

A Sharp Contrast: First-Year Teachers With and Without Teacher Preparation

Abstract

Six beginning teachers answered survey research questions about their first-year of teaching in this study. Three of the teachers were fully-certificated teachers who had completed student teaching experiences and three were college graduates without certification and with little or no teacher education preparation. Their answers about preparedness, stress, and job support indicated contrasts that match literature on teacher preparation.

“I only lasted one year as a teacher. It was probably the hardest year I had ever encountered. I was constantly working, preparing, grading, stressing over the next week’s lesson plans and how I was going to make it interesting and engaging to the students.” (First-year high school science teacher with no teacher education preparation)

“My feeling of being prepared was an 8/10. I feel that I was adequately prepared to teach content, manage a classroom, manage time, provide feedback, and create assessments.” (First-year 3rd grade math teacher with full teacher certification)

This article addresses the issues faced by beginning teachers in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields by reviewing survey feedback from six recent graduates. Three of the graduates were fully-certificated/licensed upon completion of their traditional undergraduate teacher education programs while three began teaching in private school settings without teacher preparation. Their responses indicate the contrasts between starting a teaching job with and without teacher preparation. Questions about how to increase the importance of teacher preparation are discussed.

Background

In an effort to increase enrollment in math and science teacher education programs at Berry College, a program was initiated and a Noyce Grant of 1.2 million dollars was received to support the work of the program in 2018. As a small private college in north Georgia, the annual number of student teachers in all programs (elementary, middle and secondary) was averaging forty, with only 2-3 of those graduates certified in secondary STEM disciplines. In the fall of 2019, as part of the developing STEMTeach program, email surveys were sent to a group of new teachers working in the STEM fields to elicit feedback on their preparation to teach. Six teachers chose to complete surveys. Follow-up email surveys were sent through March of 2020. Because of the Coronavirus outbreak, that school year had a unique ending with remote learning.

The survey questions included how graduates found jobs, their induction into their schools, and their feelings of preparedness in subject content and teaching. Participants were asked about the support received, as well as time and stress management

In their own words

The fully-certificated teachers had no trouble finding teaching jobs in public schools. One teacher received her job offer in December for the following August. One received her job at the school where she completed student teaching. The third teacher was hired after his first interview.

Of the three non-certificated teachers, two used a for-profit online service, Southern Teachers Agency (southernteachers.com for more information) to find jobs in private schools. The third teacher did not indicate how she found the job opening, but wrote, “I felt that they (the

school) wanted to hire me but I also went through a very arduous interview process which consisted of four different interviews, a lunch, and a 30-minute demonstration in front of students.”

When asked about their feelings of preparedness to teach, one teacher wrote, “I greatly appreciated my educational psychology and classroom management classes because the strategies that I learned are ones I have to keep in mind every day. I would rate myself an 8 (out of 10) in preparation to teach. I had a ton of classes at the college and practical experiences in a school.”

Another student wrote, “I found the classroom management aspect of teacher education program the most useful. It helped me to prepare for my class before the school year began and allowed me to adjust on the fly this year. Also, the in-depth student teaching that was offered along with great mentoring by my cooperating teacher and supervisor helped tremendously.”

The non-certificated teachers could not rate their preparation to teach, as two had no teacher education classes and one only completed a one-semester hour orientation class. Their comments about preparation included the following:

“I do not know much about creating a structured lesson plan, but I have been getting better and now have a system. Classroom management has been OK but could have been better from the start.”

“I have been struggling with classroom management and wish I could somehow have practiced it before I started.”

“I was probably a 3 or 4 on a scale of 10 to be prepared since I didn’t go through any courses.”

With regard to content knowledge, all six students indicated confidence in their knowledge of the subject content, math and/or science. However, one fully-certificated teacher wrote, “I am pretty confident in my ability to work with my content area. On the other hand, I wish I had more content-related classes that pertain to teaching strategies and how to differentiate in the content.” This is an indicator that knowledge of the content is not enough, as teachers need specific pedagogical knowledge for that content.

Induction programs and mentoring have been shown to help all new hires, especially if mentors have training in how to help beginning teachers. The teachers in this survey research had a variety of induction experiences, ranging from a highly-supportive program with ongoing professional development to no new teacher induction. Imagine being the new teacher with no teacher preparation who also found that “There was almost no new teacher orientation. I was just kind of thrown into the life of a teacher.”

How stressful did these new teachers find their jobs? Teachers in both categories – certificated and not – reported stress in their jobs. However, there were contrasts. A non-certificated teacher wrote, “The first semester was so stressful and discouraging to me that I was semi-dreading coming back from the Christmas break. I had already pretty much figured out that teaching was not for me and I was just discouraged.” (Author’s note: She did leave at the end of the first year.)

A first-year teacher who completed a year-long student teaching in the school where she was hired wrote, “My first semester of teaching was a 3 out of 10 for stress. Having a great team of other teachers helped me to be less stressed and get help when I needed it.”

How did the newly-hired teachers find their schools to be in terms of workplaces? A fully-certificated teacher wrote, “Our district also lets out early on Wednesdays so that teachers

can get the professional development they need and schools can work as a staff to better one another.” That comment contrasts starkly with this comment from a non-certificated teacher: “I feel like I have little to no support from my administration and my mentor teacher. There are only two people with science degrees on staff...so I was roped into being the middle school STEM coordinator.” Loading up a new teacher with an additional duty makes the job even harder, as opposed to giving teachers time to work together. This can be more common in small and private institutions where non-certificated teachers tend to find teaching positions.

Relating teachers’ comments to the research

While this article shares only snapshots of six first-year teachers’ experiences, some of the teachers’ comments mirror what is known from the research on teacher education.

Why do seniors in college decide to seek out public or private teaching jobs with little to no preparation in the field and no certification/licensure? Some decide to do so late in their degree program or post-graduation because they don’t know what to do with their chosen major, have decided not to go to graduate school in their field, or have heard that “anybody can teach.” Some are encouraged to start teaching and to “pick up” teacher certification as they go, because you can “learn from experience.” Some would have liked to pursue teacher certification but decided too late in their college years to do so. While others, knowing that they wanted to teach early enough in their degree program, still chose not to pursue certification.

Darling-Hammond addressed this: “Although there are certainly accounts of teachers who have valued their preparation, more popular are stories of teachers who express disdain for their training, suggesting that they learned little in their courses that they could apply to the classroom.... These views have often led to the perception that if there is anything to be learned

about teaching, it can be learned on the job, through trial and error if not with supervision” (2006, p. 6). Three teachers in this study were certainly experiencing trial and error, especially with regard to planning, instruction, and classroom management, key components to quality teaching.

College students, their parents, and society need to know that there is a knowledge base of teacher preparation and it does matter! Teacher educators must also decide, within the confines of their state accreditation, how much teacher education is enough to graduate a new teacher ready to go to work. What exactly does a teacher need to know and be able to do to assume the duties of a classroom teacher? (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). When should additional education be added to the teacher’s training? The college teacher education program cannot address everything, attempting to graduate students with multiple certifications and add-on endorsements. There simply isn’t enough time. Yet some teacher education programs have requirements above and beyond their state’s requirements, perhaps keeping potential candidates out of programs.

While field experiences are important, those experiences must be do-able within the sequence of classes needed to graduate. (See, for example, Grossman, 2018). Some students may be more willing to complete a basic teacher preparation program if it is perceived as manageable during a four-year bachelor’s degree.

Teacher educators need to increase recruitment efforts on their college campuses, informing freshmen and sophomores about improved teacher salaries and benefits so that there is time for students to consider adding teacher preparation to their programs. Teacher educators can work with professors of the STEM fields to encourage their students to take the first education class and then decide on completing teacher education. This is a hallmark of the Uteach model

for STEM teacher preparation that has been successfully adopted at many schools (UTeach, 2020).

As a professor of teacher education, I (Clement) find that informing students about the differences of teaching with and without teacher certification are immense – salary, assignment, and benefits are quite different for those with full certification. I remind students that starting a full-time teaching job and then trying to be a student at night and in the summers to earn certification will be extremely time-consuming and difficult.

Public school districts and private school organizations need to prioritize teacher recruitment and hiring. Hiring is a year-round job (Clement, 2015). Of course, schools with excellent reputations for supportive administration and reasonable workloads are not experiencing the same needs for hiring non-certificated teachers as are schools with lesser reputations. Places where teachers feel empowered may be able to choose from a large pool of certificated candidates. (See, for example, Ingersoll, 2003).

The school as a workplace needs to be designed for the success of teachers, as Susan Moore Johnson wrote in her 2019 book, *Where Teachers Thrive*. Johnson's research indicated that teachers thrive in schools where hiring systems are well-refined, principals are supportive instructional leaders, teachers' time is structured for their needs, and financial resources exist. The simple fact that three of the new teachers were hired with no certification may be indicative of the workplaces existing in those schools. Is it possible that those schools could not attract better prepared, certificated teachers?

Final thoughts

The cover of the March, 2020, *Phi Delta Kappan* magazine asked the question, “What kind of profession is teaching?” Professional organizations, including Delta Kappa Gamma, need to keep asking the tough questions about the profession of teaching and advocating to all involved in teacher preparation. Organizations can advocate that teacher certification/licensure is tremendously important. Hiring non-certificated teachers may fill a gap in a classroom for a short amount of time but will not reduce the teacher shortages in STEM fields or other areas by creating career teachers.

Much research has been done on teacher preparation and the retention of teachers in their jobs. Simply asking teachers about their work may remain one of the best methods of finding out what we need to know. The six teachers in this small study stated appreciation for being asked about their first year of teaching. They expressed hope that their comments might affect positive change in getting more students to complete teacher education courses and start careers in education, especially in STEM fields.

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