Transitioning from Alternatively Certified Teacher to School Administrator: Filling the Pedagogical Gaps to Provide Instructional Leadership

Casey Brown
Texas A&M University-Commerce
P.O. Box 3011, Commerce, TX, 75429
USA

Bill LeNeveu
Wylie Independent School District, Wylie
Texas, USA

Bridget Bourke
Garland Independent School District
Garland, Texas, USA

Abstract

This article includes an examination of the experiences of alternatively certified teachers who were promoted to positions in which they were responsible for leading others with more pedagogical experience than they possessed. School administrators were interviewed and data were coded in an attempt to examine how alternatively certified administrators bridge their knowledge gaps and how the traditionally certified teachers they lead react to their lack of pedagogical development. The themes that emerged centered on the ideas of emotional response, professional development to surmount perceived deficiencies, and assistive mentor relationships. The data collected are shared to provide perspectives on assisting alternatively certified teachers transition into leadership roles.

Key words: school leadership, alternative certification

1. Introduction

Building-level administrators who began their educational careers as alternatively certified teachers often find themselves supervising teachers who have more pedagogical experience than they have. The administrators often lack not only years of experience, but the pedagogy with which their traditionally certified colleagues enter the administration profession. This dilemma led to the questions of how alternatively certified administrators bridge their knowledge gaps and how the traditionally certified teachers they lead react to their lack of pedagogical development. Alternative teacher certification is an established avenue to certification. "Alternative teacher certification has become an increasingly popular strategy for addressing both teacher quality and teacher shortages" (Humphrey & Wechsler, 2007, para. 1). Johnson, Birkeland, and Peske (2005) posited that "Alternative certification programs usually are designed to attract candidates who are not likely to enroll in traditional programs, but who might become excellent teachers" (p. 4).

2. Background Literature

Alternative certification was established in order to assist individuals with degrees in disciplines other than education to enter the education profession (Feistritzer & Chester, 1995). Zumwalt (1991) described alternative certification as a moderately economical means to prepare people who did not partake in an established teacher education program to teach. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) defined alternative teacher certification as "any significant departure from the traditional undergraduate route through teacher education programs in colleges and universities" (Smith, Nystrand, Ruch, Gideonse, & Carlson, 1985, p. 24).

According to the *American School Board Journal* ("Licensing and Certification," 2006), "in the past decade, the proportion of teachers certified in alternative programs has grown considerably. . . .In 1995-96, one in 17.5 teachers was alternatively certified; by 2002-03, the ratio was one in 4.3" (p. 25). Forty-eight states and the District of Columbia have one or more type of alternate route to teacher certification (National Center for Education Information, 2010).

Approximately one-third of U.S. teachers enter the profession via some method of alternative certification (National Center for Education Information, 2010). Some alternatively certified teachers enter the education profession with few, if any, educational classes. Typically, little or no coursework has been completed in methods, instructional techniques, or classroom management (McDiarmid & Wilson, 1991). States that "just a couple of years ago called all of the programs they had leading to full certification 'alternatives,'" label alternative certification paths as those programs that meet "specific guidelines for entry and for completion of an alternative route" (Feistritzer & Chester, 1995, p. 9).

In some alternative certification programs, teachers "without the proper credentials (requirements such as education hours completed)" (Cornett, 1990, p. 57) are provided with "an interim status and allow them to be employed while they work to earn the college credits that are equivalent to standard requirements for teacher education programs" (p. 57). Those alternatively certified might include,

> recent liberal arts graduates with strong preparation in their subjects, but no coursework or practice in teaching; retirees from the military or business who would like to spend the capstone of their career in public education; employees in other fields (engineering, banking, law, technology) who want to switch careers in search of more meaningful work; and individuals committed to a local community who lack teaching credentials, but are knowledgeable about the schools (e.g., school volunteers and instructional aides). (Johnson, Birkeland, & Peske, 2005, p. 4)

3. Methods

The purposes of this study were to describe and understand, from the perspective of 10 school administrators who received teacher certification through an alternative means, how experience (or lack thereof) affects accession to and work as school administrators. The researchers employed the transcendental phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994), a research design concentrated on relating participants' life experiences. Valle and King (1978) stated that "phenomenologically oriented psychological research seeks to answer two related questions: what is the phenomenon that is experienced and lived, and how does it show itself?" (as cited in Creswell, 1998, p. 276).

3.1 Participant Selection and Data Collection

Phenomenological research typically involves in-depth interviews with 5-20 people (Creswell, 1998; Tesch, 1988). Ten school administrators whose original teacher certification status was alternative were included in the study. Potential participants were identified through the snowball technique (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), as alternatively certified administrators provided names of other similarly certified individuals. The prospective participants were contacted via telephone or email; the research protocol was described and participation was solicited. Most of the interviews were conducted in the school where the administrator was employed; one was completed in a vacant classroom at a university campus. Each interview began with a description of the research project and written consent to participate and record the interview. Participants were asked to respond to questions about their certification process and career progression experiences. The administrators were asked about the effect, if any, becoming initially certified via an alternative certification process had on their pedagogical and supervisory skills, and what assisted in the assisted administrators' success in their respective positions. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

3.2 Data Analysis

Following multiple semi-structured interviews, initial categories were established and amended as each response was coded. The transcriptions were repeatedly reread and verified the results of each category and analyzed the data until agreement was reached (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Relying on Moustakas's (1994) description of data analysis, the researchers followed four steps: epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. Clusters of meaning were sought in the data by grouping significant phrases to allow for theme emergence. From these collected meanings the researchers developed a description of the phenomenon. Quotes that captured the significance for participants were selected from the transcripts; the experiences were synthesized to portray the essence and introduce themes, which depicted all 10 participants. The three major themes that emerged included emotional response, professional development to surmount perceived deficiencies, and assistive mentor relationships.

4. Findings

Bush and Chew (1999) noted an increasing trend toward self-managing schools; this concept is exemplified when school leaders are granted greater autonomy in their decision-making power. The reason for this shift is that through this "there is expected to be a better alignment between the goals of the school, resource allocation and improved educational outcomes" (p. 43). With this trend in mind, it is increasingly important to have knowledgeable, prepared, principals.

4.1 Emotional Response

The majority of the participants experienced some anxiety about their abilities, but, through working with mentors, participating in professional development, and establishing collegial relationships with those they supervised, experienced success, and received positive reactions from their building's teachers. The majority of participants felt that they quickly closed the experience gaps between themselves and their traditionally certified colleagues. Emotional support is important and may come by simply providing an open door. Support from a building administrator can be in the form of coaching, formative evaluation, or any means that provides for constructive effort to assist new teachers in dealing with the myriad of new experiences that tend to become overwhelming during the first year of teaching (Stansbury, 2001). After serving as an administrator for one to two years, the majority of the participants felt that there were few differences between their experiences and the experiences of their traditionally certified colleagues.

4.2 Professional Development to Surmount Perceived Deficiencies

According to Rodriguez-Campos, Rincones-Gomes, & Shen (2005), there is an increasing trend toward more years of teaching experience in new principals as compared to their veteran counterparts. In fact, the researchers noted that "teaching experience has become an important criterion for hiring a new principal" (Rodriguez-Campos et al., p. 316). In contrast, the majority of administrators in this sample had more limited teaching experience and lacked traditional pedagogical preparation. Principal preparation and instructional understanding is often enhanced by professional development. According to McConney, Ayres, Hansen, and Cuthbertson (2003), "Principals. . .believe that professional development has helped them do a better job of school leadership. . .and [they] expressed a global belief that student learning has been enhanced by professional development" (p.101). Likewise, the majority of administrators represented in this study attributed an addition of key administrative knowledge and skill development to professional development opportunities.

Approximately one-third of the administrators did not believe that their lack of traditional preparation initially affected their instructional skills. The remaining school leaders stated that within months of becoming an administrator they realized that they lacked the educational jargon of their peers and wide array of training. Several administrators stated that they also did not have the repertoire of stories of student teaching and practicum to share with new and aspiring teachers, however. The administrators interviewed all made a point to attend more professional development opportunities than were required of them. Those who felt they initially lacked some of the preparation provided to their traditionally certified colleagues sought to immerse themselves in the areas of instruction in which they felt lacking.

4.3 Assistive Mentor Relationships

According to Fraser (1998), "a mentor is well-advised to probe and listen carefully to a new protégé's previous experiences. These experiences are the rich soil in which the effective mentoring experience is to be grown" (p. 48). Shulman (1989) found that teachers "without a firm foundation of educational methods and guided experience," need mentors to "play a role similar to that of a university supervisor, whose job it is to link research to practice and to encourage their protégés to reflect on their teaching" (p. 6). Similarly, the administrators who gained initial teacher certification through alternative means discussed the need for mentors.

Several of the participants reversed the traditional mentor-protégé relationship and asked the teachers at their buildings for assistance. The mentors they sought were often traditionally certified and had many years of teaching experience. Some administrators selected mentors who were serving as administrators but were originally alternatively certified to question about the process. Others relied on support from fellow administrators. Just as "a strong teaching profession requires highly qualified teachers who are prepared for the rigors of the classroom and who continue their professional development through the support of mentors" (Morgan, 1999, p. 374), the administrators interviewed also developed relationships with mentors.

Quoting several other studies on mentoring, Harris, Ballenger, and Leonard (2004) emphasized the importance of mentoring programs for prospective educational leaders. In their study of a Hong Kong principal training program, Bush and Chew (1999) drew specific attention to the mentoring component which allowed principal protégés to receive job specific education and experience under the tutelage of current principals. As such, these prospective principals gained experience in a safe environment with strong leadership to support them. In contrast, Bush and Chew found that principal programs in the UK are not pre-service in nature, but more likely in-service voluntary mentorship arrangements during a principal's first year of service. In a similar comparative study of pre-service administrators, Browne-Ferrigno and Muth (2006) found that the "results of [their] cross-cohort comparative study suggest to [them] two important components of successful principal preparation: (1) selective admission of candidates based on their prior leadership experiences and career aspirations; and (2) job-embedded, authentic learning opportunities with practicing administrators" (p. 286).

Morgan (1999) wrote that "a strong teaching profession requires highly qualified teachers who are prepared for the rigors of the classroom and who continue their professional development through the support of mentors" (p. 374). According to Darling-Hammond (1990), a main difference between "short-term" alternative certification programs and other programs is "the absence of a student teaching experience, presumably to be replaced by intensive supervision in the initial months of full-time teaching" (p. 138). When the supervision does in fact take place, "recruits perceive the help as a key factor in helping them learn to teach. However, a number of studies have found that promised mentors do not always materialize in AC programs" (Darling-Hammond, p. 138). The administrators interviewed had mentors who came forward and provided assistance.

5. Conclusion

The majority of the participants interviewed experienced some anxiety about their abilities, but, through working with mentors, participating in professional development, and establishing collegial relationships with those they supervised, experienced success, and received positive reactions from their buildings' teachers. Most participants felt that they quickly closed the experience gaps between themselves and their traditionally certified colleagues. The participants were successful in their positions, as evidenced by positive evaluations and offers of reemployment. After serving as administrators for one to two years, the participants overwhelming felt that there were few differences between their experiences and the experiences of their traditionally certified colleagues.

The primary need of new teachers from building administrators is support in the forms of meaningful initial induction training, providing trained mentors (preferably master teachers), and on-going staff development tailored to new teacher needs. The administrators described mentors who positively influenced them and contributed to their longevity in their positions. The mentors were present in various roles, from college professors to colleagues. Each participant described the benefits of the relationships with those people who served as mentors. Given the need for aspiring and new principals of all certification types to be able to recognize and implement appropriate leader behavior, the question then becomes whether alternatively certified teachers who become administrators engage in this type of mentoring and/or professional development.

Building a "collegial school culture" (para. 5) was described by Bloom and Davis (2007) as an integral responsibility of administrators in support of new teachers. Administrators must "create opportunities for new teachers to become part of collegial relationships and teams, by designing time and processes for collaborative planning, grade level meetings, peer coaching, and action research" (para. 5). As formal new teacher induction programs become more common, administrators' roles change but do not diminish in importance to the new teacher. While their role may shift from direct to indirect support, their concentration on supportive strategies can increase the effectiveness of the induction program itself (Stansbury, 2001). In essence, nothing is more encouraging and beneficial to a new teacher than a building administrator who sees himself or herself as both a servant leader and an instructional leader, one who is there to ensure every new teacher has every opportunity to be successful (Bloom & Davis, 2007).

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