



CENTER FOR URBAN AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

INDIANA UNIVERSITY

School of Education
IUPUI

Teacher Licensure (Certification)

Research Brief

Teacher Licensure/Certification in the United States

Teacher quality has been shown to be the primary institutional factor in improving levels of student achievement (Clotfelter, Ladd & Vigdor, 2007). As a result, much of the professional discourse and research has focused on the ability to recruit, prepare, and retain a highly qualified teaching force. In response, states have maintained rigorous licensure programs for entry into the teaching profession. These licensure or certification programs are the mechanism by which state governments regulate who is allowed to teach. Each state establishes its own procedures for certifying teachers, and many have similar certification requirements following national accreditation guidelines typically including specialized coursework, standardized examinations in general knowledge and pedagogical skills, and supervised pre-service teaching experiences (Boyd, Goldhaber & Wyckoff, 2007).

In addition to their standard requirements, 49 states currently recognize certification by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). While they do not require national board certification, as many as 37 states provide financial incentives to complete the program, which is recognized as the national standard for evaluating teacher knowledge and teaching skills (Boyd, et. al., 2007).

Ideally, such licensure processes keep less qualified candidates from entering the classroom, and gives those with high potential the necessary skills and experience needed to be effective teachers. However, some argue that the arduous licensure process has the unintended consequence of reducing the appeal of the profession. Additionally, with high teacher turnover, veteran teachers reaching retirement, and fewer entering the field as “career” teachers, many states are relying more on “alternative pathways” programs (for certification/licensure).

State Requirements

These alternative routes to certification (AC) programs allow teachers to enter classrooms while postponing or bypassing much of the criteria required by traditional teacher preparation programs. In their study of certification programs, Boyd, et. al., (2007) found much variation in requirements for AC programs across states. Due to the wide variation, identifying quality licensure programs is contentious. Although these programs often have pre- and in-service requirements, some require an academic year of pre-service preparation, while others require only two weeks. Pre-service preparation may be conducted over a four to twelve week period and often includes training in pedagogy, teaching methods, and field experiences. Less than half of states with such programs require pre-service practice teaching or fieldwork. And while education coursework is a common requirement, the nature and quantity of courses differ widely (Boyd, et. al., 2007). Newer online versions of these programs require the least criteria for credentialing (Brassel, 2003; Wise, 2003). Lack of evidence supporting the credibility and efficacy of programs, like the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE), has generated opposition from national and state associations and, in some cases, resulted in rejection by state officials (Keller, 2005; Viadero, 2004).

In 1983, less than 9 states permitted alternatives to college and university based teacher education programs. By 1999, as many as 40, and currently 46 states and the District of Columbia allow one or more AC models for entry into the profession (Boyd, et. al., 2007; Feistritzer & Chester, 2000; Zeichner & Schulte, 2001). All require a bachelor's degree, and 80% require demonstration of subject matter knowledge through coursework or by examination, or both. A number of states now rely heavily on AC programs as a source for teacher staffing. New Jersey, Texas, and California receive more than a third of their new teachers through this pipeline (Boyd, et. al., 2007).

While the literature indicates these accelerated AC programs do well at funneling teachers into the field in much needed areas (Boyd, et. al., 2007; Decker, Mayer & Glazerman, 2004; Donaldson, Johnson, Willett, & Murnane, 2008), some research suggests new teachers prepared through these programs may not be as equipped when they enter the classroom as new teachers who have been traditionally trained and licensed (Darling-Hammond, Holtzman, Gatlin & Heilig, 2005; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002). And because new teachers prepared through AC programs are concentrated in urban and rural school districts with large populations of low-SES students of color, some scholars argue that we now have a system in which the likelihood a student is taught by a fully qualified teacher largely depends on their social class (Darling-Hammond, LaFors & Snyder, 2001). Recent research documents the importance of teachers to student achievement and indicates a need to consider the issue of teacher quality and, in particular, what core elements constitute quality teacher preparation (Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Rockoff, 2004).

Teacher Quality and Student Performance

Teacher quality is a complex issue on which there is little agreement in regards to a standard and comprehensive definition. Goe (2007) suggests there is a difference between (a) teacher quality which implies a set of attributes (e.g., certification type, teacher test scores, coursework, grades, college degrees, training, etc.) that serve as indicators of who will be successful in the classroom, and (b) teaching quality which implies that it is not what teachers have in terms of training and certification, but, to a greater extent, what they do in the classroom that indicates quality.

A number of studies have examined teacher education programs and licensure to identify elements which contribute to teacher quality. These studies typically examine relationships between teacher attributes and student outcomes. A review of recent studies is summarized below.

- Teacher experience matters, particularly in the first few years of teaching (Boyd, Grossman, Lankford, Loeb & Wyckoff, 2006; Decker, et. al., 2004; Kane, Rockoff & Staiger, 2006; Rivkin, et. al., 2005).
- Having an advanced degree is associated with positive impact on student achievement in high school (Rice, 2003).
- Teacher certification (licensure) matters for student achievement in middle (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, Rockoff & Wyckoff, 2008) and high school mathematics (Betts, Rueben & Dannenberg, 2000; Darling-Hammond, et. al., 2005; Goe, 2007; Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000; Kane, et. al., 2006; Wenglinsky, 2000; Wilson, Floden & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001).
- Teacher coursework (subject specific or in pedagogy) has an impact on student learning at all grade levels, but subject-specific coursework matters most in secondary education (Rice, 2003).
- Teacher scores on literacy or verbal ability tests correlate with both teacher performance and student outcomes (Boyd, et. al., 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2009; Rice, 2003). Teacher test scores are particularly important for the achievement of at-risk students (Baker & Dickerson, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2009; Rice, 2003).
- Student achievement is most enhanced when teachers are fully certified, have completed a traditional teacher education program and pre-service program, have strong academic backgrounds, and have more than two years experience (Boyd, et. al., 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2009).
- Students gain significantly if their teacher has graduated from a selective or competitive undergraduate institution (Clotfelter, et. al., 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2009; Lankford et. al., 2002).

Conclusion

As a group, the studies find that teachers who are fully certified (through traditional college/university based teacher education programs) have a more significant positive impact on student outcomes than teachers who are not. Similarly, it suggests that full certification rather than alternative certification is associated with better teacher quality and subsequently better student performance. Many of the elements (attributes) that contribute to teacher quality are required or integrated in the full certification process. It is encouraging that AC programs are expanding the pool of available teachers, including career changers, and that some employ highly selective recruitment processes which, to some degree, ensures their teachers have attributes associated with teacher quality. However, the substantial variation in requirements among AC programs raises questions about standards and minimum requirements, and more importantly, the impact on low-income urban and rural minority populations when a significant portion of their teachers are not fully certified and/or have the appropriate skills and training to teach all children.

Note: One possible positive impact of alternative certification programs may be the attraction of underrepresented groups into the teaching profession. At present, studies appear to be mixed in the actual impact on attracting minority or male teachers as opposed to stated programmatic goals.

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