

Alternate route and traditionally-trained teachers' perceptions of teaching preparation programs

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ABSTRACT

The debate about the effectiveness of alternate route teacher preparation programs continues in K-12 schools and institutions of higher learning. As alternate route teacher programs continue to prepare more and more teachers for the K-12 classroom, these programs will continue to face scrutiny regarding their effectiveness.

This current study interviewed K-12 teachers across several disciplines to understand their perceptions of the effectiveness of alternate route teacher preparation programs when compared to traditional teacher preparation programs. Half of the teachers interviewed were trained through a traditional teacher education program while the other half were trained through alternate route programs. The findings of the study indicate that while both methods of teacher preparation programs are effective, placing teacher candidates in the classroom as much as possible to gain experience is the best way to train future teachers.

Keywords: teacher preparation, alternate route, traditional teacher preparation, teacher education

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps no single issue creates more heated discussion in the field of education than the one which focuses on the credibility of Alternate Route (AR) teacher-training programs in comparison to programs that prepare teachers via the traditional route in schools of education. In a report released in 2005, Emily Feistritzer argued that teachers who complete AR programs have a high level of competence when they enter into the classroom. Likewise, Howell Garner (2010), who is the Executive Director of the Mississippi Community College Foundation, believes that participants in his state's AR program have a favorable comparison with those who go through traditional training in university programs. On the contrary, there are some people who criticize AR programs because they feel that they "shortchange both teacher candidates and the students they teach because their preparation, particularly in pedagogy, is inadequate" (Allen, 2003, p. 6).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION/LITERATURE REVIEW

Most teacher education programs have a specific structural context after which they pattern themselves. These generally include a minimum GPA, a completion of a bachelor's degree, and a focus on the following: social, institutional, and state policy contexts; conceptual orientation; admission to teacher education programs, a specified curriculum; and field experiences (Zeichner & Paige, 2007). According to No Child Left Behind standards, teachers in elementary schools are required to be highly-qualified in specific subject-areas (Nagy & Wang, 2006). In most states, secondary school teachers are generally required to have subject-area degrees. Zeichner and Paige (2007) cite Rod Paige as affirming that content-area degrees are of primary importance for teachers entering into the field of education who are planning to teach in a specific content area. Teachers who hold standard certification, where they have the subject-area knowledge, have students who perform better than teachers who go through alternate methods to obtain certification (Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000). Nagy and Wang (2006) affirmed that "teacher's knowledge in the subject area has significant impacts on students' learning" (p. 12). In addition, Allen (2003) pointed out that knowledge of how to teach a subject is important, so some form of teacher training is imperative in order for a teacher to be successful in the classroom.

The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) helps increase the number of graduates who are fully certified to teach once they finish a program of study, but this certification does not always guarantee whether or not they will be effective teachers (Allen, 2003). In fact, some of the standards required to go into the field of teaching have become so stringent that many are veering away from education altogether (Sass, 2008). However, having a license provides the appearance that a person was trained and held to higher standards, although very little research exists on the effectiveness of teacher licensure (Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000). Most educators feel that teacher licensure is a way to screen those entering into the field of education and to ensure that they have the basic skills needed to effectively teach a class. These skills are generally measured by standardized tests, such as the Praxis exam, to help determine a teacher's knowledge of his/her subject.

Alternate Route (AR) Certification

New Jersey was one of the first states to create an AR teaching program (Nagy & Wang, 2006). Zeichner and Paige (2007) indicated that since the early 1980s, there has been a significant increase in the number of teachers who enter into the field using the AR method of attaining teacher certification or licensure. AR is defined as “anything other than a four or five-year undergraduate program in a college or university” (Zeichner & Paige, 2007, p. 3). AR teacher certification serves as on-the-job training (Allen, 2003).

Most states differ greatly on the requirements of what AR means in order to attain licensure (Darling-Hammond, 2009). Allen (2003) maintained that AR programs should require a curriculum that provides teachers with teaching methodology and basics of classroom instructional skills, but he found that there is inconclusive evidence as to which courses are important for a person to take in order to be knowledgeable about a specific subject that he or she will teach. Taking more courses in a specific subject does not guarantee the ability to successfully run a classroom.

Most AR teachers have qualifications similar to those of traditional teachers (Darling-Hammond, Berry, & Thoreson, 2000). Walsh and Jacobs (2007) found that many AR programs at this time are requiring more classes and more time for students to spend in education courses than ever before. These AR teachers now have to take coursework while they are teaching as opposed to the traditional method of taking coursework before entering into the classroom. Walsh and Jacobs (2007) avowed that many AR programs are starting to closely resemble traditional-route programs because they are facilitated by schools of education, and teachers are required to take more education courses in order to attain or keep their licensure. In some teacher-education programs, there are strict guidelines regarding who can even enter into the licensing program (Allen, 2003). Some researchers also believe that AR teachers may not have as much of a commitment as a person who chose to enter into the teaching profession. This may be the reason that the attrition rate of AR teachers is higher than others in the field (Darling-Hammond, 2009; Nagy & Wang, 2006; Sass, 2008).

The Effectiveness of AR Teachers

Several studies have attempted to determine whether or not AR teachers are effective in the classroom. Darling-Hammond (2009) claimed that research has found that AR teachers were generally less effective in their first two years than traditional route teachers, especially in the areas of teaching subjects such as reading. AR teachers who complete additional coursework and had gained some experience in the classroom had greater gains in subjects such as mathematics than other teachers from traditional-route programs. When compared with emergency route teachers, AR groups were effective when they had gone through some special training. Nagy and Wang (2006) conducted a study in Arizona on AR teachers. They found that AR teachers themselves felt that all teachers should definitely participate in some type of teacher training preparation before beginning in the classroom. Once these teachers were in the classroom, staff development was extremely important in the transition to teaching. In addition, as part of their training, mentoring and observing other teachers' classrooms to learn about classroom management and teaching styles was an effective means of teacher training to someone who went through the AR method of gaining teacher certification.

Darling-Hammond (2009) affirmed that students in AR classes generally performed no differently from students of traditional teachers. She cites the Mathematica study as justification for this premise. The Mathematica study looked at schools that hire AR teachers and did a comparison of traditional route teachers at the same school. This study was exclusive of teachers who went through selective programs such as Teach for America because these programs generally select the highest achieving college graduates. Many want to use the Mathematica study to justify encouraging people to enter the field through AR, but Darling-Hammond says that the conclusions that are drawn from the study are incorrect: teachers from low coursework AR programs generally had students who did not perform as well as students from high coursework AR programs, making the argument that teacher-education training might possibly be imperative to those who will enter into the field of education.

Also, Darling-Hammond (2009) revealed that most AR teachers are not very effective in increasing student achievement, but their traditional route counterparts also have problems with affecting student achievement. The Mathematica study did not offer any guidance to teacher education programs about how to improve the quality of the teacher who graduates from a university education program. The study found that AR teachers who were still taking their coursework while teaching were less effective in teaching subjects such as math and reading. In addition, Darling-Hammond further cited a research study from North Carolina that found that students did better in classes where the teacher was “fully prepared” (p. 7) to teach when he or she entered the classroom. This preparation can come from a teacher-education background where not only subject-area knowledge is offered but also pedagogical knowledge. Other factors that prove important in preparing teachers include the following: certification in a specific subject area, high teacher licensing scores, and even such factors as having National Board Certification.

In research conducted by Sass (2008), it was concluded that AR teachers who teach at the elementary level have stronger pre-service qualifications than traditional-route teachers. Additional educational coursework does little to help improve teacher education outcomes. In fact, it was found that there was no difference between AR teachers and traditional-route teachers in their effectiveness of facilitating a class. The author posited that innate ability, more than likely, has a great impact on a person’s ability to teach because those who wanted to be teachers from the beginning of their post-secondary education are probably more devoted to the career field. Sass further implied that many feel that taking education classes helps prepare a teacher to be better in the classroom, and if this is the case, AR teachers are not as prepared and cannot be as effective as teachers who participate in the traditional-route of gaining teacher licensure. Sass wrote that very little quantitative research has been conducted on the effectiveness of AR programs in comparison to teacher-education programs, but Sass cited a 2006 study by Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff that attempted to determine whether one type of certification route was better than another.

Boyd et al.’s (2006) study focused on students who went through the Teaching Fellows program and the Teach for America program, a type of AR teaching program. Teach for America is a program that recruits graduates from elite schools to teach in high-poverty areas. After reviewing studies on Teach for America teachers versus those who pursued the traditional route of teaching, The Teach for America group was as effective as their traditional-route counterparts in teaching math but not as effective in teaching English-Language Arts. On the contrary, the Fellows program seeks out mid-career professionals who want to go back to school to become teachers. Boyd et al. (2006) found that those from the Fellows program improved

over time in comparison to their traditionally-prepared counterparts even though teachers from the Fellows program “are more likely to teach in classes with lower achieving students” (p. 5). Teachers from the Fellows program are “actually more effective” in their third year of teaching (p. 6), especially in specific subject areas such as math and science.

Sass (2008) made the distinction between the two types of teacher certification by examining the ways Florida teachers earn their credentials. The author observed that in Florida, most teachers are not required to work toward an education degree. School districts require standard general knowledge and education certification tests to be passed. A study of Florida teachers discovered that teachers who completed AR programs had higher student achievement scores in math, reading, English, and essay writing, and they also had stronger pre-service academic skills such as college entrance exams and certification exams. When the skills of middle-school teachers were evaluated, the achievement levels of students showed little difference between the AR and the traditional route teachers. Sass noted that “The additional training that graduates of traditional teacher preparation programs receive my [sic] offset any advantages that alternatively certified teachers have in innate ability” (p. 21). Once again, the idea of innate ability comes into play. Those teachers who desired to go into education perhaps have a stronger innate ability to teach rather than those who enter the profession through AR. Sass concluded by admitting, however, that if AR teachers are proven to be just as productive as traditional route teachers, then it is suggested that this would be a more efficient way to train teachers than the traditional route.

Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff (2009) declared that there are many ways to enter into the teaching field but few ways to evaluate the effectiveness of the variety of entry methods. Many studies have been conducted on teacher preparation and its effectiveness, but the scope has been limited to preparation process rather than the outcome of the process. It is believed that the preparation that the teacher receives has a determining factor on how well teachers perform in the classroom. Teacher programs that require students to focus on the classroom experience, and what the teacher will do in the classroom, produce a better qualified teacher. Boyd et al. (2006) avowed that teachers who are allowed to student teach or complete a Capstone project that required classroom experiences go into the field with better preparation. However, Boyd et al. (2009) cited one study as concluding that once teachers are in the field and are teaching, teachers claim to learn more from professional development from their schools than they learn during pre-service teacher training.

Darling-Hammond et al. (2000) also agreed that AR teachers with more educational training tend to have students who achieve better. However, they found student achievement is higher when a teacher holds a degree in a subject area. They conclude that students of traditionally certified teachers generally do better. Teacher preparation is improved when teachers have a specific knowledge of subject matter and teaching skills; also, when teachers experience some type of clinical training, their chances of succeeding in the classroom are better. Furthermore, subject matter background has a positive connection to student achievement in specific subject matter. Darling-Hammond et al. (2000) cite Goldhaber and Brewer as stating that even though traditional teacher certification is generally thought to produce higher quality teachers, there is little evidence to support this. In fact, Goldhaber and Brewer found a positive relationship between student achievement and teachers who are traditionally certified as compared to those who achieve certification in alternate ways. Darling-Hammond (1999) stated that teachers with full certification in a specific subject-area major produce students who achieve better. Teachers must not only possess good content knowledge, but they must also be able to

relate to students and be able to diagnose students' needs. Students who have an educational background are better-prepared because they understand students' personal factors such as minority status, background, and language barriers. They learned how to understand this information through classes in educational and child psychology. By taking these classes, they are better-prepared teachers.

METHODOLOGY

This research study used a qualitative design, collecting and analyzing descriptive, open-ended questions from both K-12 traditional and alternate route teachers. The researchers collected data from K-12 teachers in the major subject areas of mathematics, science, history, and English. Data were collected in each subject area from both traditional route and alternate route teachers. The researchers felt that teachers who had completed at least two years in the classroom would have enough experience to provide meaningful, accurate feedback. Data were obtained from a total of eight teachers from three school districts in the Southeastern United States. The researchers employed convenience sampling but made efforts to obtain data from a variety of teachers across different schools. The teachers had varying amounts of experience, ranging from two years of classroom experience to 20 years. The teachers with the most experience taught mathematics (17 and 20 years), and those who responded who had the least experience taught English (2 and 3 years).

The researchers developed an online survey instrument to use in this study which asked a variety of open-ended questions to elicit responses regarding curriculum training, content knowledge, standardized teacher licensure exams, and pedagogical training (Appendix A). Further questions on the instrument were related to classroom management, teacher education programs, and mentoring. Participants were allowed to respond with as little or as much detail as they wanted for each question. When analyzing the results, the researchers found common themes in both the traditional and alternate route teachers' responses.

During the Spring 2011 semester, the online questionnaire was sent via e-mail to teachers from three school districts. The researchers secured permission from the proper administration to collect the data. Teacher participation was voluntary. Teachers who wished to participate in the study e-mailed their responses back to the researchers with the understanding that their identities would remain confidential throughout the course of the study and possible publication.

FINDINGS

There were seven major areas discussed on the survey instrument. They include the following: curriculum training, content knowledge, standardized teacher licensure exams, pedagogical training, classroom management, teacher education programs, and mentoring. Results for each of these seven areas are presented in these findings.

In regards to curricula training, the responses were varied. Responses from both traditional and alternate route teachers from different disciplines indicated that they received very little or no curriculum training before entering the field of teaching. The majority of other responses for this item indicated that they took the required college courses in curriculum and had curriculum training as part of individual district workshops. Only one response indicated a positive curriculum training experience, and this person was a traditional route teacher. On the

other hand, one respondent who was also a traditional route teacher indicated that s/he did not have a full understanding of the curriculum until the third year of teaching.

Content knowledge is vitally important. All respondents indicated that in order to be an effective teacher, a proficient level of content knowledge is necessary. The majority of respondents agreed that possessing a better understanding of content allows teachers to better relate information to students. One respondent indicated that students oftentimes want to know the reasoning behind topics and facts and only an expert in his or her subject area can explain the reasoning behind facts and events. A good content knowledge is the basis for understanding the reasoning behind facts and events.

Any person who is entering the field of teaching must pass a licensure exam in order to be licensed to teach. The respondents indicated mixed feelings about teacher licensure exams. The overall consensus was that the standardized exam does measure content knowledge, but it only measures this knowledge on a minimal or surface level. There is no way that any test can measure all of the possible content that one would need as a teacher. One respondent claimed that content knowledge is only a piece of a puzzle that makes an effective teacher, and measuring that piece of knowledge can be a challenging task.

All respondents had strong opinions regarding pedagogical training. Most of the respondents agreed that pedagogical skills can help to a certain extent, but other factors such as passion, personality, and flexibility are intangible, intrinsic characteristics that cannot be taught that will ultimately determine the teacher's success in the classroom. One traditional-route teacher stated that "We can all have wonderful pedagogical training, but in the end, it's what we do when the bell rings that makes us who we are as teachers. This mostly comes from your personality, and that is not teachable." Similarly, another traditional-route teacher asserted that a person can have all of the pedagogical training in the world and still be an ineffective teacher. Furthermore, an alternate route teacher said that pedagogical knowledge may possibly give new teachers a way to begin a teaching career, but their personal desire to improve their teaching skills is what makes them a better teacher.

Despite the number of years of experience teaching, or subject area taught, all participants in this study stated that they received little classroom management training, and more classroom management training is needed before a teacher enters a classroom. Many respondents claimed to have had bad first years because of the lack of management training. More training is necessary when entering the classroom to help manage the students. One respondent indicated that classroom management is more than just controlling student behavior; it also implies organizing lessons and managing paperwork in addition to teaching and learning. S/he stated, "It's really hard to maintain an engaged classroom when you have a mountain of paperwork to sort through, and it doesn't matter how smart you think you are or how great your lessons might be if your students are hanging from the rafters." Most of the teachers who were interviewed pointed out that they had been required to take one class in classroom management, but this was mostly theoretical information which had little practicality in the real classroom. Practicum experience and observations of expert teachers provide more meaningful classroom management training.

The university preparation for teachers requires a curriculum that balances content knowledge and pedagogy with a student teaching experience. Most teacher education programs now require a specific number of hours to be spent in a classroom observing veteran teachers in action before student teaching occurs. In this study, the overwhelming consensus from the respondents indicated that teacher education programs would better serve future teachers by

getting them into the classroom sooner to observe expert teachers. Most of them agreed that content knowledge should be learned in the university classroom, but teaching skills and classroom management are better learned by observing a practitioner who is actually teaching in an elementary or secondary classroom than listening to a professor lecture about elementary or secondary methods. One traditional route teacher even went on to say that this might impact teacher retention. S/he pointed out that “For an education major, the sooner the intern can be brought into the classroom, the better it will be during that intern’s first year of real work teaching and maybe then we can start to retain more teachers.”

The last area that was studied was regarding the importance of mentoring and its impact on teaching effectiveness of first- and second-year teachers. Traditional route teachers, in general, believe that a mentor is a “go-to” person—someone who is there to help but only when the new teacher seeks him or her out. This person can play a vital role in times of need, but the mentor is not there to inundate the new teacher with materials, advice, and specifics of how to run a classroom. On the other hand, alternate route teachers feel that mentors can be helpful but only if they have positive attitudes toward the teaching profession. Some experienced teachers might have negative attitudes toward teaching because of the number of years that they have taught, and this has an impact on the new teacher’s views toward the profession. Both alternate route and traditional teachers who participated in this study believed that mentors are important to new teachers but are not necessarily the key for the success of a person entering the teaching profession. One alternate route teacher claimed the following: “I don’t think that a mentor teacher can keep a new teacher in the profession, but a mentor can make the transition for a new teacher easier.”

When prompted to offer additional information on training that would have been beneficial before entering the classroom, one clear theme emerged: experience. Overwhelmingly, both alternate route and traditional route teachers asserted that they need more time in the classrooms before entering the teaching profession. This “real-world” experience is far greater than anything that could be learned in a textbook or university classroom. Most teacher education programs do not require practicum experience until the junior or senior year of college. One traditional route teacher posited that education majors should experience the real classroom earlier in their academic careers. Having practicum experience earlier on could allow them to decide if the teaching profession is right for them. This could, perhaps, prevent people from getting a degree in a profession for which they are not suited.

SUMMARY/DISCUSSION

Allen (2003) reported that more research needs to be conducted on teacher certification and AR certification because there is no definitive proof which method is the most reliable, and the debate between AR and traditional route certification or licensure methods will continue as long as there are standards that must be set for a person to begin a teaching career. AR programs seem to be the new trend for people to become certified, and the process of completing an AR program has changed since its inception in the early 1980s. According to Walsh and Jacobs (2007), the original intention of the AR program was to attract teachers with non-traditional backgrounds and provide more on-the-job training through close mentor-novice teacher relationships. The concept of mentoring was very important to AR teachers because the process was considered to be on-the-job training. Most AR programs today “set low academic standards, backload programs with excessive professional educational courses, and provide too little

mentoring” (Walsh & Jacobs, 2007, p.34). This is very different from the original intention of providing mentors to new teachers. The results of this current study neither confirm nor deny the importance of mentoring on teacher effectiveness. While mentoring can be a useful asset for beginning teachers, it is not absolutely necessary for success in the classroom.

Zeichner and Paige (2007) and Goldhaber and Brewer (2000) believe that teachers who hold subject-area degrees produce better students, and this study confirms their findings. The results of this study indicate that teachers who possess deep content knowledge are better able to communicate concepts and ideas to students. Teachers who have content knowledge understand the reasoning behind concepts and facts in their content areas, and they are better able to relay this information to students in their classrooms.

Previous research has been inconclusive about the effectiveness of traditional route teacher preparation programs versus AR teaching training. Darling-Hammond (2009) and Nagy and Wang (2006) concluded that AR teachers do not have the best preparation for teaching before entering the classroom because of the lack of pedagogical knowledge that comes from not taking education courses while in college. While the results of this current study show that pedagogical training is important in the classroom, this training can only do so much. Much like the findings of Boyd et al. (2006) and Sass (2008), this study concludes that it is the intrinsic desire and motivation of both alternate route and traditional route teachers that will ultimately determine their success in the classroom.

Finally, there is limited research on AR teachers’ transition to the classroom and their professional growth after they begin teaching. One way of helping AR teachers make the transition to the classroom is through mentoring (Nagy & Wang, 2006). This study found that, in addition to AR teachers, mentoring can help make the transition from university student to teacher much easier. However, a mentor teacher cannot persuade a teacher to continue in the teaching profession. The overwhelming majority of respondents in this study indicated that experience is the key to success, and obtaining actual classroom experience earlier in their college careers is vital. Experience is especially important in the areas of classroom management and pedagogical training. The results of this study indicate that experiences with real students in real classrooms are the best ways to learn classroom management and pedagogical skills. Placing future teachers into these real-world experiences earlier in their academic careers is, by far, the best preparation for those wanting to enter the teaching profession.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study indicate the need for further study in a number of specific areas. Therefore, the following recommendations are offered:

- This study was conducted with teachers at four public schools in the southeastern United States and cannot be generalized beyond that scope. Future studies should include teachers from different regions across the United States so results can be more broadly generalized.
- This study employed the use of a qualitative instrument designed to measure teachers’ opinions and perceptions about alternate route versus traditional route. Future researchers should design quantitative survey instruments as well to research this topic.
- This study utilized a qualitative analysis design. Future studies should employ a mixed-methods analysis that employs both quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Employing a mixed-method research design might allow for better understanding of teacher preparation programs and which method best prepares future teachers for the classroom.

- Since program requirements and entrance exams for the teaching profession vary from state to state, thorough quantitative research must be conducted in each state to determine the effectiveness of traditional and alternate route teaching programs. Then, there will be a better understanding of the effectiveness of these programs across all states in the nation.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

1. Do you give permission for me to use data collected from you in a written publication? Your identity will not be revealed.
2. Did you earn your teaching license through a traditional route or alternate route program?
3. How many years have you taught?
4. What subjects do you teach?
5. Is it important for a person to have a degree in his or her field in order to teach a subject? Explain.
6. What type of curriculum training did you receive prior to entering the field of teaching?
7. Explain the importance of content knowledge in teaching effectiveness.
8. Do standardized exams such as the Praxis (or NTE) adequately measure a person's subject-area knowledge?
9. Explain/discuss the importance of pedagogical training in teaching effectiveness.
10. How much classroom management did you receive? Should more classroom management be required? Why?
11. In teacher education programs, should more time be spent in an elementary or secondary classroom than in the university classroom? Explain.
12. Does mentoring impact the teaching effectiveness of first or second year teachers? If so, how?
13. Can you think of any additional classes or training that would have better prepared you to enter the classroom? Explain.