubt their ability to manage their new leadership roles. The administrators actively sought assistance from other educators in an attempt to make up for some of their lack of traditional preparation. Mentors and induction programs were utilized, as were additional professional development opportunities. It appeared that many of the interviewees wanted to make sure the researchers knew they were competent enough to be serving in the position that they held. Each spent time during the interview seeming to justify what professional development they had chosen to go through, even over and above what their own traditionally certified teachers had experienced. This was, according to three of the administrators interviewed, their duty, since they had missed preparation such as student teaching and a complete sequence of educational pedagogy classes.

The interviewees shared thoughts that their alternative certification status was assistive, allowing them to introduce an outside perspective into education. Two school leaders even suggested that people who chose education from the onset of college had tunnel vision. Regardless, the educators were fortunate, as,

when an alternative certification teacher with a solid set of teaching skills and a reasonable teaching assignment receives quality mentoring, the participant can succeed. However, when the quality of the mentoring is lacking, teaching skills are weak, and the teaching assignment is difficult, the alternative certification teacher struggles. (Humphrey & Wechsler, 2007, p. 519)

Many school districts are continually in needs of teachers, but alternative certification 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” (Tissington & Grow, 2007, p. 26). Regardless of certification route, “The challenges facing public schools today are enormous and parents need the assurance their school leaders have the proper training behind them to direct their staffs through the many demands and expectations” (Reynolds, 2006, para. 16).

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