

Editor's Perspective Article: Alternative Certification Teachers: Strategies for the Transition to a New Career

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Abstract

New teachers who are prepared to teach through alternative certification pathways may find the transition to a new career stressful and tumultuous. There are techniques that can be used to help make the transition easier on new teachers as they begin their new careers. This article explores several strategies for new teachers, which include approaching the new school year with a trusting and caring classroom approach, a sense of efficacy among teacher and student, early academic success, conceptual understanding, and developing intrinsic motivation and love of learning. Alternative certification teachers were asked about their own experiences in the classroom and provided feedback on some of things they have learned.

Keywords: alternative certification, new teachers

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New teachers who enter the teaching profession face unique challenges. Often teachers in alternative certification programs begin their teacher preparation course and field work in the summer before teaching their own classes as they transition to be the teacher of record. A common criticism of alternative certification programs is that the teachers are unprepared for the realities of the classroom with such brief preparation. However, in many programs there is infrastructure in place to support new teachers in alternative certification programs such as university supervisor observation and feedback (such as found in traditional student teaching programs), field work seminars, and mentor teacher support in the school. In my personal experience, new alternative certification teachers seek out practical advice from university faculty as they embark on their new careers. As a department chair and associate professor in a School of Education at a university with a large number of alternative certification teachers, I am frequently asked for advice and practical strategies as teachers enter their classrooms. In this article I will explicate the advice and strategies I have given to my new teachers.

One of the most important aspects of teaching that I emphasize for the new teachers is to create a caring trusting classroom community from the start of the year. Research indicates that creating a trusting learning environment is one of the most important things a teacher can do to be effective, particularly in urban teaching environments (Cousins-Cooper, 2000; Evans & Leonard, 2013; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Leonard & Evans, 2012). This can be accomplished by beginning the school year with the message that the teacher is present to help the students learn and develop, and consistently emphasizing the teacher's role as a support for all students. Part of establishing a caring classroom environment is to truly *listen* to students (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). Teachers should inquire about student interests outside of school and attempt to integrate those interests into the context of instruction such as contextualizing mathematics word problems around activities students enjoy. It is additionally important for teachers who come from different socioeconomic backgrounds from their students to take interest in student interests, backgrounds, and experiences, which can help build rapport with the students. Rightfully so, new teachers indicate one of the top concerns is classroom management (Cruickshank, Jenkins, & Metcalf, 2006; Veenman, 1984). Creating engaging lessons framed around a trusting caring classroom environment can go a long way in assisting teachers in their classroom management.

Teachers need to take particular caution in urban environments in which students have been conditioned to expect apathy and less than challenging work. Haberman (1991) referred to this as the "pedagogy of poverty" in which there is an implicit agreement between teachers and students that teachers will go easy on students in terms of academic expectations and students in turn will offer some level of compliance. If teachers raise expectations, some students will offer resistance. However, increased expectations can be implemented incrementally in order to transition from an environment of apathy to one of high academic expectations.

A research interest I have is teacher self-efficacy. It is possible that teacher self-efficacy is one of the most important variables in teacher success (Bandura, 1986; Ernest, 1989; Evans, 2010), possibly even more so than content and pedagogical knowledge. Teachers who believe they are good and effective instructors are better able to engage in deeper teaching for understanding. Just as teacher self-efficacy is important for good teaching, student self-efficacy is important for student success. Students need teachers who help them develop their self-confidence in their ability to learn well. Teachers can accomplish this through creating small success opportunities

for students who have encountered challenges in past success. For example, a low-weighted quiz or test that is not terribly difficult in the beginning of the school year could improve student self-efficacy. Clearly we want to hold high expectations for all students, but those expectations can be raised with increasing frequency of success. Authentic assessment opportunities may also create success scenarios for students.

It is important to approach teaching as not simply a collection of facts and content to memorize. Rather, teachers should approach education as a means of increasing critical thinking and developing deeper conceptual understanding. For example, in mathematics class it is not enough to memorize formulas and know how to apply them. Rather, students need to understand why the formulas work the way they do, and know when employing various algorithms and formulas are appropriate. Teachers should begin the year with an emphasis on conceptual understanding.

Finally, it is important to emphasize instilling intrinsic motivation for the students. Extrinsic rewards could inhibit intrinsic motivation (Kohn, 1994). It is important that teachers instill a love of learning in all students. A good method of doing this is to demonstrate by example. Teachers should share with students their own passion for learning and their own love of their content areas.

Strategies from New Alternative Certification Teachers

At the author's institution, 14 alternative certification second year special education teachers (nine females and five males) were asked the strategies they learned as new teachers to use in the classroom, how they create trusting and caring classroom communities, how they promote crucial thinking in the classroom, and how they motivate their students. Teachers indicated that the classroom management strategies were some of the best strategies they learned as new teachers, which is not surprising given that classroom management is a top concern for new teachers.

Teachers indicated that trust, respect, and honesty were key variables for creating a trusting and caring community in their classrooms. Making students feel comfortable was explicitly mentioned by three of the teachers. Two teachers mentioned modeling respect for the students.

Teachers indicated that they promoted critical thinking by utilizing extensive time on questioning and discussion. Of the 14 teachers, nine focused on questioning techniques. Teachers also said they used problem solving and evidence-based learning to promote critical thinking. One teacher mentioned using project-based learning and hands-on projects.

Teachers motivated their students through reward and praise for students. Of the 14 teachers, eight specifically mentioned rewards and seven specifically mentioned praise. It was somewhat surprising that no teachers mentioned intrinsic motivators.

Conclusion

New teachers in alternative certification programs undoubtedly face challenges. However, approaching the new school year with a trusting caring classroom approach, a sense of efficacy

among teacher and student, early academic success, conceptual understanding, and developing intrinsic motivation and love of learning can go a long way for new teachers. It is clear from the interaction with the teachers that in the time they had spent in the program, they had learned quite a few effective strategies that helped them reach their students from day to day.

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