How Prepared Are Alternatively Licensed Special Educators?
An Investigation of University, Local Education Agency, and Traditional Preparation

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the reported preparedness of special educators participating in an alternative licensure program at a large university in the southeast while teaching in local area schools. Responses from 76 participants indicated relatively higher (M = 3.54 on a 1-4 scale) levels of preparedness by the university compared to somewhat lower levels of preparedness by their local education agencies (M = 3.12) and as compared to peers participating in the university's traditional preparation program (M = 3.08). A t test indicated participants rated their overall experience at the university significantly higher than they rated their overall experience in their respective local education agencies. The majority of participants (79%) indicated they planned to stay in the field until retirement. Neither level of preparedness or time of year participants were hired correlated significantly with length of time participants indicated they intended to stay in the field. Results underscore the importance of quality ongoing mentoring programs in the schools and highlight the importance of the role of the university in alternative licensure programs.

Within the field of special education, the number of fully certified teachers falls short of the number of teachers needed nationwide (Boe & Cook, 2006; Rosenberg, Boyer, Sindelar, & Misra, 2007). Although many areas of education are experiencing such shortages, the lack of teachers certified as special educators is of critical concern (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2004; Brownell, Sindelar, Bishop, Langley, & Seo, 2002; deBettencourt & Howard, 2004; McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004; Pipho, 1998). These shortages are due primarily to inadequate numbers of teachers entering the field of special education, greater numbers of students qualifying for special education services, and higher teacher attrition rates within the field (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2004; deBettencourt & Howard, 2004). In response to this national teacher shortage, the U.S. Department of Education's No Child Left Behind Act (2001) encourages the formation of alternative routes to teacher certification to promote quick entry into the profession. A large number of alternative route licensure programs have been approved by the U.S. Department of Education in order to rapidly increase the number of teachers in classrooms (Rosenberg et al., 2007). Increasingly, the alternative route for licensure is used to meet the need for more teachers in the field of special education.

With alternative route (AR) licensure programs, teachers typically begin working in a classroom while concurrently receiving mentoring and participating in teacher preparation coursework or other experiences, as opposed to completing traditional teacher preparation programs before assuming the responsibilities as the teacher of record (Nagy & Wang, 2007). Although most AR programs require teacher candidates to pass certification or licensure exams to be considered highly qualified, the teachers typically have altered, shortened, or waived coursework in educational philosophy, pedagogy, and practice teaching experiences (Rosenberg et al., 2007). Nagy and Wang reported that 48 states and the District of Columbia have created AR certification programs that recruit individuals with college degrees and work experience who do not have prior training in teaching. Many of these AR programs have been implemented through higher education institutes, which have been key contributors for designing and delivering all or parts of the programs (Judge, Bell, & Cihak, 2009). The widespread implementation of AR programs helps meet the demands of special education teachers, yet variations in program implementation are likely to produce educators with varying knowledge and skill levels. Most published research suggests that preparation in these AR programs is effective when the program is organized, provides substantial supervision in the classroom, and requires considerable time and effort (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005). However, many AR prepared teachers are unfamiliar with pedagogy, instructional strategies, classroom management skills, and social and academic challenges faced by students, which makes their transitions to the classroom much more difficult than for teachers who are prepared through traditional programs (Nagy & Wang).

AR prepared teachers need continued support as they move toward becoming highly qualified teachers. Ideally, extensive and efficient support from principals and mentors in the local education agency (LEA) would ease the burden of their transition, yet many school administrators are not prepared to support these new AR teachers (Nagy & Wang, 2007). Research considering the amount of support provided to the AR teachers is sparse. Rosenberg and Sindelar (2005) found only ten studies that addressed preparation of special educators in alternative routes to certification. Within the small body of literature, little information was available on the amount of supervisory and mentor support that AR prepared teachers received. As many states are offering alternative routes to certification, more research is needed to evaluate how the teachers are prepared and supported as they enter the classroom.

The amount of training and support a teacher receives can make an impact on his or her decision to stay in the teaching profession (Nagy & Wang, 2007). Teachers' decisions to stay or leave the profession have direct implications for a continuing shortage of special educators across the nation. Nagy and Wang found that the time of year that a teacher was hired could make a difference in AR teachers' retention. Those who were hired in the summer, when in-service or preparation programs were likely available, were more likely to stay, as compared to those teachers who were hired during the school year. The retention of special education teachers is an area of concern in the field (deBettencourt & Howard, 2004; Nagy & Wang). Although some research (deBettencourt & Howard; Klagholz, 2000) suggests that AR teachers are likely to remain in the teaching

profession as long as traditionally prepared peers, other research suggests that AR teachers are more likely to leave the field (Banks & Necco, 1987; Berry, 2001; deBettencourt & Howard; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Nagy & Wang). Without clear evidence as to whether or not the AR programs are producing teachers who stay in the field, the true success of AR programs cannot be measured.

Rosenberg and Sindelar (2005) summarized, "If the existing literature proves anything, it is that no two programs are alike and not all programs are effective" (p. 124). Research in the area of alternate routes to teacher certification is crucial to establish best practices in the creation and implementation of such programs. The purpose of this study was to examine the training and preparation of students who had participated in a large southeastern university's alternative licensure program. Specific research questions that guided this study were:

- To what extent do participants in a university-based alternative licensure program believe the university prepared them for being a special educator?

- To what extent do these same participants believe their LEA prepared them for being a special educator?

- Is there a difference in participants' ratings of preparation by the university as compared to preparation by the LEA?

- How do AR participants' ratings of level of preparedness compare with those of students participating in the traditional teacher preparation program at the same university?

- How likely are alternatively licensed teachers to report they intend to remain in the field of special education and is length of intention to remain related to level of preparedness or time of year hired?

- What is the nature and frequency of LEA-based mentoring and administrative support for these alternatively licensed teachers?

Methods

Participants

Seventy-six students who participated in special education alternative licensure preparation at a publicly funded university in the southeastern part of the United States from 2005 to 2008 participated in this survey. All of the participants were working on either initial (alternative) licensure in special education (80.30%) or adding an endorsement to an existing license (19.70%) in special education. Because they were all new to the field of special education and participated in summer courses blocked for quick entry into the field,

they are collapsed into one group and referred to as AR teachers throughout the rest of this paper. Of the respondents, 30 were male (39.50%) and 46 were female (60.50%). Their ages ranged from 22 to 61 years, with a mean of 35.67 years (SD = 10.40). Sixty-eight (89.50%) of those who responded were White, seven (9.20%) were African American, and one (1.30%) was Hispanic. On average, participants had taught for 2.68 years (SD = 2.69, range = 0 – 22 years). Sixty-five respondents had worked or were working towards licensure in K-12 mild-moderate special education; 21 students received or planned to receive licensure in K-12 moderate-severe special education; and three students had or expected licensure in early childhood special education. The number of respondents teaching in rural settings was 40 (54.10%), in suburban settings was 8 (10.80%), and in urban settings was 20 (27.00%). Six respondents reported that they were located in "Other" settings, which included alternative schools, and one respondent was unemployed at the time. Participants came from 21 different school districts (17 public school districts and 4 private, parochial, or alternative schools). At the time, 62% of the respondents were still working for the same district that recommended them for the alternative licensure program. To address the fourth research question which dealt with comparing perceived preparation between alternatively licensed teachers and teachers prepared in the traditional program at the same university, a group of 12 intern students who participated in the same university's traditional teacher preparation program was used. During the 2005-06, 2006-07, and 2007-08 academic years, 27 students completed the internship associated with the traditional program; 26 were female, one was male and all were White. Follow-up feedback was available from 12 interns for an overall return rate of approximately 44%.

Procedure

Participants were identified by obtaining the names and email addresses (when available) of 130 students who had been enrolled in an alternative special education licensure program at the university since 2005. One hundred-twenty students for which current contact information was available were sent a survey via e-mail that included information explaining the purpose of the study, a link to the online survey, and a password so that they could complete the survey. Follow-up emails were sent to those not responding after three weeks. Identification numbers of participants who completed surveys were entered into a drawing for a gift certificate of $50 to encourage a timely response. Of the 120 surveys that were sent, 76 were returned, representing a 63.33% conditional response rate. Two respondents stopped the survey before completing it, and two others timed-out of the survey; hence, only the portion of the survey that they completed was used for this research. For comparison, data from the interns who completed the traditional program during the same time period were used. Responses from these 12 interns on the 18-item scale described below allowed for comparisons in perceptions of preparation between traditionally and alternatively prepared teachers. Data from the traditional program are collected as part of the university's follow-up process for students who complete an internship. These data were available only in group form; therefore, only descriptive comparisons can be made.

Types of Programs

The university's traditional route into special education licensure is a five-year program based on the Holmes model (Gollnick & Kunkel, 1990) with a fifth year internship and coordinated coursework. Students complete arts and sciences undergraduate coursework until admission during the spring of the junior year when they take an introductory special education/diverse learners course. Education foundations (e.g., educational psychology, instructional technology, children's literature) and elementary and special education methods and practica are completed the senior year, culminating in an undergraduate degree in special education (K-12 mild/moderate and K-12 moderate/severe) followed by a year-long internship. A minimum of 12 additional credits must be taken to earn the MS degree. Many students in the traditional program simultaneously complete coursework and practica for licensure in elementary (K-6) education and early childhood special education.

The state-approved alterative route includes the same foundations courses that are taken by students in the traditional program. These courses are taken over a summer or after school during the school year, depending on when the participant enrolls. Similar to the "high coursework" alternative certification programs in the U.S. Department of Education study, *An Evaluation of Teachers Trained Through Different Routes to Certification* (Constantine et al., 2009), this program requires approximately the same number of courses as the traditional program. Following the completion of foundations coursework, participants enroll in one or two intensive 10-week summer institutes (one focusing on mild/moderate disabilities and one on moderate/severe disabilities). State policy on alternative licensure stipulates that districts may hire unlicensed, nonteacher college graduates directly into teaching positions. Participants must partner with a university to develop a plan of study but do not have to complete any coursework prior to being placed in the classroom. State policy stipulates that the LEAs provide significant mentoring and on-the-job support for these teachers and set timelines for completion of coursework and passing of Praxis exams (in foundations, elementary, and special education). In general, participants have about two years to complete their coursework. Consequently, most participants take some coursework in the evenings while teaching in order to fulfill licensure requirements.

Instrumentation

A 96-item questionnaire focusing on alternatively licensed teachers' preparation and experience in the schools was designed for data collection. Development of the survey was based on a combination of sources, including items used in previous surveys cited in the literature (deBettencourt & Howard, 2004; Nagy & Wang, 2007; Rosenberg et al., 2007; Sindelar, Daunic, & Rennells, 2004), the university's follow up survey of teacher education interns the year after completion of year-long internship, and the Council for Exceptional Children's Knowledge and Skill Base for All Entry-Level Special Education Teachers (Council for Exceptional Children, 2003). The questionnaire includes 29 demographic items, including age, gender, ethnicity, undergraduate and/or graduate majors, type of

certification sought, and other information related to type and location of employment and licensure. The following 36 items consist of two parallel sets of 18 items designed to assess level of preparedness by the university and LEA respectively. These 18 items are taken from the university's follow up assessment of interns in the traditional program based on the Tennessee licensure standards and the Interstate New Teacher Assessment Support Consortium (INTASC) standards. Internal consistency reliability estimates were calculated for the two parallel 18-item university and LEA scales. As noted, these items are identical to the items used in the university's follow up assessment of interns in the traditional program, allowing for comparisons between this sample of alternatively licensed educators and interns in the traditional program. Though self-report measures have some noted limitations, Ray (2003) indicates self-report "offers an historically important way of tapping into how people think or feel about a certain topic" (p. 291). To ensure reliability, internal consistency reliability (alpha coefficients) was assessed. Internal consistency reliability was strong (.95 for the 18-item university scale and .98 for the LEA scale). The procedures used in this study were consistent with other studies examining beginning teachers' perceptions. Corbell, Reiman, and Nietfeld (2008) similarly utilized alpha coefficients to examine the internal consistency reliability of an instrument measuring perceived success and contributing factors of beginning teachers across grade levels and areas of specialty. They used a review of the literature, in part, to examine the content validity of their instrument. Similarly, in this study, a review of the literature was used in the development of the instrument to ensure that the items were consistent with those in other studies, which utilized self-report to examine the perceptions of beginning teachers.

Finally, 31 additional questions addressed mentoring. However, if the teacher was not assigned a mentor, he or she did not complete the questions regarding the mentor; the survey was designed to include or omit questions based on the teachers' responses. Questions from these various sources were compiled and analyzed for completeness and redundancy by a five-person team that included four professors in special education and one graduate assistant.

Results

Data presented in Table 1 address the first three research questions; Table 1 displays the means and standard deviations of the respondents' ratings on the 18 items assessing their experiences at the university and in their LEA. Respondents were instructed to rank the degree of preparation as *poor* (1), *fair* (2), *good* (3), or *very good* (4). Generally, participants in this study reported that the university prepared them well for becoming a special educator, with mean responses for each question ranging from 3.18 (*SD* = .81) to 3.54 (*SD* = .53). Participants were asked to rank their overall preparedness by the university; the mean for this item was 3.54 (*SD* = .53). Table 1 displays the means and standard deviations for the respondents' reflections on their experiences with their LEA using the same ranking scale that was used to rank the university. Participants' mean responses to the 18 questions ranged from 2.90 (*SD* = .99) to 3.15 (*SD* = .82). The mean for overall preparation from the LEA was 3.12 (*SD* = .78). Respondents' mean rating for

overall preparation by the university was significantly higher than overall preparation by the LEA [$t(67) = 55.07$, $p < .001$].

Table 1
Participants' Ratings of Preparation from the University and Local Educational Agencies

	University			LEA			
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	Diff
Establish appropriate instructional goals and objectives	69	3.35	.72	68	3.04	.80	.31
Plan instruction and student evaluation based on an in-depth knowledge of the content, student needs	69	3.30	.75	68	3.03	.83	.27
Adapt instructional opportunities for diverse learners	69	3.46	.70	68	3.00	.88	.46
Content knowledge in area of licensure	69	3.43	.76	68	2.93	.82	.50
Deep understanding of central concepts, assumptions, structures, and pedagogy of the content area	69	3.38	.67	68	2.96	.89	.42
Use of research based classroom strategies grounded in higher order thinking, problem solving, and real world connections	69	3.39	.71	68	3.01	.89	.38
Use of appropriate evaluations and assessments to determine student mastery of content and to make instructional decisions	69	3.38	.79	68	3.04	.80	.34
Communicate student achievement and progress to students, parents, and appropriate others	69	3.39	.73	68	3.15	.82	.24
Reflect on teaching practice through examination of classroom evaluation and assessments	69	3.41	.67	68	3.10	.83	.31
Understand results of standardized assessments	68	3.49	.64	68	2.93	.89	.56
Create a classroom culture that develops student intellectual capacity in the content area	68	3.43	.61	68	3.07	.82	.36
Classroom management	68	3.40	.74	68	3.12	.86	.28
Understand basic legal framework and history of special education, including major cases, laws, and policies governing educational systems and individuals with disabilities	68	3.43	.63	68	3.03	.88	.40
Structure, direct, support, and provide feedback for the activities of	68	3.18	.81	68	2.90	.99	.28

paraeducators, volunteers, and tutors						
Communication and social interaction alternatives for individuals with disabilities, including those who are non-speaking	68	3.31	.70	68	3.03	.85	.28
Use strategies to facilitate maintenance and generalization of skills across learning environments	68	3.46	.63	68	3.03	.83	.43
Select, plan, and coordinate activities of related services personnel to maximize direct instruction for individuals with disabilities	68	3.25	.70	68	3.03	.81	.12
Overall experience	68	3.54	.53	68	3.12	.78	.42

Follow up data from the university's traditional five-year teacher preparation program were used to address the fourth research question regarding the level of preparedness of AR prepared teachers compared with that of students participating in the traditional teacher preparation program at the same university during the same time frame. Because data from the traditional program are available only in group form, only descriptive comparisons can be made. The mean rating of their overall experience at the university for students from the traditional program was 3.08 as compared to 3.54 by the alternative license participants.

The fifth research question examined reported intentions to stay in the field of special education. All respondents except for one reported that they would stay in the field of special education; one participant was not teaching when he or she responded to the survey. One person (1.30%) planned to remain in the teaching profession for 2 to 4 more years; 9 people (11.80%) planned to keep teaching for 5 to 10 more years; and 60 people (78.90%) anticipated remaining in the field until retirement; three people (3.90%) responded "other." The amount of time participants planned to stay in the profession was not related to the time of year (i.e., summer, fall/winter, or spring) in which they were hired ($r = -.05$; $p > .05$). Correlations between the number of years participants indicated they intended to remain in the teaching profession and his or her overall preparation at the university ($r = -.16$; $p > .05$) and the LEA ($r = -.12$; $p > .05$) were not significant.

The final research question examined the nature and frequency of LEA-based mentoring and administrative support for the participants. Table 2 describes participants' responses to questions about the mentoring process in their LEA. Results indicate that most teachers (71.80%) were assigned a mentor; however, less than half (47.10%) of the respondents were formally assigned a mentor. Less than half (46.50%) of the respondents indicated that the selection of their mentor was not mutually agreed upon between the individual and the mentor. Participants also explained the amount of contact that they had with both their principal and their mentor: 12 (16.90%) people had daily contact with a mentor as compared to 13 (18.30%) who had contact with their principal every day; 20 (28.20%) participants had contact with their mentor a few times per week while 22

(31.00%) had contact with their principal that often; 10 (14.10%) people had contact with a mentor a few times each month but 22 (31.00%) of the participants only saw their principal this infrequently; 14 (19.70%) of survey respondents saw their mentor a few times each year or less and 13 (18.30%) saw the principal at their school this rarely; 15 (21.10%) people had no contact with a mentor (or did not have a mentor) and only 1 (1.40%) person reported never to have had contact with the principal.

Table 2
Participant Responses to Items Assessing Mentoring in their Local Education Agencies

Question	Yes	No
Were you assigned a mentor?	51 (71.80%)	20 (26.30%)
If so, was there a formal process by which you were assigned a mentor?	24 (47.10%)	27 (52.90%)
Was the selection of the mentor mutually agreed upon between you and the mentor?	38 (53.50%)	33 (46.50%)

Please indicate the frequency of contact with your mentor and/or principal during your first year of teaching:

	Every day		Few times a week		Few times a month		Few times a year or less		No contact	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Mentor	12	16.90	20	28.20	10	14.10	14	19.70	15	21.10
Principal	13	18.30	22	31.00	22	31.00	13	18.30	1	1.40

Table 3 presents the forms of support that the alternatively licensed participants reportedly received from their LEAs. About half (53.50%) of the participants received a student handbook; however, most (78.90%) received a staff handbook. Many (67.60%) of the respondents received a copy of formal observation forms, and most (73.20%) received an emergency evacuation plan or crisis procedures. The amount of human support provided to the AR teachers was more varied. About half (53.50%) of the participants received a visit from the principal at least once during their first week in the classroom. Only 15.50% had a certified teacher in the classroom for the first 20 days; however, 40.80% had an occasional visit from a certified teacher. Only 47.90% of the respondents had a clear understanding of the mentoring process. Five (7.00%) participants indicated that they received none of the abovementioned forms of support.

Table 3
Participants' Ratings of Forms of Support by the Local Education Agency

Which of the following did the school district provide for you when you were hired as an alternative route teacher?

	Yes	No
Student handbook	38 (53.50%)	33 (46.50%)
Staff handbook	56 (78.90%)	15 (21.10%)
Copy of formal observation forms	48 (67.60%)	23 (32.40%)
Emergency evacuation/ crisis procedures	52 (73.20%)	19 (26.80%)

Visit from principal at least once during the first week in the classroom	38 (53.50%)	33 (46.50%)
Clear understanding of mentoring process	34 (47.90%)	37 (52.10%)
Certified teacher in classroom for the first 20 days	11 (15.50%)	60 (84.50%)
Occasional visit by certified teacher	29 (40.80%)	42 (59.20%)
None of the above	5 (7.00%)	66 (93.00%)

To further explore participants' perceptions of preparedness, the three areas rated highest and lowest for university and LEA preparation were extracted. Participants indicated that the three competencies prepared best by the university were (a) understanding results of standardized assessments ($M = 3.49$) with 92.65% of teachers ($n = 63$) reporting "good" or "very good", (b) adapting instructional opportunities ($M = 3.46$) with 91.30% of teachers ($n = 63$) reporting "good" or "very good", and (c) using strategies to facilitate maintenance and generalization of skills across learning environments ($M = 3.46$) with 92.65% of teachers ($n = 63$) reporting "good" or "very good."

Participants indicated that the three competencies prepared best by the LEA were (a) communicating student achievement and progress to students, parents, and appropriate others ($M = 3.15$) with 82.61% of teachers ($n = 57$) reporting "good" or "very good"; (b) classroom management ($M = 3.12$) with 79.41% of teachers ($n = 54$) reporting "good" or "very good"; and (c) creating a classroom culture that develops student intellectual capacity in the content area ($M = 3.07$) with 80.88% of teachers ($n = 55$) reporting "good" or "very good."

Participants indicated that the three competencies prepared worst by the university were (a) structuring, directing, supporting, and providing feedback for the activities of paraeducators, volunteers, and tutors ($M = 3.18$) with 2.94% of teachers ($n = 2$) reporting "poor"; (b) selecting, planning, and coordinating activities of related services personnel to maximize direct instruction for individuals with disabilities ($M = 3.25$), although no teacher rated this item as "poor"; and (c) planning instruction and student evaluation based on an in-depth knowledge of the content, student needs ($M = 3.30$) with 2.90% of teachers ($n = 2$) reporting "poor."

Participants indicated that the three competencies prepared worst by the LEA were (a) structuring, directing, supporting, and providing feedback for the activities of paraeducators, volunteers, and tutors ($M = 2.90$) with 10.30% of teachers ($n = 7$) reporting "poor"; (b) content knowledge in area of licensure ($M = 2.93$) with 5.80% of teachers ($n = 4$) reporting "poor"; and (c) understanding results of standardized assessments ($M = 2.93$) with 8.82% of teachers ($n = 6$) reporting "poor." In addition, 4.40% of teachers ($n = 3$) reported "poor" levels for preparedness by the LEA for each competency.

Additionally, the three areas that differed the most for university versus LEA preparation were compared. The competencies prepared by the university and LEA that differed the greatest as reported by participants were (a) understanding results of standardized assessments by the university ($M = 3.49$) versus LEA ($M = 2.93$); (b) content

knowledge in area of licensure with a mean level of preparedness by the university (M = 3.43) versus LEA (M = 2.93); and (c) adapting instructional opportunities for diverse learners by university (M = 3.46) versus LEA (M = 3.00).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine ratings of preparation by teachers who participated in an alternative licensure program at a university in the southeastern part of the United States. Specifically, the goals of this study were to explore: (a) To what extent do participants in a university-based alternative licensure program believe the university prepared them for being a special educator? (b) To what extent do these same participants believe their LEA prepared them for being a special educator? (c) Is there a difference in participants' ratings of preparation by the university as compared to preparation by the LEA? (d) How do AR participants' ratings of level of preparedness compare with those of students participating in the traditional teacher preparation program at the same university? (e) How likely are alternatively licensed teachers to report they intend to remain in the field of special education and is length of intention to remain related to level of preparedness or time of year hired? and (f) What is the nature and frequency of LEA-based mentoring and administrative support for these alternatively licensed teachers?

Findings of the study have several important implications. Research questions (a) and (b) address the level of perceived preparedness that alternatively licensed teachers received from the university and from the LEA. Overall results indicate that the alternative-license/add-on endorsement students reported their university-based preparation, and, to slightly lesser degree, their LEA-based preparation was strong. The majority of respondents from AR programs rated their preparation by the university and by the LEA as "good" or "very good." This finding is important given that teachers who are better prepared often remain in the special education profession longer (McLeskey et al., 2004). Research question (c) addresses the discrepancy between the participants' ratings of preparation by the university versus the LEA. Importantly, the discrepancy between participants' perceived level of preparedness from the university and the LEA suggests the need for strong mentoring and ongoing training in school settings. This is especially true for states whose preparation programs bypass university training. The program at this particular university mirrors the traditional program, requiring the same courses (e.g., educational psychology, elementary reading and math methods in addition to specialized coursework) as the traditional program. Research question (d) examined the differences in perceived level of preparation for the teachers who participated in the alternative preparation program and the teachers prepared in the traditional program. In this study, traditionally prepared students rated their preparation somewhat lower than the AR prepared teachers. The low n (only 12 respondents) makes conclusions tenable but results provide tentative support to the robustness of a course-intensive AR program and mitigate against fears that AR programs are by definition inferior. Research question (e) dealt with the likelihood that alternatively prepared teachers will remain in the field of special education and the relationship of time of year hired with intended length of time they plan to remain. Results indicated that an overwhelming majority of participants

(90.80%) say they intend to remain in the field for at least 5-10 years with the largest percentage (78.90%) intending to remain until retirement. This finding is very encouraging given the national problem of low retention of special educators. No correlations between intentions to remain in the field and time of hire were found. The final research question (f) addressed the nature and frequency of LEA-based mentoring and administrative support. Although approximately 72% of teachers reported having a mentor, there was variability in the way mentors were assigned and the amount of contact between the teacher and his or her mentor with 20% of respondents not having a mentor or having no contact with the mentor. Similarly, the findings indicated inconsistency in how new special educators are supported at the administrative level. Given the results of this study, programs that do not include university coursework may need to thoroughly examine the level of support provided by the LEA and implement additional training and a higher level of support for beginning special educators.

The results of this study highlight the importance of the role of university teacher preparation procedures for states trying to implement alternative routes with few or no requirements for university coursework (Constantine et al., 2009). A major emphasis of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is teacher quality. As an employment condition, teachers must document "highly qualified" status in core academic content areas (Tennessee Department of Education, 2003). Specifically, participants rated university preparation in content area knowledge, central learning concepts, assumptions and structures significantly higher ($M = 3.43$; $M = 3.38$) than preparation from the LEA ($M = 2.93$; $M = 2.96$). One possible explanation for this discrepancy is the university training program engages students in systematic and sequential training and assessment procedures in recommended standards of practice that are reviewed and updated regularly. By contrast, historically, LEA personnel do not view their primary role as developing untrained professionals. The state-approved comprehensive teacher evaluation states explicitly that schools will attract qualified individuals who complete strong professional preparation programs that comply with NCATE standards (Tennessee Department of Education, 2004). LEA personnel expect newly hired teachers to come prepared with basic tools of analysis and assessment. For time-strapped school personnel, replicating university training in pedagogy and dispositions associated with effective teaching experiences may not be feasible. Future studies might examine the expectations and perspectives of LEA administrators and mentors on their perceived roles in training alternatively licensed teachers.

This study highlights some positive features of AR programs such as their potential to draw on a more diverse and mature population to enter the challenging field of special education. In this study, males and individuals from ethnically diverse backgrounds were represented at much higher rates in the AR program compared to the traditional one. Though data on student ages in the traditional program were not available, it is also clear that the AR programs draw a slightly older population (the mean for this sample was about 35 years of age). Further research about age of entry into special education and retention in the field would be interesting. The majority of participants in this study (about 80%) who participated in an alternative licensure program intend to remain in the field of special

education until retirement. Given their age and data on intended length of stay in the field, it seems that many of the individuals seeking alternative licensure in this study entered special education as a second career.

There are several limitations to the study. First, the sample was drawn from one university, which limits generalizability. Second, though survey participation rate was relatively high (almost two thirds of target population), a selection factor could have affected the results. Third, only 80% of the participants were alternatively licensed in the strictest sense; about 20% were adding endorsements to other teaching areas. And, fourth, results rely on self-report of preparedness. No actual measures of teacher competence were obtained.

Despite limitations, this study adds to the literature in that it is one of the first to compare ratings of preparedness of teachers from traditional teacher preparation programs to ratings of teachers from alternative licensure programs, both university-based and LEA-based preparation. While preliminary, the findings from this study suggest the importance of the role of universities in teacher preparation and the need for university and LEA efforts to complement one another.

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