

Alternative routes to teaching. A personal reflection

By Deena Wassenberg

Who joins an alternative certification program?

In 1995, I joined Teach for America (TFA) – a program whose goal is to attract bright idealistic individuals from quality institutions of higher learning to commit two years to teach in under-resourced schools in urban and rural USA. I was 21 years old, extremely idealistic, and aware that my upbringing had been sheltered and privileged. I joined the program for several reasons. Foremost, I wanted a chance to do something valuable for society. I also wanted to diversify my viewpoint. I grew up and attended college in upper-middle class Wisconsin and Minnesota, and knew that my experience base was pretty minimal. While I had read about social inequities in the US, I had little or no first hand knowledge of real racial, educational, and socioeconomic diversity. Finally I wanted an adventure in a new place, and the idea of being thrown into an inner city school to see if I could inspire learning sounded very exciting.

An alternative certification program afforded me a non-traditional route into teaching, requiring less up-front investment of time and money than for a traditional certification. I taught in California, which had an alternative certification program in place that granted emergency credentials to individuals with undergraduate degrees who wished to begin teaching without formal teacher training. TFA served as a recruitment, training and placement program that brought individuals like me to the high needs districts; however our formal credentialing was done through California's established emergency credentialing program

The faculty at the school in which I taught consisted of traditionally certified teachers, teachers with emergency credentials, one other TFA teacher, and me. I don't know how many of the teachers had traditional certifications, but it seemed that most of the teachers under the age of 35 either had an emergency credential or had begun their teaching career on an emergency credential. Judging from the teachers I met in my school and through TFA, I would suggest that teachers who enter alternative certification programs have one or more of several motivations.

Idealism: Like traditionally certified teachers, many individuals I encountered who were teaching through alternative certification programs were motivated by wanting to do something of value with their time and efforts. Those of us who entered through programs like Teach for America were recently out of undergraduate education, and while we saw value in teaching, had not chosen to pursue an education major for a variety of reasons. The mid-career entrants had reevaluated their own job satisfaction and decided that by teaching they would play a more valuable role in society than they did in their previous career.

Disillusionment with current career: Some of the teachers entered alternative certification because they were unhappy with their current career and wanted to try out something

different, and an alternative certification programs provided the fewest obstacles and required the smallest personal investment to trying out a career in teaching.

Employment: a number of individuals at my school had begun teaching because they were looking for secure employment after having been recently laid off, or had graduated from college and could not find a job in their chosen field.

How long will these individuals stay in teaching?

Upon my first meeting with my new principal I was a bit confused. He immediately outlined his three-year plan for teacher success for me. His first year goal for me: survival. This was not what I had signed on for! I was planning to make a difference in my first year. I had moved across the country for this job. I had family and a boyfriend back in the Midwest. I had plans to go to graduate school and become a scientist. I was not planning to stay beyond my two year commitment. I began to question what my impact was going to be. Was I doing more harm than good? After all wouldn't the school be better off with a first year teacher who planned to stay for 15 years? I wrestled with these questions throughout this first year and observed the other first year teachers around me. I think there were 6 first year teachers that year. One had gone through traditional teacher education, 2 of us were TFA participants and the other 3 were emergency credentialed teachers. Only three of us returned for a second year of teaching, one emergency credentialed teacher and the two TFA teachers. It seemed the TFA attrition rate at our school was lower than that for those who would have been teaching in our place. This was not exactly my ideal for how I was going to make a difference, but I was at least assured that I was not doing more harm than good. A two year commitment seemed to be better than none.

So, in general, what type of time commitment can administrators expect from teachers from alternative certification programs? I think that question goes back to the teacher's motivations for entering the program.

For most of my TFA colleagues and me, we were firmly committed to fulfill the two years to which we had agreed, almost regardless of the challenges presented by the job. However there were reasons I had not pursued a traditional teaching certification during my undergraduate career, and at the end of my two year commitment, those reasons still existed. Many of my TFA colleagues and I had plans to pursue graduate, law or medical school after our service. Additionally, because most of us were placed far from our homes, many of us wanted to return closer to home after the two years.

From my observations, the commitment that one could expect from non-TFA teachers entering the alternative certification program for reasons of career change or need of employment is entirely dependant on their early experience in teaching. If the person found it rewarding or felt successful, or could at least see the potential for reward or success, these people seemed to be willing to stay in teaching at the same school for decades, and tended to make excellent teachers. However, if their initial experiences were exceedingly difficult and they did not see potential for reward and success, their commitment often lasted for a year or less.

What type of training is offered for alternatively certified teachers?

Through TFA we were sent to a 5 week long intensive training summer institute. During this time we taught summer school, had crash courses in curriculum development, addressing different learning styles, diversity sensitivity, and classroom management. Once in our placement schools, we attended workshops with other TFA members who taught in our subject area, and were informally mentored by TFA alumni.

As TFA participants we were required to get California emergency teaching credentials. To fulfill the second year requirement for renewal, we had to complete 6 credits in a teacher education program before September. Many of us chose to wait until second semester to enroll in these courses as the time commitments of a first semester teacher are overwhelming without the additional stress of taking a college course. The two education courses I took were largely theory, and did not have any application to my classroom experience, suggesting to me that emergency credentialed teachers who were not associated with a program such as TFA got no training before entering the classroom and little support during their first year in the classroom.

How should we value alternative certification programs?

In assessing the value of alternative certification, I believe it is important to distinguish between programs such as TFA that actively recruit and select individuals predicted to be successful in a classroom, and then train and support these individuals to optimize their chances for success, and the emergency credentialing programs that simply function to facilitate entry into teaching with minimal selection and training. The assessment of these programs can be done on multiple levels. First at the level of the school, how does the individual in this program compare with others in similar high needs schools with regard to the success of their students, their contribution to their school community and their longevity as a teacher in that school? On a national level, what has that person accomplished since their time teaching? Are they still involved in education? How did their teaching experience alter their career path, their views on education and their volunteer or charitable pursuits?

The value of an alternative certification program can be positive or negative at both of these levels. For example, if an alternative certification program throws large numbers of people into highly stressful positions in which, because of lack of selection, training, resources and personal support, the attrition rate is high, the value of these programs to the individual schools will be small if not negative, as high teacher turnover is very disruptive to students and to a school. However if the program sends people in to a school who are successful with their students, and have a positive impact on the school community and have a lower attrition rate than the average first year teacher, the impact on the school can be positive. On a national level if the program serves to create a population of individuals who had highly stressful unsuccessful experiences in teaching, such a program may serve to alienate people from the entire field of education, and to come away with an attitude that the problems of high needs schools and the students they serve are beyond any help they could offer. However, if the program turns its participants into people with a lifetime interest in education that may manifest itself in the

person's career or in their extra-career interests, the national impact of such programs, while hard to quantify, may be very positive.

I left my teaching position after two years as I had planned. My memory of those two years is a mosaic of successes and failures. What value did my TFA service provide? I did not change the world in those years. My influence on the school, if any, was small. I don't think there was a line of better qualified science teachers to fill my position such that I was taking a position that would have been better filled by someone else. I was able to effect some progress toward the district establishing a middle school science curriculum, as there was none when I began teaching. I hope that I broadened the world of a few students. I hope that I taught some basic science skills to more than a few students. I hope that I taught some of my students that someone who comes from a very different background cared deeply for them.

How did participation in TFA affect its members? My friends from my time in TFA have careers in teaching, education administration, public interest law, and public health, and several have started charter schools in high need areas. The link between their current career and their TFA experiences is direct. I, however, went to graduate school and became a research scientist. Although it has been over ten years since the first day I stepped into a classroom, the experiences provided by being a member of TFA continue to subtly affect numerous aspects of my life, including my political beliefs, the volunteer activities I pursue, and the charities I support. The value of these changes in my life would be hard to quantify in assessing the value of TFA and the alternative certification that allowed me to teach, but I think expanding the population of people who have such first-hand knowledge of educational inequities in this country is an important step in getting the public behind the necessary societal changes to improve conditions in high need schools.