An Alternative Teacher Certification Program and the Collaborative Relationship Between the Cooperating Teacher and University Supervisor: A Personal Journey

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As traditional teacher certification changes towards alternative routes, an introduction to alternative teacher certification is provided. Next, the authors describe one alternative program of secondary teacher certification of which they were both heavily involved. The authors bring personal experiences of how the university supervisor’s and cooperating teacher’s roles are different than in traditional certification programs. Suggestions for positive collaborative work between the traditional cooperating teacher, student teacher, and university supervisor triad are offered. Furthermore, the authors’ collaborative relationship “team” used in this particular alternative certification program can be a model for others both in traditional and alternative forms of certification.

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There is a call for improved teacher quality to provide highly qualified teachers in our nation’s schools (Sandholtz & Wasserman, 2001). One way that some states, schools, and universities have answered this call is to offer alternative teacher certification programs. This article begins by exploring some ideas and explanations about alternative programs. Next, the authors provide an example of an alternative secondary teacher education program where they were instructors. An important aspect of the article is to provide first-hand knowledge from the authors’ experiences in working as a collaborative team in teacher training. This is explained first by showing traditional
roles of the cooperating teacher and university supervisor, and then exploring new roles together to develop a strong teaching “team.” Lastly, suggestions for programs to develop a collaborative teaching effort are provided.

Alternative certification issues

Alternative forms of certification are becoming more popular as legislation calls for highly qualified teachers and more teachers – in particular in areas of need. Because of the “No Child Left Behind” bill that is established to place highly qualified teachers in all schools by the 2005-2006 school year, some states and schools have looked to alternative forms of certification for its teachers. Because this bill brings to debate issues related to teacher quality and quantity, as well as the issue of a teacher shortage, “alternative approaches to teacher certification have become widespread” (Legler, 2002, p.1).

Alternative certification programs typically allow a person with a bachelor’s degree in a field other than education to receive certification after completing a shortened education training program (NCREL, 2004). These programs can offer opportunities for professionals to become teachers, for a person to make a mid-career switch, or for a college graduate without an education background to enter the field of education without completing a traditional education program (Roach & Cohen, 2002). Critics of alternative certification programs cite situations where alternative certified teachers lack preparedness for the classroom from their alternative training. However, “the predominant arguments both for and against alternative certification confuse the process of teacher preparation with the product of teacher preparation,” (Roach & Cohen, 2002, p.). Can alternative certification programs produce highly qualified teachers?
Yes, some certification programs are producing highly qualified teachers in this standards based era. In fact, some are trying to maintain a high standard with alternative certification as schools may favor university trained educators rather than some teachers who are being licensed by passing an exam with little training or background in education. A high quality alternative teacher certification program would set high standards for applicants, and provide intensive courses in pedagogy, and curriculum and instruction, while providing on-site teacher training (NCREL, 2002; Roach & Cohen, 2002). A high quality program would last from 1-2 years and have preservice components (often summer courses) before placing students in classrooms; it would include induction and mentoring in classrooms while maintaining coursework throughout the year (Roach & Cohen, 2002). The authors experienced a type of alternative certification first hand that produces highly qualified secondary teachers by providing everything mentioned above.

One example of an alternative certification program

At a small university in the Mid-west, an alternative secondary education certification program exists that follows the guidelines set forth above. The program was developed based upon the belief that teacher education is a combined school and university responsibility (Goodlad, 1987, 1991). In this particular program, students enroll in June of one year and graduate in August of the following year – enabling them to begin teaching positions almost 1 year after the start of their program (Author, 2003). This program is split into 4 sessions: summer1, fall semester, spring semester, and summer2. Within their courses, students take traditional education courses such as “school and society,” “teaching strategies,” “educational psychology,” “adolescent
issues,” “reading and writing in the content area,” “methods courses, “inquiry,” and “practicum experiences.” Students must enroll full time and are taught as a cohort. Furthermore, they must come with a bachelor’s degree in a content area, and have passed the PRAXIS exam in their content field before beginning. The practicum experiences are held in partnership schools, and students are enrolled in a practicum during all four (semesters), with the traditional “student teaching” taking place during the spring semester.

However, the unique part of this program is a teaching “team,” which is responsible for the content methods course (Author, 2003). The “team” consists of an arts and science professor in the specific content area, the university education professor (the university supervisor) in that content area, and a high school teacher (often the cooperating teaching) in that content area (and from the partnership school). This “team” serves as a unified mentoring team for the students in a particular subject area through the program. Even though the “team” teaches the methods course for that area in one semester, they work with the students throughout the program on various projects as well as observing and helping during student teaching. The team is successful because collaboration begins with the design and timing of the methods course. This sets the atmosphere for partnership for the program. This “team” can be particularly strong when all members bring various strengths, and respect each other for their own abilities. Meetings are always held together – thus the student does not meet with each person individually, but discussions center on an idea or topic with each member bringing a slightly different viewpoint. Discussions take place year round; thus the student receives an “incomplete” grade after the semester he/she enrolls in the course until all meetings
and assignments have been completed for the year. Why is this type of program effective?

Traditional and newly defined roles

In traditional student teaching, a triad has existed between the university supervisor, cooperating teaching, and student teacher (Veal & Rikard, 1998). “Neither university nor K-12 faculties know much about collaborative professional relationships. Both K-12 teachers and teacher educators are more used to working independently than to collaborating with their colleagues” (Stephens & Boldt, 2004, p.703). In fact, many university supervisors feel their role is not in a K-12 classroom, but only at the university, and some teachers feel it is the job of the university to prepare preservice teachers. Because of limited time, many teachers would prefer free time to be used for preparation and many professors would prefer free time to be used towards research and writing. Hoy and Woolfolk (cited in Veal & Rikard, 1998) summarize that little evidence exists to show that university supervisors and cooperating teachers work together to promote a positive learning environment for the student teacher.

Traditionally, the “university supervisor” has been a professor from the university who meets with the student teacher, but tends to only visit the school on a few occasions to observe the student teacher. Often, the supervisor provides the overall grade for student teaching based on these few observations (Schwebel, et.al, 1992). This can cause the supervisor to only get a glimpse of what is happening – in particular if she/he only sees the student teacher for two or three different classes. Thus, grasping the “whole picture” is difficult. A problem that adds to the limited visits is the feeling that “the supervisor remains the outside visitor to the school” (Slick, 1998, p.307). As a specialist,
the university supervisor is seen as more of an expert on "theory" than practical
instruction (Zheng & Webb, 2000). Criticisms of the traditional university supervisor
include lack of time to devote to the student teacher, other research commitments, a non-
communicative relationship with the cooperating teacher, and lack of training with poorly
defined roles (Keller & Grossman, 1994).

In a traditional sense, the "cooperating teacher" often has regular interaction with
the student teacher becoming a strong mentor and working with the student teacher on a
daily basis. Zheng and Webb (2000) state that the cooperating teacher is often the most
qualified individual to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the student teacher.
Furthermore, the cooperating teacher often has the most effect on the student teacher
during the student teaching experience. However, cooperating teachers often fail to
provide accurate feedback to student teachers’ abilities due to personal interactions
(Keller & Grossman, 1994). This may be attributed to inadequate preparation for a
supervisory role as well as a lack of a defined role for the cooperating teacher (Borko &
Mayfield, 1995). Also, many times the university is unaware of how the cooperating
teacher’s beliefs and education theories match those of the university (Scholl, 1990).
Many public school teachers have negative views of the university supervisor as someone
who does very little (Slick, 1998) or does not have an idea of what modern classrooms
are like (Veal & Rikard, 1998). Furthermore, some would prefer to be left alone to help
the student teacher, and rely on the university supervisor only if a problem occurred.

Davidson, et.al. (1991) state that in general, the cooperating teacher tends to be
more supportive than evaluative while the university supervisor tends to be more
judgmental as the evaluator. However, Koerner, etc. al (2002) state that in their study,
student teachers looked to the university supervisors to be supportive and understanding of their needs. Nevertheless, often, the cooperating teacher and university supervisor exchange few words because of lack of time for meeting and lack of interaction. The problem encountered is that parties see their roles as independent rather than collaborative. Tensions arise between university supervisors and cooperating teachers because of a number of reasons: communication problems, undefined roles, and disagreement about university theories or regulations (Veal & Rikard, 1998). In fact, sometimes the discussions between the traditional triad of university supervisor, cooperating teacher, and student teacher, are awkward since feedback might be interpreted as criticism to theory or modeled teaching (Keller & Grossman, 1994). In one study, the respondents stated that the best situation is when both the cooperating teacher and university supervisor work together to ensure the best development of the preservice teacher (Zheng & Webb, 2000).

As the authors have worked together in the past as the university supervisor and cooperating teacher, they bring first-hand experience of the power of a collaborative effort that can be possible. One important aspect of the relationship is that both are invested in the program. In other words, both are full time employees of the two partnership schools, and saw their work as a serious part of their jobs. When universities hire non-permanent or part time clinical supervisors or teachers, they often may not be as invested or knowledgeable about the goals of the program as possible (Keller & Grossman, 1994).

For a collaborative relationship to exist, the following must take place. First, the traditional roles of the university supervisor as “leader” or “more knowledgeable” and the
teacher as second in “power” (Veal & Rikard, 1998) must be abandoned. Veal & Rikard (1998) offer suggestions for a successful relationship between the university supervisor and cooperating teacher that includes 1) shared supervision, 2) shared power, and 3) collaboration. The authors believe that they, as the university supervisor and cooperating teacher, have accomplished these things by doing the following: Beginning the working relationship as seeing each other as equals and individuals who bring various strengths to the relationship. Furthermore, the authors always saw their jobs as equally important in the training of the student teacher. This is evident in working together during time allotted specifically to allow everyone to meet. For example, if a student teacher asked about mathematics education theory, the cooperating teacher often referred the student to the university supervisor to provide a response, and then the cooperating teacher would follow up. Likewise, if a student teacher asked about the politics in a department or school or district, the cooperating teacher was often the most appropriate to respond first, followed by the university supervisor. This also worked with the third member of the “team,” in particular when we are working on difficult mathematics topics. Thus, the student teacher heard a variety of opinions, and gained information about what fit their situation best.

The authors believe constant collaboration has worked well as they have instinctively followed Habermas’s four norms of universal pragmatics (cited in Smyth, 1986) which are to speak comprehensively (understanding the context and language of the student teaching experience), sincerely (listening to each other and sharing ideas equally), legitimately (offering ideas that are not based on a position of power), and
truthfully (offering suggestions based on evidence rather than only opinion) (Veal & Rikard, 1998).

Suggestions for collaboration

Some suggestions for a strong “team” idea, in particular if a program involves the traditional student teacher, cooperating teacher, and university supervisor triangle include, to first establish regular times that everyone can meet. Thus, the meeting goes from being a “midterm” or “final” conference to regularly scheduled discussions, which can be followed up with joint e-mail or discussion board conversations. Thus, everyone stays connected and in tune with any successes or problems regularly. Second, it is imperative that all members of the group (student teachers and members of the “team”) participate in the discussions both when meeting and electronically. This is crucial for the members who are not at the partnership school every day. Time constraints have always been an issue in the traditional cooperating teacher, student teacher, and university supervisor triad (Borko & Mayfield, 1995). Thus, it is imperative that time is set aside at least once every two weeks. Third, regarding evaluation, all members of the “team” must evaluate the student teacher. Often, the authors’ team would divide up grading based on area of expertise; however, each person would always have the other members of the “team” re-evaluate what he/she had graded. Thus, all information discussed or graded was shared between all members of the triad.

In conclusion, all members must get involved and be committed to collaboration and the program. The idea of the “ivory tower” university and the disconnect it has to regular schools must be overcome by regular interaction between its members. The reason our “team” works so well is that all have the same focus in mind: the purpose to
provide collaborative feedback that enables the student teacher to grow in his/her experience. Our “team” essentially involved four individuals: the cooperating teacher, university supervisor, student teacher, and mathematics professor. We were able to have a successful team with four people because we used the guidelines expressed above for three people – respecting and valuing each other is the key answer in any size of working “team.”
References


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