



Alternative Certification of Teachers

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May 2008

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Executive Summary

The hiring of teachers not regularly certified by government agencies through traditional university-based training programs and endorsement has grown rapidly since 1985. More than 60,000 alternatively certified teachers are now employed in the nation's schools, both public and private. The chances that a private secondary school teacher is uncertified doubled (from 25% to 50%) in the 10-year period from 1993 to 2003.

Teachers without regular certificates or licenses tend to be clustered in poor urban schools with high minority enrollments. Some regression studies show a relationship between higher percentages of regularly certified teachers and higher academic achievement of their students.

A few experimental studies give conflicting findings on the ability of "Teach for America" teachers to produce higher achievement among their students. Discrepancies among the studies hinge on abstruse matters of statistical methods. There is little reason to expect any consensus on the question of relative effectiveness, or to expect test score data to quiet the debate over alternative certification.

Very little qualitative or ethnographic research on the lives of alternatively certified teachers has been published. What little exists takes issue with the very positive public relations messages from such organizations as Teach for America.

The growth in alternatively certified teachers is spurred on by both exigency (a shortage of teachers in poor urban and rural schools) and ideology (a political opposition to regulation by government agencies and to university-based pre-service teacher education programs that are perceived as too progressive). Whatever the motivation of those who push for greater use of alternatively certified teachers, the movement threatens to de-skill the profession of teaching and even to devalue public education.

It is recommended that policymakers:

- Monitor the placement of uncertified and alternatively certified teachers in high-need schools toward the goal of achieving more equitable distributions of teaching talent;

- Investigate the possibility of creating a nationwide accrediting agency for alternative certification programs that are not covered by existing teacher preparation accrediting agencies.

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Introduction

The certification of teachers through programs other than those based in colleges and universities, rare before 1980, has become a prominent part of the teaching profession. Alternatively certified teachers are appearing in increasing numbers in private and charter schools and in poor urban neighborhoods where school districts have difficulty finding regularly certified teachers. As discussed below, this trend has inevitably given rise to the question of the relative effectiveness of alternatively and regularly certified teachers, but empirical research focused on students' achievement test performance gives no clear answers.

There are many good reports describing programs of alternative certification of teachers.¹ This brief neither supplants them nor updates or corrects them. Rather, it represents an attempt to cast the major issues in the debate over alternative certification in a somewhat new light and in a concise form.

Certification Basics

Traditionally, classroom teachers are “certified” or “licensed” by states. Though the former is generally tantamount to the latter, it may not always be. The difference is small but potentially significant in that it can raise legal issues. States that issue “certificates” may also issue “emergency certificates,” but there is no such counterpart for an “emergency license.”² Though such details may differ, most states use language like this: A college or university confers an “institutional recommendation” on a student who has completed its teacher education program, generally indicating specific preparation in such areas as secondary, elementary, or special education. The graduate takes the recommendation to a state agency that confers either a certificate or a license, depending on what the state calls it (California, for example, calls it a license and Arizona a certificate). Most states certify teachers with a general license, perhaps at only the elementary or secondary level, but many also issue certificates for teaching in special subjects—math or science, for example. Schools often come under criticism for assigning teachers to subjects in which they are not specially certified—known as “teaching out of field” (such special subject matter certification is beyond the scope of this brief and is not discussed further).

Currently, there are a growing number of alternatives to staffing schools with university-trained and state-certified or licensed teachers.

Individuals ineligible for state certification may be issued emergency permits if they are needed to fill critical vacancies. Or, young liberal arts graduates with short-course summer training, as in the Teach for America or New York City Teaching Fellows programs, may be placed in hard-to-fill slots in poor urban schools. Even individuals with no particular training or credentials at all, such as some charter school or private school teachers and many home-schooling parents, represent alternatives to regularly certified teachers. Although such alternatives were rarely implemented in public schools prior to 1985, when New Jersey created its Provisional Teacher Program, they have become increasingly common. Alternative or emergency teaching certificates are now issued in nearly every state in the U.S. and the District of Columbia. Some look upon this trend with concern; others see it as a welcome counter-movement to the dominance of college and university training programs and to a profession controlled by labor unions.

What are these alternative certification programs like? How prevalent are they? What has fueled their growth? Where—in what circumstances—are their teachers more likely to teach? What are the consequences of these various circumventions of traditional modes of certifying educators in terms of continuing in the profession, student achievement, and supervisor satisfaction?

The Programs and Their Political Supporters

Alternative teacher certification is generally thought of as a program leading to a teaching certificate, designed for persons who have not earned a bachelor's degree or who have not followed a traditional path through pre-service teacher training programs. The alternative routes to teaching certificates offer abbreviated training, requiring significantly less time to complete than traditional certification programs. For the purposes of this brief, "alternative certification" is also used to refer to the practice of providing emergency teaching permits to some groups. Typically, these are persons with bachelor's degrees but little or no background or training in teaching, as well as persons functioning as teachers but who lack traditional certification, such as teachers in some charter schools and parents schooling their children at home. Currently there are more than 140 alternative routes to certification or provisional certification into the teaching profession in the U.S.³

Alternative certification requirements vary greatly across states. In some states, applicants must complete some university-based training and pass a state-administered written test, or appear satisfactory in an interview, or both. States usually issue emergency teaching certificates when school districts can document a shortage of staff in critical areas like science, math, or special education. Some states have developed short courses of a few weeks that lead to an alternative certificate, or to a

provisional certificate that might become permanent after some probationary period.

States have moved into the area once dominated by university-based teacher preparation programs. Such states supplement the university endorsement with paper-and-pencil tests, and (rarely) other assessment devices, as requirements for certification. Of the 42 states and District of Columbia for which information was available in 2006: 29 states required basic skills tests; 34 states, subject matter tests; 22 states, pedagogy tests; and 19 states, performance assessments.⁴ Only three states (Iowa, Montana, and Wyoming) required no additional testing. As added requirements administered by state agencies gain legitimacy in the eyes of politicians and others, the hold that university-based preparation once had on teacher preparation is weakened.

Few other generalizations regarding the requirements for alternative certification are possible because the circumstances from state to state are so different.

Teach for America and Similar Programs

Teach for America (TFA) has become a highly visible effort to place teachers in distressed urban and rural environments, even though it accounts for only a tiny proportion—only some 5%—of alternatively certified teachers nationwide. The program receives more attention than its size alone would warrant because it represents a radical alternative to traditional forms of pre-service teacher training and is often held up as a highly successful example. TFA is an ideological banner: it represents the extreme case of what members of certain camps believe, namely, that finding the best teachers requires little more than locating high-IQ liberal arts graduates with extensive subject matter knowledge and providing them with a brief summer training course in how to be a teacher. If this model fails (and it is premature to say one way or the other), then alternative certification programs that lean in this direction but stop short of its excesses should be similarly questioned.

The intent of the Teach for America program is to place new bachelor's degree graduates with no university-based teacher training into schools for a two-year commitment after a five-week summer training experience. School districts pay a finder's fee of approximately \$4,500 for each TFA teacher placed in their district. TFA teachers receive the normal school district salary with benefits as well as an Americorps voucher to cover costs of student loans or further education. As discussed below, few of the TFA teachers continue in the profession after their brief service.

Teach for America is only one among many alternative certification programs taking a similar approach. Since 2000, New York City has operated an alternative program called NYC Teaching Fellows. The NYC Teaching Fellows program recruits and trains mid-career professionals looking to change professions as well as college graduates

with no pre-service teacher training. The program's website indicates that in 2006, there were more than 8,000 Fellows in New York City classrooms, constituting 10% of the total NYC teaching force. Approximately 90% of the Fellows persist to begin their second year of teaching. The program is highly selective, with less than 20% of applicants accepted into the program, and it subsidizes study for a master's degree.⁵ Teach Kentucky, a program in metropolitan Louisville founded by Yale University alumni, places bachelor's degree recipients in classrooms with full salary and also subsidizes their study for a master's degree. The Mississippi Teacher Corps, located in the Delta region, is another highly selective (10% of applicants) program that issues a certificate to bachelor's degree holders and subsidizes master's degree programs. Similar programs exist in many places in the U.S. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, Teach First is a program based on Teach for America; its graduates are placed in inner-city schools experiencing teacher shortages.⁶

Online Programs

Online teaching credential programs are also appearing. Prominent among them are programs at the University of Phoenix, Walden University, and Western Governors University. The latter claims to be the only online teacher education institution in the nation to receive NCATE accreditation.⁷ A teacher and principal certification program is also available entirely online from Western State College in Gunnison, Colorado.⁸ The Western State College program leads to a teaching license for those already filling a teaching position on more than a half-time basis. These programs will undoubtedly be followed by many similar online programs.

Political Support for Alternative Certification

It is fair to say that the Bush administration has assumed a hostile stance toward traditional teacher and administrator preparation since assuming power in 2001. In 2003, a discretionary grant from the U.S. Department of Education established the

National Center for Alternative Certification ... a one-stop, comprehensive clearinghouse for information about alternative routes to certification in the United States. The Center, through a toll free Call Center and a major interactive Web site, www.teach-now.org, provides immediate answers to questions and guidance for individuals interested in becoming teachers, as well as for policymakers, legislators, educators, researchers and members of the public.⁹

In April 2005, President George W. Bush named Jason Kamras the 2005 National Teacher of the Year at a White House ceremony. Kamras holds a bachelor's degree from Princeton and a master's degree from Harvard and entered teaching through the Teach for America program. Mr. Kamras's abilities as a teacher aside—and one would assume that they are substantial—it seems likely that those choosing him for this honor were aware and perhaps influenced by his exemplification of the Administration's position that academic ability is the most important characteristic of a successful teacher.

A major research study funded by the U.S. Department of Education and conducted by the Education Commission of the States in 2005 drew three rather cautious conclusions with regard to alternative certification (emphasis added):

The research provides *limited support* for the *modest conclusion* that the retention rates of alternative route graduates *can* be comparable to, and even exceed, that of traditional route graduates. ... The research also provides *limited evidence* that *some* alternative programs are successful in recruiting a constituency into teaching that is more diverse ethnically and in age than the profession as a whole.

As far as the impact of imposing more stringent requirements for entrance into teacher preparation, the research literature is *inconclusive*.¹⁰

Demographics

The supply of regularly certified teachers waxes and wanes as a function of economic forces affecting the job market and higher education. Tuition rates, student loan policy, and competing job markets all affect the production of regularly certified teachers by colleges and universities.

Prevalence of Levels of Certification

Data extracted from various National Center for Education Statistics tabulations reveal striking and significant patterns across time and school types (public v. private) in teachers' certification status. The percentage of regularly certified teachers in the nation's public schools (including charter schools) declined from roughly 94% to about 88% in the 10-year period from 1993-1994 to 2003-2004 (see Table 1). The chances that a private school elementary teacher was uncertified nearly doubled (20.3% v. 37.9%) from 1993-1994 to 2003-2004.

Figure 1 displays the numbers of alternatively certified teachers in the nation's schools across the 20-year period from 1985 to 2005. The growth in the population of alternatively certified teachers exploded beginning in 1998. While reasons aren't entirely clear, one likely contributing factor is that California's class-size reduction law went into effect in July 1996, and many emergency permits were issued beginning with the 1997-1998 school year.

Table 1: Percentages* of full-time teachers by school level and type, and certification status for the academic years 1993–1994 & 2003–2004**

	1993-1994				2003-2004			
	Elementary		Secondary		Elementary		Secondary	
	Public	Private	Public	Private	Public	Private	Public	Private
<i>Regular</i>	93.5%	73.8%	94.0%	69.0%	88.9%	54.6%	86.5%	43.0%
<i>Altern. or Provis.</i>	2.0% (n= 27,000)	3.4%	2.5% (n= 18,800)	3.0%	3.9% (n= 73,500)	3.8%	4.9% (n= 44,600)	1.9%
<i>Temp. or Emerg.</i>	1.1%	1.4%	1.0%	1.9%	2.6%	2.3%	3.2%	2.1%
<i>None</i>	2.1%	20.3% (n= 27,600)	1.5%	25.4% (n= 12,500)	1.0%	37.9% (n= 67,400)	1.4%	51.5% (n= 31,100)

(Sources: Based on <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2007/section4/table.asp?tableID=722> and <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2007/section4/table.asp?tableID=724>)

* Percentages do not sum to 100 in every case because the “Probationary” category is omitted from the results.

***Regular* certification means standard state licenses or advanced professional certificates (either public or private school teachers) or certificates granted by a certifying body other than the state in the case of private schools. *Provisional* certificates mean licenses given to participants in alternative certification programs. *Probationary* means persons who have satisfied all requirements except completing a probationary period. *Temporary* certificates mean those who require additional college coursework or student teaching. *Emergency* certificates mean those who must complete a regular program to continue teaching.

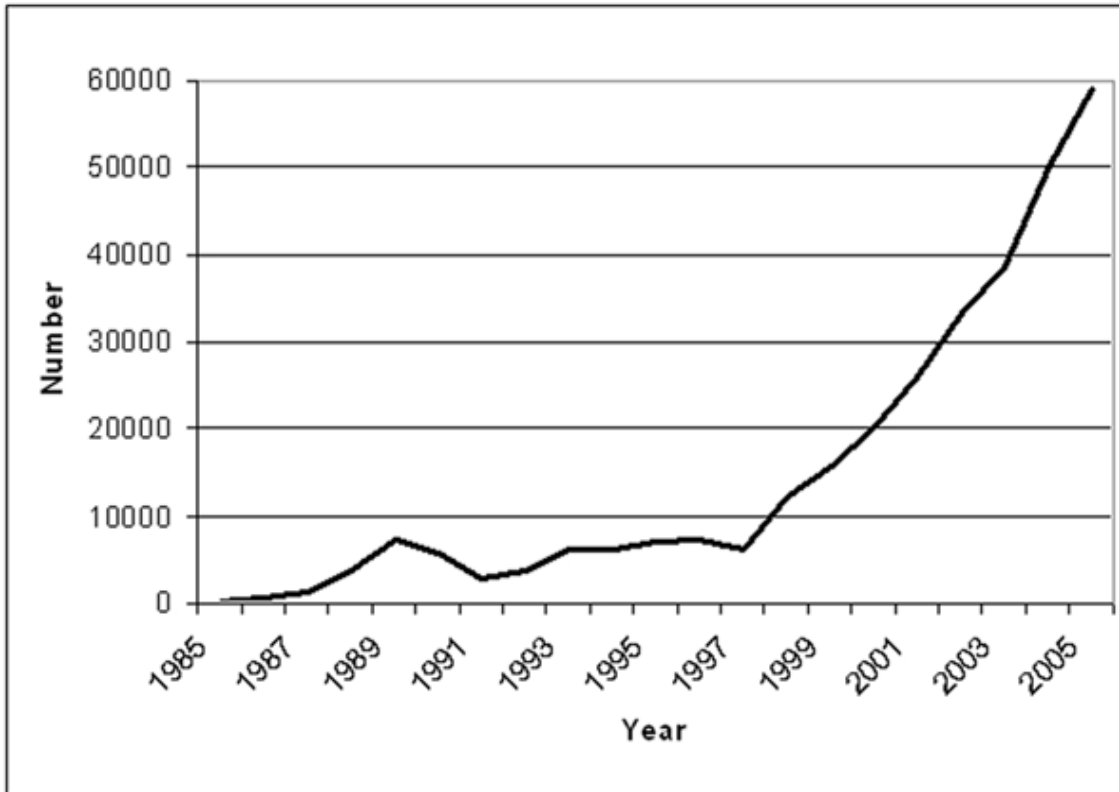


Figure 1: Number of Alternatively Certified Teachers in U.S. Schools

Source: Based on <http://www.teach-now.org/overview.cfm>, National Center for Alternative Certification

Teach for America data should be examined particularly closely since the program represents a special case to many participants in the certification debates. From a beginning in only six communities, TFA teachers now hold positions in more than two dozen urban areas. From among thousands of college graduates, TFA selects about one in five applicants for its training and placement program (see Table 2, following).

Charter schools often hire alternatively certified teachers or teachers lacking even emergency or provisional certification. In this context, “uncertified” should be considered as a form of “alternative certification.” State laws creating charter schools vary greatly with respect to whether charter school teachers must be certified. As of 2005, 22 states with charter schools required that all teachers in the charter school be regularly certified. Twelve required that some percentage of the teachers be certified, with the percentage varying from as low as 50% to as high as 90%. Two states (Arizona, Texas) and D.C. had no certification requirement at all for charter school teachers. Ten states expressly allow alternative certification for charter school teachers.¹¹

Table 2: Numbers of Applicants, Selected Teachers, Communities Served and Operating Budget for Teach for America, 2000-2007

<i>Year</i>	<i>Applicants</i>	<i>Selected</i>	<i>Communities</i>	<i>Budget</i>
2000	4,068	900	13	\$10.3M
2001	4,946	951	16	\$17.0M
2002	13,877	1,731	18	\$23.9M
2003	15,698	1,719	20	\$29.4M
2004	13,378	1,661	22	\$34.0M
2005	17,350	2,226	?	\$39.5M
2006	18,966	2,503	25	\$57.0M
2007	18,172	3,026	26	\$70.2M

Source: http://www.teachforamerica.org/about/our_history.htm

Alternative certification represents a route to the teaching profession for many minorities. Approximately 32% of new teachers entering the profession via alternate routes are non-white, although the number is lower for TFA (in 2006, among TFA’s 2,400 “corps” members, 8.8% were African-American and 5.8% were Hispanic/Latino). Nationally, only 10% of the nation’s current teaching force is minority, although it is not known what percentage of new teachers are minority. Alternative certification programs represent for many an entrée to teaching that would not be available otherwise.¹²

Teachers issued emergency permits constitute a significant proportion of those teachers not holding regular teaching licenses. Recent legislation limiting class size in California caused an immediate and severe teacher shortage that was filled largely with emergency personnel. Goe researched the types of schools where those teachers were likely to be placed.¹³ Table 3, following, is a tabulation of the correlations Goe calculated that describe how the percentage of teachers with emergency permits relates to various characteristics of the schools in which they are placed. The correlation coefficients, shown in the second column, indicate that, for example, schools with high percentages of emergency permit teachers are more likely to have higher percentages of minority students and students who are poor and less well educated. They are also more likely to have higher percentages of first-year teachers.

Alternatively certified teachers are clustered in poor urban schools. In 2000-2001, 47% of the newly hired teachers in the Houston, Texas school district were alternatively certified; 8% of the district’s teachers were from TFA.¹⁴ Not incidentally, perhaps, in the Houston situation was

the fact that Bush’s first Secretary of Education, Rod Paige was Superintendent of that district before leaving for Washington. In 2007, two urban school districts in Phoenix, Arizona, hired dozens of TFA teachers to fill otherwise vacant slots

Table 3: Percentage of California Emergency Permit Teachers by School, Correlated with Selected Student, Teacher, and School Characteristics¹⁵

<i>School Characteristic</i>	<i>% EP Teachers</i>
% African-American students	.24
% Hispanic students	.49
% Students on free/reduced-price lunch	.44
% Parents not high school graduates	.38
% Parents who attended graduate school	-.28
% 1 st year teachers	.40

Source: Based on Table 6 in Goe, L. (2002). Legislating equity: The distribution of emergency permit teachers in California. *Educational Policy Analysis Archives*, 10 (42): <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v10n42/>.

Notwithstanding the growing frequency of the practice, few districts advertise the fact that they are making extensive use of alternatively certified teachers. Goe noted how bureaucratic efforts at the state level in California disguised the prevalence of teachers with emergency permits and actually created the impression of a reduction in their numbers.

The change is the addition of a new category called “pre-intern,” which is the next step up from emergency permit on the credentialing ladder. In order to qualify for this designation, teachers must have met the EP requirements and they must have enrolled in a teacher preparation program. By encouraging or forcing EP teachers to immediately enroll in teacher preparation programs, districts can seem to have fewer EP teachers, while in fact they still have about the same number of underqualified teachers.¹⁶

In 1995, approximately 30 of the 40 largest school districts in the U.S. serving poor and minority students hired no certified teachers to fill vacancies.¹⁷ They did not generally allow the practice. Yet by 2000, nearly a quarter of all teachers in very poor districts in California were uncertified, perhaps reflecting the impact of the California class-size reduction reform.¹⁸ Still, the phenomenon remained (and remains) limited to such urban areas. If traditional teacher training is the stifling and deadening regimen that some critics think it is, then it is curious that well-

to-do suburban schools are not taking advantage of all the alternatively certified teachers available in the job market.

Few states require any form of certification for parents who school their own children at home. In March 2008, a three-judge panel of a state appeals court in Los Angeles interpreted a long-standing state law to require that persons wishing to home school their children must have a teaching certificate (and by implication, perhaps, a bachelor's degree). There are 166,000 home schooled students in California. Nearly everyone expects that the decision will be appealed to the California Supreme Court and overturned or, alternatively, reversed by legislation.

Effectiveness

The question most often asked about alternatively certified teachers is whether their students “learn as much”—that is, whether regularly certified teachers’ students score better on achievement tests. A small body of empirical research does permit some tentative answers. Some of these studies are experimental comparative studies; others are regression analyses based on data from such routine administrative sources as personnel records and test scores.

Significant Studies of Alternative Certification and Student Achievement

California granted more than 20,000 emergency permits or waivers of its certification requirements in the first five years of the 1990s,¹⁹ and these alternatively certified and uncertified teachers tended to be placed in low-achieving, high-minority schools.²⁰ There is a positive correlation between a secondary school’s dropout rate and its percentage of new teacher hires; the dropout rate is negatively correlated with the average level of teaching experience of the school.²¹

Two studies, both done in California, used regression techniques to explore possible correlations between the concentration of emergency certified teachers in schools and school districts and the academic achievement of the students. Goe²² concluded that “There is a significant negative relationship between the percentage of teachers on emergency permits and student achievement at the school level in California schools, after controlling for other student and school characteristics.” Fetler²³ showed that “The percent of mathematics teachers on emergency permits predicted test scores about as well as student participation [that is, math courses taken]. Higher percents of emergencies were associated with lower scores.” In California, more than 10% of high school mathematics teachers were teaching with emergency certificates.

In addition, research from Linda Darling-Hammond and her colleagues has consistently shown that regularly certified and experienced teachers teach more effectively, or contribute more to their students’

learning, than uncertified, alternatively certified, or provisionally certified teachers.²⁴ Darling-Hammond et al. concluded:

In a series of regression analyses looking at 4th and 5th grade student achievement gains on six different reading and mathematics tests over a six-year period, we find that certified teachers consistently produce significantly stronger student achievement gains than do uncertified teachers. Alternatively certified teachers are also generally less effective than certified teachers. These findings hold for TFA recruits as well as others. Controlling for teacher experience, degrees, and student characteristics, uncertified TFA recruits are less effective than certified teachers, and perform about as well as other uncertified teachers.²⁵

A small number of experimental studies have addressed the question of whether traditionally certified teachers are more effective than alternatively certified ones. In two prominent cases, Teach for America teachers constituted all or part of the alternatively certified group in the comparison.

Laczko-Kerr and Berliner matched traditionally certified and “under-certified” teachers on three criteria: 1) within same school, 2) within same school district, and 3) between similar school districts. The authors conducted four different analyses to ensure that the matching of certified and under-certified teachers was sufficient to permit valid comparisons of students’ achievement test data. Laczko-Kerr and Berliner concluded

1) that students of TFA teachers did not perform significantly different from students of other under-certified teachers, and 2) that students of certified teachers outperformed students of teachers who were under-certified. ... In reading, mathematics, and language, the students of certified teachers outperformed students of under-certified teachers, including the students of the TFA teachers, by about 2 months on a grade equivalent scale.²⁶

A study performed by Mathematica Policy Research came to a conclusion at variance with that of Laczko-Kerr and Berliner. In 2003, the Institutes of Education Sciences awarded Mathematica Policy Research a grant of nearly \$7 million to study the effectiveness—in terms of student achievement—of various teacher training approaches. In a 2004 interim report—the only one yet available on the four-year study—the gains in reading and mathematics test scores for students randomly assigned to TFA teachers or other teachers in the same school were compared. Students of TFA teachers gained on average .15 standard deviation units

more on the mathematics test than did the other students.²⁷ This is equivalent to students having received one extra month of instruction. There was no difference between the average gain scores in reading. Although this study has been widely cited to justify a conclusion that TFA teachers are superior to traditionally certified teachers, in fact a third of the teachers in the “control group” in this study were other alternatively certified teachers or held emergency certificates or no certificate at all. That is, the TFA teachers were not really being compared to fully certified teachers. Moreover, more than half of the TFA group had earned a regular teaching certificate by the end of the study’s first year. Therefore, all that can be said about the Mathematica study is that it compared a group of TFA teachers—half of whom *were* traditionally certified—with another group of teachers, one-third of whom were other *non*-traditionally certified teachers.

The Mathematica results appear to be inconsistent with the Laczko-Kerr and Berliner results. Although the Mathematica group makes much of the fact that their study involved random assignment of students to teachers, the experimental unit in this case was an entire classroom and not individual students. Hence, the degrees of freedom, and consequently the degree of experimental control afforded by randomization, were exaggerated in the report of the study.²⁸ As with so many issues in education research, the relative effectiveness of alternatively certified teachers dissolves into arguments about recondite matters of statistical methods.

Other Evidence of Effectiveness

The Teach for America website highlights a survey of principals in schools employing TFA teachers. The survey, conducted by Kane, Parsons and Associates Inc., involved more than 400 telephone interviews in the 18 regions in which TFA teachers were placed in 2002-2003. The survey is offered as evidence that the principals rate *the* “training and ability [of TFA teachers] to impact student achievement as better than most beginning teachers.”²⁹ However, the exact wording of the question on which this finding is based was whether the principal felt that TFA training was “better than average” (presumably the average teachers hired at these hard-to-staff schools). “More than half of principals (58 percent) surveyed regard Teach for America teachers as above average compared to their overall teaching faculty in terms of their impact on student achievement.”³⁰ Approximately 90% of the principals felt that TFA teachers were as well prepared as other beginning teachers.

Various sources report different figures on the percentage of TFA teachers who continue in teaching after their two-year obligation is completed. These figures generally range between 60% and 80%, but reliable and representative figures on TFA retention are hard to come by, and any consideration of these numbers should be understood in relation

to overall attrition among beginning teachers. It has been reported that a third of newly hired teachers leave the profession within five years.³¹

Local data suggest that rates of leaving teaching after the two-year TFA obligation are high. For instance, an average of 80% of TFA teachers left their jobs in Houston, Texas, after two years.³² The Chicago Public Schools, which hires about 100 TFA teachers each year, has found that fewer than half remain in teaching for a third year. Forty-three percent of the TFA teachers who started in Chicago public schools in 2001 were still teaching in 2004. This figure was up slightly from 39% for those who began teaching in 2000.³³ The personal observations of a former TFA teacher point toward the need for research that looks beyond bubble sheets and test scores:

In some circles, there is a perception that Teach for America's corps of teachers do not come back, that many of them view their teaching stint as a résumé-burnishing pit stop before moving on to bigger things—that T.F.A. stands for “Teach for Awhile.” The numbers are telling. More than a third leave after their two years, and another 10 percent drop out well before. T.F.A. says that more than 60 percent of its alumni stay in education, though its definition of education is a broad one. In the organization's view, it takes allies in every field to close the achievement gap. T.F.A.'s sights are set on the boardroom and Capitol Hill. This is what it calls “the second half of the movement,” beyond the classroom.³⁴

Questionnaire surveys and achievement test outcome studies have failed to capture the lived experiences of many TFA teachers. One of the few long-term ethnographic studies of Teach for America teachers discovered a reality for many that contrasts starkly with glowing testimonials in the program's literature. Veltri concluded in her study that many TFA teachers “lacked pedagogy, school law, child and adolescent development knowledge, and realistic clinical experiences in classrooms, prior to their assuming the role ... in the critical elementary and middle level ... grades, including Special Education, where 98% of their students hail from poor, racial and ethnic minority populations.”³⁵

Veltri quoted one TFA teacher as saying “Teach for America is still a system that brings middle and upper class white college grads to poor areas to teach black and brown kids, who are then used as résumé-builders.” Another confessed, “I find myself in a constant state of quandary, streaked deeply with self-doubt. What am I doing here? Am I making any positive contribution to the lives of my students? How can I call myself a teacher?” A TFA alumnus, Jonathan Schorr, described his experience in words not likely to ever appear on the TFA website: “...just eight weeks of training ... is not enough for teachers” (p. 316). “I was not a

successful teacher, and the loss to the students was real and large” (p. 318).³⁶

To some extent, at least, even the subject matter knowledge that these college graduates bring to the classroom is underutilized. An honors graduate in molecular biology and classics of the author’s acquaintance was placed in a first grade classroom as a TFA teacher in south Phoenix, Arizona. Only one of the 25 students in her class spoke English and she spoke no Spanish. The single bilingual child served as a translator for the young teacher for six weeks until she could be reassigned.

Exigency and Ideology

The phenomenon of alternative certification of educators is politically complex. Some programs are driven by exigency, some by ideology. On the one hand, programs are created to meet the need for teachers in circumstances where many traditionally trained teachers would not go. Shortages of teachers also occur because of low salaries for the profession. On the other hand, some programs are created and sustained by *laissez faire* political philosophies with anti-union and anti-regulatory sentiments. It is likely that the rise of alternatively certified educators has achieved at least some of what those with both motives sought to achieve. Teachers have been placed in classrooms that otherwise might have been substantially increased in size due to shortages; and it is likely that the professionalization of the teaching corps and increased prestige and remuneration have been retarded by the alternative certification movement.

The pressure to devise alternatives to college and university-based training programs arises in part from the perennial tension between those who train teachers in the university and those who employ them in the field. The university faculty see their mission as questioning the status quo, critiquing common practice and instituting a new and better way. Professionals in the schools often view the efforts of university faculty as “out of touch,” naively idealistic, and impractical. It is no wonder, then, that those who face the day-to-day pressures and emergencies of making schools actually work would seek alternative ways of preparing employees to work in them.

Exigency

Although a substantial body of research on the effectiveness of alternatively certified teachers exists and is growing, its conclusion that many such teachers are less effective (although not by much) is largely irrelevant to the future of the movement. Teacher shortages will continue unless wages increase substantially, and anti-regulatory ideologies appear robust and growing.

One of the engines driving the alternative certification movement is the desire to reduce the cost of public education. Uncertified teachers cannot generally demand the same level of pay as certified teachers. Increasingly, schools are turning to inexperienced teachers to fill the ranks of their teaching staff. Experienced teachers who have left and then re-entered the teaching force had always, in the past, been a major source of employees for the public schools. Compared with first-time teachers, the re-entrants can command a higher salary. Re-entering teachers made up 33% of all hires in 1988; just three years later that figure dropped to 24% and continues to drop.³⁷ In 1994, 57% of first-time teachers came from typical undergraduate teacher training colleges and universities, a decrease of about 10 percentage points from the figure six years earlier. A relatively new strategy on the scene is the re-hiring of retired teachers on contracts with a commercial placement agency³⁸; the schools do not offer these retirees health or retirement benefits and they are paid at a level substantially below their last regular salary.

Some of this sub-market hiring and provisional certification of teachers is taking place because of genuine teacher shortages. For instance, California has experienced, over the past few decades, a huge expansion of its public education system and a class-size limit law. Significantly, that expansion has disproportionately been in areas enrolling disproportionately high numbers of Hispanic students. Schools with high incidence of poverty among their students have teacher turnover rates—as much as 50% higher than more affluent schools.³⁹ However, rather than invest more in the preparation of regularly certified teachers, states and districts have tended to circumvent more expensive avenues and purchase discounted services. College graduates trained in science, mathematics, and technology require significantly higher salaries than the market will bear if they are to enter public school teaching.⁴⁰

Ideology

In an age of escalating public expenditures (as a share of the Gross Domestic Product) and deteriorating urban school districts, alternative certification is discussed with a new sense of urgency. An increasingly influential ideology of free-market capitalism and anti-government regulation has also brought alternative teacher certification to the forefront of education policy debates.

These latter arguments are cast as attacks on the value of traditional, university-based teacher training, but their source suggests that the underlying motivation is political and economic. For example, Kate Walsh, Senior Policy Analyst at the Abell Foundation and President of the National Council on Teacher Quality,⁴¹ concluded:

Maryland's requirement that individuals must complete a prescribed body of coursework before teaching in a public

school is deeply misguided. This process, known as teacher certification, is neither an efficient nor an effective means by which to ensure a competent teaching force. Worse, it is often counterproductive.⁴²

Darling-Hammond countered the Abell Foundation report “Teacher Certification Reconsidered” in a 2002 peer-reviewed article. She presented data

challenging the Abell Foundation’s unfounded claims that uncertified teachers are as effective as certified teachers, that teacher education makes no difference to teacher effectiveness, that verbal ability is the most important determinant of teaching effectiveness, that private schools staffed by uncertified teachers are more effective than public schools, and that untrained teachers are more qualified than prepared teachers.⁴³

This is an instructional exchange that interested readers may want to review. A second example can be found in the writings of Frederick Hess, Resident Scholar and Director of Education Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute.⁴⁴ Hess argues that traditional teacher training and certification are based on three false assumptions: 1) those not traditionally trained in pre-service university programs will not be able to perform their teaching duties adequately; 2) that current licensing practices “weed out” unfit persons; and 3) traditional certification raises the image of the profession and thus attracts more qualified individuals. In place of traditional pre-service training and certification, Hess proposes three requirements for entering the profession: a bachelor’s degree, a written test covering the content to be taught, and a criminal background check.

Those who argue strenuously for the traditional form of pre-service teacher training, however, may have to address the question why college-level teachers, who have no training remotely like that of K-12 teachers, seem to escape the continual criticism heaped on regularly certified teachers. Does their success present a challenge to those who argue for the necessity of the traditional route to a classroom? Or are they not as successful as they appear and their ineffectiveness merely hidden from view?

Conclusion

Research on alternative certification of teaching has been pursued with little imagination or depth. Achievement test data, gathered at arm’s length, used to compare two groups of teachers differently trained may have been helpful at a stage of almost complete ignorance. But at this

stage in the study of alternatively certified teachers it hardly qualifies as “thick description.” Investigations that contrast the lived experiences of beginning teachers placed quickly in the classroom are needed. Research must also honor teaching as something more than the production of scores on paper-and-pencil tests. 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 wither.

Recommendations

A couple of tentative recommendations for policymakers, teacher educators, and education administrators may be drawn from the foregoing observations:

- Monitor the placement of uncertified and alternatively certified teachers in high-need schools toward the goal of achieving more equitable distributions of teaching talent;
- Investigate the possibility of creating a nationwide accrediting agency for alternative certification programs not covered by existing teacher preparation accrediting agencies.

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This point seems not to have been well understood in the Decker et al. report: “Randomization ensured that the classes in the targeted grades 8 were essentially identical with respect to the average characteristics of students assigned to the classes; consequently any differences in average outcomes can be attributed to differences in the teachers.” Randomization does not ensure

- “essential identity” between comparison groups; it only provides similarity within the range of chance. Consequently, two groups in non-randomized matched conditions could be even more similar than randomly constituted groups. Moreover, “any differences” between groups can arise from the vagaries of random assignment; those that exceed reasonable limits of chance differences may be attributed to the teachers, but other sources of invalidity also affected the results of the Mathematica study. This digression into technical matters is necessary in a decade in which “randomization” has become a Shibboleth providing entry into the favored circle of IES grant recipients.
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