

Teacher Preparation Delivered Online: Alleviating Teacher Shortages

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Abstract

Teacher shortages are world-wide. UNESCO has published estimates showing that in the next 13 years countries need to recruit almost 69 million new teachers in order to provide every child with primary and secondary education. Programs that offer alternative paths to obtaining a teaching license in the USA are becoming more numerous. These programs are helping to increase the number of qualified teachers, and equally important their alumni are remaining in the profession. This case study describes an online program of teacher preparation, and reports that 82% of its alumni were retained in the profession after five years. The study also assesses that these teachers were impacting children's learning successfully. Implications for teacher preparation programs are discussed

Key words: Teacher shortages; teacher preparation; teacher retention

Introduction

Teacher shortages are affecting many countries in the world. By the year 2030 countries must recruit 68.8 million teachers if they are to reach the international education community's goal to provide every child with primary and secondary education: 24.4 million primary school teachers, and 44.4 million teachers for secondary schools (UNESCO, 2016). Additionally, unpredicted increases in the number of children can affect teacher: student ratios. For example, large numbers of displaced children fleeing from war zones are compounding the issue in some European countries, while in the USA many schools are suddenly impacted by an influx of children from families of undocumented immigrants. Countries are tackling the teacher shortage problem in different ways e.g. employing more substitute teachers, attempting to recruit more conventionally trained teachers, or by introducing alternative routes to obtain a teaching license. Alternative licensure programs in the United States of America accept mid-career professionals (mostly in the age bracket 35-55 years) who want to transition to teaching having already completed their first career.

Approximately one-third of all new teachers now being hired in the USA are following alternative paths to teacher certification (as opposed to a traditional four-year college program), and these teachers are prepared in approximately 600 programs that offer an alternative to the traditional route of college-based teacher preparation. According to Feistritz (2011), this trend continues to grow as increasing numbers of career-changers and other post baccalaureate adults seek to teach, and school districts increasingly seek to hire them. Candidates for entry to an alternative licensure program need to possess a bachelor's degree, and they must also pass a content specific test in the subject area they plan to teach

Approximately 25% of all new public-school teachers in the USA leave the profession within the first three years (U.S. Department of Education, 2007), and the leaving rate is higher in schools with low academic achievement by their student body. Empirical data are not available on the national retention rate of alternative licensure teachers, but according to Glass (2008), and Feistritz, Gallagher, and Henderson, (2009) it is estimated that 70-90 % of them continue teaching in the profession. This paper describes an alternative licensure program conducted in the south east of the United States, and reports on the retention rate of its alumni and also on their teaching effectiveness in the classroom.

Literature Review

Due to the growth of alternative licensure programs in the USA, the proportion of new hires between 2005 and 2010 coming from “traditional” undergraduate teacher education programs dropped to 50 percent and from graduate college, campus-based face to face teacher education programs to just ten percent (Feistritzer, 2011). The research to date into retention rates of alternative licensure teachers indicates that they are just as committed to continue working in education as are traditionally prepared teachers, and equally likely to quit teaching or to leave urban schools which have low rates of academic achievement (Ng and Peter 2010). Feistritzer (2011), reports that 68 percent of both traditional and alternative route teachers expect to remain in teaching for at least the next five years. However, 16 percent of traditional route teachers say they expect to be retired, compared to only two percent of alternate route teachers. Nearly a quarter (23%) of alternate route teachers say they expect to be working in a job in education other than teaching five years from now, compared to 13 percent of traditional route teachers. Empirical data are not available on the national retention rate of alternative licensure teachers, but according to Glass (2008), and Feistritzer, Gallagher, and Henderson, (2009) it is estimated that 70-90 % of them continue teaching in the profession. More recently, Haj-Broussard, Hall, Allen, Stephens, Person, & Johnson (2016) reported three-year retention rates of alternative licensure teachers ranging from 74%-92%.

Measuring success as a teacher can be subjective, depending on the criteria for defining success e.g. children’s test scores, outstanding classroom management, or being a good role model for students. Some studies have investigated whether teachers prepared in alternative programs are more or less successful compared to teachers prepared in traditional programs, but there appear to be no significant differences. Literature reporting how alternative licensure teachers impact children’s learning in comparison to the impact of traditionally prepared teachers is sparse, and those studies that have been conducted have found little apparent difference in achievement (Suell and Piotrowski, 2007). Most studies have concluded that both alternatively certified and traditionally certified teachers become more effective with experience (Blazer, 2012). However, alumni of alternative routes to teaching have revolutionized the profession in the USA. They bring an invaluable asset to the classroom – their life experiences which they can share with children at the same time as teaching them. In addition to being highly qualified teachers they are often excellent role models, and their ability to relate the curriculum to the real world that they have worked in can make learning so much more meaningful to the children they teach.

Case Study

In the south east of the USA, each state administers public education programs and local educational institutions e.g. universities, provide the teacher preparation. The program provider in this case study initially offered teacher-preparation courses in a conventional face to face format, starting in 2004. These courses include classroom management, teaching methods, techniques to assess learning, and theories relating to child growth and development. Just six students comprised the first enrollment, and during the following years the program grew steadily until by 2008 the annual enrollment was averaging 40 students. Face to face courses are only able to provide instruction for students who reside in the immediate vicinity of a program provider’s campus, so in 2009 approval was requested from the state to offer an online option to teacher candidates. Following approval, the online option was introduced in 2010 and students were then able to participate in the program from anywhere in the state as opposed to living close to the university. All new students were issued with an iPad on entry into the program. Care was taken to replicate online as closely as possible the conditions that students would expect to find in a conventional classroom. For example, collaborative group discussions are built into the modules of each eight-week course, and students participate actively in responding to discussion topics posed by their instructors. The instructors themselves had to adapt to online delivery techniques, one of the most important being a quick response to all students’ emailed queries, and a one week maximum time for grading assignments and providing feedback to students. Initially the online program ran concurrently with face to face courses, and a hybrid (or blended) option was also offered, but by 2013 it became increasingly clear that students favored the fully online delivery. The learning outcomes were all being met via the online delivery method, and therefore in 2014 the face to face and the hybrid classes were withdrawn – the program became online only. Enrollment currently averages 70 students per year. The numbers continue to grow, and at any given time there are approximately 50 students who are embarked on their first year of teaching; approximately 95% of these teach in public schools, but a few are employed in accredited independent (private) schools. All students for the whole of their first year of teaching are supplied by the university with a mentor who is available to assist with topics such as lesson planning, classroom management challenges, or techniques for assessing learning.

Short term success of an alternative licensure program can be measured by the percentage of students who are hired to teach, and since inception in 2004 this number has averaged 63% i.e. the majority of students who pass the coursework successfully do get hired to teach. Longer term success of a teacher preparation program, however, should be measured by whether program alumni stay in the teaching profession, and also whether those who do remain in the profession are able to impact children's learning successfully. Consequently, research was conducted in 2016 to determine the retention rate in the teaching profession of program alumni who started teaching during the previous five years, together with a determination of their effectiveness as teachers. The research results revealed that 218 teachers were hired during the timeframe, and that 179 of them were still in the profession – a retention rate of 82%. This figure is close to the national approximated retention rate of 85% for alternative licensure teachers. The research also showed that program alumni were having a positive impact on children's learning when measured using a variety of variables e.g. results of state pre-test / post-test learning scores; evaluations by employing school administrators; students' portfolios; teachers' self-evaluations.

Discussion and Implications for Teacher Preparation Programs

Teachers prepared by an alternative licensure program can help fill shortages in the teaching profession. Typically they are aged between 35-55 years, and have already been successful in their first career, perhaps in private business, in the military, or as stay at home mothers. Frequently, but not exclusively, they are confident users of computers and do not find learning online to be technologically challenging. In each case they have experienced the world outside of a school or college classroom, and they are able to make their teaching meaningful by applying world experiences to their instruction. Research has shown that in the United States alternative licensure teachers are more likely to stay in the profession than traditionally trained teachers, and studies have also shown that there are no significant differences in their effectiveness as teachers. As shown in this case study, preparing them can be achieved with an online delivery so consequently many of them are able to continue in their current employment while preparing to transition to a second career in teaching.

If the concept of alternative licensure can work successfully in the United States of America there is no reason to doubt that it might be equally helpful in addressing current or predicted teacher shortages in other countries. The first step is a realization and acceptance that today's learners want to be able to study online and at their convenience – and would-be teachers are no exception. The second step is to investigate within an existing teacher preparation program whether the administration is supportive, and whether the current faculty are willing to make the changes required in order to instruct online. The third step is relatively easy but requires a financial outlay: buying in to a proprietary online teaching system e.g. Blackboard. Subsequent steps include training of faculty to ensure they have the skills to teach online and designing teacher-preparation courses in an on-line format. These steps may seem daunting from the outset but directors of existing online programs have trodden them before and are invariably willing to share their experiences with others.

Conclusion

Preparation of alternative licensure teachers can be conducted successfully in an online format. The teacher candidates prefer an online delivery method because it enables them to continue working in their current career while they are preparing to transition to teaching, they do not have to travel to a university to attend classes, and they can choose their own hours and location in order to study and to complete assignments. This case study's participants demonstrate that teachers prepared in an online program are hired by schools to teach, that they are retained in the profession, and that they impact children's learning successfully. Administrators of teacher preparation programs, particularly in countries experiencing teacher shortages, may wish to consider offering their program in an online format.

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