Chapter 4

Alternative and Authentic: A Close Look at a Successful, Nontraditional Teacher Certification Program

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ABSTRACT

In this piece, the author describes an alternative teacher certification program to achieve two objectives. The first is to counter an argument that current programs in this category do not fit the criteria of alternative certification pathways that were established in the 1980s. The author will use this established framework (Walsh & Jacobs, 2007) to demonstrate that such programs still frame these criteria. The second objective is to refute the seemingly wide-spread negative perception that alternative teacher certification programs often carry due to the generalization of these types of programs. This will be accomplished by describing SUNY Empire State College’s Master of Arts in Teaching Program and demonstrating that it meets the high standards expected from any teacher preparation program. It is the author’s hope that stakeholders with an investment in education and in teacher preparation, in particular, will not make unfounded assumptions of alternative preparations and instead understand that there are high quality programs that support the profession of teaching.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Part of the motivation to write this chapter includes the fact that alternative certification programs have been in existence for several years across the United States, and this author feels it should be included in an encyclopedia of teacher education and professional development. In part due to address teacher shortages, state boards beginning in the 1980s agreed to allow new pathways to certification that differed from the traditional route, called “alternative” pathways to teacher certification. The National Association for Alternative Certification (NAAC) describes alternative routes to certification as “any other than traditional undergraduate degree-granting programs.”

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tification.org/. As this definition is rather broad, the New York State Department of Education further explains the pathway as those that “feature an accelerated introductory component, followed by paid employment, with extensive mentoring, coursework and other supports from the college and the school district.” Retrieved from http://www.highered.nysed.gov/tcert/certificate/teachalt.html. The state also makes it clear that the college and the institution of higher education are in partnership to help develop the teacher in a clinically manner.

There are two key motivating factors in the creation of alternative pathways to teacher certification. The first is to address critical teacher shortages, often in high-needs areas. The second is to provide a more practical avenue to the profession for those who are not readily able to divorce themselves of income in order to pursue a traditional pathway that includes at least a semester of student teaching. Rosenberg and Sindelear (2005) add that alternative pathways have “opened doors to teaching for persons from other careers, from the military, from liberal arts colleges, former teachers who want to upgrade their credentials and get back into teaching and for people who trained to teach years ago but never did” (p.118).

Over the last few decades, many alternative certification programs have arisen, including Troops to Teachers, Teach for America, and the largest in the country, the New York City Teaching Fellows. This latter program was created in 2000 to address serious teacher shortages in New York City, obviously one of the most diverse and complicated districts in the country. The Fellow’s strategy involves trying a different approach to teacher preparation and including people from all walks of life with whom New York City’s diverse population have a better chance to connect. Today, Teaching Fellows comprise 12% of all New York City Teachers, 20% of all science teachers, 24% of all math teachers and 22% of all special education teachers in the city. Retrieved from: http://www.nycteachingfellows.org/purpose/mission.asp

Additional reasons for developing alternative certification programs include: “the shift of subject matter to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; recognized differentiated needs of students of academic, linguistic, economic and cultural diversity; and specified geographically determined areas of need” (Kaplan, 2012, p. 37). These reasons contributed to SUNY Empire State College’s (ESC) incentive to develop an alternative certification program.

As the title suggests, Walsh, et al (2007) argue in their work *Alternative Certification Isn’t Alternative* that most programs that were created in the last few decades do not fill the model of what it truly means to be alternative. They lay out criteria that should be present in alternative certification programs and analyze many extant programs concluding (in their estimation) that they are not, in fact, alternative. In this chapter, the author looks at the criteria and demonstrate how one particular program meets and sustains expectations of alternative certification.

The second objective of this chapter is to respond to the seemingly automatic negative connotation associated with the term “alternative” when associated with teacher preparation. An explanation for this generalization is because there is an assumption that all alternative programs follow the same most recognized model of fast-tracking or “boot camps” without sufficient preparation. In the chapter that ensues, the author will demonstrate that not all programs are alike and some, in fact, serve their purpose, which is to attract high-quality candidates into the profession of teaching and support teacher retention.

**MAIN FOCUS OF THE ARTICLE**

As mentioned before, Walsh, et al (2007) lay out their criteria in the article *Alternative Certification Isn’t Alternative* and subsequent analysis of a variety of programs. These criteria include academic selectivity,
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