

Why Teacher Certification?

By Hilda Heine, EdD

Most experts on teacher quality support the claim that teacher certification correlates positively with student achievement. For example, Darling-Hammond, in a 2000 *Education Policy Analysis Archives* article titled “Teacher Quality and Student Achievement,” states that extant data supports this claim. Many others, including Walsh in a 2002 *Education Next* article titled “Positive Spin,” dispute the evidence for the value of certification claiming the evidence is equivocal at best.

While findings may be inconclusive about the role of certification, they are conclusive about certain teacher qualities and characteristics that seem to make a difference in student achievement. Walsh cites research by Ferguson showing that teachers’ verbal ability had a very large effect on student achievement. Research also suggests that students of teachers with strong content knowledge learn more than students of teachers with weak content knowledge. The research is particularly compelling in subjects such as mathematics, and the role of teacher certification is equally compelling in assuring that such skills are taught. The role of certification requirements in motivating and pushing teachers toward acquiring necessary competencies in teaching subjects such as language arts and mathematics cannot be overstated.

Teacher Certification and Licensure

Teacher certification and licensing systems exist to assure the public that a minimum level of competency has been achieved by practicing teachers, thereby ensuring that unqualified people are not practicing the profession. In other words, certification is

designed to protect the public from harm. The goal of licensing tests is to set a minimum level of competency, allegedly eliminating poor teachers from schools and, in essence, guaranteeing that teachers who pass teacher exams are of high quality.

Those who defend the process of teacher certification assert that it is an essential component of the development and maintenance of the teaching profession. Among many characteristics, a profession is defined as possessing a distinct body of knowledge and exercising control over the education and licensing of its members.

Wise, in a 1994 article in *Action in Teacher Education* titled “The Coming Revolution in Teacher Licensure,” notes that school systems generally use two methods of controlling entry into the teaching profession: professional and popular control. Professional control is the primary means of promoting the teaching profession within the economic sector. In specifying standards for certification and through other political mechanisms, the profession controls the quality of teachers who enter the profession. On the other hand, popular control allows public demand to control who is placed in the classrooms, with less concern for their qualifications. Emergency certificates to teach when there are shortages of teachers are an example of popular control.

On-the-Job Training and Teacher Certification

Howey and Zimpher, in their 1994 article in *The Educational Forum* titled “Nontraditional Contexts for Learning to Teach,” and Darling-Hammond, have found that on-the-job training is not an adequate way to provide the knowledge and skills required for teachers. Principals and veteran teachers who could serve in mentoring roles generally do not have the

required skills, training, or time to provide novices with quality on-the-job training and supervision. Articulating the prevailing view, Hawley, in a 1992 *Peabody Journal of Education* article called “The Theory and Practice of Alternative Certification,” suggests that there is a body of subject-matter content and subject-matter method, as well as skills and pedagogical knowledge, that needs to be learned prior to teaching.

Certification and Competency Testing

There is conflict in the profession about what is necessary for teachers to know in order for them to be effective. This presents a challenge for teacher certification exams; nevertheless, as shown by Laczko-Kerr and Berliner, in a 2002 article in *Education Policy Analysis Archives* titled “The Effectiveness of ‘Teach for America’ and other Under-Certified Teachers on Student Academic Achievement,” more states are moving toward requiring such exams that focus on measuring basic skills, content, and pedagogical knowledge.

Most current definitions of teacher competence examine teaching in the light of student learning, a relatively new concept (see Mitchell, Robinson, Plake, & Knowles, *Testing Teacher Candidates*, 2001). It is probably fair to say that many aspects of teaching cannot be assessed by using multiple choice or essay exams, and if performance tests were used, such testing would be prohibitively expensive.

Certified Teachers and Student Achievement

An important component of the teacher certification process is teacher preparation programs. In turn, the

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most important measure of the success of teacher preparation programs is the academic success of the students. Leibbrand, in a 2000 article in *Quality Teaching* titled “High Quality Routes to Teaching,” cited several studies that showed positive impact of fully licensed teachers on student outcomes.

A review of research suggests that there is sufficient evidence to conclude that: (a) subject-matter knowledge is important (see Golhaber & Brewer’s 1996 article “Evaluating the Effect of Teacher Degree Level on Educational Performance” in *Developments in School Finance*; and Monk & King’s chapter, “Multi-Level Teacher Resource Effects on Pupil Performance in Secondary Mathematics and Science,” in R. G. Eherenberg [Ed.], *Choices and Consequences*, 1994) but not a sufficient factor in a certified teacher’s success, particularly with mathematics and science students in the upper grades; (b) according to Ferguson and Womack’s 1993 *Journal of Teacher Education* article “The Impact of Subject Matter and Education Coursework on Teaching Performance,” teachers who have training in pedagogy outperform teachers without such training; and (c) according to Laczko-Kerr and Berliner, traditionally certified teachers teaching in their area of certification outperform both certified teachers teaching out-of-field and alternatively certified teachers, particularly with children who are most at risk of school failure and dropping out.

Traditional Teacher Certification Model

Although state certification systems vary from state to state, they generally share a number of common elements. Most states now require teachers to successfully complete a 4- or 5-year “certified” or state-approved teacher education program that teaches basic skills and pedagogical knowledge. Many have also adopted nationally developed standards for teachers; most states mandate state tests that certify teachers’ competency in the subject matter to be taught.

Alternative Certification Program

In the U.S., the primary purpose of alternative certification is to provide a pathway for people to enter the teaching profession without following the conventional undergraduate 4-year path. Pathways may be different, but alternative certification still involves issuance of teaching licenses to individuals who have not completed a traditional college or university teacher education program.

Laczko-Kerr and Berliner cited a 1999 study by Kanstrom and Finn that allegedly found that alternative teacher certification attracts better quality candidates who are more academically able than those who attend traditional certification programs. They also cited a 1991 study by Zumwalt that concluded that teachers of alternative certification programs, such as Teach for America, are more willing to work in rural or urban poor

districts than traditionally trained teachers.

On the other hand, opponents of alternative teacher certification programs cite research that debunks the belief that subject-matter knowledge is more important than education-related coursework (see Monk and King and Darling-Hammond’s 2002 article in *Educational Policy Analysis Archives*, “The Research and Rhetoric on Teacher Certification”).

Emergency Certification

Emergency certificates are typically issued to prospective teachers who have met some, but not all, of the requirements for state certification. Nationally, minimum requirements are often a bachelor’s degree and a passing score on a certification exam. Emergency certificates are issued for a limited time period, usually 1 or 2 years. According to Laczko-Kerr and Berliner, emergency-certified teachers are more likely to be hired in already low-performing schools, schools that serve low socioeconomic status (SES) students, schools in rural and inner city areas, and for positions that are hard to fill.

Overall, the research suggests that emergency-certified teachers are probably the least prepared to do well. Leaders of professional teacher organizations staunchly oppose emergency credentialing, claiming that it keeps teaching a quasi-profession, a low-level job one can “fall back on” if better employment is not available.

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