

Fall 9-1-2005

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Recommended Citation

Adcock, Phyllis K. and Mahlios, Marc (2005) "Nontraditional Alternative Teacher Certification Programs: Their Purpose, Design and Participants," *Essays in Education*: Vol. 15 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://openriver.winona.edu/eie/vol15/iss1/4>

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Nontraditional Alternative Teacher Certification Programs: Their Purpose, Design and Participants

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Introduction

When the subject of nontraditional alternative teacher certification programs is discussed among teacher educators, there seems to be a wariness due to the way in which nontraditional alternative teacher certification has been managed in the past. However, current research seems to bear out that quality nontraditional alternative certification programs are not only helping with teacher shortages, but are producing quality teachers who know how students learn and are effective in their roles as teachers (Ducharme & Ducharme, 1998).

The first part of this paper, the impetus of nontraditional alternative teacher certification and how this type of certification has become an auxiliary path for those who want to pursue a career in teaching. The second part of this paper will try to define what constitutes a nontraditional alternative teacher certification program and some of the ways in which states are implementing these programs. This second part also features the first of a study of midwestern states to determine what form of teacher certification programs are offered in these states. The final part of this paper encompasses information about the participants who enter nontraditional alternative teacher certification programs. In this final section, the reader will also find the second part of the midwestern study is covered, in which there is a discussion of the demographics of the participants who took part in this study.

The Purpose for Nontraditional Alternative Certification

Teacher Supply and Demand

Teacher educators and policy makers are aware that traditional certification programs will not be able to prepare enough teachers for the classrooms where they are needed. Since there is a shortage of teachers which leads to emergency certification, the misassignment of teachers is inevitable; therefore an alternative solution is needed. Educators are concerned that the continued use of emergency certification and the misassignment of teachers will compromise the quality of education that students need and deserve, therefore nontraditional alternative certification programs, which fully prepare teachers, are a viable option where there is a shortage of teachers (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996).

In the next few years, there will be a need to hire many new teachers, due to increases in K-12 enrollment, retiring teachers, and attrition of new teachers. During this time of increased enrollment, one quarter of all teachers over 50 years of age will soon be retiring. In an editorial in the *Journal of Teacher Education* (1998), the ACCTE stated “member institutions are not experiencing sufficient increases in enrollment to begin to meet the projected increased demand for teachers” (Ducharme & Ducharme, 1998, p. 163). Whether these shortages are widespread or if they exist only in certain subject or geographical areas, educators do not want to revert to the practices of the 1960s when emergency certification was used to deal with major teacher shortages (Ducharme & Ducharme, 1998). These solutions did alleviate teacher shortages, but at the expense of effective learning experiences for students. Teacher educators need to realize that nontraditional alternative teacher certification programs are a positive option in dealing with teacher shortages as long as those programs adequately prepare their participants to take on the role of teacher (Ducharme & Ducharme, 1998).

Stoddard and Floden suggest nontraditional alternative certification programs are a way to upgrade teaching standards already degraded by teaching shortages (Stoddard & Floden, 1995). For example, when looking at the shortages of certified teachers in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), they argued that it was the teacher shortages that led to the use of emergency certification and misassigned teachers in the first place (Dill, 1996). In other words, emergency certification and misassigned teachers in the LAUSD is a result of teacher shortages, not of a nontraditional alternative teacher certification program.

In the middle 1980s, John Goodlad suggested the focus in teacher preparation programs should be on teacher quality, regardless of teacher shortages or surpluses. McKibbin and Ray (1994) state that the purpose of developing nontraditional alternative certification programs is not for replacement of the traditional certification programs, but for nontraditional certification to offer a way to expand the pool of qualified teachers with individuals who might not otherwise become teachers. Teacher educators are often reminded that the principle virtue of nontraditional alternative teacher certification is that these programs are labor market sensitive and can be tailored to address shortages where they exist, and that they need not be viewed as a replacement prototype for traditional preparation programs.

McKibbin and Ray (1994) have argued that this type of “fast-track” preparation is not appropriate for all prospective teachers, but is suited for students who have spent their earlier careers in learning-by-doing environments. Also, since candidates are usually screened for subject matter competency before being allowed into a nontraditional alternative certification program, the focus is directed on teaching methods and classroom management. They stated in their article, “There is no one right way to teach and there is no single teacher preparation program that addresses the particular needs of all individuals who want to enter the teaching profession” (p. 205).

Nontraditional alternative certification programs are an option to the traditional teaching program, and have been revisited more recently, because of the need for teachers in areas of shortages, such as mathematics and science, and the regional shortages in rural and urban schools. Stoddard and Floden ((1995) quoted Emily Feistritzer concerning nontraditional teacher

certification: “What began as a short-term measure to deal with teacher shortages is now becoming an institutionalized alternative to college-based teacher education” (p. 1).

Nontraditional Alternative Teacher Certification Programs

Program Designs and State Rationales

In comparing the features of traditional and nontraditional alternative teacher certification programs there are some distinct differences. First, traditional certification is usually based on a fixed-curricula, with thorough pedagogical study, and classroom experience. Second, traditional programs are typically supported and supervised by faculty in a higher education institution with which it is connected.

In nontraditional alternative teacher certification programs the curriculum is designed with the academic background of the student in mind, and usually requires from one to two additional years of education beyond the baccalaureate degree. Typically, the pedagogical courses are concentrated and restructured, and often times are held in the evenings and weekends to accommodate the work schedules of those seeking nontraditional alternative certification (Miller, McKenna, & McKenna, 1998). Most nontraditional alternative certification programs require intensive supervision and mentoring of the teacher candidate from the institution offering certification. Some of these programs are said to be more effective than others, due to the difference in how programs are managed and configured. Darling-Hammond (1990) described these nontraditional alternative programs as merely alternate routes to full certification of teachers.

A common aim of nontraditional alternative certification programs is to concentrate teacher preparation in a smaller amount of time, even though some of these programs have similar expectations in content, rigor, and outcomes compared to traditional programs (Stoddart & Floden, 1995). Since candidates are usually screened for subject matter competence before being accepted into a nontraditional alternative program, the programs often focus on teaching methods and classroom management. Proponents of nontraditional alternative certification suggest that teachers going through these programs are typically required to do more hours of supervised field experience than students in traditional certification programs. Many nontraditional alternative certification programs provide mentor teachers to support and guide the new teachers in their first few years as a novice teacher.

In the literature review of nontraditional alternative certification, it appears as if the concentration of these programs is mainly found in the coastal states. There are a number of different nontraditional alternative teacher certification programs that have developed in California, Texas, Connecticut, New Jersey, Virginia, Colorado and elsewhere. States, such as California, Connecticut, and New Jersey, have a number of different nontraditional alternative teacher certification programs, which began in the middle 1980s (Zumwalt, 1991). Many of these states' programs are designed to attract college-educated people with subject matter competencies.

In California and New Jersey nontraditional alternative certification programs were driven by teacher-shortages, and changes in these states' teacher preparation programs were top-down decisions by the legislation and state departments of education. These states' teacher education programs have been reshaped by legislative and executive mandates. In California, programs encourage consultation from higher education faculty, but it is not required. Teacher education faculty may or may not be involved in nontraditional certification programs that local school districts offer. In New Jersey, the regional training centers which implement nontraditional alternative teacher certification are now run, almost exclusively, by teacher education faculty, and the teacher education faculty are required to teach the mandated state curriculum (Zumwalt, 1991). Since the development of New Jersey's nontraditional alternative certification programs, all teachers holding an emergency teaching credential were required to enter a nontraditional alternative program or a traditional certification program if they wanted to continue to teach. Since that time, no emergency certification has been issued except in areas where there is not any nontraditional alternative certification route, such as special education (Zumwalt, 1991).

In Connecticut, nontraditional alternative certification programs were developed because of the concern for teacher quality. In the past three years since the inception of their nontraditional alternative teacher certification program, the state operates with a teacher surplus, where before there had been shortages. In Connecticut it is not the strategy or the desire of state administrators to directly regulate the curriculum of teacher education programs. Officials hope that nontraditional alternative certification programs will provide a catalyst for change in existing teacher education programs (Zumwalt, 1991).

What is unique about the Los Angeles (California) Unified School District (LAUSD) is that certification is offered through the local school district, rather than state designed programs such as in Connecticut and New Jersey. In the LAUSD, the content of the program is devoted to learning generic teaching skills and the rest of the time is spent in learning district policy, procedures, and curriculum. In state nontraditional alternative certification programs in Connecticut, all nontraditional alternative route teachers are prepared in the eight weeks when school is not in session. These state program training sessions focus on subject-specific pedagogy rather than curriculum-specific pedagogy. As an incentive, nontraditional alternative certified teachers are hired at a salary slightly higher than the salary paid teachers who are hired on emergency credentials (Zumwalt, 1991).

In the Los Angeles and New Jersey nontraditional alternative teacher certification programs, students are required to secure employment in a school while in their teacher training program. In Connecticut, candidates face competition for a limited number of spaces in the summer orientation program before they enter the tight job market. All of these programs, whether delivered through state programs or the local school districts, rely heavily on school-based mentoring programs to supervise and support these new teachers, who are subject to formal, statewide evaluation systems (Zumwalt, 1991).

A Study of Alternative Certification Programs

A study was conducted to determine what type of nontraditional alternative teacher certification programs were offered in the midwest, and the participants who utilized this type of program. The first part of this study examined the component structure of teacher preparation programs offered through a survey of these programs. The survey inquired whether the teacher preparation programs were traditional or nontraditional alternative certification programs, and the requirements for entry into the program. The teacher preparation program survey also solicited program information on content, pedagogical and human development studies, classroom experiences, and induction and mentoring offered.

Of the 101 programs that were contacted, 48 (47.5%) responded, however only 44 (43.5%) completed and returned the survey. The total number of graduates from these states' teacher preparation programs was 6,617. Of that number, 6,233 or 94.2% of the graduates came from traditional programs, and 384 or 5.8% of the graduates came from nontraditional alternative certification programs. The total number of teacher preparation program directors responding to the survey was 44, of which 26 (59%) had traditional teacher preparation programs, and 18 (41%) had nontraditional alternative programs.

Some of the differences between the traditional and nontraditional alternative programs, which were revealed when reviewing the data, is in the internship and student teaching components, and the human development courses required in the teacher preparation programs. (See Table 1). When comparing the two types of programs, the traditional programs are almost four times as likely to require an internship as the nontraditional alternative certification programs. In the terms of human development courses and student teaching, more traditional programs require these types of courses compared to nontraditional alternative programs. The differences in the program component data are sometimes difficult to assess since analysis must account for how programs define those components. For example, human development courses were sometimes listed as psychology courses and thus not counted as professional education courses. Other considerations to keep in mind, is that some programs required student teaching only, internships only, or in some institutions student teaching and internships are both required for certification.

Table 1
Teacher Program Preparation: Program Components

<u>Program Components</u>	26 Traditional	18 Nontraditional
Content Courses	22 (84.6%)	15 (83.3%)
Pedagogy Courses	22 (84.6%)	15 (83.3%)
Human Development Courses	25 (96.1%)	14 (77.7%)
Student Teaching	25 (96.1%)	15 (83.3%)
Internship	11 (42.3%)	2 (11.1%)
Induction	4 (15.3%)	2 (11.1%)
Mentoring	2 (7.6%)	1 (5.5%)

Alternative Certification Program Participants

Traditional and Nontraditional Alternative Teacher Candidates

One of the frequently cited benefits of nontraditional alternative certification programs is the nature of individuals these programs typically attract. Participants in nontraditional alternative programs are more likely to be older, a member of a minority group and male, who have had past experiences in other occupations (Shoho & Martin, 1999). It should also be noted that many of these candidates would not go into teaching if they had to go through a traditional program. The literature indicates that nontraditional alternative certification programs prepare teachers who usually certify in the areas where teacher shortages are the greatest, namely in math and science, and in inner city schools serving minority students (Shen, 1997). Conversely, an examination of graduates from traditional certification programs, shows that they are typically European-American, female, and middle class. Studies indicate these traditionally certified teachers usually desire to go back to the type of school they attended, which are usually suburban, largely white and middle class schools, where there is little problem with shortage of available teachers.

Studies show that these nontraditional students are different not only in age, maturity, gender and race, but also in how they approach learning to teach (Eifler & Potthoff, 1998). These students are usually characterized as bringing a greater variety of experience into the classroom, because of their age, other career experiences, and maturity. They use sound reasoning and listening skills, have better management skills, have the ability to concentrate more fully and are eager to learn. Nontraditional students tend to remain in their own communities, once certified, and have a better knowledge of the local culture and the makeup of the community (Eifler & Potthoff, 1998). From an adult learner perspective, nontraditional students want to be viewed as serious college students, and see themselves as life long learners who are self-motivated and have good decision-making skills. Nontraditional students often indicate that they have had to sacrifice money, position, and family time for the sake of their college degree, and vigorously pursue their goal of becoming certified to teach (Manos & Kasambira, 1998).

Haberman and others have argued that older, mature teachers having a better sense of self, and are better at relating to students of varied backgrounds and challenges, and may ultimately prove to be more effective educators. His reasoning seems to be that when teachers come from similar community backgrounds as the students they teach, they are able to relate to the real life experiences of their students and thus become more effective teachers (Stoddart & Floden, 1995). It is generally agreed that the context of teaching and one's knowledge of pedagogy contribute to a teacher's overall effectiveness.

Studies also indicate that teachers certified through a nontraditional alternative program bring with them positive dispositions toward teaching in urban schools, which is not commonly found in the traditional teacher education population (Stoddart, 1993).

Teacher Preparation Program Graduate Study

The second part of this mid-western study consisted of surveying the graduates from these programs. The graduate survey asked for background information of the graduate, and other questions such as whether they completed a traditional or nontraditional program, and the level of certification and teaching experience. The survey inquired about the graduate's sense of preparedness as a classroom teacher regarding classroom management, teaching methods, designing curriculum and lesson planning, assessing student performance, maintaining classroom discipline, working with parents, colleagues, and the community, and addressing the special needs of students.

Of the 44 colleges and universities who completed the teacher preparation program survey, 28 (63.6%) provided names, telephone numbers, email addresses, or administered a copy of the follow-up survey to the graduates. Of the 28 (63.6%) colleges and universities that completed the teacher preparation survey, 81 (48.2%) of the graduates completed and returned the survey (See Table 2).

Table 2

Teacher Preparation Program Graduates

	<u>Traditional and Non-Traditional</u>	<u>Traditional</u>	<u>Non-Traditional</u>
Gender		67 (82.7%)	14 (17.3%)
Male	27 (33.3%)	20 (29.9%)	7 (50%)
Female	54 (66.7%)	47 (70.1%)	7 (50%)
Ethnicity			
African American	8 (9.9%)	7 (10.4%)	1 (7.1%)
American Indian	3 (3.7%)	3 (4.7%)	12 (85.7%)
Asian American	1 (1.2%)	1 (1.5%)	1 (7.1%)
European American	66 (81.5%)	54 (80.6%)	-----
Hispanic	3 (3.7%)	2 (29%)	-----
Age			
20's	37 (48.7%)	36 (56.3%)	1 (8.3%)
30's	13 (17.1%)	9 (14%)	4 (33.3%)
40's	14 (18.4%)	17 (26.6%)	4 (33.3%)
50's	12 (14.8%)	2 (3.1%)	3 (25%)
Level			
Elementary	33 (40.8%)	37 (40.2%)	6 (42.9%)
Secondary	24 (29.6%)	20 (29.9%)	4 (28.5%)
Middle or Multi-level	24 (29.6%)	20 (29.9%)	4 (28.5%)

In comparing the results of participants in the two different types of certification programs, there were equal number of males and females in each of the nontraditional programs, with a greater number of females in the traditional programs. In fact, in the traditional program, females outnumber the males two to one. The reader will also note that Table 2 shows that

nontraditional students going through a nontraditional alternative program are found in the older age ranges, where in more traditional students going through a traditional teaching program can be found in the earlier age ranges. Finally there is little to report when comparing the ethnicity of those in the traditional and the nontraditional alternative certification programs. Although there were a number of African Americans in traditional than in alternative programs, there were more American Indians in nontraditional alternative certification programs than traditional programs.

Concluding Thoughts

Demographers note that the traditional college age population is declining. Educators have to consider how many students from this available population will enter the teaching profession, both now and in the future. We are also reminded that traditional teacher preparation programs often prepare a homogeneous supply of teachers, who will be entering classrooms that are increasingly heterogeneous. In situations where the teacher is unlike their students in background characteristics, there may have less understanding of and less communication with their students, therefore the attrition rate among traditionally certified teachers is high.

What is needed, some say, in urban classrooms are older, male, and minority persons, who desire to teach in these schools and can establish a viable relationship with these children. There is some evidence that teachers, whether they complete a traditional or a nontraditional alternative teacher education program, teach in schools that are like the communities they grew up in. As a result, teachers who go back to urban or rural schools to teach and have similar life experiences as their students, are better able to relate to these students (Eifler & Potthoff, 1998). If this is the case, then the nontraditionally certified teacher may be better for students of minority and urban background than the traditionally certified teacher.

In July 2002, when the U. S. Secretary of Education issued the Secretary's Annual Report on Teacher Quality, entitled Meeting the Highly Qualified Teachers Challenge, claims were made that nontraditional alternative certification programs have academically stronger recruits who are highly effective and show high retention rates. Darling-Hammond and Youngs (2002) dispute these claims stating the narrow focus of part of the data did not give the whole story. Overall it appears that the attrition rate for those completing a nontraditional alternative certification program may have similar rates of attrition to teachers from traditional programs, when looking at the first five years in their role as teacher. Also, it appears from the Darling-Hammond and Youngs (2002) study, that whether a teacher goes through a traditional or a nontraditional alternative teacher certification program, both of these groups of teachers are still more effective in helping students learn than where they are taught by uncertified teachers.

Added to this debate is the fact that it is hard to compare the different types of traditional and nontraditional alternative teacher certification programs because they are structured so differently. Some nontraditional alternative programs resemble traditional programs in content and pedagogy, however the coursework is streamlined and compressed into evenings and weekends. These nontraditional alternative certification programs also offer good supervision and mentoring support, which novice teachers depend and thrive on. What is unfortunate is that nontraditional alternative certification programs are commonly lumped in with emergency

programs, which are a form of on the job training in which little pedagogy is offered (Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002).

Whether we are talking about a nontraditional alternative or a traditional teacher certification program, good programs provide intensive preparation for teacher candidates and extensive support and mentoring once the teacher candidate enters their novice years of teaching (Berry, Hoke, & Hirsch, 2004). Also, we must consider that a number of teachers who were trained in a nontraditional alternative teacher certification program, are going into the most challenging areas of shortage in urban and rural schools, or in subjects such as math and science classes. In the final summary, findings are clear that new teachers need more direct experience in the school setting and continued assistance in discipline, time management and communication skills (Meister & Melnick, 2003). A good supervision and mentoring program can help both traditionally and nontraditionally certified teachers to feel more confident in their roles as teachers in the critical first few years which helps with problems of retention of both groups (Berry, Hoke, & Hirsch, 2004).

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