

Building Teacher Preparation Programs that Attract and Facilitate the Transition of Sustainable Second-Career Teachers

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Abstract

There is a vast population of individuals who are interested in changing careers and transitioning into the teaching profession. Much of the possibility for bringing these individuals into the teaching profession rests with teacher preparation programs. Teacher preparation programs must invest time to thoroughly understand the characteristics, perspectives and experiences of those individuals seeking to change careers. Using this information as an ingredient for designing and administering teacher preparation programs will not only facilitate the orientation and transition of this population into their new-found profession, but also enhance the odds that these individuals remain in the profession long-term. This literature review profiles potential career changers while bringing to light characteristics which are deeply relevant for effectively identifying and recruiting these individuals into the profession. It also discusses how, according to the literature, teacher preparation programs can acknowledge these characteristics thereby making the transition from the former to the new-found career virtually seamless.

Keywords: teacher education, alternative certification, second-career teachers

1. Introduction

Teacher shortages have been and continue to be an ongoing challenge for school systems across the United States. Terms that have been used to describe the gravity of these shortages include: "Alarming", (Hung & Smith, 2012, p. 3) "complex and widespread", (Howard, 2003, p. 142) "critical demand", (Veale, Dobbins, & Kurtts, 2013, p. 107) and "perpetual" (Peter, Ng, & Thomas, 2011, p. 232). With less than ideal student-teacher ratios, the widespread granting of emergency teacher certifications, and a heavy reliance on substitute teachers, one glimpse into a typical school district is all that is necessary to find evidence of teacher shortages; however, upon reviewing the statistics surrounding projected shortfalls, it becomes even more apparent that teacher shortages are real. In 2002, it was reported that about 200,000 K-12 teachers would need to be hired each and every year over the next decade in order to resolve ongoing teacher shortage problems (Hung & Smith, 2012). While the problem continues to go unresolved across all disciplines, the challenge is especially magnified within the areas of math and science. As part of his State of the Union address in 2011, President Barack Obama called attention to the need for 100,000 teachers over the next 10 years in the areas of math and science alone (Epstein, & Miller, 2011).

While the average number of teacher openings each year is 200,000, only about 150,000 individuals become prepared to teach. At the same time, almost 18% of all individuals who do become prepared to teach each year never actually enter the field (Resta, Huling, & Rainwater, 2001). A remedy that was designed to help rectify the situation came on the scene as early as the 1980's (Hung & Smith, 2012). Since their inception, alternative certification programs have been and continue to be very popular avenues through which individuals may become certified teachers without having completed a traditional teacher preparation program. Alternative certification programs can be defined most simply as programs that allow individuals who hold a non-teaching degree to become certified to teach. For example, someone who holds a bachelor's degree in English can become a certified English teacher by completing an alternative certification program.

The curricular designs of these programs greatly vary; however, a key component involves supplementing the candidates' content knowledge with the pedagogical knowledge and skills they lack. According to Hung & Smith (2012), the percentage of new teachers who are certified through an alternative certification program in the United States is between 20% & 30%. Hundreds of alternative certification programs exist within the United States producing roughly 60,000 new teachers each year. From 2005 to 2010, approximately one-third of new hires were alternatively certified. Teachers having fewer than 5 years of experience are more than twice as likely to be alternatively certified rather than traditionally certified (Morettini, 2014). At the same time, the number of individuals who leave the profession is staggering. After only one year in the classroom, many novice teachers choose not to return while the number not returning doubles five years in. New teachers are more than two times more likely to abandon their teaching careers after the first year with about 25% of all first year teachers leaving after 5 years. For these reasons it is no surprise that according to a 2012 report issued by the U.S. Department of Education, 49 states and the District of Columbia have significant teacher shortages (Hung & Smith 2012).

There is a vast and very viable population of individuals who are interested in changing careers and transitioning into the teaching profession. More and more people in North America are turning away from their first careers in order to become teachers (Etherington, 2009). As a result of a large-scale study on the views of potential career changers, the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation (2008) stated:

Taken together, these findings suggest a substantial potential human resource pool available to be tapped for teaching among college-educated adults (p. 4). This pool's potential, however, has yet to be fully tapped, despite substantial growth in the number of programs targeting such candidates in recent years (p.v). Calling these would-be career changers "low-hanging fruit", the foundation goes on to express great optimism in this population's potential for making a sizable dent in the teacher shortage (p. 7). In fact, according to their survey, the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation (2008) found that, a significant proportion (42%) of 24 to 60 year olds with at least a bachelor's degree would consider becoming a teacher in the future. Nearly an equal proportion (43%) has considered teaching in the past, including two in three (66%) potential teachers, which indicates that this is a decision to which they have given significant thought (p. 2).

Much of the possibility for bringing these individuals into the teaching profession lays with teacher preparation programs. The key to narrowing the gap between the number of career-long teachers who are currently in the classroom and the number of career-long teachers who are needed in the classroom rests heavily with higher education institutions. Until teacher preparation programs invest the time that is necessary to thoroughly understand the characteristics, perspectives and experiences of the vast population of individuals seeking to change careers, conditions surrounding teacher shortages are not likely to improve. More importantly, using this information as an essential ingredient for designing and administering teacher preparation programs will not only facilitate the orientation and transition of this population into their new-found profession, but also notably enhance the odds that these individuals remain in the profession long-term. Unfortunately, these practices are not entirely common. As Wilson and Deaney stated (2010), "little attention has been given to understanding the transitional processes of individuals coming into teaching at a later point in their working lives" (p. 169).

This literature review seeks to meet two objectives. First, it will thoroughly profile potential career changers while bringing to light characteristics which are deeply relevant for effectively identifying and recruiting these individuals into the profession. Secondly, it will discuss how, according to the literature, teacher preparation programs can acknowledge these characteristics thereby making the transition from the former to the new-found career virtually seamless. These two objectives are based on the premise that, when armed with these details, institutions of higher learning are then in a position to effectively facilitate this population's very unique transition into an entirely new academic world.

2. Demographics

No doubt, alternatively certified teachers are demographically different from their traditionally prepared counterparts. Candidates who complete an alternative certification program are, as would be expected, typically older than those individuals completing a traditional teacher preparation program. Most research indicates that the age of this population ranges from the late 20's through the late 40's (Haselkorn & Hammerness, 2008). In terms of gender, the rates at which alternative certification programs recruit men and women into the teaching profession is largely dependent on the type of certification program.

For example, women are more heavily attracted by programs that target para educators while Troops to Teachers, a United States Department of Defense program helping eligible military personnel begin a new career as teachers, is more popular among males. Generally speaking, some programs have made progress in bringing more males to the teaching profession while other alternative certification programs perpetuate the traditionally female-dominated field. Individuals who pursue an alternative path to certification are also more diverse than those who complete traditional programs. These programs are shown to be quite effective in bringing minority candidates to the profession. Studies also indicate that some alternative certification candidates are not truly midcareer or second-career candidates. Some of these individuals simply hold a college degree but did not actually practice a profession or career until deciding to teach later in life. As for their previous careers, research findings are rather mixed concerning the extent to which the background careers of this population vary (Haselkorn & Hammerness, 2008). Some studies (Morton et al., 2006) indicate a wide variety of academic backgrounds; however, according to evaluators of federally funded Transition to Teaching programs,

Studies of alternative routes have found relatively limited occupational diversity among participants as a whole. These studies indicate that many participants have backgrounds as students or in other school-related areas, or in other fields, rather than the anticipated professional backgrounds (Humphrey and Wechsler as cited in Haselkorn, 2008, p. 9). Some findings show that few come to the field of teaching from such areas as engineering, law, and medicine (Haselkorn, 2008).

3. Concerns

Not only is this population demographically unique, but the nature of their transitional journey from a former career to the teaching profession presents a different set of concerns among the group. Teacher pay is a significant concern for individuals who are potential career changers. Although salary is not the only thing they consider when looking to change careers, receiving enough money is important to them. Low pay is the biggest concern that potential teachers raise about transitioning to the teaching profession. Many (68%) feel that teaching will decrease their salary and some (36%) indicate that a salary below \$50,000 would be acceptable. When asked about what policymakers could do to spur them to teach, making sure there are adequate salaries was among the top replies of 43% of potential teachers. Improving school conditions for educational success was also a top reply for 30% of respondents (Woodrow, 2008).

Although alternative certification programs began their life as a way to recruit degree-holding individuals from all content areas into the profession, in recent years particular emphasis has been strongly placed on recruiting science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) teachers. For career changers going from a STEM career to teaching, there are concerns about how society will perceive the transition. Because of negative stereotypes surrounding teaching, many of these individuals feel a loss of identity, particularly among women (Grier & Johnston, 2009). Another concern frequently cited among this population is the fear of becoming a student again along with worries about not succeeding in college work. Some STEM candidates for alternative certification perceive the transition as regressing to a novice status after obtaining success in their former career (Grier & Johnston, 2012). Not only does the idea of becoming a student again cause concern for this group, but so does the fact that they often do not view teacher certification requirements as being relevant to their needs. The thought of having to complete a credential program is considered by some as unnecessary due to their prior experiences and backgrounds. Perceived bureaucratic policies and procedures sometimes deter these career changers from actually taking the leap. Additionally, some potential career changers have concerns surrounding the financial and family implications of returning to college to become a teacher. On top of earning less money, the effects of paying college tuition and having less family time were points of consideration. Others raise concerns by expressing how becoming a teacher is easier for younger students because of their flexibility (Grier, 2008).

4. Motivations

Perhaps the most telling and useful information for teacher preparation programs to know about the pool of potential alternative certification candidates is what their motivations are for not only considering a transition to the teaching profession but also ultimately making the decision to change careers. At the same time, their motivations for altogether rejecting such a career change are just as telling and useful. Influence apparently plays a significant role in individuals' decision to become a teacher later in life. Interestingly, Lee (2011) wrote that traditionally certified teachers are influenced to become teachers by their former teachers while career changers are influenced by intrinsic factors and prior work experiences.

The research is amazingly consistent when it comes to the reasons why individuals decide to pursue alternative certification. By far, the most common reasons given include the desire to work with children, give back to the community, and make a difference (Haselkorn & Hammerness, 2008; Veale et al., 2013; Castro & Bauml, 2009; Lerner & Zittleman, 2002; Harms & Knobloch, 2005; Williams & Forgasz, 2009; Grier & Johnston, 2009; Lee, 2011; Shannon & Bergdoll, 1998; Woodrow, 2008). The next most common reason is the need to do more meaningful and fulfilling work, (Haselkorn & Hammerness, 2008; Novak & Knowles, 1992; Wilson & Deaney, 2010; Castro & Bauml, 2009; Lerner & Zittleman, 2002; Grier & Johnston, 2009; Lee, 2011; Williams & Forgasz, 2009; Harms & Knobloch, 2005). Among STEM candidates, the desires to change the way the subject is taught to make it more relevant to students and to also encourage future scientists were cited as motivations for switching careers. They also cited job-related disappointments and disillusionment with their former careers as reasons (Grier & Johnston, 2009).

Non-STEM alternative certification candidates also gave reasons directly related to their former careers. Those reasons included dissatisfaction (Haselkorn & Hammerness, 2008; Shannon & Bergdoll, 1998; Lee, 2011), repetitiveness in the previous field, and no longer being satisfied with the values and demands of their previous work (Wilson & Deaney, 2010). Being bored and having no opportunities to work to their full potential in the previous field or obtain career advancement are other conditions that prompt many individuals to pursue a teaching career (Castro & Bauml, 2009; Harms & Knobloch, 2005). Although they are not among the most common motivations given for transitioning to the field of teaching, practical reasons are taken into consideration. A better fit for their schedule, more family time and vacation opportunities are also very common reasons individuals consider a transition to teaching. Other reasons include: the desire to be a role model for children, viewing teaching as a true calling and a homecoming of sorts, having a strong interest in the subject matter, strong support of family and friends and the time and resources needed to make a career change. Job security and experiencing empty nest syndrome are other miscellaneous and less commonly cited motivations (Haselkorn & Hammerness, 2008; Williams & Forgasz, 2009; Harms & Knobloch, 2005; Lee, 2011; Castro & Bauml, 2009; Woodrow, 2008; Shannon & Bergdoll, 1998; Lerner & Zittleman, 2002).

Morettini (2014)) who in her study found the most common motivation to be a life-changing event like the birth of a child, also categorized individuals' motivations to teach under 4 types of influences: (a) model influences - a former teacher (b) pragmatic influences - working conditions (c) experiential influences - experiences with young people, informal teaching, and positive and negative experiences as a student themselves and (d) race/gender-related influences - a lack of African American and male role models.

Perhaps most powerful, particularly from the perspective of teacher preparation programs, are the findings that suggest simply knowing what it actually takes to transition to a teaching career is motivation to take on a career change. Research suggests that members of the pool of potential alternative certification candidates simply are not aware of the process and requirements necessary to make the transition (Woodrow, 2008). Some potential candidates assume that the process involves far more than it actually does in reality and it is at the point that this information is made known to them that they often make the decision to be a career changer (Castro & Bauml, 2009). As part of their study on career changers, Castro and Bauml (as cited in Grier & Johnston, 2012) found that "access to resources about teaching and availability of educational programs and opportunities - at the right time - most influence whether someone would pursue teaching as a second career" (p. 22). Having immediate access to information on ways to enter the teaching profession was deemed very important by these participants. In fact, "the accessibility of a certification program is more influential than financial incentives" when it comes to program recruitment by institutions of higher learning (Castro & Bauml, 2009, p. 115). Geographical proximity is also among the highest priorities for individuals when making the decision to change careers (Shannon & Bergdoll, 1998). It was discovered that "location is one of the program features that matters most to midcareer teacher candidates, with respect to both their preparation programs and first teacher placements" (Woodrow, 2008, p. 12).

5. School Setting Preferences

A large-scale study of potential teachers found that when they have a preference, they prefer traditional schools and suburban area schools. About 47% indicated that the area where the school is located did not make a difference while 35% preferred suburban schools, 1% urban schools and only 6% rural schools. Teaching in a high school was highly favored by 45% of participants while about 32% favored low socio-economic schools or schools having children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

As for charter schools and low-performing schools that especially need quality teachers, 31% and 30% of respondents found these settings extremely appealing, respectively. Only about 15% expressed a very strong desire to work with special needs special education students (Woodrow, 2008).

6. Ideas Concerning the Field of Teaching

Career changers, who are new to the field of education, tend to bring an interesting, yet often erroneous set of ideas with them to the field of teaching. Research suggests that second career teachers strongly associate good management skills with good teaching. Due to their prior management experience in a variety of other career areas, they tend to believe that these skills will naturally and automatically translate into good classroom management (Freidus & Krasnow, 1991). In a separate study, second career teachers initially believed that providing a caring and loving environment in their classrooms was all that is needed for learning. After having some experience under their belt, they soon realized the significance of having good classroom management skills. Additionally, second career teachers do not immediately understand the amount of time, effort and energy that good teaching requires. Early on in their transition, they believed that prescribed lesson plans and teachers' guides would provide everything necessary for being a good teacher (Freidus & Krasnow, 1991). Generally speaking, they tend to have a skewed view of the teaching profession and are rather naïve about how complex the field actually is (Konecki et al., 2002). One misconception that second career teachers sometimes bring with them is the notion that the field of education does not have the bureaucracy and politics that were found in their previous career fields. They tend to have very little patience with bureaucracy and paperwork, which are viewed as a hindrance to working with students, and were soon disappointed by the realities of the teaching profession (Freidus & Krasnow, 1991; Resta et al., 2001). A major assumption that individuals pursuing alternative certification make is that their transitional journey will be very familiar and second-nature, almost intuitive, simply because they have a number of years under their belts as students themselves (Gifford, Snyder, & Cuddapah, 2013). Most of these individuals feel that their life experiences and maturity give them an edge as they enter the teaching profession (Veale et al., 2013). "They bring with them their memories of being a student, their experiences as parents, their impressions from the media, their dreams and their commitment. Most have excellent academic knowledge of content fields but they need help in becoming a practitioner" (Konecki et al., 2002, p. 10).

Some of the strengths that career changers bring to the teaching profession are maturity, life experience, and good work habits (Resta et al., 2001). They also tend to be more open to diversity and more apt to subscribe to teaching methodologies that are student-centered and also highlight the connections between the content and the real world (Grier & Johnston, 2009). At the same time, they also sometimes bring challenges for their colleagues. Research suggests that members of this population tend to be very assertive and determined. They also have a number of expectations from their colleagues. Having discussions about school and instructional reform issues, giving support in difficult situations, providing constructive criticism, mentoring, showing moral support, peer coaching, and supplying assistance within the classroom are among those expectations, in addition to serving as a sounding board. "Administrators who want docile teachers who won't make waves may not be prepared for the assertive, resourceful, and vocal second-career teacher. Those administrators who appreciate the skill, wisdom, resourcefulness, and determination of the career changers who have come through high-quality teacher preparation programs will find strong teachers committed to student learning" (Resta et al., 2001, p. 62). One study showed that largely due to their prior experiences in other fields, alternative certification candidates, when interning, often clashed philosophically with their mentors. In many situations, they disagreed with their interns and deemed it "appropriate, if not expected" to challenge their mentor's teaching strategies or interactions with children (Morton, et al., 2006, p. 46).

There is even evidence that some second-career teachers may be more likely than their traditionally prepared counterparts to fail the practicum experience in their teacher preparation program due to having such inflexible viewpoints (Novak & Knowles, 1992). Additionally, second-career teachers often need time to adjust to the school schedule and culture which tend to be dramatically different from that found in their previous careers. Taking restroom breaks, chatting with neighboring teachers, enjoying a soft drink or a cup of coffee, or even the desire to converse about their own instructional challenges in the presence of students are some examples of areas in which this population needs time to adjust (Morton et al., 2006).

With regard to career changers' academic qualifications, quality of work experience, and experience with children, the literature is very mixed and rather inconclusive.

It has long been argued that because of the experience they have in their fields, second career teachers bring a deeper knowledge and understanding of their content when compared to their traditionally prepared counterparts (Haselkorn & Hammerness, 2008; Friedus & Krasnow, 1991; Williams & Brindley, 2006). However, one study found that older teachers were less qualified academically than those who were younger and also far more likely to have failed their Liberal Arts and Science Exam. At the same time, more than a third (37%) of career changers has been found to hold an advanced degree. Another long-held argument is that second career teachers are seriously lacking when it comes to their prior classroom experience and skills in child development; however, others have argued that because they come from an older population that has already raised a family, they gain in experience what their younger, childless, and traditionally prepared counterparts lack (Haselkorn & Hammerness, 2008).

7. Implications and Recommendations for Teacher Preparation Programs

Following are some general implications and recommendations brought to light by the research literature.

Teacher preparation programs simply cannot take for granted that the candidates entering their alternative certification programs necessarily have strong content knowledge. Program faculty have often found that this group needs extensive content-related scaffolding and just as much, if not more, transitional support during their practicum and internship experiences than those candidates who are completing an undergraduate teacher preparation program (Morton et al., 2006). At the same time, it is also highly recommended that teacher preparation programs do a better job of tapping into candidates' prior experiences by integrating those experiences into the curriculum (Novak & Knowles, 1992).

As a result of conducting focus groups in six cities around the nation, the following recommendations for teacher preparation programs emerged (Haselkorn, & Hammerness, 2008, p. ii). Programs should use targeted selection processes that identify the strongest candidates. Programs should also be designed to take into account the specific needs of adult learners. Pedagogy should be grounded in content and the needs of diverse learners, integrating theory and practice. Strong clinical experiences should be provided in schools that prepare candidates for the specific settings in which they will teach. Assistance with appropriate job placement in schools that make efforts to support novice teachers should also be made available. Teacher preparation programs should also ensure that they are organized to promote students' success as learners. A study involving 20 novice teachers, all who were graduates of a program designed exclusively to recruit and cater to the needs of second career teachers, utilized biographical questionnaires to collect data. The following list represents the implications of the study's findings for teacher education programs: (a) Utilizing a differentiated curriculum that specifically addresses the needs and concerns of this population enables second career teachers to maximize their full potential. (b) Both second career teachers and teacher preparation programs themselves falsely assume that candidates' backgrounds and prior experiences will automatically transfer over to their new-found career. Teacher preparation programs should make an intentional effort to teach second career teachers a wide variety of pedagogical strategies thereby equipping them with the skills they need to adapt their prior knowledge and experience to the classroom setting. (c) Although most second career teachers bring to the profession a strong desire to work with and care for children, teacher preparation programs must include a component on child and adolescent development and also clearly show how these areas connect to practice. In doing so, these programs will correct the common misconception that simply caring for students is all that is necessary for creating an environment that is conducive to learning. (d) Teacher preparation programs must include in their curricula the social and political issues that are directly related to education.

Doing so prevents candidates from being blindsided by a general lack of awareness concerning these issues and how they impact teachers and teaching. (e) Teacher preparation programs need to systematically address the complexities and challenges that are present in the world of teaching. By providing very strong support systems, career transition is far more likely to successfully occur. (f) Second career teachers bring very strong notions concerning what constitutes good teaching. Although they arrive at these notions through deep reflection, they are typically not successful at effectively scrutinizing practices that are commonly accepted as good practice. Teacher preparation programs that provide these candidates with the skills and opportunities they need to objectively reflect on defining good teaching will do much to help in this area (Freidus & Krasnow, 1991). There are also very practical and easy-to-do things that teacher preparation programs and institutions of higher learning can do to attract, recruit and retain career changers. Research indicates that timing is crucial as to whether members of the pool of potential career changers will actually choose to teach or not.

When they have access to resources, and accessibility to programs, they are far more likely to commit. It has even been suggested that rather than asking "Where are recruits?" teacher preparation programs should instead be asking "When are recruits?". Simple things such as decreasing opportunity costs, ensuring a user friendly website, holding frequent informational sessions, instituting year-round admissions and interviews, having frequent entry points, utilizing mentors and alumni speakers, and offering a variety of class formats all help to ensure that the potential career changers see the time to make the switch as now (Castro & Bauml, 2009).

At the same time, Morettini (2014) makes clear the importance of not just recruiting anyone and everyone into alternative certification programs. Due to the vast number of teachers, both traditional and second year, who leave the teaching profession annually, recruitment into alternative certification programs should seek to reach the masses yet still be selective. Individuals who convey vocational reasons for changing careers should by all means be recruited, and teacher preparation programs must ensure that they clearly understand the demands and challenges of teaching before beginning their transition.

According to Blazer (2012), experts have reached agreement regarding key characteristics of high-quality alternative teacher preparation programs and researchers agree that the following components should be present when seeking to identify such programs: (a) high standards and rigorous screening of candidates (b) strong academic coursework component encompassing pedagogy, classroom management, lesson planning, child development, subject-specific teaching methods, exposure to diversity (c) opportunities to practice teaching under the supervision of expert teachers who give feedback and suggestions for improvement (d) a comprehensive system of support that extends beyond program completion and (e) community partnerships between university, non-profit organizations, and school districts.

8. Conclusion

The implications of the demographics, concerns, and motivations of second career teachers may mean one thing for one teacher preparation program and something entirely different for another program. Regardless of what the implications ultimately turn out to be, they do warrant attention. As Resta (2001) stated, "Administrators should understand the unique characteristics of this new pool of teachers and should be able to recognize the components of high-quality accelerated teacher preparation program" (Resta et al., 2001, p. 62). The key is having teacher preparation programs that are not only well informed, but also use this information to design and administer alternative certification programs.

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