Fighting the Wrong Battle in the Teacher-Preparation Wars

By Daniel C. Humphrey & Marjorie E. Wechsler

Like many education policy debates, arguments over alternative teacher certification vs. traditional teacher preparation have been heated, often vitriolic. On one side, proponents view alternative certification as an effective way to put bright and talented individuals into classrooms without forcing them to jump the "meaningless hurdles" of traditional teacher preparation. They claim alternative certification will help diversify the teacher workforce, alleviate shortages in fields such as mathematics and science, and benefit students as teachers bring real-world experiences to the classroom. On the other side, opponents see alternative certification as a threat to teacher professionalism by allowing unprepared individuals into the classrooms of the hardest-to-staff schools. They claim that it offers teachers a lower-quality preparation and, ultimately, is a disservice to the neediest students, who end up with the least-prepared teachers. Both sides can point to research that supports their positions and are quick to dismiss research that appears to contradict those positions.

A growing body of evidence makes it clear, however, that this debate is based on faulty assumptions about teacher-preparation programs of all kinds, whether alternative or traditional. Our study of alternative-certification programs, sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, was charged with identifying the characteristics of effective programs. But as we examined seven alternative-certification programs, we discovered that there is more variation within a single preparation program than there is across programs, in terms of the training teacher-candidates are offered, their experiences in their programs, and their effectiveness when they become teachers. We concluded that program-to-program comparisons make no sense.

We found that teacher-candidates' preparation and teaching ability are shaped by the interaction of three forces: their personal background (academic record and previous classroom experience), their formal training (the coursework they experience), and the context of their school placement (principal and mentor support, professional community, and availability of materials). These three factors—personal background, preparation, and school context—define the candidates' paths into the teaching profession.

Ultimately, it was this path into the profession that determined candidates' retention in the field, their teaching skills and knowledge, and their confidence in their ability to teach all students. In a given program, individuals from highly competitive vs. less competitive universities, those with previous classroom experience vs. no classroom experience, and those with prior careers vs. those just starting out experienced the program in dramatically different ways and came away with very different sets of skills, knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs. Moreover, individuals with similar backgrounds in the same program had dramatically different outcomes, depending on the context of the school in which they were placed and the quality of support they received as they began teaching. As it turned out, program-to-program comparisons did not reveal the features of alternative teacher preparation that mattered.

A more discerning approach, then, is to look at individuals across programs on the basis of common background characteristics, program experiences, and school contexts. Using this strategy, we found that the quality of candidates' education backgrounds, previous teaching experience, coursework, quality and intensity of mentoring, and school context all contributed to their development as teachers, but they influenced the various outcomes differently. For example, educational background and certain kinds of coursework contributed to candidates' knowledge for teaching reading and mathematics. Being placed in a good school context had a major impact on retention and resulted in higher levels of self-efficacy and positive self-reports of candidates' growth. At the same time, we found no significant differences in outcomes when we compared programs.

Other recent research underscores the greater influence of teachers' paths into the profession than of the certification programs they completed. Susan Moore Johnson, Sarah E. Birkeland, and Heather G. Peske's research for the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers concluded that the certification program was only one element that determined how teachers fared in the classroom; the skills and experiences they brought to their programs, as well as the support they received in their schools also mattered. Similarly, Donald J. Boyd, Pamela L. Grossman, Hamilton Lankford, Susanna Loeb, and James H. Wyckoff's Teacher Pathways Project in New York City examined the effects of teachers from various teacher-preparation programs, including both traditional and alternative-certification programs, on student achievement. They found that, among other things, the variation in effectiveness within programs is far greater than the average difference between programs.

Another recent study of the effectiveness of certified, uncertified, and alternatively certified teachers in the New York City public schools, by Thomas J. Kane, Jonah E. Rockoff, and Douglas O. Staiger, calculated the variation within different routes. Although they found little difference between routes in terms of student achievement, they found dramatic differences within routes. When they ranked teachers by the value they added to student achievement, they found that the impact of assigning a student to a top-quartile teacher vs. a bottom-quartile teacher was 10 times the impact of assigning a student to a teacher with a particular kind of certification or from a particular program.

With so much variation in teacher effectiveness within programs, and so much variation in how different individuals experience their preparation programs, what is the point of passionate debates between proponents and opponents of alternative certification? Not much. The debates may reflect a broader philosophical divide over teaching as a profession, but they cannot lead to real improvement in the way we prepare teachers.

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This broader conception of teacher preparation, one that emphasizes paths into the profession rather than programs, has important implications for the ongoing dialogue about how to prepare skilled teachers. Understanding the unique contributions of each component of a teacher's path into the profession, and the interaction of multiple components, becomes more important than

the search for the perfect preparation program. Unfortunately, both researchers and policymakers often are fixated on program-level solutions to complex problems. The numerous "horse race" studies comparing student test scores of Teach For America teachers and others are good examples of the problem. The studies inevitably declare a winner, but a closer look shows that the margin of victory is so small as to be nearly meaningless. And what does it mean to find out that TFA teachers can move their students from the 13th to the 14th percentile in math?

Instead of investing millions of dollars in these program-to-program comparison studies, a better investment of resources would be in understanding the combination of factors—both personal and programmatic—that add up to effective teaching. We currently know very little about how a teacher-candidate's educational background, previous classroom experience, coursework, clinical practice, mentoring, and school placement interact to produce a teacher with the skills and knowledge to meet the academic needs of diverse students. The research will be difficult in and of itself. The real challenge, however, will be in applying this research to practice.

Attending to teacher-candidates' paths into the profession has major implications for all forms of preparation programs—alternative and traditional. At the very least, recognizing the importance of individual paths underscores the importance of assessing the skills and knowledge of teacher-candidates early and often, and then tailoring a package of coursework, clinical practice, mentoring, and appropriate placement to fit the needs of different individuals. This approach requires the difficult abandonment of a fixed set of program components in exchange for an assessment-based and individualized set of training and supports. Currently, neither traditional preparation nor alternative-certification programs devote very many resources to the assessment of their candidates, nor are they sufficiently flexible to tailor their programs to individuals' needs.

The most poignant implication of the importance of paths stems from the fact that some beginning teachers are effective teachers on their first day on the job. This runs counter to the widely held assumption that all new teachers must struggle through their first year. It runs counter to the belief that beginning teachers should not be expected to know how to teach well, and that their students must wait to have a truly effective teacher. But if some beginning teachers follow paths that lead to success during their first year, then shouldn't we identify all the paths that lead to effectiveness and demand that all teachers follow one of them?

The line between alternative and traditional certification is an illusion; the line between effective and ineffective novice teachers is real. If we are to battle over teacher preparation, the fight should be over the best way to assess and prepare a given candidate to reach the high bar of immediate effectiveness. Arguing about traditional vs. alternative certification, when there is so much variation within these categories, does no one good, especially not the neediest students. It is time to rethink what matters in teacher preparation, so that all new teachers can be equally successful on their first day on the job.