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**A Comparison of Teacher Perceptions  
of their  
Teacher Certification Programs**

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## ***Introduction***

The Hartford Public School District is one of the districts which hire teachers from various teacher certification programs. Hartford currently has teachers that have obtained their teaching certification through traditional routes; defined as those routes that provide prospective teachers with training and preparation in either undergraduate institutions or graduate schools. Undergraduate and graduate institutions are quite diverse themselves depending on which school or university teachers went to, but for the purposes of this research I have considered them as either “traditional undergraduate” program or the “traditional graduate” category. Secondly, there are the alternative routes. The most commonly referred alternative route is the Teach for America program. The Hartford Public School District has witnessed an increase in the number of Teach for America, consisting of about 75 members.

Lastly, there are schools that do not require all of their teachers to be certified, such as charter schools and private schools. The focus of my paper is teachers working in schools that require teachers to be certified, and their experience in those programs. For that reason, teachers in private schools and charter schools, which may not require all their teachers to be certified, are not included in this research.

As school districts are aiming to make all students perform better, especially in the aftermath of the No Child Left Behind, all the districts are striving to attract highly qualified teachers. However, there seem so many different ways to train and prepare teachers. Principals are making hiring decisions about their new staff on a constant basis. On what grounds they hire them makes a difference in the lives of their students. As a result, my research question will focus on comparing different teacher preparation programs as described by the teachers who went through them. Their perspectives on their own program and the programs of others will provide evidence from which comparative analysis is possible.

### ***Situating my Research in Hartford Public School District***

In an attempt to gain some insight into different teacher preparation programs, I decided to interview teachers in Hartford Public Schools. In this brief and non-extensive research project, I worked with teachers from two different schools. Throughout this paper, I will refer to these schools as the Urban High School and City High School. As Hartford Public School System is divided into four zones, I decided to select schools from two different zones. Assuming that there may be differences in teacher demographics and perhaps differences in where teachers obtained their teaching certification, selecting

schools from different parts of Hartford would provide a wider picture and help avoid some of the sample bias problems.

In all the schools in Hartford, there are a total of 1315 teachers of general education (excluding special education teachers), of which 6 were American Indian, 16 Asian, 161 Hispanic (not of Hispanic origin), 159 Hispanic/Latino and 973 White (non-Hispanic origin). The large number of white teachers in Hartford Public schools, even though the majority of the students are either Black and/or Latino, is the norm.

Between the two schools I chose for this research project, I had an opportunity to interview six teachers. That is, three teachers at each school. At the Urban City High School, all three teachers interviewed were white. At the City High School two teachers were African-American and one of Latino background.

Teachers at the Urban High School came from two different certification pathways: I had two teachers who majored in Political Science and History as undergraduates. One of them then went through Teach for America while the other went through UConn's 1-year accelerated master's program. In this master's program, he was able to receive masters of education and teaching certification. The third teacher went to University of Hartford for her undergraduate, majored in Mathematics, and then did Teach for America to be able to teach in that subject.

At the City High School, there was a slightly different "kind" of teachers. Two of the teachers received their teaching certification through undergraduate education institutions. One of the teachers went to University of Connecticut and majored in Mathematics and Education studies, which enabled her to fulfill requirements both for math major and education classes for certification. The other teacher went to Boston College, and similarly majored in mathematics and in secondary education. By double majoring in these two things, he was able to obtain his licensure to teach. The third teacher went to University of Connecticut, majored in biology and environmental science. After completing her undergraduate, she went to Teach for America.

### ***Research Question***

The question I am seeking to answer is "How effective do teachers perceive their training programs to be in preparing them to become teachers, which tools they equip them with and how do these tools and skills gained differ depending on the training they received?" In order to answer this

question, I relied on teacher experiences in both the teacher training programs as well as their experience in classroom.

As much as I wanted teacher to talk about their own experiences, they provided their views on other teachers that went through the program as well as teachers that they work with who were certified in different programs. These intergroup and intragroup comments were significant as they shed more light onto perceptions of what makes one a “good” or a “bad” teacher. These conversations provided enough data to analyze the differences among programs.

### ***Research Design and Methods***

Based on my knowledge of Hartford Public School System and staff in various schools, getting in touch with teachers in schools was an easy task. In order to narrow the scope of teachers, and for ease of comparison within the group, my goal was to have all of my teachers be within their first 2-3 years of teaching. These teachers will have best recollections of their teacher preparation programs but also best evaluate how they were prepared to handle the classrooms. At City High School, after getting in touch with one of the teachers that fit my criteria, I used snowball method in which that one teacher I interviewed recommend two other teachers that started teaching the same year as he did.

To complement the interviews, I also looked at historical documents to see how teacher certification has changed over the years. I was interested in seeing patters as to when certification became a requirement, how the alternative routes have been introduced and making projections for the years to come. I also make comparisons between Hartford and other similar cities in order to find whether there are stark differences in the makeup of our teachers in comparison to those in other cities. While this historical perspective was not a central component of my research, it helped me contextualize the debate over teacher certification as well as gain insight into what was historically perceived as “qualified” and “prepared” teacher.

Attempting to answer which certification program equips teachers with most tools to use in the classroom and the most useful skills to make them efficient teachers has to be addressed through qualitative skills. I can use quantitative data to show how many teachers in a particular school have which kind of training, but in the end to be able to evaluate teachers and how well they are prepared, I need to be talking to them personally. Having individual teachers describe their experience and preparedness for classrooms through the interviews that I conducted, I was able to better analyze and

compare different teacher certification paths. Teacher perceptions of their own programs as well as programs of other teachers provided rich data analyzed in the data and analysis section of this paper.

### ***Certification Programs in my Sample Size***

#### *Teach For America*

This very popular alternative to teacher certification is very common among recent graduates. The program promises to prepare students over the summer and have them teaching by the fall semester. The summer program is six weeks long during which the first two weeks are about learning skills and techniques, and four weeks working with a teacher, student teaching. Curriculum specialist teachers are hired to help recruits with curriculum and instruction management.

The assumption of Teach for America is that college graduates with strong backgrounds in their majors can be ready and successful to teach in elementary, middle and high schools. The program thus does not focus on academics, but on providing skills that future teachers can use. The training for recruits is short, but they receive necessary help throughout the two years they are required to teach. Their placements are varied, in rural or urban areas. However, the members serve high need schools. Emphasis then is on how to train teachers to be successful in these schools. Currently, Connecticut has members in four districts, among which Hartford has about 75 members.

#### *University of Connecticut Undergraduate*

This program can be taken as just undergraduate, to receive a bachelors degree or as integration of the undergraduate and master's program into one 5-year program. Candidates are completing both the education program requirements as well as requirements in their chosen field. As such, students are introduced to classes in how to teach in a classroom, using technology in classrooms, classroom and behavior management, instruction and curriculum classes, teaching reading and writing in the content areas, and methods of teaching. Students also complete one semester of directed student teaching.

In addition to these education classes, the major must be completed in a particular subject. This involves having at least 12 classes in the subject a candidate wishes to teach. If the student just wants a bachelor's degree, the program can be completed in four years. If one wishes to receive a masters degree, additional courses must be taken on top of those already described. The teacher I interviewed completed her degree in four years.

### *University of Connecticut Masters Program*

This program is tailored to college graduates. Due to its nature, it attracts candidates that may have had previous experience doing something else and then decided that they want to teach. The program doesn't require applicants to have any previous education classes or experience teaching. The requirement is to have completed a major (or equivalent number of courses) in the subject one wishes to teach.

The program is 13 months, during which students spend a whole semester in the fall student teaching in one of the local schools. Students are given an opportunity to choose whether they would like to teach in urban, rural or suburban schools. The program is designed for those wishing to teach secondary education, so elementary school teachers would not be able to receive their certification through this one year intensive program. The program does have "cohorts" in which those who want to teach a specific area would be able to take classes for that particular interest.

### *Boston College Undergraduate/ University of Hartford*

Very similar to UConn's undergraduate program, these two programs are tailored to students who know that they want to teach and wish to receive teaching certification. Students are required to complete their education major requirements as well as the requirements for the subject that they want to teach, to a total of 39 courses. For the secondary education major, students are exposed to child growth and development, family, school and society education, adolescent psychology, secondary curriculum instruction, and secondary methods courses.

In addition, students must have student teaching for a semester. An interesting part of Boston College's school of education is that they strongly encourage their students to have student teaching classes if they go abroad. This international perspective is indicative of the global changes and diversity within our schools.

### ***Limitations***

Constrained by time, I was only able to interview six teachers between the two schools. In order to get more perceptions about different teacher certification programs, a bigger sample would have been needed. I accomplished to have two Teach for America teachers, three undergraduate certified teachers and one graduate program teacher. Two teachers do not represent the views of the entire Teach for America program, and neither do three undergraduate certified teachers represent numerous

universities and colleges that offer teaching preparation and certification. Lastly, having one teacher from the graduate teacher certification program express his experience does not give us much insight into how the program was experienced by others.

In addition to wishing that I had talked to more teachers for this research project, it would have been equally important to talk to the principals about their schools. Information on hiring practices and the make-up of the school, pertaining to how many teachers come from which certification program, would have provided me with information useful to see if there are any shifts in which teachers get hired more. Besides the hiring changes that may have taken place, I would have attempted to gain principals' opinions on effectiveness of teachers based on the classroom evaluations.

Furthermore, since I am comparing different teacher certification programs in the greater Hartford area, I wish I had the time to talk to someone from the certification programs themselves. Talking to teacher preparation would have enabled me to gain more in depth information that I was not able to gain from their websites. Since I did not have time to do these interviews, I relied on the information available on their websites.

With these limitations in mind, it is important to remember that views expressed in this paper are views of six individuals. Their opinions are valuable in understanding of their own experiences in the programs, but cannot be generalized to all the teachers in the same program as having the same experience and views.

### ***Literature Review***

Teacher certification programs and their effectiveness is a contested debate. Everyone agrees that we want the most qualified teachers in our schools but there is very little consensus about what it means to be prepared to be an effective teacher. In order to regulate the teaching profession, teacher certification programs serve as gateways. In most cases, in order to obtain a license, one needs to pass exams in general knowledge as well as teaching skills, have some experience teaching, and complete the coursework that is deemed sufficient to educate and prepare prospective teachers about teaching in classrooms.

Historically, teacher education in the 19<sup>th</sup> century shifted from normal schools to college and universities, which were somewhat standardized by state regulations (Golhaber and Brewer, 2000). However, Goldhaber and Brewer say that there was yet another shift in teacher certification programs



where “more recently (since about 1970), there has been a shift from undergraduate training toward postbaccalaureate programs” (Goldhaber and Brewer, 2000). Today, becoming a teacher is more challenging than it was a century ago. While some states have tightened regulation of teacher preparation and certification, others have relaxed their requirements via alternate certification in order to attract more people into the profession.

In general, the “licensure is designed to guarantee a basic level of quality or skill of teachers in schools” but without a clear definition of what it means to be “qualified” (Goldhaber and Brewer, 2000). Teacher education, certification, teacher experience, verbal and subject matter knowledge, and other factors can all have impact on any teacher but there is not an agreement or any conclusive findings that set one apart from another as being more important. However, there are researchers that claim certain things need to be present in order to ensure teachers are ready to teach. The question one is left with is, “What does it mean to be a qualified teacher?”

Under the No Child Left Behind Act, qualified teachers are defined as those who “receive state certification and demonstrate content knowledge of the material they teach, either by passing a subject-area exam or by having an undergraduate major in that subject, or both” (Boyd et al, 2007). Based on these qualifications, they do not seem too harsh or imposing unrealistic expectations. However, some states are still having a hard time with their teachers meeting these standards and passing the exams. Since those teachers who try to obtain teacher certification via undergraduate programs are having a hard time passing necessary tests, states have increasingly turned to teachers certified through alternate routes.

Darling-Hammond and Youngs(2002) point out five different aspects by which districts determine if teachers are qualified. They are a) general academic and verbal ability, b) subject matter knowledge, c) knowledge about teaching and learning as reflected in teacher education courses or preparation experiences, d) teaching experiences, and d) the combined set of qualifications measured by teacher certification, which includes most of the preceding factors (Darling-Hammond and Youngs, 2002). Some states believe that teachers should have certain minimum grade point averages or achieve a minimum test score on certification exams. The majority of states also require teachers to have either majored or minored in the subject they want to teach. However, what may qualify an individual to be qualified in one state may disqualify him/her in another. There is not a national consensus about what a “qualified teacher” is.

The most common route to certification today is the “traditional route” in which college graduates of a teacher preparation program are hired to teach. As Boyd et al. point out, “these programs are shaped by a combination of state regulation, the criteria of accreditation groups, and the choices made by individual programs and institutions” (Boyd, et al., 2007). After an individual completes the program, they need to still pass exams required by the state. In these programs, teachers are given courses in three areas: foundational courses, pedagogical courses, and content of the subject knowledge. Furthermore, they are required to have field experience. However, the number of weeks dedicated to teaching experience differs greatly from state to state and even school to school.

Boyd et al. explain that the strengths of traditional routes to teacher certification are that in addition to content knowledge, teachers are exposed to pedagogy of teaching. Boyd et al. say,

“Most traditional teacher preparation programs devote significant resources to teaching pedagogy, the skills that enable teachers to structure and communicate material to students; and most states also require teachers to demonstrate knowledge of pedagogy through exams and coursework” (Boyd, et al.,2007).

For new teachers entering the teaching force this is crucial because it includes knowledge about learning theories of children and how to manage classrooms. In fact, Boyle et al. say that “84 percent of states require preparation programs to present material on classroom management, and 83 percent require them to address subject-area pedagogy” (Boyle et al., 2007).

On the other hand, the alternate routes to certification allow prospective teachers to postpone or completely bypass many requirements of the traditional preparation routes. According to Ruckel, there are three types of alternate certification routes, all which make it possible for those aspiring to be teachers to do so quicker. She claims that some alternative programs are “night schools that deliver traditional teacher education” to older adults or those making career changes. In addition to these, there are college based programs that work with teachers who are hired with emergency certificates and they work with them to make them fully certified. And, lastly, there are fast track programs like Teach for America that are designed to help teachers know the basics in preparation and learn most through their own experience teaching. With these various options to get certified, bypassing of requirements imposed on undergraduate students pursuing teacher certification is much easier.

Accessibility to these alternative teacher programs is also growing. She says, “Today, 115 alternative programs exist in over 40 states” and furthermore, “more than 250 colleges and universities are currently involved in some type of alternative teachers preparation” (Ruckel, 2000). Ruckel cites

Linda Darling-Hammond who wrote about “studies suggesting that teachers who begin work through very short alternative routes tend to have greater difficulties than those more fully prepared” (Ruckel, 2000). More specifically, Linda Darling-Hammond wrote about difficulties with planning curriculum, lack of classroom management techniques, lack of experience teaching, and trouble identifying student learning needs (Darling-Hammond, 1999).

The effectiveness of various teacher certification programs in preparing teachers is a huge topic that many have tried to address. The debate that currently exists is over whether certification matters at all and how much of an impact a teacher’s certification has on student achievement. Proponents of standard certification claim that there is a need for strong certification requirements since they delineate minimally qualified teachers and in the end schools hire only the best candidates (Boyd et al, 2007). The requirements are there to ensure bad teachers do not pass and do not end up teaching in our schools.

Proponents of alternative routes say that teacher preparation is expensive both for individuals, who invest money for tuition and their time, and for schools who focus on educating prospective teachers. Having many requirements as part of the traditional (undergraduate) way to be certified discourages some who could have been good teachers from taking that path. With alternative routes, people can be hired because they are academically strong in the subject they want to teach. These are people who focused their time and energy in mastering a subject so it is believed that with little training they can pass on their knowledge to students.

Boyd et al. say that “highly selective alternative route programs can produce effective teachers who perform about the same as teachers from traditional routes after two years on the job” (Boyd et al. 2007). This implies that teachers from even most selective alternative route programs would be struggling in their first two years. However, with experience on the job, their performance would improve. The evidence that teachers from different certification routes will perform about the same, challenges whether or not states should strengthen existing requirements or make them more flexible to have even more interest in the teaching field. Furthermore, Glazerman et al. have found that Teach for America teachers are helping students do better in math than the traditionally certified teachers. They say that “average math scores were higher among TFA students than among control students, and the difference was statistically significant” (Glazerman et al. 2006). With this positive impact, it shows that alternative route teachers may be more desirable to teach certain subjects.

Regardless of the positive gains that Teach for America candidates can bring about, there are those who claim that TFA and programs like it are not good. Linda Darling-Hammond supports the traditional education routes and criticizes alternative programs such as Teach for America. She criticizes TFA for not looking out for students' best interests, but rather for college students who are seeking to do "charity" work. She cites a former TFA teacher who professed that they were not prepared enough even though they had good intentions and will to work with students. One student in particular said that "just eight weeks of training...may be long enough to train neighborhood clean-up workers or even police auxiliaries but it isn't enough for teachers" (Darling-Hammond, 1994). Based on her viewpoint, TFA teachers go into classrooms with "simplistic approaches to teaching that have little or no grounding in knowledge about how students learn or what teaching strategies may be effective" (Darling-Hammond, 1994).

Furthermore, most of the members of TFA did not have any training in child development, learning theory or training in how to, for instance, teach kids reading. They attempt to do what they think is right, but lack of training and understanding of their students is a barrier to effective teaching. (Darling-Hammond, 1994). The assumption on behalf of TFA that their candidates are "the best and the brightest" leads them to assuming that those same college graduates can figure out how to teach on their own. The logic that these are smart college graduates who can do it on their own prevents them from getting the training they need to succeed.

The relationship between different teachers in schools is also critical. Darling-Hammond says that Teach for America candidates were not getting along with the other teachers in the school, who would have been great mentors and advisors for incoming teachers. "The staff began complaining that the TFAers didn't have high expectations of the children" said one a first grade teacher (Darling-Hammond, 1994). Even the TFA teachers expressed their dissatisfaction with TFA. One TFA teacher said, "I don't think I'm what they need. Every classroom in schools like these needs an experienced teacher." Darling-Hammond says that

"TFA candidates often have difficulty with curriculum development, students' differing learning styles, classroom management, and student motivation. Unprepared teachers usually try to teach in the way they were taught, but with little awareness of the thinking processes undergirding their former teachers' actions and decisions" (Darling-Hammond, 1994).

In terms of training, before teachers are placed in classrooms, the recruits are trained for eight weeks during which they spend half of the time in "disconnected one-hour workshops

from which they can choose at random (about 19 days) in a “students teaching” experience in summer school classrooms” (Darling-Hammond, 1994). She believes that this short time is not enough to train and prepare teachers to face some of the toughest schools in our nation. Even the portfolio evaluation that teachers have to submit is not rigid and it was noted that even when teachers do poorly on portfolio reviews, they are given another year to teach in order to improve themselves. This all comes at cost to students who are deprived of qualified teachers who know what they are doing.

A positive thing about alternate teacher routes, including Teach for America, is that the recruits do have higher levels of academic achievement than the average college graduate (cite). Alternative programs rely heavily on exams in order to judge who is “qualified” and these teachers perform better than standard teachers. The fellows of the Teaching Fellows Program in New York City, for instance, were found to have higher exam scores, undergraduate college rankings, and SAT scores than the traditional program teachers (Grossman et al., 2009). Furthermore, a few analyses of the alternative programs show that teachers in alternative programs are racially more diverse and there are more men in the programs, which has been a positive addition to the field of teaching (Grossman et al., 2009). These teachers are recruited to serve in hard-to-staff schools and in schools with high number of minority students so diverse teachers are a good addition. However, the benefit of diversifying our teachers may not outweigh the lack of qualifications and preparedness to serve these students.

To add complexity to the teacher certification programs, Richard Ingersoll bring in another issue on this debate.. He claims that it is not how these teachers get certified or which education program they go through. He blames low performance of students and teachers who are struggling on school hiring practices. His argument is that the huge majority of teachers is in fact certified and has sufficient preparation. However, when they are hired, they are placed to teach subjects that may not be their strength. He calls this "out-of-field teaching" (Ingersoll, 1999). “For example, in each of the fields English, math, and history, ever year well over four million secondary-level students are taught by teachers with neither a major or minor in the field” (Ingersoll, 1999). He says that a teacher may be very well qualified and certified to teach biology, but she/he can be placed to teach physics. This out-of-field teaching is the real culprit based on Ingersoll.

According to Ingersoll, a teacher is qualified if he/she has expertise in at least three areas: knowledge of the subject, skill in teaching and pedagogical content knowledge which means knowing which method to use with particular topics, with particular students and particular kind of settings

(Ingersoll, 1999). Teachers may very well have this in some subjects, but with budget cuts and especially smaller schools, teachers may be teaching things for which they are not certified. Therefore, the root cause of unprepared teachers is not that they are unqualified altogether, but that they are unqualified for what has been imposed on them by their schools.

Teacher certification has been talked about and addressed by many researchers. They may be defending one view over another but in the end, everyone is trying to find definitive answers as to what makes teachers “good” teachers and as a result have them educate our students. Understanding what makes good teachers may lead to “improved quality of teachers; however, it is also possible these standards restrict the supply of qualified individuals by discouraging them from trying to become teachers” (Goldhaber and Brewer, 2000). But as teachers are in high demand and we are trying to weed out bad teachers, it will take more research to come to more conclusive results.

### ***Data and Analysis***

In order to bring this issue over certification to Hartford Public Schools, I had an opportunity to interview teachers from a range of different certification programs: undergraduate at a four-year institution (two different colleges), graduate programs (accelerated one-year program), and alternate route to certification (Teach for America). My teachers are as follows:

Teacher V – UConn undergraduate teacher certification program

Teacher B – Boston College undergraduate teacher certification program.

Teacher C - Teach for America teacher

Teacher A – UConn’s Master’s 1 year Accelerated Program

Teacher E – Teach for America teacher

Teacher L - University of Hartford undergraduate teacher certification program

### ***Reasons for Teaching***

In my sample size of six teachers, I had two teachers who were definitely sure that they wanted to teach since very early on in their lives. Teacher V said “There wasn’t any point when I realized that I wanted to teach, so no epiphany, I always knew sort of knew that’s what I wanted to do. Teacher B also

said that the reason he went to that school, in addition to other reasons, is because he was able to get his teaching certification upon completion of his undergraduate education.

Neither one of these teachers mentioned that someone talked to them about teaching, recruited them into teaching or that it seemed “like an easy thing to do” after completing their undergraduate. They were certain of their decision of wanting to become teachers, and it reflected in their early start on both education classes and the major in the subject they wanted to teach. Both of these teachers are mathematics teachers.

The three Teach for America teachers are somewhat similar in why they choose to do Teach for America over any other program to get certified (as well as over doing any other job). They were opposite to the more traditional sort of teachers discussed above in that they were recruited by someone, had heard about the program and how it works, and wanted to do something that would be quick. Teachers C said,

“I was walking from class one day, and I never really wanted to teach – so I was walking and I randomly stumbled over teach for America recruiter. He stopped me because I looked like I was bored. It sounded like a cool opportunity to be able to like teach right away without going through all the, I guess, the certification program and student teaching. “

This “randomness” of just stumbling upon someone recruiting was expressed very similarly by the teacher who went to University of Hartford. She said that she wanted to do something relating to mathematics “because that would be the logical step after I did my math study.” She thought about working for one of the insurance companies in the area. She was born and raised in Hartford County, but not Hartford, and so she knew that there was a reputation associated with the insurance companies in the city. The reason she did not do that is because it was hard to find a job. Teacher L explained,

“In this economy, I still wanted to do that. I wanted to work for Aetna, Travelers or The Hartford. Well, really any one of them or others. But with this economy, and two years it was even worse! So I needed something else.”

The third Teach for America teacher was another example of not wanting to really teach, but with no other alternatives given to her; she wanted to give it a try. She went to UConn, majoring in Biology. Her initial goal was to go to medical school, “but honestly it is so competitive, I just couldn’t, could not keep up” she explained. Teacher E then took time, as she was advised by friends, to give a try to Teach for America. She said “I was somewhat confident that I would be accepted: I was intending to teach Biology and they always said they [Teach for America] want Math and Science teachers.” This

confidence that she would be accepted into the program paid off and she became a corps member in 2008.

In my sample size of six, the two Teach for America teachers came into teaching based on stumbling onto recruiters or as a job to do until their “real” job was available. The teachers who decided to study education in the undergraduate were basing their decision on having wanted to teach since they could remember. It was something that they decided to do coming into the undergraduate school.

### *Differences as Perceived by Teachers*

Since these programs are different in how they train their teachers I was expecting teachers to differ in how they explain the shortcomings of their teacher certification program. To some extent my expectations were met. Teachers did mention weaknesses – and not only when I explicitly asked them that question. All the teachers were able to criticize their programs from various aspects.

In order to address the issue with TFA, all of the teachers mentioned the perhaps most obvious weakness that there are people who do get into teaching for the wrong reasons. Teacher E pointed out:

“Teach for America right now is, there is this...this is...there is this status associated with it. Thing of “hey I got into TFA” as an accomplishment. That’s why you have a large percentage of students from ivy leagues applying and being accepted. There is like this statistic that is harder to get into TFA than Harvard law. Yeah.”

She went on to say that at UConn, there are a lot of smart people who think that being accepted into Teach for America is another achievement. At that point, it doesn’t become a matter of teaching students but rather another achievement on their resume.

Teacher C furthermore illustrated how there are people who become teachers for the “wrong reason”. According to him, “wrong reason” would be someone coming in for the reputation of the program. He said that since Teach for America targets highly intelligent perspective teachers, they build a reputation that college graduates want. He said “It’s really hard, because they are selective and they are looking for certain kind of person.” The prestige of the program and Teach for America’s low acceptance rate makes it desirable to high achievers. He relates a story of a graduate from Pepperdine University who was in an honors program. And as a Teach for America advertized, he was the perfect person to teach. However, as he found himself working with kids and working on creating plans and engaging activities for the younger kids, he found himself “bored and he could not stick through it”.



Teacher C says that the purpose of the story is that even though this guy quit, most other people do not. He says “Some candidates know that they can’t do it but stick through it. They are not willing to give up because they are raised in society where giving up isn’t acceptable.” When people who realize that they are not meant to be teachers stay in teaching, the students of those teachers suffer. Coming into teaching from the point of view that one is smart and, therefore, can teach is wrong because those candidates do not have passion to work with kids. They do not see teaching as their career, but rather just another job.

Teacher L also mentioned that the mentality of Teach for America is wrong. Teach for America has the mentality that if you are not one of the Teach for America teachers, you aren’t good. She says “TFA has a mentality that if you are not Teach for America teacher, there is no way that you can be a good teacher.” She is quick to point out that she works “with great teachers, and I also see bad TFA teachers.” Teach for America thinks this as a key component of their program, and they want all the teachers to believe this. She says that most teachers go into schools believing just that.

The implication of having this attitude toward teaching is that one does not need to be trained in order to become a teacher. If TFA claims that their program of having their teachers trained for six weeks over the summer is good enough, it undermines the longer training that undergraduate programs are providing. By assuming that one can become a teacher over brief period of time, it perpetrates the idea that training is not very important as long as one has a degree in some subject matter.

Teacher C similarly criticized this part of Teach for America. He said that Teach for America sees themselves as the solution to all the problems in any school given. He said,

“They are saying that TFA is the answer to all the problems, and that all teachers need to be like TFA teachers. They are not going to come out and say that, but there is that feeling that if you are not TFA and you are not doing what we are doing, then you can’t be a good teacher.”

While most of the criticism against Teach for America were by TFA teachers (perhaps based on the fact that my question asked them to talk about weaknesses of their **own** program), there were other teachers who brought up the negative perspective of Teach for America. Teacher A, who received his teaching through UConn’s accelerated master’s program, said that there was a teacher who came to his school thinking like Teach for America wanted her to think. “She thought that all other teachers don’t know what we are doing” and he went on to laugh about how “naïve Teach for America teachers are in believing everything that TFA tells them to believe.”

But Teach for America was not the only program seen as the one that attracted teachers for the wrong reasons. Teacher A from UConn's masters program said that his own program was attracting teachers who wanted a quick way to do something. This program does not require any background in the educational studies as prerequisite to the program. They only require their students to have a strong background in the undergraduate major. They then prepare students over the intensive year long program. His concern was that there needs to be more education knowledge, on top of the content knowledge.

Interestingly enough, Teach for America teachers I interviewed were able to say that there are other Teach for America teachers who get into teaching for the wrong reasons, but they did not consider themselves to be one of those teachers. However, looking at their answers as to why they became Teach for America teachers, they were "randomly" stumbling upon recruiters, they also failed to secure the job they really wanted at one of the large companies and only then deciding to do Teach for America as the fall back option, and aspiring medical school student who "couldn't keep up" with the rest of the pre-med majors. The statement "I never really wanted to teach" are repeating over and over again, yet they see themselves in teaching for a good reason versus those other Teach for America teachers who are not.

While I am sure that there are Teach for America teachers who wanted to teach and Teach for America was just one of several ways they could obtain permission to teach, my small sample of two Teach For America Teachers showed otherwise. All the teachers were in for the "wrong" reason, as defined by their own terms: someone teaching who wasn't intending to do so early on.

Equally important to mention is that just because someone got in to teach for the wrong reason, does not mean that they will be a bad teacher. Teach for America teachers talked passionately about their students, about their roles as teachers, about how responsive their students are to their efforts. Teacher C also mentioned how the Teach for America director in Connecticut asked him to share his tips and strategies, and why and how he accomplishes engaging his students so well. Therefore, it is important to give credit to the work that Teach for America teachers are doing. However, if these teachers decided to teach as an alternative to something else, that means that they may be leaving teaching altogether when other opportunities arise. Raymond and Fletcher say that in their four cohorts, "Across the four cohorts of teachers included in this study who completed two years or more of teaching, more than a third of TFA teachers remained past their commitment" (Raymond and Fletcher,

2002). This means that around 60% of those teachers have left teaching after completing the required two years.

### *Success Based on Personality Traits*

In addition to criticizing their programs, what I found is that there is a large emphasis on themselves as being the key players if they succeed or not. In our conversation about classroom management as well as discussions on teaching content to their students, teachers strongly believed that they could handle the classrooms. They thought that one cannot be trained or taught to handle classrooms, but rather that it was something that teacher had it “in them”. This is across the board: both Teach for America teachers and graduate and undergraduate certification programs’ teachers felt this way. Teacher C from Teach for America said,

“It comes down to teacher personality and how teacher handles it [the classroom]. You can’t teach someone how to manage and command the room, you can’t teach someone to hold someone’s attention so a lot of times the elementary and middle school teachers in the TFA are getting all these strategies that they probably could use, like call and response, starting the class, having like a consequence board, and things like that. But with us, in high school if we walked in and said “When I said ‘Start’, you say ‘Let’s go’” it just wouldn’t work. So teaching us about classroom management can’t happen. There is no script. It is then about whom you are as a person. And you can’t change yourself; it’s within each teacher to do that, to have it or not to be able to do those things. “

Teacher A from UConn’s master’s program and certification said that it is his personality traits that made him successful. He attributes his students respecting him and doing well to his “easy going” personality and love for what he is doing. He says, “You cannot teach me or anyone else how to work with kids. If I suck at it, in the end, you can do only so much. Good teachers have it in them, and if you aren’t one of those teachers to have it in you, you won’t be good” he said.

Teacher V from UConn’s undergraduate teaching certification explained that teachers need to have certain qualities to be good teachers. Among her major qualities is confidence. She said “You have to have confidence, you have to make decisions quickly, you have to be on your toes all the time, you have to have a sense of improv [being able to improvise], you know, no matter how much you plan, something is going to change your plans.” To her, having the confidence that she can handle the class makes all the difference in how she teaches. She believes that there needs to be collaboration between students and herself, but she has to have the confidence that things will go “according to key things in my plan so I don’t lose control.”

Teacher B who did his undergraduate at Boston College was very much aligned in his thinking with both UConn's master's program Teacher A and Teacher V from UConn's undergraduate teacher certification. Teacher B said,

“You have to be easy going, but you have to also know how to put your food in the sand, so you don't get pushed around. I don't know what number one is, but it's about your personality. It isn't what you know about your subject. You also have to like what you are doing, because students can immediately figure who likes doing this and who doesn't. If they see you don't [like what you are doing] they will rip you apart.”

Relying on “personality” as an important tool to give teachers ability to handle classrooms is an important finding. Teachers do not see training programs as the most important factor. They attribute their success in classrooms not to the training they received, but rather to something that they possessed before they even became teachers. Being able to work with students and gaining their respect was seen as something that cannot be incited if one does not have it.

#### *Strengths of Individual Programs*

Even though all of the teachers were able to point out weaknesses in their programs, they were also enthusiastic to talk about strengths and benefits of their programs. UConn's programs are diverse because they offer three mainstream ways to receive certification: undergraduate, integrated bachelor's/master's teacher education program and then master's for college graduates. I had two teachers from UConn: from the master's program for college graduates and from the undergraduate program. Both of the teachers (more than any other teachers) stressed how important collaboration was. Their programs, both in undergraduate and in graduate school, emphasized the importance of working with other teachers in their schools. Teacher V said “They kept saying that we shouldn't be reinventing the wheel, rather just working on improving what's already in place. And to do that, you had to collaborate.”

Teacher B also said that Boston College was always reminding their teachers of the importance of working with others in the same field. He said

“Our program completely and over the board, which I loved, with their emphasis on collaboration with other teachers. They couldn't emphasize enough how important collaboration was. It's not stealing of information, it's collaborating. It's not stealing, but working with someone.”

Teachers from Teach for America said that collaboration with other teachers was important too, however, Teach for America was strongly encouraging them to work mostly with other Teach for

America teachers. All three of my Teach for America teachers said this in their interviews. Teacher E said that her program urged her to work with only other Teach for America teachers. She says,

“They urge you to work with other TFA teachers, especially with teachers in other classes within the same field. TFA tells you, I don’t want to say cautious about working with other teachers, but they like you to work with TFA teachers. Because there is still this whole idea that you know, what we are doing is the best way and approach.”

These stark differences in which the teachers have been told what to do had an impact on their teaching practices. Teacher L said that she is more likely to talk to a teacher in another school who is a Teach for America teacher to ask for advice, than any of the teachers in her own school. Teacher C said that when he started teaching in his school, he was the only Teach For America teacher at that time and even in that case when he was the only TFA teacher, he didn’t collaborate much with other teachers his first year. However, he did say that now since he is teaching for the third year, he has found himself working with all the teachers, regardless of the program they are from. But his concluding mark was “I have more freedom now because I am Teach for America alumni at this point, but they certainly didn’t like it before.”

Teach for America teachers have also expressed that the training, while short, was extremely beneficial. The training was described by members as “heavily based on planning, unit planning, and curriculum planning.” It was also seen as providing the most essential tools needed to be able to go to a classroom and teach. The teachers from Teach for America were still “just thrown in there [classroom]” as Teacher C said, but they received support over the next two years. Teacher E said that “everything else you would need came over the next two years. One Saturday a month, we had trainings for other things we needed.”

The teaching certification at both Boston College and University of Connecticut involved longer periods of student teaching. Teacher A said

“The most helpful, and I guess the most obvious, is the student teaching component. It is a mandatory three months of teaching. You are supposed not to have sink or swim method. They are supposed to guide you along. UConn had a process of how you were going to student teach: first few weeks of student teaching would be more of observing, taking notes, writing lesson plans with the cooperating teacher and after that they gradually, slowly bring you into the forefront.”

Teacher A said that most of the students were successful and enjoyed their student teaching placements. Some were quicker to start teaching while others took the time to get to that level. Either

way, working with both UConn facilitators and the cooperating teacher in the classroom provided necessary guidance. The gradual transition from learning about teaching to actually teaching helped students, decreased their anxieties, and prepared them step by step to gain confidence to handle the whole class.

### *Views of Other Teachers in School*

Before I even came around to asking my interviewees to talk about other teachers in the school, the topic came up. There was a clear difference between teachers who received their certification as undergraduates and those who did not. The undergrad certification teachers I worked with blamed others for not wanting to put up with intense work. They believed that those who want to teach should know by college time whether that's what they should be doing or not. "It is hard to decide what you want to do when you are in middle school, even in high school. But by college, you know what you are interested in and you should decide if teaching is for you" said teacher B. He declared education and mathematics majors his freshman year and focused on both of those.

Undergraduate certified teachers were critical of how others after graduation suddenly decide that they want to teach. They see them as just using Teach for America as a temporary site of employment. "It is not a long term job" said Teacher V, UConn undergraduate, "and our students are suffering the consequences of these people performing this experiment." The idea that they think of Teach for America as doing experiments demonstrates how much they devalue the program. Teach for America in this sense is not seen as producing "real" teachers but rather just providing available employment for otherwise unemployed college graduates.

On the other hand, Teach for America, as well as UConn master's certified teachers, had negative views of those who chose to receive their certification as undergraduates. In my joint interview of Teach for America teacher and UConn master's of education teacher it is clear that both did not think highly of the program.

Teacher A: "I remember, you can pick out education students in your history classes at UConn. You can 100% pick them out. One, they are, there is something different. I remember I can pick out those students. They didn't care as much about the history maybe. They were worried more about education.

Teacher C: You had the sense that people who were in these programs were just looking for the top level that they would have to know in order to teach their students later.

Teacher A: Exactly.

Teacher C: And that was the difference. They didn't think that you needed to go that deep into

the subject to teach US history to high school students. It was more like, what do I need to know to know enough as opposed to someone who is history undergrad and wanted to get to the very core of the subject. You can tell who those students are. Some of them even told me “I just have to get this done.”

With too much to worry about, Teacher A concluded that what these teachers learn in the content areas is not good enough. He said,

“They weren’t as prepared. I really don’t think they were as prepared. They were focused on too many different things. By focusing on too many different things, you are actually not focused on the thing that you should actually be focused on. So for me I just focused on history and political science. They were focusing on those two things maybe and on top of that all their education classes because they wanted to be teachers. But in the end, then they would focus on education classes more.”

This resembles some of the literature on different teacher certification programs. The view of TFA and other alternative programs is that teachers need to focus on undergraduate studies on the content area rather than worrying about teacher preparation. This directly contradicts the research from Darling-Hammond and others who claim that teacher preparation programs are critical for successful teaching.

Whether or not they were criticizing one another’s programs openly, there was an idea that what they were doing was the best thing. It made me think of whether it is pride that they want to defend their program or whether they truly believed that. In the end, I think it’s both. They do not want to admit that they would have chosen a program that would put them at a disadvantage. But at the same time, from the passion they had for their students and how they talked about their classrooms, it was obvious that they at least cared about their job. Teacher C said, “I guess I thought, if they did it the way we did it, then it would be better. There it goes, me thinking as TFA would want me to think, that we are better [laughing].”

### ***Conclusion***

In the end, does it matter which certification one gets? Based on my interviews, all of the teachers were willing to work with their students and believed that they can help their students perform better. All of the teachers were teaching in two urban schools with high need students. TFA targets these schools with their mission of helping high-need areas, so teachers chose to work in those settings. Teachers which obtained their teaching certification in

undergraduate or graduate schools held similar beliefs about helping high need students. So, does certification matter if they are doing the same thing now?

Based on these interviews and the existing literature on teacher certification, it does matter. Teachers may be doing equally well in a classroom, but they are promoting two different versions of what it means to be a teacher. On one hand, undergraduate programs and graduate program teachers value the idea of training and studying education pedagogy as a field like any other. In order to become a good teacher, they believe that you need to receive education in how to get to that point. Teach for America Teachers on the other hand, are looking at teaching as an opportunity to help out for a brief time and leave. Their perspective on teaching is not as a career; rather it is seen as “charity” work. The expectation is that one would do it for a two years and then move on to other things. This image of teachers damages the view of what teaching is.

Furthermore, the implication that one can come in and go in two years exacerbates the problem of high turnover teachers. Teachers in high need areas leave their teaching in search of other teaching positions in areas where they may have an easier time teaching. With TFA teachers, this problem becomes even worse. These schools need stability and consistency, not a program that by design is intended to have high turnover rates.

As such, the debate over certification routes will continue. New research and data on teachers is necessary in order to evaluate the effectiveness of teachers, regardless of which program they come from. Having more effective ways to measure teachers effectiveness will lead us to better examine which teaching certification programs are more productive.



## ***APPENDIX***

### Questions to ask Teachers in Hartford Public Schools about their Teacher Certification Programs

- How long have you been teaching?
- Did you teach in any other school previously?
- What made you want to teach?
  - o First career? Career changes?
- How did you obtain your teaching certification?
  - o Undergrad or graduate program?
  - o Alternate route?
- Thinking about your teaching certification program, what was the biggest strength of that program?
- What was the biggest weakness of that program?
- After teaching in a classroom for \_\_ years, do you wish the program prepared you for something that they may not have?
- How much did the program focus on strengthening your academics?
- How much did the program focus on classroom management?
- How much did the program focus on teacher-to-teacher interactions?
- Why did you choose that certification route?
- If you had a chance to do it all over, would you get certified any other way?
- What do you think are the most important characteristics to be a teacher?
- Which characteristics did your teacher certification program instill as being key for successful teaching experience?
- Do you think that your program was consciously preparing you for a placement in an urban placement? Suburban? Rural?
- Did you have a teacher training placement while obtaining the certification?
  - o Where did you have your teacher training placement before getting a license?
- Did your personal background have an impact in the way you approach teaching? Do you believe that some people just have it in them to be teachers? How important is the training?
- How long are you planning on staying a teacher?
- In comparison to other teachers that started teaching the same year as you, do you feel all of you were on the same level of teaching?
- What's your opinion of teachers who were certified
  - o A) Traditional route?
  - o B) Teach for America?
  - o C) Accelerated State Certification?

- D) Any other way?
- Any other comments you have about your teaching experience?

Thank you! I appreciate your time and effort you put in to help me conduct my research!

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