

The Proliferation of Alternative Routes to Certification in Special Education: A Critical Review of the Literature

Prepared for the Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

by

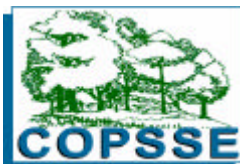
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April 2003



Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education

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COPSSE research is focused on the preparation of special education professionals and its impact on beginning teacher quality and student outcomes. Our research is intended to inform scholars and policymakers about advantages and disadvantages of preparation alternatives and the effective use of public funds in addressing personnel shortages.

In addition to our authors and reviewers, many individuals and organizations have contributed substantially to our efforts, including Drs. Erling Boe of the University of Pennsylvania and Elaine Carlson of WESTAT. We also have benefited greatly from collaboration with the National Clearinghouse for the Professions in Special Education, the Policymakers Partnership, and their parent organizations, the Council for Exceptional Children and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education.

The Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education, H325Q000002, is a cooperative agreement between the University of Florida and the Office of Special Education Programs of the U. S. Department of Education. The contents of this document do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of Education, nor does mention of other organizations imply endorsement by them.

Recommended citation:

Rosenberg, M. S., & Sindelar, P. T. (2003). *The proliferation of alternative routes to certification in special education: A critical review of the literature*. (COPSSE Document Number RS-10E). Gainesville, FL: University of Florida, Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education.



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Education Programs

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INTRODUCTION

Alternative routes to certification (ARC) in special education are reviewed. ARC is defined, and then the confluence of factors that has hastened its growth and popularity, particularly in specialized, high need areas such as special education, is discussed. Available research in the area of ARC in special education is summarized with particular attention focused on the efficacy of the various approaches and programs as well as the process and outcome variables employed to assess program impact. Based on the research, the programmatic features associated with successful ARC programs are discussed, and what remains unknown about these programs is highlighted. The review concludes with a series of recommendations for policy makers and teacher educators, both campus and district-level, who are in the position of developing ARC programs.

In recent years, there has been no shortage of reform-minded manifestos, policy initiatives, and individual school efforts that have sought to improve public education. To many, a major reason for the drop in performance levels in many of our schools is that dedicated, knowledgeable, well-trained, and credentialed teachers are becoming rare commodities. As the number of challenges for our troubled public schools expands, it is getting increasingly difficult to find personnel who want to pursue a career in the field of education.

For decades, there simply have not been enough qualified personnel to address the educational needs of the growing numbers of students with disabilities. Moreover, the traditional sources of supply for special education classrooms—freshly minted graduates of college or university degree programs—have not met the current and growing demand for teachers. Not surprisingly, alternative certification has become a growth industry.

WHAT IS ARC?

Most education professionals regard certification status as an index of teacher qualifications. A standard certificate generally means that a teacher has been prepared in a state-approved teacher education program that has combined aspects of specific subject matter knowledge with knowledge of teaching and learning processes. States exercise the authority for licensing teachers, often by approving programs at colleges and universities that deliver and monitor required course work and field experiences. Although the requirements for obtaining a license through approved program routes vary greatly, there is a general recognition that valid and explicit professional standards are necessary for teacher preparation. Among the more prominent groups associated with the development, refinement, and maintenance of these standards are the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and its subject and specialty area partners, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the National Council for the Teaching of English (NCTE), and the National Council for the Teaching of Mathematics (NCTM).

At the same time that traditional teacher preparation programs are subject to rigorous standards-based program reviews, local education agencies (LEAs) are permitted to hire less than fully qualified personnel and do so in large numbers. By one estimate, well over one quarter of all newly hired teachers have either no license or a substandard license in areas they are hired to teach.

Defining the critical features of ARC programs is difficult, however, because programs instituted by states, LEAs, and institutions of higher education (IHEs) vary greatly. Also, the term *ARC* has multiple meanings and applications. ARC has been used to reference a number of avenues to teaching, ranging from Spartan emergency certification survival training to sophisticated high-tech programs for individuals with unique life experiences. The point at which alternative ends and traditional begins is uncertain. On a basic level, the defining characteristic of ARC lies in what the programs choose to avoid: ARC programs provide access to a teaching credential that circumvents conventional college and university preparation programs.

Teacher preparation programs vary in three respects—length and structure of program, delivery mode, and candidate population. The extent to which a program is alternative or traditional may be assessed by considering these variations. Length and structure of program refers to the number of units required to attain certification and the types of activities employed to foster the acquisition of content. ARC programs are usually shorter than traditional programs and are structured to allow candidates to enter the teaching force immediately or soon after beginning their studies. Delivery mode refers to how instruction is presented. ARC programs tend to rely more heavily on field experiences than traditional teacher preparation and less on formal classroom instruction; in this category, on-line, web-based teacher preparation will soon be a reality.

Candidates for ARC typically have bachelors degrees in noneducation fields. In comparison to traditional programs, ARC programs tend to attract proportionally more males; persons over 25; persons from multicultural backgrounds; individuals who have had business, industry, or military experience; and math, science, and foreign language majors. Career changers in ARC programs tend to come from jobs in the low salary ranges rather than from the professional or managerial ranks.

PROLIFERATION OF ARC IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Three major factors have contributed to the rapid growth of ARC in special education.

Persistent Shortages of Qualified Personnel

There is little doubt that there has been, and continues to be, a chronic and severe shortage of special educators. For example, in the 1996-1997 school year, over 31,000 special educators were needed in the states and territories to fill vacancies and replace less than fully certified teachers, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

Decades of shortages in the supply of fully certified special educators, coupled with inadequate production of graduates from IHEs, has prompted the consideration of flexible certification programs that attract promising individuals and consider varying life experiences. IHE graduates meet only one half of the demand for special education teacher hires each year, according to CEC.

Acute Need for Multicultural Personnel

The shortage of both general and special educators from multicultural backgrounds is acute. Special education teachers were reported to be predominantly white (86%), and the student population requiring special education was diverse (32%). A diverse teaching force provides visible role models for a full range of students, many of whom have not seen an individual of their race or ethnicity in a position of status and leadership. Moreover, diversity among teachers demonstrates explicitly the concept of equality of opportunity and allows for the delivery of culturally responsive instruction in a range of communication styles.

Unfortunately, the need for a more diverse presence in the special education teaching force has not translated into large numbers of students from diverse ethnic and cultural groups enrolling in and ultimately completing traditional special education teacher preparation programs. However, ARC programs do tend to recruit a higher percentage of teachers from multicultural backgrounds into public school teaching than traditional programs. The recruits tend to work in urban schools with high concentrations of students from multicultural backgrounds.

The Education Establishment's Hold on Entry to the Profession

Several political action groups outside the profession believe that: (a) traditional approaches to teacher preparation are self-serving, bloated, overregulatory, and anachronistic; and (b) the teacher education community merely tinkers at the edges of a system that has failed to improve teacher quality. Two foundations, The Milken Family Foundation and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, have been particularly vocal in their disdain for traditional teacher education approaches to certification and licensure. These foundations question the regulatory assumption

that good teaching rests on a solid foundation of specialized professional knowledge about pedagogy and that the existing standards screen out ill-prepared teacher candidates. What traditional programs do, they claim, is discourage talented liberal arts graduates who wish to teach but who do not want to endure "Mickey Mouse" pedagogical training. These groups have urged states to open more paths into the teaching profession and to encourage individuals who have not attended traditional schools of education to teach. According to the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, states should encourage the development and growth of programs that provide compressed basic training for prospective teachers. Programs meeting these criteria, including programs at for-profit universities, are already available. It remains to be seen whether courses and learning activities that merely address the minimal requirements for continued employment as a special education teacher will result in professional competence in special education settings.

ARC: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Critical Contextual Findings

The paper summarizes important findings on how teacher qualifications relate to important outcomes such as student achievement. Sample results from selected studies are briefly noted:

- When teachers' qualifications are operationalized as certification, advanced degrees, and experience, qualifications correlate significantly and positively with student achievement.
- Partially certified special education teachers are twice as likely to move from school to school and twice as likely to leave teaching as fully certified teachers.
- Although ARC graduates are typically and consistently judged to be at least minimally competent teachers, when differences are found, ARC graduates are judged to be less competent than traditionally prepared teachers.
- ARC graduates have been reported to score as high as and sometimes better than traditionally prepared graduates on competency and certification tests and tests of pedagogy.
- ARC programs are more likely to attract more participants from diverse cultural backgrounds than traditional programs.
- Graduates of an ARC program and matched, traditionally trained, middle school teachers did not differ on observed classroom performance, student achievement in math and reading, and self-reports of ability and preparedness.

What We Know from the Special Education Literature

The paper offers more detail on the issues listed below.

The extent of ARC in special education. The statistics on ARC programs come from separate studies:

- In 1991, only 6 states had reported ARC programs in special education.
- By 1995, 39 states authorized alternative programs generally, including 24 that authorized special education.
- No recent state evaluations of ARC programs have been reported in the teacher education literature.

ARC and special education teacher attrition. These sample results are based on studies of teacher attrition in special education:

- Graduates of ARC programs stayed in teaching for fewer years than graduates of traditional teacher education programs.

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- A relationship between length of training and attrition was found; the longevity of teachers with masters degrees was greater than that of teachers with bachelors degrees.
 - The proportion of fully certified teachers who stay on the job is higher than the proportion of incompletely certified teachers who stay.

Evaluations of ARC programs in special education. Research questions about alternative programs should include:

- What are the elements of the training program?
- For whom is it designed?
- Who enrolls and how do they do in the program?
- What kind of teachers do they become?
- Are ARC graduates as capable in their work with children as graduates of traditional teacher preparation programs?
- How long do they remain in the field?

Among the difficulties that researchers face in comparing traditional and ARC graduates in special education are:

- the problem of comparability of groups
- lack of reliable and valid instrumentation with which to measure outcomes
- availability of few studies in which programs were compared to one another; most studies evaluate single programs.

The special education research to date offers little support to the proposition that quick and abbreviated preparation is a viable alternative to traditional teacher education. ARC programs can produce competent teachers, but not all ARC programs are alike. The paper concludes that the evidence on the effectiveness of abbreviated, add-on certification models is inadequate.

INDICATORS OF EFFECTIVE ARC PROGRAMS

A rather large underground economy for teaching credentials is in place in many geographic areas of our nation. Clearly, large numbers of uncredentialed special educators are receiving training that leads to certification. Although little information on the nature and efficacy of these programs is available, existing research supports these conclusions.

Meaningful IHE/LEA Collaboration

Meaningful collaboration among key stakeholders is a prerequisite for program success. Graduates of IHE/LEA collaborative ARC programs were judged superior to those who completed LEA-only offerings in one study. Such collaboration is achieved through agenda building, negotiation, consensus building, and commitment to success.

Adequate Program Length with a Variety of Learning Activities

Programs are most effective when their content is substantive, rigorous, and truly programmatic. Extensive degree-linked ARC programs are superior to programs that make extensive use of unanchored courses and add-on activities that lack a unified programmatic focus.

To meet the needs of nontraditional students, it is also necessary to deliver program content through a number of learning activities and in a number of alternative formats. Examples are integrated block scheduling; self-paced computer-based modules; seminars to complement the content provided in traditional course work; course work and seminars via distance education to aid in recruiting, education, and retention of nontraditional students; and formats designed for the learning characteristics of adult learners.

IHE Supervision and Building-Based Mentor Support

Most agree that IHE supervision and on-site mentor support is critical for the development of ARC teachers. On-site supervision should incorporate features of IHE supervision and building-based coaching and mentoring. There are few guidelines indicating what should be included in a mentoring program, how much direct assistance is necessary, and what the nature of that assistance should be. Ideally, mentors assist ARC teachers by sharing materials, strategies, and techniques through peer coaching and other collaborative methods. Mentors can regularly visit ARC candidates' classrooms and provide feedback on teaching performance and guide teachers in their acquisition of procedural knowledge.

ARC UNKNOWN: AREAS OF EXTREME CONCERN

Need for an Adequate Definition

The proliferation of ARC programs has rendered the term *alternative route* useless in defining a category of preparation that may be readily differentiated from traditional teacher education. Researchers comparing teacher preparation programs are urged to go beyond traditional and alternative classifications by providing consistent and functional program comparisons to clarify key differences and similarities.

Shortage of High-Quality Research

There is not enough research to allay concerns about the proliferation of alternative-route programs. Research is needed to assess the teaching competence of program graduates in a reliable and valid fashion and to determine graduates' career paths and career longevity. Every effort should be made to ensure that our assessments of outcomes are methodologically rigorous and that groups being compared are carefully defined.

Lack of Explicit Professional Standards in ARC Programs

The relationship between the accreditation of special education preparation programs (i.e., ensuring that programs do adhere to high standards) and the actual credentialing of special educators must be strong and direct. Factors that influence the development of individual special education program standards include both an articulation of the core values shared by faculty who train and supervise teacher candidates and evidence that national standards espoused by relevant professional organizations are included in preparation programs.

If open special education positions are to be filled with competent educators, there must be a defensible set of professional standards for ARC programs and participants. At present, no such standards are being applied to ARC special education teacher development efforts. More needs to be known about how or how well individual programs integrate best practices in professional preparation.

Developing a Sense of Profession and Professionalism

Criteria used to determine professional status typically include the following:

- the requirement of formal credentials or licensing to practice one's craft
- formal and informal mechanisms for induction
- continuous professional development to upgrade one's skills
- the ability to exercise substantial authority in regard to work place policies and practices
- having a commitment to client needs
- possessing a strong collective identity
- receiving relatively high levels of compensation.

We can only speculate about the effects that the proliferation of ARC programs will have on efforts to professionalize special education. With few existing standards and the variety of programs offered by IHEs, state education agencies (SEAs), and LEAs, we know little about how

much of the knowledge base candidates possess or how they were inducted into the classroom. The paper summarizes the requirements for effective teaching of students with special needs: caring, techniques, creativity, organization, a solid knowledge of child development, and an ability to develop and maintain relationships with students, parents, and colleagues.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- More needs to be known about the nature and extent of ARC programs.
- Successful ARC programs are planned and delivered collaboratively by consortia of IHEs and LEAs, often with specific waivers from SEAs. Programs are of adequate length and employ a variety of learning activities to deliver critical content.
- Successful ARC programs make considerable use of IHE supervision and building-based mentor support to guide teacher development. Mentors are selected based on their superior teaching skills, experience working with student teachers, and willingness to participate in novel approaches to the development of novice teachers.
- A major area of concern regarding ARC programs in special education is the lack of explicit professional standards employed in program development, candidate recruitment, and program completion.
- Little is known regarding how (or whether) the proliferation of ARC programs will affect the professionalization of special education or how completion of an ARC program influences the professional behavior of a candidate.

We recognize the pressing need to maximize the supply of new teachers and, to this end, the necessity of options. Nonetheless, we remain concerned about the possibility of programs that fail to provide adequate training opportunities and the potential consequences to students with disabilities.

Until research strengthens an understanding of effective teacher preparation, the field should move ahead on the ARC agenda cautiously and with skepticism. Solid, well-conceptualized ARC programs may be one of the solutions that can assist in reducing the shortage of qualified special educators. However, ARC programs must provide high-quality teacher education, and the graduates of such programs must meet agreed-on professional standards.