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ALTERNATIVE CERTIFICATION AND ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS: A PERSONAL TAKE ON A CORE POLICY DILEMA

jon snyder

In the spring of 2001, I interviewed for the position of dean of the Graduate School at Bank Street College of Education. After a packed 10-hour day of interviews and presentations, I met with the president of the college, Dr. Kappner. There had been a fire in the building two days before, and the smoke that was still in the air caused my eyes to burn and tear. That, along with my increasing confidence and exhaustion, lowered my internal censoring devices, and I was a bit more frank than politic in my responses to her questions.

She asked for my opinion on rapid-entry alternate teacher certification routes. I said that I thought they were bad policy and bad for children. I went on to say that Bank Street, because its name meant something in the world, had an ethical responsibility both not to participate in them and to take a public stand against them. I then learned from her response that Bank Street not only already had a partnership with Teach for America, but also was initiating a partnership with the New York City Department of Education to train Teaching Fellows. At that point I may have said “oh,” or I may have just gone silent.

When I returned to my hotel room that night, I phoned my son and told him I didn't think we would be moving to New York.

I was wrong. President Kappner did offer me the position, and I accepted. The past six years as dean, have forced me to think, and continually rethink, my understandings and doubts regarding rapid entry alternate routes.

Alternative Certification vs. Alternative Pathways

I believe that the fundamental function of initial certification of teachers is the protection of the children whose guardians are compelled by law to send them to school. It is not to ensure that everyone who receives that credential is a great teacher. That is a longer, much more complex undertaking, requiring supportive contributions from many more players in many more contexts than initial certifi-

cation provides. Becoming a great teacher involves turning ideals into realities and is a lifetime's work. The teacher who is talented, well prepared, well supported, and lucky gets better with experience. An entire preservice professional education provides an introduction to enacting core values as pedagogy. The preservice experience, no matter how exceptional, serves only as the beginning. Initial certification, on the other hand, works to assure a baseline of the minimal knowledge, skills, practices, and dispositions required for the education of children.

Different minimal knowledge bases, skills, practices, and dispositions are necessary for teaching different groups of students or achieving particular educational goals, so it makes sense to require a different certification for each. For instance, the minimal requirements for teaching mathematics to students aged 14–18 differ from those needed to teach all subjects to students aged 5–12. Similarly, there are particular requirements for teaching English language learners (as opposed to native English speakers) and for educating atypically (as opposed to typically) developing children. Thus, states have many different certifications because the minimal protective floor for each varies according to the developmental status of the students and the content for which a certification recipient will be responsible.

Unless similar children require different levels of protection, alternate certifications lose their significance. More specifically, why would one typically developing eight-year-old require a different set of protections than another typically developing eight-year-old? Who needs more protection, and who needs less? Given that the huge majority of rapid-entry alternatively certified teachers work with children living in poverty, alternative certification does not pass the test of either common sense or basic fairness.

People, however, pursue entry into the teaching profession at different phases of their lives and with different constellations of knowledge, skills, practices, and dispositions. To require each prospective teacher to meet the basic requirements in precisely the same manner ignores human nature, the varying career paths of prospective teachers, and the labor market. This makes the case for offering multiple alternate pathways to meet the minimal protective floor provided by initial certification.

For instance, some proponents of alternate certification ask what would happen if Albert Einstein decided to become a high school physics teacher? Let us pretend for a moment that there are many Einsteins, and that several of them wish to become teachers, and that this would help to meet a small percentage of the overall need for high school physics teachers. Clearly there would be little value in these Einsteins taking the physics courses that would generally be required of people pursuing careers as high school physics teachers. On the other hand, because children's interests are best served when educators have some basic understanding of how children learn and develop, the Einsteins would still have to study those subjects in order to be prepared to teach.

A more realistic concern is the case of college graduates who have succeeded in other careers and then decide that they wish to become teachers. To require them to complete a full undergraduate initial certification program not only denigrates what they already know and have accomplished, but also seriously reduces the likelihood that they will in fact become teachers. Let's also assume that some of these career changers have families, along with personal and financial responsibilities to them. Both they and their families require and deserve flexibility, recognition of their life experiences, and a quicker entry into a paid position as a teacher of record. In short, the varying strengths, interests, and needs of adult learners and the hiring needs of schools demand multiple pathways to meet initial credentialing requirements.

The Core Policy Question and Dilemma

If the fundamental purpose of initial certification is the protection of children, the core question, regardless of the pathway into the profession, is: at what point should an individual become a teacher of record? When is it safe to entrust a year of a child's educational life—a year that, once over, cannot be rolled back and started again as if it never happened—to a teacher? Some would argue that such questions can only be answered by placing that teacher in the classroom and seeing how he or she does—in other words, that there is no way to tell how good a teacher someone is until that person actually begins to teach. Those who make such an argument often also believe that all preservice teacher education is a waste of time.

In fact, both the experience of teachers and research evidence¹ refute those two premises; and in any case, that argument does not satisfactorily address the core question. The “let the buyer beware” business orientation underlying that argument not only suggests that it is acceptable for a child to have an unprepared teacher, but also implies that it is the child’s fault for buying a bad product (even though the child, after all, is compelled to attend school). But while teachers can be dismissed after a year or two, children cannot erase the years of poor education they receive when they have minimally accomplished teachers. Thus, the net result of this type of thinking dismantles the social benefits of public education. Free public education for all is a primary function of each and every one of the 50 states, both for the benefit of the individual student and because our democracy, our economic well-being, and our way of life depend upon an educated populace. We all have a responsibility and a stake in assuring that all our children have the teachers they deserve and that the well-being of our communities requires.

Analyzing this argument thus reveals an essential element of an ethical response to the core question of the protection of children. When we consider what happens when someone becomes a teacher of record, it is clear that a preservice professional preparation program must work with its candidates once they become teachers of record both to continue to help them grow into that role and to assure itself—and, more importantly, students and families—that it has met its responsibility to protect children.

¹ See, for instance, the line of research developed by Darling-Hammond and colleagues (www.NCTAE.org), who compared the achievement test scores of students of Teach for America (TFA) members with the scores of students of fully credentialed teachers. They found that students of fully certified teachers performed better than TFA members’ students (who, however, scored as well or better than those of other non-fully certified teachers). See also the work of Wyckoff and colleagues (www.teacherpolicyresearch.org), who found that the students of fully certified first-year teachers performed better on standardized achievement tests than the students of either Teaching Fellows or TFA members did. Important to consider, however, is that their research also suggests that after TFA candidates and Teaching Fellows had completed certification requirements and were in their third year of teaching, their students scored higher than those of “traditionally” certified teachers. Combined, these findings make a strong argument for both traditional and alternate credentialing pathways.

Nearly all states have created rapid-entry alternate certification models designed to ensure that there are enough teachers to staff all their schools. Most states, to their credit, have tempered their rush to fill classrooms with policies that maintain their prime directive to protect the children. This is usually done in two ways: (a) assuring some level of preservice preparation, including opportunities to work with students under the guidance of experienced teachers and teacher educators; and (b) requiring mentoring and continued professional education for alternate pathway candidates until they fully meet the basic requirements of initial certification.

When teacher education programs and schools work together, these alternate pathways have the potential to protect children while simultaneously providing the flexibility appropriate for adult learners. New Haven, California, for instance, in partnership with CSU-Hayward, offers a secondary teacher education program organized around the knowledge, skills, and practices required for initial certification in the state of California. When both the teacher educators and the New Haven school agree that candidates in the program have developed sufficiently to be considered qualified to work with children, the school hires them to teach one or two periods as teachers of record; until they have completed the requirements for initial certification, the candidates spend the remaining periods working with other teachers.

Another example of such a partnership is Bank Street College's work with three schools in the South Bronx in an early childhood and/or childhood teacher education program. In this model, Bank Street candidates who are halfway through an initial certification program can be hired by schools as lead teachers. While those teachers complete the requirements for initial certification, the three schools involved in the project work with the candidates and the college to provide a reduced work load and additional on-site mentoring.

In both the New Haven and Bank Street models, alternate pathway candidates: (a) become classroom teachers only after establishing the capacity to work successfully with students; (b) do not immediately assume full teaching responsibilities; and (c) work in supportive schools that arrange release time for experienced teachers to mentor them. In addition, the colleges involved also provide supports to the schools and the candidates.

In an ideal world, all children's educational rights are protected by having teachers who meet a minimal protective floor for certification and who have supports to continue to improve once they become teachers of record. In an ideal world, all teacher education providers would work with the schools that hire their candidates to assure the protection of children while providing the flexibility required to accommodate adult learners and meet the staffing needs of districts. Reality, however, dictates a different set of circumstances. States do allow, and districts do hire, teachers who have not met the minimal protective floor for certification to work as teachers of record. Some teacher education providers do not work with or in the schools that hire their candidates; in those cases, alternate route entrants into the classroom are left without the supports they require to meet their responsibilities as beginning teachers.

This is, in simplest terms, bad public policy. It leaves children unprotected. It exacerbates teacher shortages by creating a revolving door of well-meaning but underprepared and undersupported beginning teachers. It allows policy makers, teacher education providers, and schools to avoid responsibility for making the kinds of changes needed to ensure that all children have qualified teachers. Meanwhile, those underprepared and undersupported beginning teachers are currently working with children. What, then, is the right thing to do? Fight the flawed policies and inadequate practices rather than participate in them? Or participate and work to reduce the damage done by the policies and practices?

Once doing the right thing moves from abstraction to human affairs, it blurs the line between absolute right and absolute wrong. At times there are strong, principled values on both sides of that line. Helping the teachers working with children right now is at the heart of Bank Street's mission and should be part of a core commitment of all professional educators. Standing up for the best interests of children and advocating for good public policy is equally at the heart of Bank Street's mission and should also be a core commitment of all professional educators.

The murkiness and the conflict of principled values do not dictate that one withdraw from the confusing terrain, ignoring its complexity and succumbing to advocating a single simplistic response. Befuddling as human affairs inevitably are,

our responsibility is to remain engaged intellectually and ethically, to continue to do the best we can in the moment, and to vigorously and vigilantly enact our personal and professional commitments to protect and serve children in the multiple environments in which we pursue our calling.

An Evolving Perspective

My personal stance on this inherent ethical dilemma continues to evolve. For nine years I served as director of Teacher Education at the University of California, Santa Barbara. The two local districts there did not have a shortage of initially certified teachers. In fact, they were able to hire our best graduates each year, as there were many fewer openings than graduates who wanted to teach in the Santa Barbara area. At that time I was also involved in several national education policy research projects and, as a member of California's Commission on Teacher Credentialing, worked on state-level education policy issues. Not surprisingly, given my experience of the local teacher labor market and my state/national research focus, I wrote and acted vociferously in opposition to what I derisively called "instant teacher" programs.

In the summer of 2001, we moved to New York City and I became dean of the Graduate School at Bank Street College of Education. When I arrived, New York City was filling its teaching vacancies with candidates from its homegrown Teaching Fellows Program and with Teach For America (TFA) participants. At that time, Bank Street's involvement with rapid-entry alternate teacher certification routes consisted in enrolling Fellows and TFA members, once they had begun working as teachers of record, as students in our regular teacher education programs. While both the Teaching Fellows and TFA programs provided some preparation for their participants before they became lead teachers, neither offered the kind of safeguards or ongoing supports provided by the New Haven and Bank Street models described above. Thus, my initial response was to argue that we should not be involved with them. Instead, we should drop out of those partnerships and develop the kind of model we eventually did.

As dean, I am responsible for the well-being of the Graduate School, and so financial concerns play a role in my thinking. Bank Street College is a private

nonprofit institution that receives no state funding; tuition dollars must generate the resources required to run its programs. After enrolling one cohort, Bank Street discontinued its participation in the city's Teaching Fellows Program for financial reasons. It certainly made no sense to put Bank Street at financial risk in support of bad public policy. TFA, however, approved a plan that provided Bank Street with the funds required to work with their members. Thus, there was no financial reason for Bank Street not to work in partnership with TFA.

More important than finances, however, were the testimonials of TFA candidates whom I saw working so tirelessly and idealistically to support the growth and development of the children in their care. They reported, and our faculty advisors who worked with them corroborated, that they were better prepared to work with children because of their training at the college. In fact, they reported that they would have left the classroom had it not been for the professional and personal support they received from Bank Street faculty and from their colleagues. That support included the Bank Street advisement model and its focus on understanding children, along with instructors who were exemplary teachers. It was hard work, but together they were helping to protect and educate children. After several years, we knew that the professional education that Bank Street provided TFA members was making a difference: they were staying in the classroom after the required two-year period at much higher rates than other TFA participants in both the state of New York and nationally.

Bank Street is working to expand the “halfway” model now used in partnership with three schools in the Bronx. But at the same time, we will also continue to work with TFA members. However, I remain personally and professionally uncomfortable with that decision—though certainly not with TFA core members or others who want to provide quality instruction to children who are ignored and underserved in the current system. Rather, my discomfort revolves around Bank Street's relationship with bad public policy. On the one hand, Bank Street is helping alternate route certification teachers do a better job with children right now. Because the college's graduates' retention rate is high, our work appears to be successful. Perhaps Bank Street College is even helping the band aid to stick, thereby decreasing the revolving door of well-meaning but underprepared and

undersupported individuals who enter teaching via the alternate certification route. On the other hand, the college's continued participation helps maintain a policy that in the long run is harmful to children. Is the benefit achieved by making bad public policy less bad greater than the harm done by enabling the continuation of that policy? How do institutions like Bank Street balance the immediate needs of children in the classrooms of underprepared and undersupported teachers with the longer-term needs of all the children in the years to come?

As long as the policy question remains focused solely on preservice teacher education, and as long as that question continues to be framed in terms of rapid-entry alternative versus traditional certification pathways, the ethical dilemma described in this paper will remain. One way out of the conundrum can be found in the new alternative pathways described above and in such routes as the urban teacher residencies in Boston, Chicago, and Denver. In all of these instances, in different ways and with differing degrees of success, partners without a history of successful collaboration are coming together to work simultaneously on teacher recruitment, preparation, and induction, ongoing professional development, and school redesign. In short, all the institutions that share the responsibility for the education of our children must work together to make certain that:

- Strong candidates are recruited into programs that adequately prepare them to begin teaching;
- Teachers receive numerous effective opportunities for continuing to refine their practices and to use their knowledge and skills to support other teachers; and
- Schools are organized in such a manner that teachers can maximize their potential as educators, in turn allowing their students to maximize their potential as learners.

We must come together to generate solutions to all three of those issues or remain trapped within the ethical dilemma of existing teaching certification policy. Doing so will not be easy, as it will require a radical reconfiguration of the rules, roles, and relationships within and among schools, districts, unions, universities, states, and the federal government. But failure is not an option; our children's future and the communities they will create depend upon our succeeding.