

Chapter 6

The Experience of Learning in an Alternative Certification Program

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes an alternative teacher certification program to achieve two objectives. The first is to highlight the connection to experiential learning. This connection to experiential learning that underscores the strength of a program in which “work” is essential to gaining true knowledge. The second objective is to refute the negative perception that alternative teacher certification programs may carry due to the negative connotations associated with such programs. These objectives will be accomplished by describing the State University of New York (SUNY) Empire State College’s Master of Arts in Teaching Program and demonstrating that it meets the high standards expected from any teacher preparation program. It is the author’s hope that stakeholders with an investment in education and in teacher preparation, in particular, will not make unfounded assumptions about alternative preparations and instead understand that there are high quality alternative teacher certification programs that support the profession of teaching.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Alternative certification programs have been in existence for several years across the United States, yet they are still unknown to many or they are subject to sweeping negative generalizations. In part due to addressing teacher shortages, state boards beginning in the 1980s agreed to allow new pathways to certification that differed from the traditional route called “alternative” pathways to teacher certification. The National Association for Alternative Certification (NAAC) describes alternative routes to certification as “any other than traditional undergraduate degree-granting programs.” Retrieved from <http://alternativecertification.org/>. As this definition is rather broad, the New York State Department of Education further explains alternative pathways as those that “feature an accelerated introductory component, fol-

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lowed by paid employment, with extensive mentoring, coursework and other supports from the college and the school district.” Retrieved from <http://www.highered.nysed.gov/tcert/certificate/teachalt.html>. New York State also makes it clear that schools and institutions of higher education are in partnership to help develop the teacher in a clinical manner. This partnership will be discussed later in this chapter, but to summarize, both institutions are responsible for joint mentoring of new teacher candidates.

There are two key motivating factors in the creation of alternative pathways to teacher certification. As noted above, the first is to address critical teacher shortages, often in high-needs areas. The second is to provide a more seamless avenue to the profession for those who are not readily able to divorce themselves of income in order to pursue a traditional pathway that includes at least a semester of student teaching. Rosenberg and Sindelear (2005) importantly add that alternative pathways have “opened doors to teaching for persons from other careers, from the military, from liberal arts colleges, former teachers who want to upgrade their credentials and get back into teaching and for people who trained to teach years ago but never did” (p. 118). This speaks to the significant contribution alternative pathways offer for diversifying the teaching profession, which is an often under-achieved, yet vital objective in this field.

Additional reasons for developing alternative certification programs include: “the shift of subject matter to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; recognized differentiated needs of students of academic, linguistic, economic and cultural diversity; and specified geographically determined areas of need” (Kaplan, 2012, p. 37).

For all of these reasons, over the last few decades, many alternative certification programs have arisen, including Troops to Teachers, Teach for America, and the largest in the country, the New York City Teaching Fellows. This latter program was created in 2000 to address serious teacher shortages in New York City, obviously one of the most diverse and complex districts in the country. The Fellow’s strategy focuses on actively recruiting people with varying experiences and diverse backgrounds with whom New York City’s diverse population have a better chance to connect. Today, those who have successfully completed the Teaching Fellows program comprise 12% of all New York City Teachers, 20% of all science teachers, 24% of all math teachers and 22% of all special education teachers in the city. Retrieved from: <http://www.nycteachingfellows.org/purpose/mission.asp>.

The aforementioned reasons also contributed to SUNY Empire State College’s (ESC) incentive to develop an alternative certification program.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

Experiential Learning as the Basis for New Learning

Michael Apple (2000) asks the question, “whose knowledge is most worth? (p.180). He goes on to suggest, rightly, that knowledge is socially constructed. Empire State College’s alternative certification program was developed for many of the reasons described above, but its origin was also deeply informed by Apple’s question and by its commitment to fostering this emphasis on the social construction of knowledge, that is, on the knowledge of pedagogical practice gained in a clinical setting through experiential learning. This chapter explores what the program entails and its relationship to experiential learning. In their piece *Experiential Learning Revised*, Herman and Mandell (2015) state that “at the simplest level, our experiential learning is little more than paying attention. At its most sophisticated, these complex but coherent experiences are the beginnings of science, worship and art” (p.4). For the

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