

Editor's Perspective Article: Improving Alternative Certification Teachers' Experiences by Developing "Soft Skills" for the Classroom

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Abstract

This issue's Editor's Perspective article focuses on what the editor has learned from coordinating an experiential learning program at his university complemented through his decade-long work with preparing alternative certification teachers. The focus is on improving teachers' experiences through mentoring and developing soft skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, communications, and socioemotional intelligence. The editor has learned there is indeed overlap between an experiential learning program for undergraduate students and a graduate level alternative certification program.

Keywords: alternative certification, mentoring, experiential learning, problem solving, critical thinking, communications, socioemotional intelligence

The views expressed in this article are the editor's views and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Association for Alternative Certification.

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I have been preparing teachers in alternative certification programs at my university for over a decade now and have written numerous articles and studies on teacher success in alternative certification programs by focusing on variables such as content knowledge, pedagogical skills, self-efficacy, teacher beliefs and attitudes, and cultural responsiveness. Three years ago, I took on a new role at my university coordinating a program we call the Pace Path, which combines purposeful planning, academic excellence, coaching and mentoring, and experiential learning to create transformative experiences for our undergraduate students (Pace Path, 2017). The Pace Path begins in the first semester of college in an introductory orientation class in which students develop a four-year plan with their advisor/instructor's guidance. The plan is intended to be flexible and change with the students as they develop throughout their college years. The Pace Path continues as students learn study habits for academic success and receive coaching and mentoring from various sources but increasingly through the growing student-alumni mentoring program, which matches undergraduate students with alumni mentors who provide guidance for the students. The highlight of the Pace Path is the focus on experiential learning, which takes the form of student-faculty research, internships/cooperative education, service learning, exploring culture (e.g., study abroad), and/or student club/organization participation or leadership. Through the process of planning, academics, coaching and mentoring, and experiential learning students learn important "soft skills" such as critical and creative thinking, problem solving, communications, collaboration, leadership, cultural appreciation, resource management, and improving socioemotional intelligence.

Since the Pace Path only applied to undergraduate students, and I was responsible for the program for all Schools/Colleges at the university, this complemented the seemingly very different work I conducted with the graduate students in the alternative certification program in my School of Education. Over the last three years, I have split my professional life between coordinating the Pace Path and my faculty role in the School of Education with a large focus on preparing alternative certification teachers through the New York City Teaching Fellows (NYCTF) program. NYCTF is one of the country's largest alternative certification programs and has over 9,000 Fellows who teach in high-need subject areas in the schools that need them most (NYCTF, 2017a). They comprise 12% of New York City teachers and more than 20% of New York City mathematics, science, and special education teachers (NYCTF, 2017b). The NYCTF program began in 2000 and Fellows teach in 80% of New York's 1,800 public schools (NYCTF, 2017c).

As a partnering university to the NYCTF program, my university welcomes new Fellows to our campus in June, and the Fellows begin their graduate coursework along with summer fieldwork in order to begin teaching the following September. Fellows continue their master degree coursework while teaching over the next two years. They receive a provisional certification until reaching initial certification upon completion of the master degree program and New York State certification requirements, which includes successfully passing teacher certification examinations. During the time I have worked with the Fellows I have conducted numerous studies on content knowledge, pedagogical skills, self-efficacy, teacher beliefs and attitudes, and cultural responsiveness. I have been interested in understanding the important variables for effective and successful teaching.

One important finding has been the importance of developing trust and rapport among the students the Fellows teach. I found this to be one of the more intriguing and career-changing findings in my time as a professor of education. Imagine we have two teachers, Teacher A and Teacher B. Teacher A has a very strong academic background and a solid grasp on educational research and theory. Teacher A knows the works of Vygotsky, Piaget, and Dewey very well, and Teacher A understands how children develop and learn. Teacher A's pedagogical skills are very strong. Teacher B struggled with coursework in college (and elementary and high school as well). Teacher B does not have a strong understanding of educational research, theory, and pedagogical skills. However, Teacher B understands how to connect with people. Students simply love Teacher B and they know Teacher B has their interests as a top priority. Teacher A does not really like young people all that much even though Teacher A choose to be a teacher. Teacher A has trouble connecting with students and finds it challenging to communicate with them. While the students believe Teacher A is very knowledgeable and accomplished, they do not have much respect for Teacher A. They find Teacher A unnecessarily difficult toward them, and often think Teacher A really does not prefer to be a teacher. Who do you think will have more success with the students? Interestingly, it is likely Teacher B. I certainly do not wish to imply that content knowledge and pedagogy are unimportant. They absolutely are. However, content knowledge and pedagogical skills are not the only variables to consider for teaching success and may not even be the most important variables in every situation. Lessons such as this one have been critical to my own development as a professor of education.

After splitting my professional life between the Pace Path and School of Education for the last three years, I began to think about what lessons I can learn from each half of my professional life that would inform the work I do on the other half of my professional life. I have been giving considerable thought to how the work on the Pace Path could help me better prepare alternative certification teachers in a graduate degree program at my university. An immediate connection I see is the focus on experiential learning and mentoring within alternative certification programs. Alternative certification candidates already engage every day in experiential learning in the classroom and often have access to mentors in their programs such as university faculty, staff, field supervisors, along with teachers and principals at their schools. In some programs, staff through the partnering organization can serve as mentors. I have considered that more formalized mentoring experiences in alternative certification programs could be beneficial for new teachers.

My recent thoughts have been focused on the development of the softer skills, such as problem solving, critical thinking, communications, and socioemotional intelligence, for alternative certification teachers. There is no doubt that I attempt to develop problem solving and critical thinking in the context of the content I teach. My area is mathematics education, and for many years I have emphasized teaching mathematics from a problem solving approach and often employ George Polya's methods of problem solving: 1) Understand the problem, 2) Make a plan, 3) Carry out the plan, and 4) Look back (Polya, 1945). However, recently I have been interested in how teachers problem solve and critically think in their own classrooms. For example, if most of the class is having difficulty understanding a complicated concept, it is not sufficient for the teacher to continue lecturing on the topic and perhaps finding a few different ways to explicate the same thing. The teacher needs to be more creative in solving this problem and may find that exposing the students to a real-life scenario related to the concept would give students a better understanding through experiencing the concept in the real world.

Communications and socioemotional intelligence are important for teachers in a similar manner that trust and rapport are essential, as explained through my earlier research and sample scenario. I have been thinking about how we help new teachers develop their communication style and socioemotional intelligence as it relates not only to interacting with their students, but also their teacher colleagues and principal. I have encountered teachers who have struggled in their relationships with their students, colleagues, and principals. In some cases, I have been able to offer advice that helped improve those relationships. A book that I have been promoting among my new teachers is Dale Carnegie's (1936) *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. In this classic but still relevant book, Carnegie uses simple psychology in order to make people amenable toward the individual. He emphasizes giving compliments over criticism, calling people by their names, smiling often, being polite and respectful, talking about the interests of others with them, avoiding an argument before it begins, listening more attentively, and admitting one's own mistakes. Carnegie recommends a very useful phrase that can be used during a disagreement that is paraphrased as, "I understand, and I would feel the same way you feel if I were you." This statement is a tautology because if I were the other person, naturally, I would feel the way that person feels right now.

A technique that might be particularly useful for teachers is to use the "sandwich" technique while interacting with students, parents, or colleagues. The sandwich technique begins with a compliment, then addresses the concern that needs to be changed, and finishes with a compliment. Carnegie cautions us to be sure to use "and" instead of "but" at the center of the sandwich because most people know what "but" means when it comes after a compliment. For example, "I really enjoy and appreciate your contributions in this class, but... you did not do so well on the last test." Instead, we might use something such as, "I really enjoy and appreciate your contributions in this class, and I wanted to chat about your last test and how we can improve that score together." We finish with a statement such as, "I'm very glad we had this conversation and look forward to our next class together." It is even better if the teacher can be specific as to why he or she enjoys and appreciates the student's contributions because specific praise would be more genuine.

I am finding that in the literature I have been reviewing for the Pace Path on skills employers want for graduates coming out of bachelor degree programs in all fields, the same skills applied to the classroom by new teachers would be just as beneficial. It is certainly satisfying when two seemingly very different aspects of one's life can come together in an unexpected manner. This is something I will continue to explore with both my undergraduate students and my alternative certification graduate students.

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