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## Trends toward Alternative Teaching Certification and Compensation in Special Education: Considerations and Implications for Traditional Teacher Preparation Programs

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# Academic Leadership Journal

## Introduction

Both the professional literature and non-academic resources are replete with references to both the successes and failures of the current state of education. There is very little doubt that education is receiving intense scrutiny from a variety of sources and in regard to numerous aspects of its implementation. A primary focus of this examination has been the teacher work force, specifically its effectiveness in promoting measurable student growth and achievement. While this is a natural and imperative center of the investigation, it also encompasses ancillary issues, such as the manner in which the teachers are prepared to assume their instructional roles, and to what extent they are continuing to augment their professional development and effectiveness once they enter the classroom setting. Issues such as these clearly draw teacher preparation programs at the higher education level into the conversation. To address these concerns, conventional teacher education programs are being analyzed as to their efficacy and practical application to real world demands.

The discussion in this article centers on the role of teacher preparation as a critical aspect of the educational reform agenda. Through the delineation of two specific issues as a backdrop, the reader will note that the current environment in teacher education is ripe for reform, a reality which is already in process, but still demanding additional evolution. Teacher education must recognize these issues and respond appropriately to remain relevant and functional. While this is no doubt true of all teacher education programming, a particular emphasis in this discourse is programming for special education personnel, an area with particular relevance to the issues to be discussed. Considerations for traditional teacher preparation programs, in light of the issues discussed, will be subsequently presented.

## Issues for Consideration in Special Education Teacher Preparation Reform

### The Continued Growth of Alternative Certification Options

Alternative certification (AC) has been described as an educational option to conventional university-based teacher preparation for individuals who hold at least a bachelor's degree (Feistritzer, 2007). Although there appears to be some disagreement regarding some substantive and implementation issues (Humphrey & Wechsler, 2007), AC programming generally progresses at an accelerated rate, and involves abbreviated course requirements and training (Constantine et al., 2009; Sindelar, Daunic & Rennells, 2004) with the courses sometimes being scheduled at the school where the candidates are employed (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005). Further, the coursework is often completed while the candidates are concurrently in the instructional environment (Tissington and Grow, 2007).

As one can imagine, AC is not without controversy. While numerous professional articles have addressed various aspects of such a credentialing system (e.g., Constantine et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002; deBettencourt & Howard, 2004; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002;

Rosenberg, Boyer, Sindelar, & Misra, 2007; Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005; Shaw, 2008; Zeichner & Schulte, 2001), the focus of this discussion is not on its merits or shortfalls, but rather on how its increasing existence is affecting the preparation of teachers who work with students with disabilities.

In a 2007 investigation of AC options, every state noted having some type of AC opportunities, with an approximate one third of recently employed instructors having been involved with AC programming on a national level (Feistritzer, 2007). While a discussion of AC options often leads to more prominently known programs such as Teach for America or Troops for Teachers, the reality is that “there are myriad alternative teaching licensure programs (e.g., local school districts, state education departments, commercial-enterprise programs, and online programs)” (Tissington & Grow, 2007, p. 25). Special education, specifically, has been the recipient of a rapid increase in this type of teacher preparation (Honawar, 2006; Rosenberg et al., 2007; Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005).

There are two major reasons for this surge in AC programming for prospective special educators, one of which is a general discontent with the traditional university-based route of teacher preparation. Critics of conventional teacher preparation often point to the inclusion of costly and sometimes excessive coursework. In their discussion of AC in special education, Rosenberg and Sindelar (2005) perhaps summarized this negative perception of traditional teacher training best by noting that “widespread sentiment holds that traditional approaches to teacher preparation are self-serving, bloated, overregulatory, and anachronistic” (p.119). Whether or not one agrees with this perspective, it does indicate that there is a substantial foundation for the evolution and continual growth of alternatives to traditional certification paths.

The second and perhaps even more immediate reason for the growth of AC in special education is the ongoing teacher shortage in this field (Connelly, Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2004; Honawar, 2006; Robertson & Singleton, 2010; Rosenberg et al., 2007; Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005). In addition to issues with attrition, and teachers exiting the field or transferring to general education placements (Thornton, Peltier & Medina, 2007), there is also the view that special education teacher preparation programs are not producing an adequate number of graduates (Boe & Cook, 2006). The demand is outweighing the supply, thus encouraging the active proliferation of alternative options for teacher credentials.

This increase in AC as an option for credentialing special education teachers should not be dismissed by traditional university-based teacher preparation programs as inconsequential or fleeting. While this author supports traditional teacher preparation in special education, the reality is that, at least to some extent, it is in competition with AC programming for prospective special education teachers. Traditional teacher preparation programming cannot afford the luxury of simply resting on its laurels, debating the utility and conceptual suppositions of AC. Support it or not, AC in special education exists and its graduates are populating many of our classrooms for students with disabilities.

Traditional teacher programs must move beyond the discussion of whether or not AC should be an acceptable option, to deciphering how they will subsist in this educational climate, and make meaningful contributions to teacher education reform.

## **The Increasing Emphasis on Pay-for-Performance**

**Legislative momentum for merit pay.** The legislative aspect of the school reform agenda includes an intense emphasis on linking financial incentives for teachers to their effectiveness, as evidenced in

two programs funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), namely, the Teacher Incentive Fund and Race to the Top (Laine, Potemski, & Rowland, 2010). Both of these programs make reference to rewarding determinants of teacher effectiveness (Teacher Incentive Fund, 2010; The White House, President Barack Obama, 2009). In addition, discussions surrounding the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as the No Child Left Behind Act, have supported the idea of associating teacher compensation and performance evaluation. Multiple references to this type of relationship may also be found in *A Blueprint for Reform, The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, which was published in March 2010 (United States Department of Education, 2010). As Springer and Gardner (2010) note, “current education reform efforts, including the Race to the Top program, put performance pay center stage” (p.8).

Various states have been involved with pay-for performance programs and at times with mixed results. One example is the District Awards for Teacher Excellence (D.A.T.E.) initiative, funded by the state of Texas, which found not only improvements in pupil achievement, but a drop in the turnover of teachers (National Center on Performance Incentives, 2010). On the other hand, the National Center on Performance Incentives also reported dissimilar results for such a system in Nashville, Tennessee, where bonus pay alone did not appear to increase the test scores of the students. These two examples exemplify part of the difficulty with accepting the universal utility of pay-for-performance options in education. Although this type of compensation system is increasing in its incidence, there is not yet a sufficient research base to determine its true value (Cissell, 2010). As more states and school districts initiate the pay-for- performance model, the results of its success or failure will be apparent, and specific nuances to its implementation should be clarified. In the meantime, however, the legislative impetus for initiating performance pay is unmistakable, and will no doubt continue to be a relevant factor in the educational reform movement.

**Dissatisfaction with the current salary structure for teachers.** The most common approach to compensation for teachers is the single salary schedule, which was first introduced in 1921 in Denver, Colorado and Des Moines, Iowa, as an attempt to equalize pay and end discrimination (Johnson & Papay, 2010; Koppich, 2010). The system gained in acceptance and by the 1999-2000 academic year, almost 100% of teachers were compensated based on this type of system (Podgursky, 2009, cited in Springer & Gardner, 2010).

The single salary schedule provides a structure by which teachers are paid according to years of experience and accumulated college credit hours or degrees (Johnson & Papay, 2010; Koppich, 2010). One advantage of this compensation approach is its relative stability and predictability, valued characteristics in an uncertain economic climate.

The single-salary scale has the advantage of providing a level of certainty; it allows districts to anticipate costs and permits teachers to foresee what their pay will be. Given that assurance, some teachers are willing to trade the chance to earn more in the short term at a noneducation job for the guarantee of steady pay as a teacher. In a field that's perpetually hampered by shortages, a system that brings stability to the teaching force has its benefits (Johnson & Papay, 2010, p. 49).

While there may be advantages to single salary schedules, there is also discontent with such a system. One of the major criticisms relates to the fact that it makes no distinction regarding the quality of the performance of teachers. Poor teachers can be paid the same salary as those who excel in the

classroom, thus advancing the sentiment that mediocre instruction is adequate for financial rewards (Ramirez, 2010/2011). An additional consideration with the single salary schedule is the paucity of research evidence supporting an association between teacher credentials and teacher effectiveness (Vigdor, 2008) as indicated by student outcomes (Gordon, Kane, & Staiger, 2006; Podgursky & Springer, 2007). This has also been verified specifically in reference to teachers who have been involved with graduate education and/or earned Master's degrees (Hanushek, 2003, cited in Hanushek, 2007; Wasley and Roza, 2009). The other half of the salary schedule equation, namely, years of experience, has fared only slightly better in regard to its connection with student achievement. As Vigdor reports, "the connection between additional years of experience and teaching effectiveness, while substantial in the first few years in the classroom, attenuates over time" (p. 38).

Clearly, there are issues of concern with this method of compensating teachers, thus inviting alternative options for consideration, most notably, pay-for-performance compensation. Pay-for-performance options, however, not altogether unlike single salary schedules, are also being received with mixed reviews. Much of the debate appears to be related to how to factor student accomplishments into the criteria for financial incentives. Most educators would agree that student achievement should be a factor in determining teacher effectiveness, but the methodology and variables entering into the equation can be quite controversial.

This may be especially true of teachers of students with disabilities. The determination of specific criteria by which special educators will be evaluated for financial compensation is made more complex by the nature of their role, in that they may act in both an instructional and consultative manner, in a variety of educational environments, including co-teaching in a general education classroom. Establishing the impact of the special educator on student academic growth separate from the general educator in a co-teaching classroom, raises numerous questions of equity and objectivity. Moreover, if special educators do in fact function in more of a consultative, supplemental role to their students placed in inclusive settings, is that role considered to have less of an impact on student achievement than if they are involved in direct instruction, and if so, does this role negatively impact their chances for fiscal compensation? Will the students' IEP goals and objectives be taken into consideration for pay-for-performance determination, since working toward their achievement is an overriding responsibility of special educators? Will these goals and objectives be the primary indicators of student growth for students with disabilities, or will special educators be strictly held to their students' test scores as indicators of student growth? In addition, particularly for special educators who work with students with multiple disabilities and often alternative curriculum and assessment procedures, there is the question of which specific criteria would be considered adequate to indicate student growth worthy of financial compensation. These are but a few of the many questions that need to be addressed in the discussion of performance pay, particularly related to special educators.

The answers to such concerns may not always be apparent yet to personnel in traditional teacher preparation in special education, but it seems prudent to at least consider the potentially large impact that pay-for-performance may ultimately have on teacher education. As noted previously, although the single salary schedule may not be the most appropriate fiscal approach when it comes to its association with measures of student achievement, it does have elements of predictability and stability for the work force. Will the ambiguity of the variables for determining performance pay, particularly as they may relate to the unique aspects of the role of special educators, deter students from entering the field of special education? Further, will enrollment in post-baccalaureate and graduate degree

programs in special education be affected if there are reduced or no financial incentives to pursue additional coursework or advanced degrees, as is the case with the single salary schedule? As it appears that performance pay is on the fast track to fruition, it seems prudent to review and critique current preparation programs, in light of these and similar issues.

### **General Implications for Special Education Teacher Preparation Reform**

As is evident from the previous discussion, traditional teacher preparation programs in special education co-exist with alternative certification options which provide teacher candidates a quick route to classroom entry and job opportunities. Pay-for-performance approaches, although perhaps more appropriate in some ways than the single salary schedule, may have the potential to reduce, at least in some cases, the security of a steady, graduated income. In this climate, is it realistic to assume that enrollment in conventional teacher education programs in special education will remain status quo and that the content and program length of current programming should continue without revision? What is a reasonable perception is that preparation programs must be relevant, practical, and applicable to this current educational environment, which may include a more streamlined, restructuring of programs of study. Teacher candidates will want to understand and experience the direct connection between what they are learning and what they will be implementing in an instructional setting. Particularly with alternative certification options available and salaries linked to performance, teacher candidates will want to feel that they will receive a return on their investment in their professional training.

Teacher education was already an area of focus in educational reform efforts, but it appears that the issues of AC and pay-for performance have illuminated, if not in fact intensified, the need for revisiting teacher preparation for special educators. The question now is what needs to be accomplished to make the reform feasible, productive, and in the best interest of the teachers being prepared and ultimately, the students with whom they do or will work. As with many approaches to critiques and revisions, the foci often fall on the “what” and the “how,” more specifically in this case, on the program content and its delivery.

Before discussing these particular aspects of teacher education, however, it is imperative to note the foundation upon which the general implications will be made, namely the partnership between the institutions of higher education (IHEs) and the school districts. IHEs and schools have long worked collaboratively in reference to classroom observations, field experiences, and student teaching/internships, but the current call for reform necessitates an even greater degree of cooperation and reciprocal involvement. This type of collaboration not only has a sound pedagogical and pragmatic basis, but it expands access to vital resources and professional skill sets (McCray et al., 2011). This partnership, throughout the teacher preparation program, is the foundation upon which the remainder of this discussion progresses.

### **General Implications Regarding the Content of Teacher Preparation in Special Education**

Although the delineation of specific courses and explicit curricular content are of serious concern to teacher education personnel, that discourse is beyond the scope of this discussion. Rather, the focus of the remainder of the article will be on some general implications regarding content and program delivery for consideration, as educators continue to review and revise existing programs, and assume the responsibility of teacher education reform.

Clearly, there must be continued attention to making certain that teacher candidates in special education are able to prove competency and become “highly qualified” in core subject matter areas for which they will provide exclusive instruction. This is not only an instructionally reasonable expectation but one required by the tenets of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). In addition, *research-based practices* must continue to be the foundation of the content to be taught (Bauer, Johnson, & Sapona, 2004). In their discussion of university-school partnerships, McCray et al. (2011) note the collaboration between school personnel and university faculty in the implementation of various evidence-based strategies focusing “on improving literacy, mathematics, content area instruction, and discipline” (p.51).

Moreover, as the movement toward pay-for-performance has indicated, the program should continue to have, perhaps more than ever before, a primary focus of improving results in the instructional environment (Wasley & Roza, 2009). In their discussion of graduate programs, Wasley and Roza conclude that “restructuring compensation should ... tip the scales to those programs that have redefined their offerings with a focus on achieving better results in the classroom” (para. 9). To that end, these authors promote the re-orientation of programming toward instructing students in the usage of data for informed educational practice, a skill to be used both in their preparation program and in the actual classroom environment. Practices such as this, and the implementation of action research projects in classroom settings, should go a long way in preparing teachers to make sound, evidence-based decisions regarding their students. Partnering with local school districts in such activities will provide the teacher candidates authentic experiences on a regular basis, and much needed practice prior to culminating experiences such as student teaching or internships.

While a review of current teacher preparation practices in special education may lead to a discussion of streamlining program requirements, or at minimum, a refocusing of program emphases, particularly in light of AC and pay-for performance options, teacher educators should not forego quality in the interest of brevity and marketability. “With multiple user-friendly paths to certification and almost immediate employment available in certain public schools, we must be careful that all approved programs include rigorous teacher education activities” (Rosenberg et al., 2007, p. 235). A particular focus which should not be overlooked in special education teacher education is that of pedagogical practice.

One of the criticisms of AC programming in special education is the lack of emphasis on pedagogy and methodology. Although some AC options are more inclusive of these content areas, many do not highlight them as crucial components in preparing teachers, instead seemingly advancing the idea that content knowledge is adequate (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2003). While there is no dispute that subject matter content knowledge is vital to an effective special educator, diminishing the value of pedagogical content and related experiences in teacher preparation is doing a serious disservice to the varied role of the special education teacher. Special educators are not only called upon to instruct students with disabilities in appropriate curricular content, but also to provide instructional modifications or adaptations to this content on a regular basis. As noted previously, they may also act as consultants to other educational personnel, not only in regard to the provision of student accommodations, but in reference to such issues as behavioral mediation. Moreover, they may also be called upon to fulfill these roles in a variety of educational environments, from full-time co-teaching in a general education classroom to being an itinerant instructor, moving from room to room or even school to school.

Clearly, pedagogical knowledge and methodology will need to be particular areas of strength for special educators, thus necessitating their continued comprehensive coverage in a teacher education program. In addition to the anecdotal knowledge supporting this position, there is also a basis of research support for including coverage of pedagogy in a teacher education program. In a review of research in teacher education, Wilson, Floden & Ferrini-Mundy (2001) recounted that some studies which centered on pedagogical factors in teacher preparation programs validated the influence of these elements on both instructional practice and student accomplishment. This finding is in close alignment with the increasing emphasis on teacher accountability for student achievement, as purported in the literature regarding pay-for-performance options.

### **General Implications Regarding Program Delivery in Special Education Teacher Preparation**

As previously noted, this author recommends a university-school partnership as the foundational model for teacher education in special education. This partnership should be implemented comprehensively throughout the coursework and activities. As with *effective* AC options, there should be a solid relationship between coursework and experiences in the field (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005; Wasburn-Moses & Rosenberg, 2008), where students are afforded the opportunity to garner classroom experience as they transfer their textbook knowledge to practical implementation of concepts learned.

Although AC has its critics, there are some aspects of successful AC programming from which traditional teacher preparation could borrow and adapt accordingly. In a review of the literature on AC programming, Rosenberg & Sindelar (2005) found that *effective* programs incorporated mentor support on the building level and supervision from IHE personnel. If both school-based mentoring and IHE supervision are provided to candidates as they progress through more traditional teacher preparation programs, it will not only strengthen, and in essence, epitomize the university-school partnership model, but will provide the students with considerable feedback from dual sources of expertise. The difference between this approach and conventional student teaching/internship/practicum experiences is that the feedback would be provided throughout the program, not just at specific intervals within the course sequence, thus formally establishing a strong support system for the teacher candidates throughout their studies.

In addition to university-school district partnerships exemplified in the provision of building-level mentors and IHE supervisors, teacher education programs in special education should continue to find innovative ways to present the content. Again, some ideas found in the literature on *effective* AC programming could have applicability to traditional teacher preparation. Certainly many of these delivery methods are already implemented in teacher education programs, but in the current climate of educational reform, increase in AC programming, and promotion of pay-for-performance options, there is an even greater need to be innovative and to some extent, flexible, in the delivery of the program content.

McCray et al. (2011) discuss the use of flexible class schedules to include evening and after-school classes, as well as the operation of seminars. The use of technological options is also a theme which is found in the literature, including online instruction (McCray et al.) and the implementation of virtual communities of learners (Wasburn-Moses & Rosenberg, 2008).

These learning communities, virtual or real, may be involved in such activities as discussions and interviews on a variety of topics, such as unit plans and positive behavioral support programs, while



promoting collaboration across disciplines (Wasburn-Moses & Rosenberg). The inclusion of practical activities which promote collaboration between special educators and other school personnel, particularly general educators, is key to the structure and delivery system of the preparation program. As special educators may often be called upon to cooperate with other educators in the implementation of their students' instructional programs, it is imperative that they actively engage in real-life practice of co-teaching strategies and other collaborative skills with general educators in their preparation programs.

### **General Implications Regarding Continued Professional Development for Special Educators**

A discussion of teacher education reform in special education, particularly in light of the issues of AC and pay-for-performance, does not seem complete without mentioning the importance of professional development activities for field personnel. The university-school district partnership should extend beyond the focus of providing what is necessary for meeting special education certification requirements to opportunities for continued professional growth for practitioners.

LEA [local education agencies]-IHE [institutions of higher education] partnerships set the stage for a more expansive

and developmental view of teacher preparation. Rather than being viewed as a fixed series of events within a limited time

period, teacher preparation through partnerships is conceptualized as an ongoing process that bridges preservice

development, induction, and ongoing professional development. (McCray et al., 2011, p.47).

An example of an activity which would continue this partnership after the conclusion of the formal preparation program is the establishment of discussion groups for practitioners to share their experiences and issues of concern with other teachers, as well as IHE personnel. These groups could be accessed on-line and maintained by the IHE, and would undoubtedly be a useful source of support, information, and professional development, especially to novice teachers (Whitaker, 2003).

In addition to providing a forum for technologically-based professional development, special education teacher education personnel should continue their partnership with the school districts through more formalized in-service activities. These professional development activities, however, should have an explicit focus and relate to specific instructional concerns. In her discussion of a research-based reform movement in relation to professional development, Hill (2007) notes that professional development with a focus on content can effectively alter teacher behaviors. Hill further emphasizes that professional development opportunities should be firmly rooted in the context of the teachers' educational settings, with the content and activities being clearly applicable to their instructional practice. "When teachers study the content, curriculum materials, assessments, and instructional methods they will be using, student achievement improves" (Hill, p.121). As student achievement is a common variable and major emphasis in discussions of pay-for-performance options, such information can prove to be extremely useful to IHEs as they partner with school districts in providing relevant and effective professional development options.

## Conclusion

The educational reform movement not only includes the k-12 school environment, but all aspects of the instructional arena. School personnel, including special educators, are increasingly being scrutinized as to their effectiveness in promoting student achievement, which ultimately leads to an evaluation of their professional preparation. Traditional teacher preparation programs for special educators have been criticized as not meeting the demands for meeting a crucial teacher shortage, thus permitting the entry and increasing existence of alternative certification options. The issue of pathways to teacher certification in special education is an extremely pertinent aspect of the educational reform movement.

In addition to competing systems of teacher certification, there is much discussion in the reform agenda concerning educator compensation. Alternatives to the traditional single salary schedule are being promoted, such as the pay-for-performance option. Differentiated compensation is a particular issue of interest because of the multifaceted role of special educators and the current lack of clarity in determining criteria for financial rewards.

Because AC programming and teacher compensation are issues in the reform movement with particular relevance to special education, they must ultimately be considered and evaluated as to their impact on the preparation of this work force. In response to these issues, general implications regarding content and program delivery of teacher education programs, as well as subsequent professional development activities for practitioners, were addressed in the context of university-school district partnerships. It is hoped that this discussion has added to the continuing dialogue surrounding the evolving framework of special education teacher education, as personnel attempt to respond to issues such as those discussed herein, as well as proactively contribute to the educational reform agenda.

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