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Teacher Education Through an Alternative Route

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As a participant in the Dorothy Danforth Compton Fellowship Program, Mary was able to leave her career in banking to pursue a teaching career. She was one of fifty mid-career changers who was selected to participate in the structured, year-long alternative certification program. After teaching for one month in a seventh grade classroom, Mary was ready to leave the teaching field. She was overwhelmed with the reality of inspiring and managing her students on a day-to-day basis. She believed that having a mentor assigned to her was a major factor in her deciding not to quit her first teaching job. Mary explained:

[Commentary article](#)

In the beginning my class was driving me nuts! I didn't know what to do. I had a hard time getting the students to settle down right at the beginning of the class and it just got worse as the period went on. I tried everything! It was only October but I was ready to call it quits. Teaching was a little more than I had bargained for. She [her mentor] came in and observed me teaching and gave me some immediate feedback. She pointed out to me that I didn't have a procedure in place for my students to follow as they entered the classroom and waited for me to start the class. She suggested that I put something on the board like a journal writing assignment or a brainteaser that the students could work on each day while they waited for me to finish taking attendance. It made a big difference with my classroom management! Our relationship was a major factor in me staying in teaching. Without my mentor, I know I would have quit!

Mary is still teaching five years later. She had a positive first year experience and believes that her training in the Compton Fellowship Program was invaluable. But if the statistics hold true, there is a nearly 1-in-2 chance that she will be doing something else in five years. Researchers agree that there is a severe teacher shortage for many schools across the nation due to increased student enrollments, reductions in class size, and accelerating retirements (Feistritzer, 2001; Archer 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1997). While this is a problem for school districts nationwide, the problem is most severe in urban school districts where principals report greater difficulty in hiring teachers than their rural or suburban counterparts (NCES, 1998).

To address the increasing teacher shortage, a growing number of states have responded by focusing more on alternative certification programs. Feistritzer reported in 2000 that

115 alternative certification programs exist in over 40 states. These programs allow individuals who typically (but not always) possess an undergraduate degree in a field other than education to participate in a shortened training and/or on-the-job learning experience that leads to full certification. McKibbin and Ray (1994) stated that the purpose of developing nontraditional alternative certification programs is not for replacement of the traditional certification programs, but for nontraditional certification to offer a way to expand the pool of qualified teachers with individuals who might not otherwise become teachers. Shoho and Martin (1999) reported that participants in nontraditional alternative programs are more likely to be older, a member of a minority group and male, who have had past experiences in other occupations. Nontraditional students tend to remain in their own communities, once certified, and have a better knowledge of the local culture and makeup of the community (Eifler & Potthoff, 1998). Haberman and others have argued that, particularly in urban areas, school officials should seek out older, second-career teachers of varied races and both genders whose life experiences make them better able to manage a classroom and to make a more mature commitment to teaching.

Since alternative routes to teaching have only become widespread in the last 10-15 years, definitions of what constitutes an alternative certification vary widely. Fiestritzer and Chester (2002) describe that:

The term 'alternative certification' historically has been used to refer to every avenue to becoming licensed to teach, from emergency certification to very sophisticated and well-designed programs that address the professional preparation needs of the growing populations of individuals who already have at least a bachelor's degree and considerable life experience and want to become teachers. (p.3)

Alternative certification programs vary greatly on many dimensions including scope, size, duration, and intensity. According to the Center for Teaching Quality, many programs do not currently provide the extensive mentoring by expert teachers and corresponding coursework in teaching and assessment strategies, as well as in child and adolescent psychology, that make other alternative certification programs successful in preparing teachers.

The literature on alternative certification programs has shown that these programs do help in recruiting a diverse teaching force, but controversy usually is centered on the perceived value of traditional teacher education. The idea of having an alternative certification program based on state standards is one way to ensure that the quality of teacher training is not jeopardized. Current research reveals that quality nontraditional alternative certification programs are not only helping with teacher shortages, but are producing quality teachers who know how students learn and are effective in their roles as teachers (Ducharme & Ducharme, 1998). The Compton Fellowship Program is among those that have initiated a vigorous program in teacher preparation that requires demonstration of knowledge and competency of the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) standards (see <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/pbl/pblintasc.htm>).

As alternative certification programs become more widespread, now is the time to examine the impact of these programs by talking to teachers who have successfully completed the programs. Rather than attempt to compare the effectiveness of the traditional route versus the alternative route of teacher preparation, the goal of this article is to describe an *alternative certification program* for urban middle-school teachers that leads to teacher *certification* and highlight critical components of the program that contributed to its success in recruiting, training and retaining quality teachers.

As the former director of the Compton Fellowship Program, I have in-depth knowledge about the program. When I left the position in 1997, I became interested in doing research on the impact of the program. I knew that I would filter the events and situations that took place through a lens which would influence my interpretation of the study. To minimize subjectivity, I conducted the study while incorporating safeguard procedures such as triangulation, member checks, peer debriefing, and verifying of data to establish trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Drawing on new teacher mentoring research, this article emphasizes the importance of quality mentoring in new teacher development. Here, I present a brief summary of the Compton Fellowship Program in an effort to demonstrate that alternative certification programs can be viable educational options for preparing teachers especially when mentoring is a major part of the program design.

One School District's Experience

The preparation, recruitment, and retention of teachers is an on-going problem. Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), located in the southeastern city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is no exception to the problem. Two very important areas, however, are considered when viewing the problem in MPS. First, attrition data shows that 50% of the new teachers (1-3 years of service) in MPS will leave the district within three to five years of being hired. When recruiting new teachers, MPS is focused on the preparation and selection of quality teachers who will make a long-term commitment to teaching in MPS. Second, hiring and retaining teachers of color is another on-going problem in MPS. Approximately 20% of MPS teaching staff are teachers of color, compared to approximately 80% students of color. This means a major part of the task of preparation and recruitment includes increasing the number of qualified teachers who reflect the student population in the city schools. Several partnership programs, which focus on preparation and recruitment of teachers of color, exist in MPS. Three of them are alternative certification programs: the Compton Fellowship Program, which has a focus on teachers of color for the middle school, the Metropolitan Milwaukee Teacher Education Program (MMTEP), which is geared towards paraprofessionals that are already working in MPS, and MTEC, which has a bilingual education and a special education focus. Of the three, MMTEP has been around for the longest and has research data to support the impact of the program. According to Haberman (1999), MMTEP is producing 78 percent minority teachers, 71 percent of whom are African American and of the MMTEP participants who have completed the program, 94 percent are still teaching in MPS. MMTEP, MTEC and the Compton Fellowship Program have three important features in common. They all focus on the urban context, utilize full time mentors, and report high retention rates of graduates. This article focuses on the Compton Fellowship Program.

The Background

The Compton Fellowship Program is a collaborative effort among MPS, Marquette University, Alverno College, and Lakeland College that was created in 1996 to specifically address the teacher shortage in MPS. The intended goal of the program was to recruit, prepare, and retain new middle school teachers of color in MPS. Interested candidates have to go through an extensive application process to enter the program. Once candidates are accepted into the program, they complete sixteen graduate hours of coursework that includes student teaching, and defend a portfolio that demonstrates competency in the performance-based standards established by the Wisconsin Standards for Teacher Development and Licensure and the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC). Participants are mentored during their internship year.

Upon successful completion of the program, participants are guaranteed a contract in MPS and recommended for grade 5-8 certification by one of the three participating

colleges. To date, the program has produced 228 new teachers of color. Of the 228 graduates, 191 (84%) have remained in Milwaukee's schools and embrace the challenge and view their new careers as high callings.

Critical Components of the Program

Interview data from an exploratory case study of the Compton Fellowship Program (Author, 2002) shed light on the critical components of the program. These include: a rigorous screening process, mentoring, training, supervision, a cohort model, and using standards as a guide for teachers' knowledge, disposition, and performance. Interview data are presented to highlight each component and its application in the field. Names of the participants have been changed to protect their identity.

Rigorous screening process

Entry into the Compton Fellowship Program includes a grade point average of 2.5, a completed application to the school district, an Urban Teacher Perceiver interview, transcripts that verify receipt of a bachelor's degree from an accredited university, three letters of recommendation and a personal statement about why the candidate wants to teach. As part of the selection process, potential candidates are required to provide information about their experiences with urban children. If candidates do not have this type of experience, they must spend fifteen hours in an urban school setting and document their observations and reflections. After a review of the application materials, a candidate may be contacted by Compton Fellowship staff to schedule a final interview. A criminal background investigation is automatically conducted upon receipt of the above materials.

Haberman (1995) contends that individuals need to be selected for the teaching profession on the basis of criteria other than (or in addition to) good grades and test scores. The Compton Fellowship Program places a great deal of emphasis on recruiting individual who have experience in urban settings because they believe that one of the most effective ways to provide urban schools with high-quality teachers is to focus recruitment upon individuals who already live and work in urban areas or who have previous experience to prepare them for the particular challenges of urban teaching.

Mentoring

The mentor component is by far the most critical component in the Compton Fellowship Program because the program has been able to utilize full time mentors to support the interns and maintain a ratio of seven or fewer interns per mentor. The mentor provides support on a daily basis and on-the-job coaching. The mentor in a sense is the "life support" to the intern. The mentor offers ideas, models instructional strategies, team teaches, works with the intern on lesson planning, provides resources, and engages in on-going problem solving with the intern.

All the mentors are recruited from a pool of MPS teachers who have been teaching for at least five years, have demonstrated successful teaching practices in their own classrooms, and have been highly recommended by their principals and/or the administrative staff at their school site. In particular, mentors are chosen who have demonstrated "star teacher" characteristics for urban students as described by Haberman (1995). Therefore, as instructional leaders and successful urban veteran teachers, the mentors can be professional lifelines to the Compton Fellows. An example of the instructional support is illustrated by one of the Fellows. A Milwaukee native, 33-year old Pat is still committed to teaching in the urban schools after seven years in the Milwaukee Public Schools. She had been advised by friends and family members to transfer to the

suburbs, pointing to the better starting pay and better working conditions. But Pat said that while it might be more challenging teaching in urban schools, it's also more gratifying. Pat earned her bachelor's degree in communication. She was working in campus ministry at a nearby university when she found out about the Compton Fellowship Program. She worked as an intern during the 1996-97 school year and was hired on as a teacher for the current year. She reflects on her decision:

As a second career changer, I didn't know much about teaching and was getting very frustrated. I knew a lot about community service and social justice issues but I didn't see how that could become a part of my teaching. My mentor in the program helped me to tap in to my talents from my previous profession and use them in my classroom. It wasn't long before she helped me to see that classrooms must provoke student to develop their democratic capacities: to question, to challenge, to make real decisions, and to collectively solve problems. I got rejuvenated when she made me start thinking about how scholastic learning could be linked to real world problems. Now, every year, I involve my students in service learning projects. I have figured out how to use my training in campus ministry to make learning experiences meaningful for my students. This is the work I was called to do.

It is not unusual that Pat had a difficult time her first year teaching. Research has shown that new teachers, regardless of how they are certified, encounter difficulties and frustrations during their induction years (Odell & Huling-Austin, 2000; Brock, 1990; Veenman, 1984; Lortie, 1975). Because of this, mentoring programs for new teachers have proliferated since the 1980s. Several researchers have found that mentoring helps novice teachers during the critical first year(s) of teaching (Odell & Huling-Austin, 2000; Ganser, 2000; Feiman-Nemser & Parker, 1993; Odell, 1990).

In general, research on mentoring has found that mentors can contribute to new teachers' development of resilience to survive the routines and the frustrations of teaching (King & Bey, 1995) and that mentors foster discovery, learning, creativity, and self evaluation while supporting the protégé's attempts to organize new values into his or her value system (Gray & Gray, 1985). Mentors also provide information on procedures, assistance with curriculum development and teaching skills, and help with becoming integrated into the profession and the school in which they work (Schaffer, Stringfield & Wolfe, 1992; Ganser, 1996). One study suggests that mentoring is responsible for relatively high classroom performance scores of teachers in alternative certification programs, compared to teachers from traditional certification programs who may not have a mentor during the period studied (Miller, McKenna, & McKenna, 1998). Therefore, alternative certification programs that include a strong mentoring component might provide the kind of on-site support new teachers need to develop their professional skills in an effective and efficient manner.

Minimally, mentors should be teachers who are successful in their own classrooms and can articulate their practice (Denmark & Podsen, 2000; Stansbury & Zimmerman, 2000). However, researchers agree that the role of the mentor requires specialized preparation and significant ongoing personal and time commitments (Odell & Huling-Austin, 2000). The Compton Fellowship mentors were successful in their own classrooms but a weakness of the program is that the mentors did not receive training prior to taking on the mentor role despite the complexity of the task. After becoming mentors, training was done on topics like cognitive coaching and dealing with difficult people but there was no formalized training program that was designed for mentor teachers.

Training

Tamicka, a 27-year-old with a social work degree, found herself applying to the Compton Fellowship Program after only two years in the social work field because in her words, "that just wasn't for me." Tamicka spent one year as a paraprofessional in an MPS classroom when she decided that she wanted to be a teacher. "I didn't want to make copies and change bulletin boards. I wanted to work with the kids." She believes the training she received three years ago in the Compton Fellowship Program prepared her to work in her MPS seventh grade classroom.

The overall design of the Compton Fellowship curriculum enables students to integrate content and pedagogical studies for classroom instruction. The courses take previous experience and training into consideration. Participants are brought up to date about schools and learning. The internship places program participants in schools with students and teachers with a mentored learning practical experience. The methods courses provide participants with multiple approaches to the teaching of content. Participants read such texts as *The First Days of School* (Wong & Wong, 2001), *Other People's Children* (Delpit, 1995), *Classroom Strategies for Interactive Learning* (Buehl, 1995) and other research based literature with a focus on urban education. Courses are offered in how to teach literacy, how to assess student work, and how to work with parents and families. It is the on-the-job field experience in an actual classroom that helped Tamicka connect teaching theory to practice. She was familiar with how schools work, but she still needed training in content and pedagogical skills. She needed to learn things like how to create and implement effective lesson plans. For example, she explained:

My classes were pretty boring. I knew how important it was to get through the social studies curriculum and I followed the teacher's guide every day. My mentor helped me to liven up my lessons and still cover the curriculum. One day she showed me how to create a game called Social Studies Jeopardy to review the chapter on Africa. My classes have never been the same since then. I still use that game after three years of teaching. More importantly, I learned how to look at the learning goals in the teacher's guide and find creative ways to reach them.

The program was designed with the urban context in mind; therefore, the professional training was to prepare teachers specifically for urban schools. Culturally relevant teaching was a major focus. Culturally relevant pedagogy has been described by a number of researchers as an effective means of meeting the academic and social needs of culturally diverse students (Howard, 2001; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Tracy, a graduate of the program, said that the program taught her how to teach beyond the traditional textbook curriculum by incorporating students' lives into the curriculum. For example, when she couldn't get her students to write in class, her mentor suggested that she encourage students to write about a personal interest. Tracy had the students write letters to the local television station about its cancellation of a popular television show. She reports that "the students had plenty to say, and I was able to teach them how to write a business letter."

Supervision

All of the higher education partners contributed two faculty members to serve as supervisors in the Compton Fellowship Program. The mentors also served as supervisors and some would argue that this is a weakness of the program. Considerable debate exists over adding assessment as a part of the mentoring role. Educators assume that support and assessment are incompatible functions, which should not be carried out in the same program, and certainly not by the same person (Feiman-Nemser, Schwillie, Carver, & Yusko, 1999). Some researchers say that it is often difficult for mentors to give constructive feedback to beginning teachers while maintaining a relationship as peer and

colleague (Denmark & Podsen, 2000; Halford, 1998).

Cohorts

The Compton Fellowship Program organizes its participants into cohorts so that participants could travel together along a shared path of professional learning. In addition, four to six participants are usually placed at the same school for their internship. This helped them form their own small learning community. One graduate said, "My mentor would schedule a weekly meeting with all of his teachers. This was a very positive experience because it allowed us to share together." The value of a cohort program over the isolated individual model holds enormous promise. Lortie (1975) pointed to the need for a shared ordeal in teacher education. Neesy, another graduate, stated that meeting with other new teachers helped her mentally. She explained:

Sometimes my mentor would set up a meeting with her group of mentees as well as the other new teachers in the building. It was really helpful to hear that I wasn't the only one having problems. That really helped me mentally. If that wasn't happening, I may have quit.

Howey and Zimpher (1999) state that teacher educators must create programs so that "teachers are socialized to continue to learn with and from one another" (p. 293). Relationships with mentors and other colleagues were critical during the internship year for the Compton Fellowship graduates. These relationships provided both personal and professional support.

Using standards as a guide for teachers' knowledge, disposition, and performance

AJ is a middle-aged father of two grown children, all MPS graduates, who came to teaching after working as a teacher's aide at MPS. He earned his education degree from UW-Milwaukee over seven years, taking night and weekend classes.

AJ, now a teacher in his fifth-year at a MPS school on the city's north side, said he was committed to teaching children in MPS and that the Compton Fellowship Program provided the kind of support that he needed. "I never felt like I was alone. I knew my mentor had my back. I wasn't afraid to try new things because I knew if my lesson failed or a strategy didn't work, my mentor would be right there to help me to reflect on the experience and keep things in perspective." Although AJ received his teaching certificate through an alternate route, he feels confident to teach in any district in the state. The performance measures used for teachers licensed in the Compton Fellowship Program are of the same rigor as those used in higher education programs; therefore, the quality of the teacher preparation was not compromised. At the end of the year, the participants are required to successfully defend a portfolio demonstrating their knowledge and competency of the INTASC standards. The portfolio demonstrates the participants' knowledge about teaching and learning, their dispositions, and their acquired skills. AJ described this experience:

My mentor really helped all of her fellows. She explained to us what the standards were and she gave us a template to show us how to design lesson plans that addressed them. It was A LOT of work creating lesson plans this way, but I tell you what, I could explain the goals of my lesson, the objective, the reason for the instructional strategy, and the assessment plan for the day quite easily. My mentor didn't just look to see if I wrote a lesson plan; she sat down with me and we talked about what I was doing and why I was doing it. Often times, she would ask me to videotape a lesson and then we would

walk through the tape together. My mentor was hard on me but this helped me so much! When it was time to pull my teaching portfolio together, I didn't have to scramble for the "perfect lesson plan." I had lots of lessons to use that would demonstrate my ability to create effective lessons and I had a videotape to prove that I could also implement them.

Critics are concerned that alternative certification programs are not as rigorous as traditional teacher preparation programs, but in some cases, alternative certification programs may improve teacher quality. Compton Fellowship participants are involved in a program of intensive supervision that consists of structured guidance and regular ongoing support from a full-time mentor. One program graduate said that many teachers in his building assumed that the "fast route" to teaching was equivalent to the "easy route" until they understood the portfolio process and the portfolio defense that he had to prepare for all year long. "When I show other teachers my portfolio, they can't believe all the work that I had to do to get my license."

Conclusion

The Compton Fellowship Program is both a means for getting increasing numbers of quality teachers in urban schools where they are greatly needed and a sensible approach for preparing teachers. The program has provided effective alternative certification education to individuals for seven years. The faculty members believe that participants developed invaluable skills that have helped them become highly qualified urban teachers. Traditional teacher preparation programs are able to prepare students in content knowledge and in various forms of instruction. The ultimate test that all beginning teachers encounter is when they are in the schools as the teachers of record, however. It is at this time that novice teachers must determine whether they demonstrate the skills needed to be successful in schools. Participants in the Compton Fellowship Program benefit from the program's focus on distinctive skills, knowledge, and experiences needed by teachers in urban environments. Whether considering a nontraditional alternative or a traditional teacher certification program, good programs provide intensive preparation for teacher candidates and extensive support and mentoring once the teacher candidate enters their novice years of teaching (Berry, Hoke, & Hirsch, 2004). The strong mentoring component in the Compton Fellowship Program is essential to the success in training and retaining teachers in Milwaukee.

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