Comparison of Traditional Versus Alternative Preparation of Special Education Teachers

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Comparison of Traditional Versus Alternative Preparation of Special Education Teachers

Janna Siegel Robertson¹ and Jacques D. Singleton²

Abstract

The shortage of special education teachers has prompted the creation of alternative certification programs. The effectiveness of the University of Memphis’s (U of M’s) 14-year-old alternative Special Education Institute program in preparing teachers to teach and remain in the field was examined. The program was compared to the U of M’s traditional certification program. During spring of 2009, data were collected through information obtained from the U of M’s College of Education’s database and information from four local school districts about the current employment of special education teachers. The number of program graduates from the traditional and alternative programs was compared for longevity. It was found that a larger percentage of the alternatively prepared teachers (50%) were employed at local school districts than the traditional program graduates (33%). But there was evidence that alternatively prepared teachers may not stay as many years (4.1 as compared to 6 years). The male graduates were also more likely to be employed in area school districts than females from both programs. Similarly, a larger percentage of African American students were employed by area school districts than were their White counterparts. The results give support that alternative programs do lead to additional employment and teachers were retained for several years.

Keywords

alternative preparation, retention, employment

States across America have continued to experience a critical shortage of personnel qualified to meet the needs of children with disabilities. Although significant teacher shortages exist in some areas of general education, particularly math and science, the problem has been more profound and severe in special education. Each year, it has become harder for school districts to hire qualified special education teachers. Each day, teachers who do not have a license to teach instruct more than 600,000 special education students in our nation’s schools. Many teachers meet certification standards in one state and not in another, further complicating the problem. If special education was to be successful—that is, if it was going to meet each student’s needs—then recruiting quality people and retaining them had to become a greater focus of everyone’s efforts (Dieker et al., 2003).

The employment opportunities in special education teaching were expected to grow 21% to 35% through 2010, an increase of more than

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150,000 positions. In the early 1990s, job openings for special educators were estimated at approximately 333,000 nationally. It was estimated by the year 2010 that there will be more than 600,000 open special education positions in the United States (National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education, 2003).

Although state-reported data suggest that federal support for preparing personnel to serve children with disabilities has been helpful in meeting state needs, critical shortages still persist. For the school year 1999-2000, more than 12,000 openings for special education teachers were left vacant or filled with substitutes throughout the United States. In addition, many special education teachers were not fully certified for their main teaching assignment. Special education administrators report that the greatest barrier to finding teachers was a shortage of qualified applicants and that insufficient salaries and benefits were a major barrier to recruiting qualified applicants (Pasternack, 2002).

Special education teachers have the highest turnover rate in the teaching profession. We have learned that the number and types of students with disabilities served, the special education teachers’ job responsibilities, manageability of workload, and the extent to which their schools were caring and supportive of students and staff all affect the special education teachers’ confidence and intent to stay in the profession. Of those who plan to leave, 75% report that paperwork interferes with their primary role—teaching—and many report that their workload is not manageable (Pasternack, 2002). According to the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP, 2004) in the 2004-2005 school year, it was reported that 21% of teachers whose primary teaching assignment was special education either moved to a new assignment or left the field of education altogether, citing extreme workloads as the reason for leaving. In fact, 14% of the individuals who left education for other fields stated that their workloads in their new jobs were much more manageable than when they were in education (OSEP, 2004). Although this causes a shortage in the field, we must be certain we have recruited and retained teachers with the right disposition and commitment and not merely find people who want to be employed. The field of special education cannot continue to recruit and retain the wrong people for children with special needs, but the challenge was to become better at developing processes to ensure that the right people were inducted into the special education teaching profession (Dieker et al., 2003).

Supply and Demand and Rational Choice Theory (RCT)

The theory of supply and demand and RCT can be helpful in explaining the shortage of special education teachers. Supply-and-demand theorists note that the demand for special education teachers was high but the supply was low. When this phenomenon occurs in any occupation, quality job benefits must be devised to make the job appealing. The more appealing the job, the easier it was to recruit and retain individuals and the greater the supply of individuals seeking employment in the field. Therefore, special education has seen the need to offer a variety of incentives in an attempt to increase supply (Browning, Haleli, & Webster, 2000).

RCT theorists explain that once the incentives are put in place, the individual has to evaluate them to determine whether they are attractive enough to justify a new choice of profession. The individual has to examine the costs and benefits (Browning et al., 2000). RCT theorists state that a rational person will be able to examine the costs and benefits and make an informed decision regarding whether the occupation was worth pursuing. When the costs outweigh the benefits, it often causes a supply-and-demand problem in the field. This was the scenario being experienced in education, especially special education (Guarino, Santibanez, & Daley, 2006).

Tennessee’s Shortage

In Tennessee, the teacher shortage was as critical as in other areas of the United States. Approximately 4.5% of teachers in the state
were on waivers and permits. A permit or waiver is not a license, but it does allow a local education agency to employ an individual with a Bachelor’s degree in the event that a licensed educator cannot be located. The teachers on these permits and waivers were teaching 16.1% of the special education population in the state, or 145,083 of the 900,510 total student population (Otuya, 1992). The state recognized the shortage, especially in the area of special education, and followed the lead of many other states. The state formed a partnership with state-funded colleges and universities to recruit and prepare more special education teachers. Two of the largest school districts in the west Tennessee area were Memphis City Schools (MCS) and Shelby County Schools (SCS). The Tennessee Statewide Educators Supply and Demand Report (2003) revealed that these two districts were feeling the effects of the lack of supply of and the increase in demand for special education teachers. Since the 1996-1997 school year, the number of special education positions in both the MCS and SCS increased 2% and 1.8%, respectively. The open special education positions in the two districts combined for 10% of the total number of teaching jobs. An average of 14% of special education teachers left the school systems per year in the last 5 years. Approximately 98% and 91% of the individuals who left MCS and SCS, respectfully, choose careers outside of education.

Otuya (1992) pointed out that the attrition rate was highest (25%) in the first 3 years of employment. The individuals who have 5 or more years of experience only have an attrition rate of 8.6% (Otuya, 1992). The trend was that once a person stays more than 3 years, they more than likely have identified the costs and benefits and made the decision to stay in the field.

Studies Related to Alternative Certification Programs

There have been many studies conducted on the effectiveness of alternative certification programs. Clewell and Villegas (2001) and Villegas and Clewell (1998) evaluated the Pathways to Teaching Careers Program launched in 1989 by the DeWitt Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund, which targeted minority paraprofessionals and emergency-certified teachers in urban school districts. At 40 separate sites, a total of 2,593 participants enrolled through the date of the later report. Compared with the national pool of newly prepared teachers, Pathways participants were 63% minority (versus 18% nationally), were 70% female (versus 73% nationally), and had a mean age of 35 (versus 28 nationally). The report tracked retention using follow-up surveys and found that 75% of Pathways graduates were still employed as teachers 3 or more years after completion and another 13% were employed in education-related jobs. These rates were higher than the commonly reported national averages for alternative credentialing programs.

Another study, conducted in 2001 by Corcoran et al. using data from a survey administered in 2000 to three cohorts (the sample size was 72) of program graduates of the Teacher Fellows Program in Texas, found that all 39 members of the 1998-1999 and 1999-2000 cohorts were recruited by Texas districts and that 83% of the 1997-1998 cohort were still teaching 2 years later.

Darling-Hammond, Hudson, and Kirby (1989), using a survey of 481 nontraditional teacher education program participants and graduates, found that recruits from nontraditional programs appeared to enter and remain in teaching at similar or slightly higher rates than other college graduates prepared for teaching. Excluding former teachers, 86% of nontraditional program graduates entered teaching and about 75% were still teaching within 2 years of program completion. These percentages are roughly comparable to those for teachers in general. In addition, the authors found that nontraditional programs recruited higher proportions of older and female candidates to science and math teaching than national proportions of science and math teachers with these demographic characteristics. Those who came from working backgrounds in science tended to come from
lower paying, technical, support, and service fields than from professional or managerial fields. Those who came from nonscience occupations were drawn disproportionately from lower salary ranges.

Although there are many benefits in alternative teacher certification programs, still many traditional-thinking educators believe the system is flawed and favor the traditional route. Rosenberg and Sindelar (2001) stated that at the same time that traditional teacher preparation programs were subject to rigorous standards-based program reviews, local education agencies were permitted to hire less than fully qualified personnel and to do so in large numbers. In such cases, teachers typically were hired with little or no formal teacher education.

Advocates of traditional education programs had two other valid arguments against alternative teacher certification. First, alternative recruiting efforts were costly. It was found to cost about 75% more to prepare a teacher in well-designed alternative certification programs compared to traditionally certified programs (Zeichner & Schulte, 2003). Second, in some cases, standards were lowered and alternative programs were viewed as undermining attempts to professionalize teaching because they minimized the need for specialized professional knowledge and implied that all a teacher needs to become a successful teacher was content knowledge and an apprenticeship in a school during an internship (Zeichner & Schulte, 2003).

Some researchers perceived alternative certification as an attempt to undermine the credibility, as well as the professionalism, of teachers. Alternatively certified teachers lacked adequate pedagogical skills, which were normally acquired from formal teacher education. Because teachers were certified from competency in a subject matter area, the knowledge bases were weak and narrowly focused to the extent that they limited the learning horizon of the students and adversely affected the quality of the students’ overall educational experiences (Otuya, 1992).

Perhaps the most vocal critics of alternative certification have been Linda Darling-Hammond and her colleagues (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Darling-Hammond, Wise, & Klein, 1999). Darling-Hammond is a staunch supporter of the need for sound and thorough preparation of teachers that includes rigorous academic course work at the undergraduate level, highly structured and supervised internships, full licensure before a teacher candidate is given control of a classroom, and ongoing professional development. Many critics of alternative certification programs contended that assigning students to teachers who entered through shortened preparation programs was as inconceivable as entrusting them to the care of a doctor who had 6 months of intensive course work and a mentor in the next room.

University of Memphis's Traditional Certification Versus Alternative Certification Programs

The University of Memphis created two certification programs for students who planned to teach special education: The Bachelors of Science in Education (BSED) program, which was described in this study as the traditional certification program, and the Masters in Teaching (MAT) Program, which was created to try to help curb the shortage of special education teachers and was referred to as the alternative certification program.

The fundamental difference between the two programs was the undergraduate traditional program has an additional semester of courses on characteristics and methods for learning disabilities, physical disabilities, mental retardation, and behavioral disorders. This program also has a block of courses that are taken together (methods, behavior management, and assessment) in conjunction with a practicum, where students practice the skills they were taught. The program had a sequential order of courses. The traditional undergraduate program ended with a student teaching assignment in three settings. The teacher education portion of the program lasted 2 years (approximately 60 credit hours), all taught during the school year.
The alternative program had less credit hours (approximately 43 to 46) and was often taught in shortened summer terms. Although there was a summer practicum for 90 hours, the teachers usually did not student teach, as they were already teaching full-time on a waiver. The courses were not usually taken in any particular order. This abbreviated program usually took students 1.5 to 3 years part-time and in the summers to complete. Many of the students had their licensure courses paid for by the state.

**University of Memphis’s Special Education (SPED) Institute and Its Benefits**

Throughout the state of Tennessee, there has been a severe shortage of special education teachers, and this shortage has existed for many years and gives no indication of abating anytime in the future. As a result of this shortage of special education teachers, school districts and private special education facilities throughout this state found it increasingly difficult to hire and maintain a sufficient number of special education teachers to meet the needs of their children with disabilities.

The University of Memphis’s SPED Institute has become the leader in recruitment of special education teachers in the city of Memphis. There were nine other SPED Institutes throughout the state of Tennessee that were created to address the shortage of qualified special education teachers. The SPED Institute participants must already have a bachelor’s degree in some area and want to take classes that lead to licensure in special education. The main incentive offered by this program was that the Institute paid for all classes leading to licensure. The participants could finish the program in 18 months.

The attractive piece to school district administrators was that the individual would be available to teach almost immediately by applying for Tennessee State Alternative A license. The participant may apply for a license after completing 6 graduate hours. The license can be renewed for up to 3 years if the individual is continually taking classes toward licensure.

Another benefit was that the individual could receive real-life practical experience. The ability to gain real-life experience could be a major reason for the higher retention rates for alternatively licensed individuals. They realize prior to licensure the costs and benefits of the job.

The traditional program took 4 years to prepare the students. Although they received more pedagogy, they received less real-life experience until they got into the classroom after graduation. Many did not have a full concept of the responsibilities of the job. Another factor was that the average age (obtained from a previous study by the first author) of SPED Institute participants was 25 years old, whereas the average age of Bachelor of Special Education students was 21 years old. The maturity factor could have an impact on the individual’s ability to stay in the field of teaching. This study leads the researchers to ask the following questions:

1. How did the job retention rate of University of Memphis’s alternatively certified graduates compare to those of its traditionally certified graduates?
2. What were the demographics (i.e., ethnicity, gender) of both alternatively and traditionally educated teachers who remained in the field?

**Method**

This study used a quantitative research model. A quantitative design was implemented to determine how the retention rates of individuals who were alternatively prepared compare with those individuals who completed the traditional education program. To answer Question 1, the researchers acquired the names of every student identified as completing the University of Memphis’s alternative or traditionally certified program since the alternative program’s beginning in fall 1995. The major school districts surrounding the University of Memphis provided lists of their currently employed special education teachers. These lists were compared to see which graduates
were still working as special education teachers. To answer Question 2, the researchers used the information obtained from the University of Memphis’s College of Education archives to identify and compare demographics of these alternatively prepared and traditionally prepared individuals. The demographics that were identified and compared were ethnicity and gender. Simple statistics were used for all comparisons. An independent $t$ test was used to determine if the differences in retention rates were significant.

Results

The purpose of this study was to investigate how alternative certification programs may affect special education teacher retention.

Research Question 1: How Does the Job Retention Rate of University of Memphis’s Alternatively Certified Graduates Compare to Its Traditionally Certified Graduates?

Employment rates. The four neighboring school districts who were the major employers of University of Memphis’s education graduates provided lists of their current special education teachers during the Spring of 2009. These lists were compared to the University of Memphis’s database of graduates from the traditional and alternative special education programs. The alternative program began in fall of 1995, so there were 14 years of teacher graduates included. Table 1 shows the number of teachers employed from the alternative and traditional special education programs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Employed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$N$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative program</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional program</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data demonstrate that 50% of the alternative program students graduated in the past 5 years, whereas 50% of the traditional students graduated in the past 9 years.

Length of employment. Data on length of employment were projected from the graduation dates of the teachers. Although all four school districts provided a current list of employees, only one district supplied the researchers with information about length of employment. Since these data were not available for the majority of teachers, the researchers calculated employment as the number of years after graduation from the University of Memphis (see Table 3).

An independent samples $t$ test was conducted to compare the length of employment for the alternatively and traditionally certified groups. There was a significant difference in length of employment for the alternatively certified group ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 2.84$) and the traditionally certified group ($M = 6.00$, $SD = 4.34$). The result was significant, with $p \leq .05$. On average, the traditionally certified individuals remained in the field longer.

Research Question 2: What Are the Demographics (i.e., Gender and Ethnicity) of Graduates in the Alternative and Traditional Certified Programs?

Gender. The total number of males and females who graduated from the traditional and alternative special education programs was collected. In the alternative program, 80% of the students were female and 20% were male.
In the traditional program, 93% of the students were female and 7% were male. The number of male and female special education teachers currently working in local school districts was compared (see Table 4).

Although there were many more females than males who graduated from the University of Memphis programs, it appears that there was a larger percentage of male students from both of the programs who chose employment in area school districts.

**Ethnicity.** In the alternative special education program, 60% of the graduates were White and 39% of the graduates were African American. Approximately 1% were of another ethnicity. The ethnic breakdown of the graduates who were employed by the four area school districts is presented in Table 5.

In both programs, the African American students had a higher percentage of graduates employed by area school districts (alternative = 60% and traditional = 50%). The White students had lower employment in area school districts from both programs (alternative = 44% and traditional = 28%).

These results demonstrate that there were differences between the graduates of the alternative and traditional programs, but some trends with demographics appear similar for both

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**Table 2.** Numbers of University of Memphis’s Special Education Teachers Employed by Four Local Public School Districts by Year \( (N = 373) \)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years since graduation</th>
<th>Alternative Employed ( (n = 92) )</th>
<th>Traditional Employed ( (n = 63) )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total ( (n = 183) )</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Table 3.** Alternative and Traditional Program Graduates Length of Employment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>( M )</th>
<th>( SD )</th>
<th>( p )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alternative program</td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>.0028*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional program</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*\( p \leq .05 \).

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**Table 4.** Gender \( (N = 373) \)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Total ( n )</th>
<th>Employed ( n )</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alternatively certified ( (N = 183) )</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>72.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>37.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Traditionaly certified \( (N = 190) \)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Total ( n )</th>
<th>Employed ( n )</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>46.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>32.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
groups. The main differences were that slightly more than half of the alternatively certified teachers were still working in area schools as compared to about a third of the traditionally certified teachers. Also approximately 50% of alternatively certified students graduated in the past 5 years, whereas 50% of the traditionally certified students graduated in the past 9 years. The data also show that traditionally certified students remained in the field on average 2 years longer than the alternatively certified students. In both programs, there were about twice as many women enrolled, but there were more men who were still employed at the area school districts. The implications for retention and employment may have more to do with the population that were enrolled, other career and life options, and the structure of both programs than the programs themselves.

### Discussion and Conclusion

#### Employment Rates

As shown in this study, alternatively certified graduates were more likely to be employed by the area school districts than the graduates in the traditional program. This may be due to the nature of the alternative program. One option some graduates chose required them to work for 2-plus years in high-need school districts if they received grant funds for their education. But the average length of years of longevity demonstrates that the teachers stayed longer than this requirement. Another important confounding variable not considered was that the majority of alternatively prepared teachers work 1 to 3 years before graduation. Those years were not accounted for in this study, as the number of years after graduation was all that was calculated. If it was true that the alternative program teachers taught an average of 2 years before graduation, then the alternative program teachers’ length of retention was closer to 7 years (rather than 5.1) and therefore not significantly different from the average number of years of retention of the traditionally certified graduates (7 years). At the time, there was no way to determine the impact of this variable, but it was worth keeping in mind so that not too much was made of the significant difference found in this study and for future study replications. Table 2 was included to demonstrate that there were more graduates in recent years of the alternative program than the traditional program, which also may have an impact on the number of students employed. The further from graduation, the more chance people will leave or move.

These findings were consistent with the national average of 92% to 96% of teachers retained each school year. In any school year, new teachers make up only 6% to 7% of the total number of teachers (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2001). The retention rates of teachers seem to be low, but when examined against jobs in the private sector, retention rates of public school teachers were actually higher. At the end of the 1999-2000 school year, public and private schools lost a total of about 550,000 teachers because of teacher turnover. These numbers were extremely high, but when examined carefully, about half of the individuals transferred to other schools and the other half left for other reasons, such as returning to school to further their education. These data indicate that many of the individuals were not leaving the field of education because of simply being dissatisfied (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2001). These factors seem to contradict the theory that explains the critical demand for teachers. Many job openings may be due to teachers obtaining additional

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**Table 5. Ethnicity (N = 373)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Total n</th>
<th>Employed n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative (n = 183)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>59.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>44.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional (n = 190)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>50.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>28.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
education that will help them improve their job functioning or some may have moved to nonteaching jobs in the field of education.

One other confound of this study was that the traditional program was completed at the undergraduate level, while the alternative program was at the graduate level. There were inherent differences between the students in both programs, including age, job experience, and even the pay they received after graduating. Graduates with a master’s degree received several thousand dollars more in salary from the school districts that participated in this study. Several of the graduates from the alternative program moved into administration or higher education after 5 years. Although the school districts were only asked to provide information on teachers, anecdotally the researchers were familiar with many former students, mostly from the alternative program. From the alternative program, the researchers know that five of the graduates who were not counted in this study as employed by area school districts became administrators, two became education professors, and one was working for a special education agency. Additionally, six graduates from the alternative program moved away. Approximately 20 graduates from both the traditional and alternative programs were pursuing an advanced degree or other certifications, mostly in education. Although we cannot state with certainty what happens to the students who were not working in area school districts, many may have gone on to private schools or moved out of town. They may still be working as teachers in special education, so it is not accurate to assume these individuals left the field. The traditional program graduates also had more years to work because they were undergraduates or may be using this degree as a stepping stone to other career aspirations.

Rational choice theorists believe that all people’s actions were based on their calculation of the costs and benefits; therefore, policy makers need to make it clear that opportunities in the profession of teaching allows advancement, which would make it more attractive when trying to improve the educational supply-and-demand issue.

At the same time, some of the experiences in both the traditional and alternative programs were similar. Many of these individuals had the same professors, curriculum, and some of the same experiences, which might have an effect on their ability to deal with the stressors of the profession. We do not know if the alternative program produces significantly differently prepared students than the traditional program, despite the differences in number of credits, program content, and field experiences.

Length of Employment

The average length of employment for teachers has been identified as 5 years or less (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2001). This current study revealed that the alternatively certified graduates remained in the field of education for an average length of 5.1 years. The traditionally certified graduates’ average length of employment was 7 years. Both groups had a higher average length of employment than the national average. Each group had at least one individual who taught for 14 years. The individuals who had 5 years or more experienced a lower rate of attrition. This trend is consistent with previous research that states the attrition rate was highest in the first 3 years of employment. The trend seems to be that once a person stays more than 3 years, they more than likely have identified the costs and benefits that helped to shape their decision to stay in the field of education (Browning et al., 2000).

This research was consistent with previous research data that more than 75% of alternatively prepared teachers were still employed as teachers 3 or more years after the completion of their program. The study seems to validate a previously cited study conducted in 1989, in which alternatively certified individuals appeared
to enter and remain in the field of education at similar or slightly higher rates than other college graduates (Kirby, Darling-Hammond, & Hudson, 1989). This validates the argument of alternative certification proponents that this type of education was having a positive direct effect on the perceived teacher supply-demand problems.

**Demographics**

The second research question addressed the demographics of the alternatively and traditionally certified individuals who participated from the University of Memphis College of Education.

**Gender.** According to Table 4, the data showed evidence that females were consistently more prevalent than males in Colleges of Education regardless of being prepared alternatively or traditionally. When the alternative and traditional groups were looked at individually, both groups had more than 4 times as many females. The gender difference has been well documented throughout studies of the field of education and was dramatic in schools of education, which equates to big differences in teacher employment. The data were consistent with a study conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2002) that stated that historically in the United States, females made up the majority of the teacher workforce in 1999-2000. A total of 2,590,000 teachers were females, whereas 860,000 teachers were male (75% vs. 25%). A study on the national Pathways program (an alternative certification program) was consistent with this current study, as its graduates were 70% female. Males were among the underrepresented group recruited for alternative programs, so it was not surprising that more males were in the alternative programs at the graduate level than in the traditional program at the undergraduate level (Bradshaw & Hawk, 1996).

Although the numbers were smaller, a larger percentage of male graduates were working in local school districts than their female counterparts in both the traditional and alternative programs. The males working in the area school districts made up 72% of the study as compared to only 37% of the females. This trend was also true for the traditional program but was less pronounced (males = 46%, females = 32%). The only explanation that came to mind was that some female teachers take off years from teaching to raise families, while their male colleagues do not. But it was unknown why there was such a large difference in male employment, especially for the alternative program.

**Ethnicity.** According to Table 5, the researchers revealed that the majority of students were White in both programs. The data were consistent with research demonstrating that African Americans teachers were usually the minority, not the majority, in the field of education (Clewell & Villegas, 2001).

Table 5 also demonstrated that a larger percentage of alternatively certified graduates than the traditionally certified graduates were African American. The trend may be due to the fact that much research has shown that alternatively prepared individuals usually were recruited into College of Education programs that were trying to fill vacancies in inner-city schools, where the majority of students are African Americans. These data were also consistent with a study done by DeWitt Wallace–Reader’s Digest Fund (1997) on an alternative program called Pathways in which 63% of the participants were minority.

What was interesting was the larger percentage of the African American graduates who were employed in local school districts as compared to the White graduates from both the alternative and traditional programs. Of the alternative program graduates, there were 60% of African Americans employed in area school districts as compared to 44% of White graduates. The traditional program graduates also had 50% African American employment in area school districts but only 28% employment by their White graduate colleagues. It was not known why there seems to be ethnic differences, but it could be due to more Whites finding employment in private schools or other school districts. It also may be that Memphis has a predominantly African American population. Sixty-one percent of the more than
670,000 residents are African American, so there may be reasons for African Americans to settle in this region outside of the scope of this study.

Conclusion

The retention rates of teachers have been a highly touted issue in the last decade. The shortage or perceived shortage has created the need for alternative certification programs to meet the critical needs of teachers in the classroom. Darling-Hammond (2000) has been a critic of alternative certification programs since their inception, stating that they do not have a positive effect on teacher retention and were not highly structured or supervised enough to entrust them with students. Examining the difference between alternatively and traditionally certified teachers in this study revealed that the Darling-Hammond statement about not having an effect on teacher retention may not be accurate. For these graduates, though the alternatively certified teachers appeared to stay in their positions for 1.9 years less than their traditionally certified counterparts, this finding was confounded by unaccounted years of teaching before graduation and the issue of moving up into administration or higher education. There was no evidence that the individuals who went through the traditional program had any more ability to handle the stressors of teaching than the alternatively prepared individuals. In fact, they both had average years of retention of more than 5 years.

The findings of this study support the use of alternative certification programs. Preparing these individuals has shown that it has a positive effect on filling vacant jobs in several different areas of education throughout the nation. There does not seem to be any significant difference in these individuals’ ability to handle all the stressors of teaching, as their retention rates were on par with the traditionally certified individuals. Although alternative certification programs have been vilified by many in previous years, this study showed that they recruit competent teachers who seem to be as effective in the classroom as traditionally prepared teachers. They were mature and bring a wealth of life experiences, and most important, they were showing a good retention rate.

The alternative certification program provides areas of education that were experiencing critical shortages, such as special education, a knowledgeable, mature, and more ethnically compatible pool of teachers. From this study, the alternative certification programs were accomplishing the mission for which they were created: to adequately and effectively fill positions that were not being filled by traditionally certified teachers.

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