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A Longitudinal Evaluation of an Alternative Licensure Preparation Program.

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Abstract

Qualitative research in a longitudinal study was conducted to determine whether alternative licensure teachers who had started teaching in the previous three to five years were retained in the profession, and to assess their impact on children's learning. Results show that the retention rate of 82% for the sample was slightly higher than the average retention rates reported in the literature. Qualitative analyses provide evidence of a positive impact of these teachers on children's learning, i.e. a measurement of the teachers' performance in the classroom. This case study provides program directors with an easily replicable format for evaluating the effectiveness of an alternative certification program, and recommendations for further research are included.

Keywords: alternative certification, teacher retention, teacher effectiveness, impact on children's learning

Introduction

The alternative route to obtaining a teaching license (as opposed to a traditional four-year college program) started in the United States in New Jersey, California and Texas in the mid-1980s, and all states now have an alternative route that prepares high-quality teachers. This case study reports on one such program that was established in Virginia where alternative licensure teachers are known as Career Switchers (CSs).

In common with other states, Virginia first established the alternative route to licensure to help relieve teacher shortages, particularly in hard-to-fill subject areas such as math, science and foreign languages. On receiving approval from the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) in 2004 the program provider in this case study initially offered preparation courses in a conventional face to face format. In 2007 the provider applied successfully for a federal Department of Education Transition To Teaching grant in partnership with a local school division and from 2008-2012 the grant funded marketing initiatives, retention bonuses and additional personnel.

Face to face courses only provide transition opportunities for students who reside in the immediate vicinity of a program provider's campus, so in 2009 approval was requested from VDOE to offer CSs an online option. Approval was given with the caveat that all students would be required to attend some in-person sessions on campus regardless of where they reside in the state, the rationale being that otherwise program staff would not have any opportunity to assess first-hand the ability of candidates to deliver classroom instruction. The online option was introduced in 2010, and with its introduction the provider was able to enroll students across Virginia. Initially it ran concurrently with face to face courses in a hybrid format, but by 2013 it became increasingly clear that students favored the online delivery, the learning outcomes were all being met, and therefore in 2014 the face to face classes were withdrawn.

The introduction has described the establishment, development and evolution of the program from an original face to face delivery to a fully online format. Short term success of an alternative licensure program can be measured by the percentage of students who are hired to teach, but true success can only be measured longitudinally to determine retention in the profession. Additionally, a program's success should be measured in terms of whether its alumni are teaching children effectively.

Literature Review

Alternative licensure programs are now established in all 50 states, and data show that nationally since 2005 about 40% of all new teachers were prepared via an alternative program. Conversely, the proportion of new hires between 2005 and 2010 coming from traditional undergraduate teacher education programs dropped to 50% and from graduate college, campus-based teacher education programs to 10% (Feistritzer, 2011). The research to date into retention rates of alternative licensure teachers indicates that they are equally committed to continue working in an education capacity as are traditionally prepared teachers, and a review of the literature suggests that teachers prepared either alternatively or traditionally are as likely to quit teaching or to leave urban schools (Ng & Peter 2010). Feistritzer (2011) reports that 68% of both traditional and alternative route teachers expect to remain in teaching K-12 classrooms for at least the next five years. However, 16% of traditional route teachers say they expect to be retired, compared to only 2% of alternate route teachers. Nearly a quarter (23%) of alternative route teachers say they expect to be working in a job in education other than teaching five years from now, compared to 13% of traditional route teachers. Almost 25% of the total of new public-school teachers leave the profession within the first three years (U.S. Department of Education, 2007), and the rates are higher in schools with low academic achievement by children. Empirical data are not available on the national retention rate of alternative licensure teachers, but according to Glass (2008), and Feistritzer, Gallagher & Henderson, (2009) it is estimated that 70%-90% of them continue teaching in the profession. In a study using samples drawn from alternative licensure programs across various states, Haj-Broussard, Hall et al (2016) reported three-year retention rates ranging from 74%-92%.

Success as a teacher is more difficult to measure than retention rates, and the criteria for defining success are varied. Some studies (e.g., Bowe, Braam, Lawrenz & Kirchhoff, 2011; Hirshberg, 2011) have investigated whether teachers prepared in alternative programs are more or less successful compared to teachers prepared in traditional programs, and the conclusion to date is there are no significant differences. Research comparing the two routes to licensure appears to be hindered by the scarcity of data that are available on the classroom performance of alternative licensure teachers because alternative route programs are collecting only minimal data to evaluate program effectiveness (Walsh & Jacobs, 2007). Consequently, good research on these teacher licensure programs is hard to come by and frequently the research is not as rigorous as it could be (National Research Council, 2010). The literature researching how alternative licensure teachers impact children's learning in comparison to the impact of traditionally prepared teachers is similarly sparse, and the studies that have been conducted have found little apparent difference in achievement among children in classrooms of teachers prepared either traditionally or alternatively (Suell & Piotrowsi, 2007). Teacher experience appears to be more important than the program through which certification is obtained. Most studies have concluded that both alternatively certified and traditionally certified teachers become more effective with experience, with an increase in effectiveness occurring after the second year of teaching (Blazer, 2012).

In order to further the body of research the current study investigated the retention rate among alternative licensure teachers recently prepared for the profession and their impact on children's learning by posing the following questions:

1. What percentage of alumni who graduated from an alternative licensure program during the past three to eight years are still employed as classroom teachers?
2. How do those alumni who are still employed as classroom teachers impact children's learning?

Methodology

During the five-year period covered by this study, 218 alumni from the CS program had been hired as teachers in middle and high schools across Virginia; each teacher had graduated from the preparation program in the previous 3 to 8 years. Research was conducted firstly to determine those who were still teaching in the classroom; 179 were identified as still being employed as teachers, and their demographics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics: Program alumni employed as teachers

Gender and Ethnicity		
Female	140	78.2
Male	39	21.8
African-American	38	21.2
Asian/Pacific Islander	8	4.5
Caucasian	111	62.1
Hispanic	17	9.5
Other / Undeclared	5	2.7

Once determined to be teaching, each one of the alumni was sent a survey to gather initial (self-reported) data on teaching success. There were some challenges in the collection of data for this study as teachers are no longer enrolled in the CS program upon successful completion of their first year of teaching. While CS program administrators do maintain a database of program participants, many of the program alumni do not notify the program provider of changes in their mailing address, and many do not report changes of their teaching position(s). Consequently, the researchers could only collect data received from those participants who voluntarily provided information on their current employment. Three separate mailings of the survey were made and consequently the participants in this study to investigate alumni impact on children's learning are the 39 who responded to the survey mailings, i.e. a return rate of 22%.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics: Study Participants

Gender and Ethnicity		
Female	27	69.2
Male	12	30.8
African-American	7	17.9
Asian/Pacific Islander	2	5.1
Caucasian	25	64.1
Hispanic	5	12.9
Other / Undeclared	0	0

Using the criteria of gender, ethnicity, subject and grade level taught, and location of employing schools to give regional representation within Virginia, 20 participants were purposefully selected from among the 39 who responded to the survey. In-depth interviews were conducted with the participants and with their employing principals addressing the impact of the CSs teaching on children's learning as measured by three variables, namely standardized test results; employing principals' evaluations of the individuals' teaching performance, and program alumni self-assessment of their classroom performance.

Constant comparative analysis was conducted using the variables and use of coding to validate participants' responses through triangulation with their employer's input. Participants were asked to describe and reflect upon the methods they use to determine whether children are learning from their teaching, and the two primary questions are shown below. During the interviews, follow-on questions were asked together with supplementary questions generated by the survey responses.

Question 1 (to teachers) "How do you know that your students are actively engaged?"
Question 2 (to teachers and administrators) "How do you know children are learning?"

Results

The research conducted in this case study determined that of the 218 program alumni who had been hired during the five-year period, 179 were still teaching full time, i.e. a retention rate of 82%. This percentage could be higher because the researchers were unable to determine whether 39 of the 218 alumni of the program were still employed in schools.

Constant comparative responses to the first primary question on children's engagement were coded and grouped and are shown below in Table 3. The percentages in the table indicate the number of similar responses given by different participants, and they reveal that there is no single indicator reported by the participants to determine whether children are actively engaged. Clearly the level of active engagement can vary, e.g. the subject being taught, the method of instruction employed, or the type of topic being learned. The overarching result from Table 3 is that the participants reported being proactive in determining whether children were engaged as indicated by the high percentages of "observing participation" (70%); "watching and noting" (68%) and "asking questions" (66%).

Table 3. Participants' Responses on Children's Active Engagement

Question To Participants: How do you know that your students are actively engaged?	
By their level of participation (70%).	Through students' regular involvement (54%)
By routinely watching students and noting how they are reacting (68%)	Through regular assessments (45%)
By their asking and answering questions (66%)	Their participation in group work (32%)
Through student feedback (65%)	Gauging collaborative atmosphere of class (21%)
By noting their individual engagement (64%)	By observing collaborative work in pairs (18%)
Through classroom management / number of disciplinary issues (58%)	Through parents' feedback (14%)

Responses to the second primary question on children's learning were coded and grouped and are shown below in Table 4. The percentages shown indicate the number of similar responses given by different participants, and they reveal that the teachers and their administrators rank standardized tests (92%) as the main indicator of children's learning. Summative assessments (74%) were the second highest-scoring indicator, and classroom pretests and posttests to measure student growth ranked third (68%).

Table 4. Participants' Responses on Children's Learning

Question to Participants and their Administrators: How do you know children are learning?	
Through standardized state tests (92%)	Few behavioral issues with students or parents (48%)
Quiz and test results (76%)	Personal observations and conversations with students (38%)
By noting student growth measures (74%)	Through feedback from parents (22%)
By administering pretests and posttests (68%)	Results of collaborative learning (18%)
Via regular formative and summative assessments (64%)	Results of graduate exams (18%)

Discussion and Conclusions

Evaluating the retention rate of an alternative licensure program can only be conducted longitudinally, and the time frame used in this case study was a five-year period. The retention rate of 82% in this case study is above the 80% average reported in previous studies e.g. Haj-Broussard, Hall et al. (2016), who found three-year retention rates ranging from 74% to 92% across a large sample of alternative certification programs, and Feistritzer, Gallagher & Henderson, (2009), who estimate retention rates of between 70%-90%. Retention rates are important data not only for the directors of alternative licensure programs but also for the administrators of the local education authorities for whom the programs are provided.

The results of this case study show that the program alumni are impacting children's learning positively and successfully. Many program participants measured the evidence of their students' learning based on standardized test scores. Teachers thought they were successful if their students achieved passing scores on these mandated assessments. Several teachers, including two middle school science teachers both in their fifth year of teaching, reported 100% pass rates. Another middle school science teacher noted that his students' test scores had risen by 15%-18% by the middle of the year when 10% by year-end was his goal. A middle school math teacher reported evidence of her students' learning as she became a more experienced teacher: her courses' standardized test scores had nearly doubled during her second year of teaching.

Other participants thought their students were learning based on a comparison of their teacher colleagues. One middle school teacher of Civics and Economics explained that while her standardized test rates were barely passing, they were higher than a veteran teacher and program chair at her school. A sixth grade English teacher stated, "My benchmark and CFA scores are [approximately] 30% higher than [the other three] English teachers. My [general education] students score higher than the other teachers' honor classes."

In contrast, several other teachers based their success upon feedback from teachers of the grade above them or from the students themselves. For instance, one program participant teaching in a middle school explained that "high school teachers note a distinct improvement of my students compared to former coming-up students." An eighth-grade English teacher noted that a large number of his students were placed in Honors English classes the year following his instruction, and that his former students provided him with "positive and affirming feedback" regarding their preparedness for high school.

Several teachers reported using diagnostic pretests and posttests to measure their students' learning in addition to scores on exit tickets and quizzes. Students' scores on final exams or projects were another indicator of success reported by the participants. A number of participating teachers based their success on the number of students who matriculate. Many participants indicated that all of their students were promoted to the next grade. One teacher specified that the only students who failed her German 1 class were those who did not regularly attend. Other program participants found evidence of their students' learning through recognition of their personal efforts as a teacher.

An upper-level teacher at an independent school noted that he received "much parental support and encouragement regarding communication" and that he was eventually promoted from the classroom to administration. Another teacher measured her success based on her principal's "exemplary review." One former high school teacher, who is now an assistant principal, stated his receipt of the "Teacher of the Year Award" in 2010 was an indicator of his students' learning.

Implications and Recommendations

Short term success of an alternative licensure program can be measured relatively easily by recording pass rates during the coursework phases of the program, or by analyzing data based on the number of coursework completers who get hired to teach. It is more difficult to measure success based on the results of the transitioning teachers' first year of employment because school administrators are not always forthcoming with data on their personnel. During that first-year, however, program staff should still have access to their students via a mentor and therefore be able to collect some basic data. A realistic measure of true success can only be determined by a longitudinal study in which the participants have been employed as teachers for at least three to five years. Collecting data for a study of this type has its challenges, e.g. the whereabouts of program alumni may not be determined easily; the response rate to questionnaires by busy teachers may not be high; school administrators may be reluctant to release personal information about teachers, especially in writing. It would be beneficial for program administrators to confirm program participants' contact information on a regular basis, particularly personal email addresses, in order to maintain contact beyond the first year of teaching. Obtaining employment data and collecting survey results may also prove more successful if administered during the summer months when teachers are less busy and better able to reflect on their previous school year.

Despite these procedural challenges it is recommended that all directors of alternative licensure programs conduct a study to determine the long-term effectiveness of their program in order to know whether their program is indeed preparing teachers for the workforce who remain in the profession, and whether those who are employed in schools are teaching children effectively. It is further recommended that program directors make this valuable information available to their local education authority. It is also recommended that a study be conducted to investigate the reasons why the minority of alternatively certified teachers leave the teaching profession after their first year; such a study may provide useful feedback to program directors leading to improvements in course curriculum or in the delivery of coursework instruction.

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