

Decision-Makers' Perceptions of Hiring Teachers Certified through Alternative Pathways in Georgia

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Abstract: This pilot study describes the development of a questionnaire to examine the perspectives of PK-12 hiring decision-makers (i.e., superintendents, human resource directors, and principals) in five school systems regarding certification pathways in Georgia (N=121; 83% response rate). The findings informed instrument refinement for an identical statewide study and identified questions that warrant further study. First, principals have reservations about employing teachers who gain certification through workshops and tests, without formal university coursework and student teaching. Second, decision-makers with school-age children are less likely to hire teachers certified through alternative programs than are decision makers who have no children, or whose children are grown or under age five; $X^2(1, N = 92) = 479, p = .029, Phi \Phi = .25$. Third, decision-makers rate the “how-to” knowledge and skills of teaching as more important for new teachers than the social foundations coursework taught in typical university teacher preparation programs.

The shortage of qualified teachers is raising renewed concern, especially in the most challenging schools. This shortage is intensified both by shifting demographics and educational policy.

A survey by the National Center for Education Information (NCEI) expects an annual teacher attrition rate in K-12 public schools of eight percent for the next five years. This suggests that 40% of teachers will exit the profession within five years, the highest rate since 1990 (NCEI, 2005). Attrition will disproportionately affect high schools, where half of teachers do not expect to be teaching in 2010.

The anticipated exit is due mainly to retirement. In 2005, 42% of teachers are age 50 or older, compared to 24% in 1996 (NCEI, 2005). This turnover deprives schools of the benefits of teaching experience and accumulated wisdom. Emily Feistritzter, Director of NCEI, notes that the teaching corps has grown older across the board because people are moving into teaching in their 30s and 40s, as mid-career switchers (NECI).

The impact of the attrition rate is compounded by education policy. The federal *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* act requires that all teachers in core academic subjects be “highly qualified”

by 2005-2006. While different states interpret “highly qualified” somewhat differently, many infer that this requires teachers to be fully certified in the subject areas which they teach. In addition, it is assumed that certification assures competence in both subject matter and teaching pedagogy (American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE), 2004).

In light of the impending teacher shortage and *NCLB* legislation, states and districts are considering alternate pathways to teacher certification as a part of their comprehensive education strategy (ABCTE, 2004). Alternative certification pathways enable individuals, most who are mid-career switchers, to become certified as teachers more quickly and with less cost than following traditional certification pathways. Georgia, one of the fastest growing states in the nation¹, is searching for ways to ease its teacher shortage; thus, the state offers a variety of alternative certification options to bachelor’s degree holders.

The Georgia Professional Standards Commission (PSC), which oversees teacher certification, recently approved a number of controversial rule changes for teacher certification (Layton, 2003). These changes were adopted in response to reports that public and private universities’ traditional teacher certification programs produce only 22% of the new teachers needed in the state (Georgia Educator Workforce 2002). Additionally, human resource directors from several school systems requested that the PSC develop additional pathways to certification that would enable them to hire applicants who could demonstrate content knowledge.

Although the alternative certification pathways make it possible for school systems to hire more teachers who meet the highly qualified criterion as defined by Georgia under *NCLB*, critics charge that the rule changes were not grounded in research (Georgia Deans of Schools and Colleges of Education, 2003). Ingersoll (2004) notes that few education issues have received more attention, and been more misunderstood, than the failure of our education system to ensure that all K-12 classrooms are staffed with qualified teachers. This complex problem, therefore, warrants further study.

Our paper presents findings from a pilot investigation with individuals who are in positions to hire teachers, examining their perspectives about pathways to teacher certification in Georgia. The initial work presented in this paper will inform future statewide studies we intend to conduct in three waves as follows: Phase 1 – Hiring Decision Makers (HDMs), Phase 2 – Teachers, and Phase 3 – Community Members and Parents.

We conducted the pilot study with five metro-Atlanta school systems comprised of suburban, small town, and rural schools.² The process enabled us to develop and refine an instrument and procedure to undertake a larger statewide study of the perceptions of HDMs regarding certification pathways and policy, whether they would hire and/or work with alternatively certified teachers, and what preparation they think beginning teachers need in order to work effectively at various grade levels. In addition to informing the future statewide study of decision-makers (Phase 1), pilot results will also shape our approach to similar studies with teachers (Phase 2) and community members and parents (Phase 3). Further, the findings presented in this paper suggest possible patterns that may persist when we examine responses from PK-12 HDMs in the subsequent statewide study.

Theoretical Framework

The dual crisis of providing quantity and quality in the teaching workforce requires bold action (Finn & Madigan, 2001). Solving the problems of teacher shortage, quality, and retention requires states to think comprehensively about their teacher certification pathways. Indeed, America's Colleges of Education are criticized for "the pitiful job most of them do in preparing our teachers" through traditional programs (Gregorian, 2004, p 48). While research has consistently suggested that quality teaching is the most important variable in student achievement (Gregorian), there is not agreement on whether proficiency in content knowledge is sufficient for quality teaching, or if pedagogical knowledge or training in teaching skills is also required (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2003; Torff, 2005).

In this paper, we define alternatively certified teachers as those who gained certification through pathways other than the traditional, university-based teacher education program. These alternative pathways include condensed teacher training programs, national programs such as Teach for America, and certification gained by passing a standardized certification test (i.e., the "Test Only" option referred to in the remainder of this paper). Laczko-Kerr and Berliner (2003) note that teachers certified through these alternative pathways comprise a significant part of the teaching faculty in many states. For example, one in six Arizona teachers is alternatively certified. Fewer than half the teachers in New York are certified in classes that they teach. In Philadelphia, 30,000 students are taught by alternatively certified teachers. Twenty-two percent of teachers in Chicago's 81 probationary schools (i.e., those with the lowest test scores) are not fully certified in the subjects they teach.

In 2004, Georgia expanded its alternative pathways to teacher certification to include a "Test Only" option, in which a bachelor's degree holder who passes standardized tests on subject matter and pedagogy can be fully certified to teach. Some support such an action as removing the "hoops and hurdles" that discourage good candidates from entering teaching, contending that teachers with subject knowledge have enough skill to begin teaching (Finn & Madigan, 2001). Indeed, Emily Feistritzer, Director of the National Center for Education Information, views teacher shortages as a tremendous opportunity for mid-career switchers and people whose life experiences and altruistic motives might fit well with teaching (NCEI, 2005). In support of Feistritzer's view, a recent survey found 55% of school administrators "somewhat" in favor of opening the teaching profession to qualified (i.e., proficiency in subject matter or content), motivated people who lack formal teacher training (Public Agenda Online, 2000). In addition to being cost effective, alternative certification pathways attract a more diverse group of candidates, specifically men, older adults, and minorities (Kwiatkowski, 1999), and candidates who are willing to work in rural or urban poor districts (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2003).

On the other hand, research on the effectiveness of alternatively vs. traditionally certified teachers is inconclusive. Goldhaber and Brewer (1999) found no significant difference in the effectiveness of high school math teachers who were traditionally certified and those who followed alternative pathways. Elementary students taught by Teach for America teachers, a national alternative certification program, performed as well in reading and slightly better in math than students in other classes (Decker, Mayer, & Glazerman, 2004). Conversely, Laczko-Kerr and Berliner (2003) found a two-month advantage on a grade-equivalent scale for

elementary students whose teachers are certified. Using state-level data, Darling-Hammond (2000) found negative correlations between the percent of a state's new alternatively certified teachers and the level of student performance on six different state assessments, and an equally large positive correlation between student performance and the percentage of traditionally certified teachers teaching in their field.

School districts welcome new teachers prepared through traditional university teacher education programs; nevertheless, teacher shortages compel PK-12 school administrators to hire alternatively prepared candidates, as well as graduates of traditional university programs. The pressure is especially keen in high-poverty schools where teacher turnover rates are much higher than in affluent schools, and more so in urban schools than in suburban schools (Truscott & Truscott, 2005).

This pilot study examines the perspectives of PK-12 hiring decision-makers (HDMs) about traditional university programs and alternative certification programs, and the hiring of these programs' completers. The views of school leaders who are in positions to hire new teachers are important for shaping policy about teacher qualifications. Their perspectives are particularly important if the intent of policy is to provide the equitable distribution of resources to provide quality learning experiences for all students

Method

Research Questions

We conducted this 2004 pilot study for two reasons. First, we wanted to get a sense of how decision-makers who hire teachers within our university's regional service area feel about employing teachers prepared through very different pathways. Indeed, if decision-makers value condensed routes to certification, this finding will have implications for the way the university shapes its teacher preparation programs. Thus, we asked superintendents, human resource directors, and principals (see Table 1) to respond to items that addressed three research questions:

1. What preparation does the beginning teacher need?
2. Which teacher certification pathway(s) do you most prefer?
3. Would you hire new teachers prepared through each of the five certification pathways available in Georgia? (see Figure 1).

Second, we wanted to develop and refine a questionnaire to use in a statewide survey. The statewide study will help us assess the extent to which PK-12 hiring decision makers (HDMs) support multiple pathways, including condensed routes to certification, and it will provide empirical evidence to show the extent to which contextual variables (e.g., geographic setting and Adequate Yearly Progress status) influence hiring preferences among decision-makers. This information will be useful at the university level for program development and at the state level for refinement of policies that govern teacher certification.

Table 1
Hiring Decision-Makers and Survey Response Rates

Group	Number returned	Response rate (%)
Superintendents (n = 5)	4	80
Human resources personnel (n = 6)	3	50
“Other” central office (n = 3)	3	100
Elementary principals (n = 62)	55	89
Middle school principals (n = 22)	17	77
High school principals (n = 23)	19	83
Population Total (N = 121)	101	83

Participants

We conducted the pilot study with five school systems located within the university’s service area. These systems can be described as small town or suburban districts, with some individual schools located in rural areas. Every administrator with a role in hiring new teachers was surveyed; thus, surveys were mailed to all superintendents, human resources directors, and principals in the five systems (N=121), along with a small number of “other” central office personnel who are involved in the hiring of new teachers. Our 83% response rate is disaggregated by role in Table 1.

Instrumentation

We developed a new instrument entitled *Changing Times – Teacher Preparation in Georgia* to capture PK-12 HDMs views about the preparation needed by new teachers. The first step in developing items for the instrument included a consideration of the content included in typical teacher education programs in Georgia (e.g., Berry College, Georgia State University, University of Georgia, University of West Georgia). This was followed by an examination of the National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Education standards (NCATE, 2002) and state certification requirements (Georgia PSC, 2004).

We constructed each item using neutral language to avoid politically charged biases associated with the current policy debate on teacher certification in the state. Research-based principles for the development of survey questions guided our work (Dillman, 2000; Fowler, 1995). Additionally, three PK-12 practitioners (i.e., teacher, principal, human resource director) and two university professors, a teacher education reading specialist and an educational researcher, reviewed the survey items to assess readability and content validity.

Part 1 of the survey collected respondents’ demographic information, Part 2 asked questions about what new teachers should know and be able to do, and Part 3 requested information about preferred pathways to teacher certification and whether decision-makers would hire new teachers prepared through each of the five pathways. We also asked respondents to report the type of preparation program through which they earned their own teacher certifications, recognizing that personal experience may influence the types of preparation experiences one thinks are appropriate for new teachers.

Part 1 asks respondents about their gender, position, geographic locale, highest degree, teaching certification(s), years worked in education, and years of classroom teaching experience. We also asked if the respondent is a parent, and if yes, the age categories of their children. We included the parent item with the idea that decision-makers with school-age children might think differently about teacher preparation pathways than would other respondents.

Part 2 asks decision-makers to rate eight domains of knowledge and skills which are typically taught in teacher education programs. The rating scale provides respondents with three choices to indicate the depth of knowledge they think should be required of the newly certified teacher, to include (1) little or no understanding, (2) basic understanding, and (3) in-depth or thorough understanding. We asked decision-makers to indicate their thinking about the preparation needed by new elementary teachers within the eight domains, and repeated these questions to address new middle and high school teachers. The domains, with descriptive phrases, are as follows:

1. *Understanding of subject matter* – content such as history, mathematics, English, and science
2. *Actual experience working with students in classrooms* – supervised field experience; student teaching
3. *Understanding of students* – how children develop and learn; how to motivate students to be interested in learning
4. *Understanding of “schooling”* – purpose of schooling and why schools are structured the way they are; how social contexts and backgrounds of students influence teaching and learning; how to gain the support of parents to help their child succeed; what laws regulate working with students in regular classroom settings; what laws regulate working with “special needs” students
5. *Understanding of individual learning needs* – how to work with all students in the regular classroom, including those with limited English proficiency, learning and/or physical disabilities, and learners who are gifted; how to work with students who live in situations that impair their learning and social development, situations such as physical and/or substance abuse
6. *Proficiency with pedagogical skills* – methods and strategies for teaching effectively; adapting instruction to various groups of learners; using technology to enhance learning
7. *Proficiency with managing classrooms* – how to establish routines and rules that help the classroom run smoothly; how to establish a classroom where students feel safe and free to learn; how to discipline students in ways that protect their dignity and respect
8. *Proficiency with monitoring learning* – how to accurately measure student learning; how to use data from tests and other assessments to improve instruction; how to help students develop and apply reading skills to guide their own learning

Part 3 items ask decision-makers how they perceive each of the major certification pathways currently available in Georgia. We included five graphical items (see Figure 1) to illustrate the pathways as simply as possible. Although graphics are subject to oversimplification, they help readers understand complex subject matter. Within Part 3, we asked two questions: (1) What do you think of this pathway? – response options are “preferred,” “acceptable,” or “not

acceptable;” and (2) Would you hire an applicant with this training? – choices include “yes,” “yes with conditions,” or “no.” Space is provided for optional written comments.

Pathways 1 and 2, the “Traditional” and “Post-Baccalaureate” programs, require university coursework and classroom experience (i.e., supervised internship) prior to obtaining certification. In contrast, persons following Pathways 3, 4, and 5 are certified on the “front end,” followed by pedagogical training that varies in format and scheduling. Additionally, the first year of teaching (Pathways 3, 4, and 5 teachers) is typically credited as a “supervised internship,” since some form of oversight and support is provided during that time.

Pathway 3 individuals (i.e., Typical Alternative Certification) usually enroll in education coursework at a university the summer before they begin teaching and continue in coursework

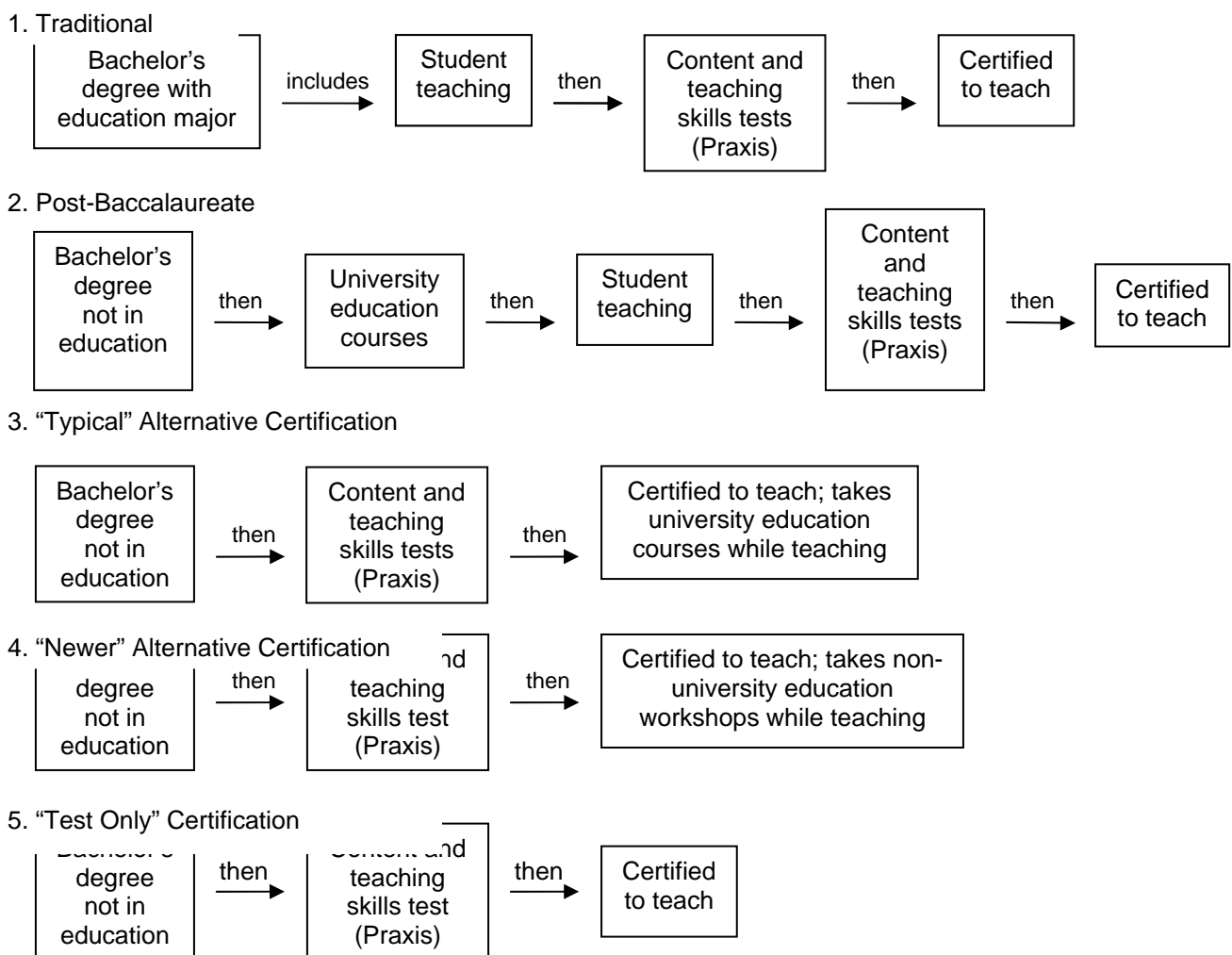


Figure 1. Survey item showing five pathways to teacher certification in Georgia. The survey includes a statement that teachers prepared through Pathways 3, 4, and 5 receive supervisory support during their first year.

throughout their first year. Since they are supported by a university supervisor during their first year, they also earn credit for their supervised internship while “on the job.”

Pathways 4 and 5, the “Newer Alternative Certification” and “Test Only” options, are different in that they do not require education coursework at a university. Pathway 4, the “Newer Alternative Certification” option, typically delivers pedagogical content and education theory through workshops that are often provided by regional education service centers. These workshops begin in the summer before the teacher assumes classroom responsibilities, and typically continue for one year or longer. Pathway 4 individuals are usually assigned a support person whose role may vary from school system to school system (e.g., peer classroom teacher mentor, regional education service center supervisor, full-time mentor who supports several new teachers, and so forth). The new teacher earns credit for the supervised internship during the first year of teaching. The Teach for America program and its state counterparts are examples of certification Pathway 4.

The “Test Only” option, Pathway 5, requires a bachelor’s degree in a content area needed by the school. No university education coursework or education workshops are required prior to assuming teaching responsibilities, although the “Test Only” teacher will likely participate in some form of training after beginning the school year. Like Pathways 3 and 4, the “Test Only” teacher’s first year is credited as a supervised internship, since a support person usually works with the new teacher during this time.

Procedure

We used Dillman’s (2000) Tailored Design Method (TDM) to construct the instrument and implement data collection. The effectiveness of TDM to increase both the quality and quantity of survey results, thus reducing survey error, is supported by compelling evidence from three decades of research on survey methodology (Dillman, 1978, 1991; Heberlein & Baumgartner, 1978; Linsky, 1975; Schaefer & Dillman, 1998). The principles of social exchange theory that help explain why people do or do not respond to surveys are foundational to TDM’s development and refinement over time (Dillman, 2000, p 13) — not a trivial matter when survey results are used to frame decision-making.

The Tailored Design Method incorporates five elements that reduce survey error: (1) a respondent-friendly questionnaire, (2) up to five contacts with the questionnaire recipient, (3) inclusion of stamped return envelopes, (4) personalized correspondence, and (5) a token financial incentive that is sent with the survey request (Dillman, 2000, p 150). Keeping in mind our well-educated population and the salience of the topic for informing program and policy-development, we reduced the number of contacts from five to three and deleted the token financial incentive.

Three mailings comprised the administration of our survey (Dillman, 2000):

1. Questionnaire packet – included a detailed cover letter, the questionnaire, and a postage-paid return envelope. The personalized cover letter described the purpose of the survey, its voluntary nature, and information related to informed consent. Each questionnaire had

an individual identification number printed on the return envelope so that follow-up mailings, an essential component of the TDM, would be sent only to those persons who did not respond to the first mailing (p 165). We guaranteed participants that their answers would be kept confidential and that identification codes were used only to track returned surveys. A database containing the names of respondents, their schools, and ID code numbers was separated from the SPSS file used to analyze the data to avoid potential bias during analysis and interpretation of the findings.

2. Follow up “thank you” post card – the post card was mailed approximately two weeks after the questionnaire packet. This second contact had a different “look” than the questionnaire packet, a research-based procedure for attracting the attention of respondents to increase return rates. The card’s message thanked those who had returned the survey and gently reminded those who had not yet responded that their response would be greatly appreciated (p 178).
3. Replacement questionnaire – the replacement questionnaire was sent two weeks after the post card only to those persons who had not yet responded. The abbreviated cover letter explained that the survey had not been received and made an appeal for its return (p 178).

Results

Demographic Information

Demographic data reveal that respondents in this pilot study share the characteristics expected of those who lead schools. Education is a first career for 80% of them. More women (59%) than men (41%) completed the survey, although slightly more than half the population was comprised of men. Ninety percent of our respondents are principals and 10% work in central office as superintendents, human resource directors, or other persons closely tied to the hiring of teachers. Of the principals, 55% represent elementary schools, 17% lead middle schools, and 18% are in high schools (see Table 1). Many respondents hold more than one teaching certificate: 37% are certified in early childhood education, 34% in middle grades, 39% in secondary education, and 24% have P-12 certificates (e.g., physical education, art, foreign languages). Half the respondents work in suburban schools and/or systems (52%), with the remainder in small towns (27%) and rural settings (21%). The highest degree earned is largely a specialist’s degree (69%), with the remainder split evenly between doctorates (16%) and master’s degrees (15%). Respondents reported an average of 21 years experience in education, with a mean of 11 years of classroom teaching. Eighty percent of the participants are parents; of those, 50% have adult children and 12% have infants or preschoolers at home. Of the respondents whose children are of school-age, 18% have teen-agers, 14% have pre-adolescents, and 23% have elementary age children.

What Preparation Does the Beginning Teacher Need?

Part 2 of our survey examines perceptions about the preparation experiences deemed most important for new teachers before they are hired for their first classroom position (see Table 2). We report mean scores in Table 2 rather than median scores, although medians are technically the correct choice for ordinal data analysis, because the Part 2 data suffered from

range restriction. Examining mean scores, only for exploratory purposes, provided insight about potential patterns that may hold when we conduct the future statewide study.

Median scores did reveal one interesting point. Respondents want beginning teachers to have an in-depth, thorough understanding of every domain except *Understanding of Schooling*. All principals—regardless of level—are satisfied if their new teachers have a basic understanding of the content contained within *Understanding of Schooling*, although superintendents and human resource directors want beginning teachers to deeply understand this domain.

We purposely used a three-point scale for these items, with the idea that respondents could more easily discriminate among three points than five or six points when assessing the preparation new teachers need before assuming their first teaching position. Since our results produced a clustering of data at the high end of the scale (i.e., 3 – in-depth, thorough understanding), we expanded the scale to six points when revising the instrument for the future statewide study. Hopefully, the additional response options in the revised scale will solicit more precise information from survey completers during the statewide administration.

Table 2
What Preparation Does the Beginning Teacher Need?

Domains	Grades K-5		Grades 6-8		Grades 9-12	
	CO ^a	ESP ^b	CO	MSP ^c	CO	HSP ^d
Subject matter	2.90	2.69	3.00	2.94	3.00	2.94
Pedagogy	2.90	2.75	2.80	2.67	2.80	2.65
Supervised field experiences	2.80	2.81	2.80	2.61	2.80	2.65
Understanding of students	2.80	2.78	2.80	2.72	2.80	2.65
Monitoring learning	2.80	2.72	2.80	2.61	2.80	2.71
Individual learning needs	2.70	2.63	2.70	2.61	2.70	2.76
Managing classrooms	2.70	2.74	2.60	2.72	2.60	2.94
Understanding of “schooling”	2.60	2.49	2.60	2.33	2.60	2.29

Note: Numbers are mean scores for each group. Respondents rated each knowledge or experience domain using the following scale: 3 – in depth, thorough understanding; 2 – basic understanding; 1 – little or no understanding.

^aCO = central office personnel, to include superintendents, human resource directors or their equivalent, and others who work closely with the hiring of new teachers (e.g., associate superintendents of curriculum & instruction), ($n = 10$).

^bESP = elementary school principals ($n = 55$).

^cMSP = middle school principals ($n = 17$).

^dHSP = high school principals ($n = 19$).

Although mean differences in this pilot study are small, several patterns emerged which may hold true in the larger statewide study. For the most part, central office administrators rate

the domains consistently across all grades levels. For example, if they consider knowledge of *Monitoring Learning* important for high school teachers, they also consider it important for elementary and middle school teachers. Principals, on the other hand, are more likely to view prerequisite knowledge and skills as a function of the age of students with whom teachers work. When asked, What preparation does the new teacher need?, central office administrators and high school and middle school principals rate knowledge of *Subject Matter* as the most important proficiency. Elementary principals rate *Supervised Field Experiences* as most important.

All participants, regardless of their position, rate *Understanding of Schooling* as the least important competency for beginning teachers, placing this item at the bottom of their “need to know” lists for new teachers. *Understanding of Schooling* addresses key questions such as What is the purpose of schooling?, What does it mean to be an educated citizen?, and What does it mean to be a teacher?. Thus, these data suggest that PK-12 hiring decision-makers (HDMs) want beginning teachers to have in-depth, thorough understandings of the applied, “how-to” knowledge and skills of teaching, and are satisfied if novices possess a basic understanding of the more theoretical knowledge typically taught within the domain labeled *Understanding of Schooling*.

Pathways to Teacher Certification

Findings in this section are divided into two parts: (1) certification pathway preferences of HDMs, and (2) willingness of those same decision-makers to actually hire candidates prepared via the five pathways. We combined the “preferred” and “acceptable” response options in Figure 3 and the “yes” and “yes, with conditions” options in Figure 4, since collapsing response categories often helps policy makers detect patterns more easily (Patton, 1997, p. 307).

Preferences of hiring decision-makers. Figure 2 displays the certification pathway preferences of respondents for each of the five certification pathways. Some respondents rate all five pathways as acceptable, although no one selected the “Test Only” option as a preferred certification route. The “Traditional” and “Post-Baccalaureate” programs receive the strongest support. Respondents view the two most flexible pathways more negatively, in that almost half (48%) rate “Newer Alternative Certification” as unacceptable, and more than three quarters (78%) rate the “Test Only” option as unacceptable.

Whereas Figure 2 collapses all HDMs into one group, the disaggregated data shown in Figure 3 reveal differences among subgroups (particularly between central office administrators and principals) for Pathways 3, 4, and 5, the “Typical Alternative Certification,” “New Alternative Certification,” and “Test Only” pathways, respectively. Eighty percent of central office administrators rate “Typical Alternative Certification” as preferred/acceptable, whereas 61% of high school principals, 65% of middle school principals, and 56% of elementary principals do so.

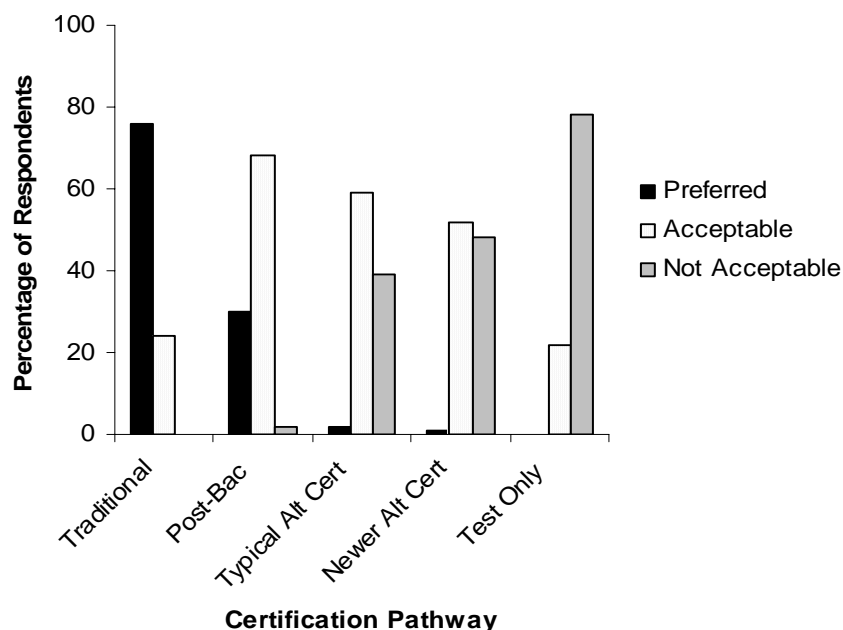


Figure 2. Preferences of hiring decision-makers (N = 101). Each bar corresponds to responses from all groups collapsed together (i.e., central office administrators; high school, middle school, and elementary principals).

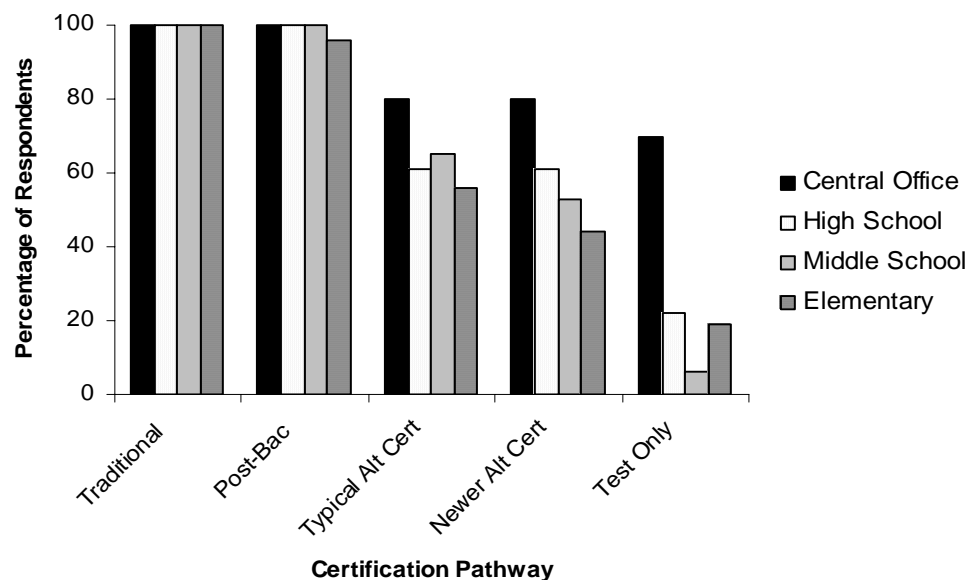


Figure 3. Certification pathway preference by position. Each bar corresponds to the “preferred” and “acceptable” categories collapsed together. Respondents represent central office ($n = 10$), high school principals ($n = 19$), middle school principals ($n = 17$), and elementary principals, $n = 55$).

Again, 80% of central office administrators rate the “Newer Alternative Certification” pathway as preferred/acceptable; however, principals’ preferred/acceptable responses are 61% - high school, 53% - middle school, and 44% - elementary. The most pronounced gap between central office and campus administrators emerges with the “Test Only” pathway; 70% of superintendents and human resource directors view this pathway as preferred/acceptable, but only 22% of high school principals, 6% of middle school principals, and 19% of elementary principals agree.

Would you hire this candidate? Figure 4 shows how each group responded to the question, *Would you hire this candidate?*. Uniformly across the board, hiring decision makers (HDMs) in the study say that they would employ teachers prepared through traditional (100%) and post-baccalaureate university programs (99%). Responses were mixed for candidates who gain certification through the variety of alternative certification programs currently available in the state. As certification options deviate from criteria commonly associated with standard teacher education programs, central office administrators somewhat, and principals to a large extent, deviate in their responses to the question, *Would you hire this candidate?*.

Our pilot study includes too few central office administrators to make statistically significant claims³ about their responses to the question, *Would you hire this candidate?* However, the data suggest that real differences exist between central office administrators and principals regarding their willingness to employ teachers who obtain certification through the “Test Only” option (80% vs. 30%, respectively), the pathway most recently approved by the state’s teacher certification agency. A discrepancy also exists between central office personnel (90%) and campus principals (56%) concerning their willingness to hire teachers prepared through “Newer Alternative Certification” programs that do not require university coursework.

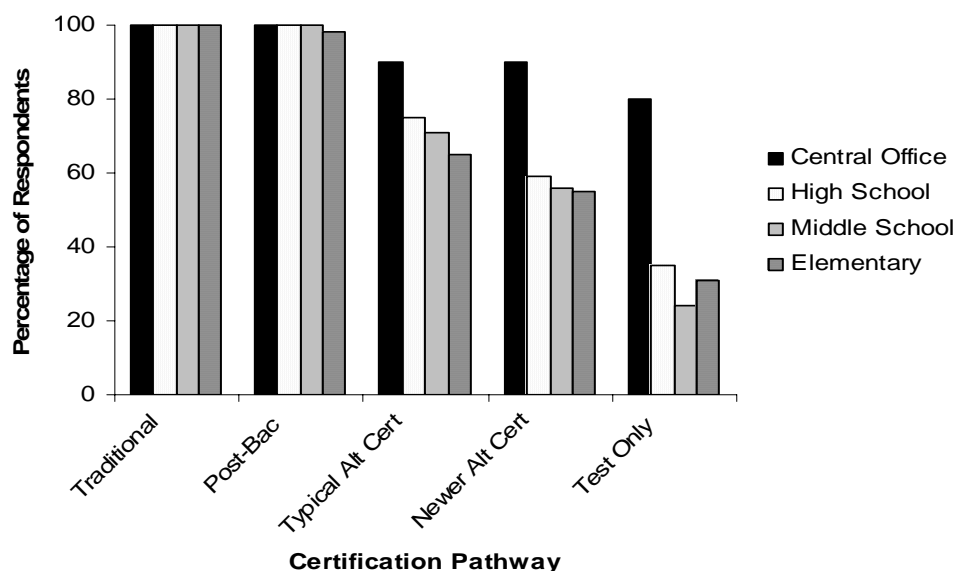


Figure 4. Yes, I’d hire this candidate. Each bar corresponds to the “Yes, I’d hire” and “Yes, I’d hire, with conditions” categories collapsed together. Respondents represent central office ($n = 10$), high school principals ($n = 19$), middle school principals ($n = 17$), and elementary principals, $n = 55$).

Although limited by the number of superintendents and human resource directors when comparing central office administrators' responses with those of principals, we were able to test for differences between HDMs who are parents of school-age children and those who are not. When asked, Would you hire this candidate?, statistically significant differences emerged for the "Newer Alternative Certification" option; Continuity Correction $X^2(1, N=92) = 479, p = .029, Phi \Phi = .25$. These results indicate that HDMs with school-age children are less likely to hire teachers prepared through the "Newer Alternative Certification" option than are decision-makers who have no children, or whose children are grown or under age five. Interestingly, this difference emerged only with the "Newer Alternative Certification" pathway, and not with the "Test Only" option. Perhaps participants' responses are a reflection of their work with teachers prepared through the "Newer Alternative Certification" pathway introduced in 2001, whereas the "Test Only" option is much newer; thus, its challenges and/or benefits are unknown.

Refining the Instrument

One of our goals for the pilot study was to refine our instrument for subsequent statewide data collection. We made four major changes to the instrument based on the pilot administration. First, we clarified the description of the classroom management domain by removing words related to students' self-esteem and phrasing the item strictly in terms of observable behaviors (i.e., "how to establish routines and rules that help the classroom run smoothly"). Second, the pilot instrument asked respondents to answer the question, "What preparation does the new teacher need? at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Three levels proved cumbersome for the respondents and our analyses; thus, we collapsed middle and high schools into one category labeled "Secondary Schools (6-12)" for the statewide instrument. Third, we expanded the response scale for the items that assess the question, What preparation does the new teacher need? The scale for the statewide study will have six points instead of three. Lastly, we added a ninth domain, *Proficiency with Personal Interactions* (i.e., get along with colleagues, parents, and students; respond effectively to conflict; work collaboratively; clearly articulate personal values and standards), to Part 2 of the statewide instrument, based on written comments from several respondents that alternatively certified teachers with strong interpersonal skills often adjust well to their new teaching positions.

Discussion

This pilot study serves three purposes: (1) it provides insights into the thinking of superintendents, human resource directors, and principals in five Metro-Atlanta school systems regarding multiple pathways to teacher certification in Georgia, (2) the process informs refinement of our instrument in preparation for the larger statewide study of hiring decision makers (HDMs), and (3) pilot results raise questions that will be explored with the statewide studies of HDMs (Phase 1), teachers (Phase 2), and community members and parents (Phase 3).

The pilot results provide empirical evidence that principals in the five systems included in this study question the adequacy of preparation for teachers who gain certification through workshops and tests, without the benefit of formal university coursework and classroom experience and student teaching field experiences, although superintendents and human resource

directors view increasingly flexible certification programs more favorably. Certainly, these principals' perceptions may change over time, particularly as they work with larger numbers of teachers who are prepared through the condensed alternative certification programs.

The results of this initial investigation point to three important observations which are discussed in this section. First, the findings suggest disagreement between central office administrators and principals about their preferred teacher preparation pathways and whether they would hire new teachers who gained certification through each of the five pathways. Since 98% of respondents report earning their professional credentials through "Traditional" or "Post-Baccalaureate" programs, the disagreement is not an artifact of participants' preparation experiences, but may be linked instead to the demands of their positions. Central office administrators must attend to student achievement gains and compliance with the mandate to place a highly qualified teacher in every classroom in a day of teacher shortages, especially in hard-to-staff schools. Principals, on the other hand, function as the instructional leaders of their schools and are held accountable for student performance. From their perspective, relaxing the certification requirements may diminish instructional quality as experienced teachers add mentoring to their already crowded schedules. Few schools have sufficient resources to provide alternatively certified teachers with quality mentoring experiences, even though new teachers with partial "up front" preparation will likely experience excessive stress and would benefit from high quality support structures. Experienced teachers who are assigned the task of mentoring these new teachers may be diverted from their primary instructional focus with their own students, creating implications for job performance and job satisfaction with these seasoned professionals. We will explore these potential problems when we conduct the statewide study with teachers (i.e., Phase 2).

Second, our findings raise the question, Whose children will be taught by alternatively certified teachers, particularly those prepared through the quickest certification pathways? Historically, schools with high minority and low-SES populations employ fewer well-prepared teachers than do other schools, diminishing students' opportunity to learn. Indeed, one intent of the *NCLB* legislation is to ensure that high minority and low-SES students have access to qualified teachers. Our findings, however, add an interesting twist to the equity (i.e., distribution of resources) question. We found statistically significant differences between those decision-makers whose own children are PK-12 students (referred to hereafter as "Parent Decision-Makers") and those without children, or whose children are infants, toddlers, or grown (referred to hereafter as "Non-Parent Decision-Makers"). Parent Decision-Makers are more reticent to hire teachers prepared through the "Newer Alternative Certification" pathway than are Non-Parent Decision-Makers. This finding suggests that actively parenting a school-age child moves the certification pathways issue closer to home, which in turn, may impact their hiring decisions. Perhaps Non-Parent Decision-Makers perceive rapid certification through a rational/technical lens, since the issue does not directly impact their personal lives, whereas Parent Decision-Makers process the issue through the rational/technical lens as well as the affective domain. We will explore this finding further when we conduct our future statewide studies with HDMs (Phase 1) and community members and parents (Phase 3).

Third, the finding that central office administrators and principals rate *Understanding of Schooling* as least important among the eight domains typically taught in university-based

teacher education programs raises the question, How should beginning teachers be led to think about their profession? While this finding may not be surprising, it is disappointing for university-based teacher educators who value the process of reflecting on the purpose and mission of the profession, for how can new teachers begin their careers without questioning why they do what they do in the classroom? How and when can we lead new teachers to become more thoughtful about the profession, reflectively analyze what they do, and weigh the potential consequences of their actions on the individual student and on society? Possibly, our respondents believe that pre-service teachers need substantial hands-on experience before they can ask meaningful questions about the foundations that ground the profession. Or perhaps they sense that pre-service teachers poorly integrate these philosophical ideas into their emergent professional thinking due to a singular focus on the act of teaching and desire to get into their own classrooms. It is unclear from this study whether our participants identified a de-valuing of foundational knowledge in teacher preparation programs, or a preference that foundational knowledge be studied in graduate school rather than initial certification programs. As teacher preparation programs, both traditional and alternative formats, are revised and developed, the challenge of how to build thoughtful practitioners must be addressed by both academics and practitioners.

Conclusions

This study uses perceptual data from PK-12 decision-makers to gain an understanding of how they view the increasing flexibility of certification pathways in Georgia. The knowledge gained in this investigation will be extended through future statewide studies comparing the views of hiring decision-makers with teachers, as well as community members and parents. Perceptions are of monumental importance in the shaping and influencing of new policies designed to alleviate complex, thorny problems. Understanding what matters to stakeholders, how they respond to current policies, and what preparation they think new teachers need can be useful to policymakers as they attempt to find meaningful solutions to teacher shortages, particularly for those schools that are challenging to staff.

High-quality teacher preparation is an expensive and labor-intensive enterprise. Flexible certification regulations may well be a viable option for increasing the pool of highly qualified teachers in Georgia, as well as other parts of the county. However, if this road leads to long-term changes in teacher preparation, we urge policymakers to consider ways to develop and fund mechanisms to support the professional growth of teachers who are prepared through flexible pathways. Permanent, adequate funding is a necessary condition for building sustainable support structures for new teachers once they assume responsibility for their classrooms; however, attention must also be given to factors such as mentor teacher workloads and content knowledge, mentor training, and classroom scheduling to assure that veterans have the time and expertise, as well as desire, to contribute positively to new teacher growth.

Additionally, questions of equity cannot be ignored in the rush to increase the pool of highly-qualified teachers. Indeed, our finding that decision-makers who parent school-age children are reticent to hire teachers prepared through the “Newer Alternative Certification” pathway has implications for the equitable distribution of resources (i.e., highly-qualified teachers) as leaders strive to build strong faculties in their schools.

Lastly, findings from this study have implications for future research in higher education teaching. The fact that all groups of hiring decision-makers in our study rated foundational knowledge last among eight domains typically taught in teacher education programs raises interesting questions, because this finding conflicts with beliefs held by many university-based teacher educators. As PK-12 educators place more emphasis on the technical skills of teaching, due in part to accountability demands of the *No Child Left Behind* legislation, it is worth investigating questions that probe the foundational grounding of our profession. Such questions might include, “What is the purpose of education?” and “What does classroom learning look like when technical skills are valued more highly than the philosophical underpinnings that define the purpose of teaching?”. It is likely that the knowledge base deemed critical for new teachers will evolve over time; however, programmatic changes are usually more successful when the rationale for change is grounded in research.

Perhaps such research would lead us to rethink the emphases of content delivered in initial certification programs, adjusting the balance of practical knowledge/skills and theoretical or reflective understandings that underpin good teaching. There may be value in moving some of the more theoretical content from pre-service coursework to graduate studies, where practicing professionals have the ability to scaffold learning with their deep understandings of day-to-day classroom work. On the other hand, teachers who ground their technical skills with deeply held beliefs about the purpose of education may produce the strongest gains in student achievement. Certainly, as teacher preparation programs, both traditional and alternative formats, are revised and developed, the challenge of how to build thoughtful practitioners must be addressed by both academics and practitioners.

At this point, it is uncertain whether increasing the flexibility of certification pathways will meet the intent of *NCLB*—that all children have the opportunity to learn in classrooms taught by well-prepared teachers—or if implementation of the legislation will create shortcuts to teaching competence that fulfill the letter of the legislation, while circumventing its spirit. Examining perceptual data to determine what PK-12 hiring decision-makers think about the teacher preparation knowledge base and whether they intend to hire large numbers of teachers prepared through increasingly flexible certification pathways is one useful approach for understanding the viability of policies designed to meet the teacher shortage challenge.

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Author Notes

¹ Twenty-four Georgia counties are listed among the 100 fastest growing counties in the nation (US Census Bureau, retrieved July 31, 2004 from <http://eirecensusgov/popest/data/household/HU-EST2003-top100php>)

² We used the 2004 database from the Georgia Department of Education that list each Georgia school and its “locale code.” Locale codes are based on U.S. Census Bureau standards for defining communities (i.e., settlement patterns). For more information, review the *Standards for defining metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas; Notice* (Federal Register, Vol. 65, No. 249), published December 27, 2000, by the Office of Management and Budget.

³ We were unable to conduct a two-way contingency table analysis (central office administrators x principals) with the pilot data because one cell (25%) had an expected count of less than five. We anticipate that the statewide data will produce a statistically significant difference between central office administrators’ perspectives and principals’ perspectives with regard to the question of hiring “Test Only” candidates.

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