

## **An HBCU Alternative Teaching Certification Program: Increasing the Educator Workforce Numbers While Recognizing Student and Program Insights**

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### **Abstract**

This ethnographic case study offers a description of an alternative teacher certification program within an HBCU-based teacher preparation program within Xavier University of Louisiana. The program is named the Norman C. Francis Teacher Residency Program (NCFTR). Data from the study offers insights from six in-service, alternative teaching certification seeking educators within this program. Research findings indicate continued knowledge is desired by each teacher. These areas include continued erudition in (1) pedagogy including the selection and effective usage of differentiated instruction, instructional strategies and instructional activities, (2) content mastery, (3) the appropriate types, choice, and procedures of assessments, (4) understanding the steps of a lesson cycle and lesson planning, and (5) classroom management. Data from the participants also reveal the alternative certification program prepares the students to effectively teach and the schools in which the educators teach should continue to offer more support, resources, and trainings needed to ensure comprehensive understandings these areas.

*Keywords:* differentiated instruction, content mastery, lesson planning, classroom management, historically black colleges and universities

### **Introduction**

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) have unlocked the door of educational opportunities for many African Americans who were, as of not long ago, legally deprived of an education and a multitude of rights and resources. Many HBCUs have been the bedrock for African American students creating a celebratory atmosphere of erudition, identity, and pride (National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2024). HBCUs were conceived with the determinant undertaking of educating Black students with a quality college

education. This is especially evident in the context of those students seeking a career in education. The relationship between HBCUs and becoming an educator has a long, accomplished history, yet there is still a disparity in numbers between teachers of color and their counterparts (Nguyen & Gold, 2020). A university-based alternative certification teacher preparation program is working to increase the representation of teachers of color in classrooms. This article's conceptual framework positions Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) at the intersection of history, identity, and the empowerment of educators of color. It emphasizes the critical role of HBCUs in addressing disparities in teacher diversity and explores how alternative certification programs can expand their impact. By examining this intersection, the framework provides a foundation for future research, policy development, and educational practices that promote equity and excellence in education.

### **Literature Review**

According to the National Museum of African American History and Culture (2024), the first colleges for African Americans were formed primarily through the fortitudes of black churches with the reinforcement of the American Missionary Association (AMA) and The Freedman's Bureau. This Association and The Freedman's Bureau were both created when Congress passed the Freedmen's Bureau Acts of 1865 and 1866 to launch a Bureau to assist in providing food, shelter, clothing, medical services, schools, and land to displaced Southerners, including newly freed African Americans after the Civil War ended on April 9, 1865. When the Union armies began freeing slaves after the American Civil War, the AMA worked tirelessly to open schools and churches for them. The AMA founded more than 500 schools for freed slaves in the South in the decades following the Civil War. Creating schools at all levels, including higher education, was not easy. According to National Institute of Food and Agriculture (2024), The Second Morrill Act of 1890, signed into law by President Benjamin Harrison, required states, especially former confederate states, to provide and establish separate land-grants and money for the creation of higher education institutions for black students if admission was not allowed at other higher education institutions. As a result, many Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were founded. Early HBCUs were established to train teachers, agriculture, mechanical arts, religious leaders, and other community members

At present there are approximately 107 HBCUs in the United States with more than 228,000 students enrolled. 56 institutions are under private control, and 51 are public colleges

and universities (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022). According to the Minority Education Initiatives (2024), 32 offer doctoral degree programs, 53 offer master's degree programs, 84 offer bachelor's degree programs-and 33 offer associate degree programs, educating students of all racial and socio-economic backgrounds.

### **Historically Black Colleges and Universities Teacher Preparation Programs**

According to HBCU Teacher Education Schools-2024 Ranking (2024) of the 107 HBCU's, 80 have teacher preparation programs. The most teacher education HBCU schools are located in North Carolina (10 schools), Texas (8 schools), and Alabama (7 schools). Others are spread throughout the United States. There are eight HBCUs in Louisiana including Dillard University in New Orleans, Grambling State University in Grambling, Southern University at New Orleans, Southern University at Shreveport, Southern University AG Center, Southern University Law Center, Southern University and A&M College in Baton Rouge, and Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans. Six of eight of these universities in Louisiana have a teacher preparation program.

### **Alternative Teacher Certification Programs**

Beginning in the mid-1980s two states, New Jersey and Texas, created alternative teaching programs. Alternative or non-traditional teacher certification programs were originally conceived to provide more teachers to address a decline in the number of students seeking an education degree. This decline in numbers contributed to an educator shortage. Soon many other states embraced alternative teaching programs to combat a nation-wide teacher shortage. Advancement of these programs received major support with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. Provisions within this Act identified alternative teacher certification programs as an effective means to train teachers. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and Title II of the Act addressed the preparing, training, and recruiting of highly quality teachers. A key aspect of this Act was to recruit qualified professionals from other fields and provide them with effective alternative paths to teacher certification (Mikulecky et al., 2004).

At present, alternative certification routes to teaching assists to assuage teacher shortages. These programs serve to recruit individuals who have a keenness for teaching but did not pursue a traditional, institution of higher education (IHE) undergraduate teacher preparation program. As these alternative methods to teaching certification have become more accepted, all states and

the District of Columbia have developed various types of these programs. Programs can be achieved in many forms. Three popular methods include Practitioner Teacher Programs, Master's Degree Programs, or Certification-Only Programs. These programs can be online, in person, or can be in hybrid-form which includes a combination of online and in-person classes. The programs can be done at universities with alternative certification programs, school districts working in conjunction with a university or for-profit operators outside institutes of higher education, or certification-only operators which are often for-profit. Practitioner Teacher Programs are streamlined routes to teacher certification that merge intensive coursework and full-time teaching. Master's Degree Programs comprise a concentrated path to a master's degree as well as alternative education certification in a specific area or areas of interest and/or need often with the student full-time teaching but not always. Certification-Only Programs are for persons focused on the alternative certification only and not seeking a master's degree. The individuals in these programs often work full-time as a teacher or perhaps an education para-professional, depending on the state education agency guidelines. Participants also must have a bachelor's degree and understand the programs are an accelerated route to teaching, typically completed in one to two years, depending on the program. Many of these programs also grant a transitional or provisional teaching certificate. This certificate enables these individuals to teach while completing their teacher preparation program. These programs likewise can lead to a post-graduate teaching certificate(s) or a master's degree (Teacher Certification Degrees, 2022).

According to data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in 2015-2016, about 18% of public-school teachers earned their teaching license through an alternative certification program. In the most recent NCES report, which collected data on the 2017-2018 school year, the percentage of public middle and high school mathematics, natural science, and other teachers who entered teaching through an alternative program included 23.5% of math teachers, 30.1% teach the natural sciences, and 22.4% teach other disciplines (NCES, 2021). Alternative certification programs enroll an elevated percentage of students of color than traditional teacher preparation programs, but white students still make up the majority of enrolled students in all varieties of teacher preparation programs (Yin & Partelow, 2020).

Alternative certification programs offer those who have not taken the conventional route to becoming an educator the means to a license to teach. During this undertaking education coursework within these are centered on educator certification standards. Within these standards,

certification seeking individuals are expected to become proficient in instruction, content mastery (their own and that of their students), and crafting effectual opportunities for student application of this content, including instructional strategies for full comprehension. These same requirements are undertaken in traditional teacher preparation programs. Often state and national assessment data influences how and what pedagogy, content, and application of this content (Yin & Partelow, 2020).

### **Declining Educator Workforce Numbers**

The teaching profession has experienced significant fluctuations over the past 50 years, with a sharp decline in recent decades, reaching its lowest levels due to various systemic and societal challenges. In the context of declining numbers of historical trends are denoted. Kraft and Lyon (2022) observed a notable decline in individuals entering the field of education in the 1970s, followed by a rise in the 1980s through the mid-1990s, then stability until 2010. However, since 2010, there has been a persistent decline in the number of people choosing to become educators, with the profession now at its lowest levels in half a century. Research attributes the decline to several causes, including low pay, limited resources, stressful work conditions, high workload, fewer women entering teaching, an aging workforce with insufficient replacements, and a perceived lack of respect and support for educators.

The data presented by Kraft and Lyon (2022) reflects a cyclical trend in the teaching profession, influenced by social, economic, and cultural factors. The mid-20th-century dip can be linked to shifting career opportunities for women and minorities, who historically made up a large proportion of the teaching workforce. The resurgence in the 1980s and 1990s coincided with efforts to expand educational access and improve working conditions. However, the subsequent decline highlights deeper systemic issues, such as stagnating wages, increasing accountability pressures, and a lack of institutional support, which collectively discourage individuals from pursuing or staying in teaching careers.

These issues are compounded by demographic shifts, such as retiring educators not being replaced at sufficient rates and fewer women which historically is the backbone of the teaching profession. Many are also choosing other career paths due to expanded opportunities in other fields. The profession's low pay relative to other careers requiring similar education levels further exacerbates these trends. Additionally, many feel there is a lack of respect and support from

society, administrators, and policymakers which can create an unwelcoming atmosphere that can perpetuate the decline.

The teaching profession is at a critical juncture, with its lowest participation levels in 50 years. This decline is driven by systemic challenges, including low pay, poor working conditions, and a lack of respect for the profession, as well as demographic trends like an aging workforce and changing career preferences among women. Addressing these issues requires systemic reforms to improve teacher compensation, provide greater support and resources, and elevate the profession's status, ensuring a stable and thriving educational workforce for future generations (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Carver-Thomas et al., 2022; Edwards et al., 2023; Kyriacou & Coulthard, 2018; Schmitt & deCourcy, 2022; Sutchter et al., 2016).

### **Increasing Educator Workforce Numbers**

With the declining educator workforce numbers, educational stakeholders are seeking many approaches to increase the number entering and staying in the field of education. Various researchers (Carver-Thomas et al., 2022) have found methods to increase the workforce include high school pipeline programs, financial incentives such as service scholarships, loan forgiveness, improving compensation, investing in recruitment and hiring capacity, community college to 4-year university pathways, improving working conditions, teacher residencies, greater collaboration efforts between the teacher, mentor, school administration, and student caregivers, and culturally and racially diverse university-based alternative certification teacher preparation programs such as the program at Xavier University of Louisiana named the Norman C. Francis Teacher Residency Program (NCFTR). This one-of a kind program takes the concept of alternatively certifying teachers and advances the nurturing process to two years to ensure teacher longevity and success.

NCFTR combines the established methods of Xavier University of Louisiana's Master's Degree program, mentoring, and on-the-job coaching to ensure alternative teacher accomplishments as well as the achievements of the students of these educators. These educators are referred to as Residents and are selected through an intensive nation-wide application process. Those Residents chosen are then matched to a New Orleans elementary, middle, or high school and grade level, based on their desires and the needs of the school. The Residents pursue a Master's degree, receive educator development from a knowledgeable and experienced mentor at the school for one year, and rigorous two-year coaching from the NCFTR program staff.

Residents are offered financial assistance, specific training for high-need schools and subject areas, navigation strategies as they work through the often times complex process of becoming a teacher, and effectual sustenance to guarantee the retention of these new teachers.

Platforms as the NCFTR serve to strengthen the connection between the historical role of HBCUs and the current teacher disparity, it is critical to recognize how these institutions have long been a foundation for Black educational leadership, and to address systemic barriers that continue to limit access to and support for Black teachers. In essence, the historical role of HBCUs in nurturing Black educators is directly linked to current disparities in the teacher workforce. Addressing these disparities requires recognizing and reinforcing the invaluable role that these institutions continue to play in educating and preparing the next generation of teachers

### **Alternative Teacher Certification Program Challenges**

Alternative certification programs for teachers are certified by state Departments of Education, but they can vary across states, creating potential challenges. Thirty-eight years ago, Watts (1986) identified several concerns that remain relevant today. One issue is that these programs may allow individuals to teach in subject areas where they lack content mastery, potentially impacting their ability to effectively teach those subjects. Another concern is that alternative certification candidates may not have as strong a foundation in education theory compared to those who attend traditional teacher preparation programs. Additionally, Watts noted that these programs may not provide sufficient training in teaching methods and classroom management.

More recent research and feedback from educational stakeholders have highlighted additional challenges. These include inconsistent administrative support across alternative certification programs, which can make teachers' professional lives more difficult. Other concerns include the stress alternative certified teachers face, such as classroom management, school/community violence, and the need for better training in pedagogy and curriculum (Bowling & Ball, 2018; King & Yin, 2022; Rose & Sughrue, 2020).

### **Methodology**

The study used an ethnographic case study approach to gather data based on the guiding questions and providing an open framework for examination and thick description of the culture, experiences, and beliefs. Spindler & Spindler (1987) authenticated the use of ethnography as a research discipline by stressing that the objective is to ascertain the cultural knowledge persons

have and how it is used in social situations. They also accentuate the social and cultural dynamics involved and propose ethnography case studies as a means to document these dynamics. For this six month study a qualitative, triangulated approach was used and included interviews, observations, and researcher field notes. From these data, examination via a coding system to assist the explanation process transpired. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) stated “coding qualitative data enables the researcher to recognize and re-contextualize data, allowing a fresh view of what is there” (p. 45). Miles & Huberman (1994) signified this coding and categorizing system grants the researcher to ascribe units of meaning to the information amassed. The information was compiled in “chunks” of words, phrases, sentences, segments, or meanings significant to the study. Codes and categories were developed to retrieve and organize these “chunks” thereby drawing conclusions from the data. Coding also involved constant reading and examining the collected data to ensure well-founded explanation. These interpretations arose from the use of the grounded theory approach called constant comparison (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This approach was a constant process of comparing and revising the significant meanings and segments in and across these categories.

Not only was an ethnographic stance appropriate for this study, but within this stance a case study approach was used. According to Gall et al. (2003), the case study approach stresses the “in-depth study of a phenomenon in its natural context and from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon” (p. 436). The researcher’s primary objective for this study was to closely observe the participant in natural classroom setting that included pedagogy and practices while discovering patterns. This design objective allowed the researchers to study the study participant and the occurring phenomenon holistically and insightfully. The design also allowed for a comprehensive description of the subject and the current knowledge and pedagogy. A systematic approach to attaining and handling research data was established to aid and reinforce the research design and thus the fidelity of the findings.

### **Demographic Sample**

The study participants included six in-service alternative certification seeking teachers and were a convenience sample. The alternative certification program the participants attend is a university-based program in which the researchers teach. Each school in which the educators teach is located in the same large metropolitan area in the southern region of the United States.



Each study participant is in their first year of teaching, which is also the first year of the two-year NCFTR Program.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The researchers conducted two separate observations of each participant while they were teaching their respective subject matter to students. During these observations, the researchers took detailed field notes, capturing instructional strategies, student engagement, and classroom interactions. These field notes served as a foundational resource for subsequent interviews, allowing for a deeper exploration of each participant's teaching methods, challenges, and experiences.

Following each observation, the researchers conducted individual interviews with each participant, resulting in a total of twelve interviews across all participants. The initial interviews were structured, featuring predetermined questions designed to gather baseline information about the participants' teaching practices, perspectives, and experiences. However, as data collection progressed, subsequent interview questions evolved based on emerging themes and insights from both the observations and previous interviews. This iterative approach allowed the researchers to explore topics in greater depth, ensuring that the data collected was rich, contextually relevant, and reflective of the participants' lived experiences in the classroom.

To enhance the reliability and validity of the findings, the study employed a systematic and rigorous approach to data collection, management, and analysis. This careful methodology strengthened the research design, ensuring that data were gathered with precision while preserving the integrity and accuracy of the results (Bernard et al., 2016). By prioritizing the perspectives of participants and capturing their experiences within the natural classroom setting, the study provided an authentic and comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with pedagogy in alternative certification programs. This commitment to methodological rigor enhanced the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, ensuring that the conclusions drawn were both meaningful and well-founded in addressing the research questions.

The researchers utilized a systematic observational approach to examine participants' teaching practices in real-time. Each of the six participants was observed two times, resulting in a total of twenty-four observations. These observations specifically focused on how teachers implemented disciplinary literacy strategies within their content areas and engaged with students

during instruction. By conducting multiple observations for each participant, the researcher was able to track changes in teaching practices over time, providing a more comprehensive analysis of pedagogical strategies and their impact on student learning.

Following each observation, the researcher conducted a follow-up interview with the participant to gather insights and reflections on the teaching session. These interviews played a crucial role in the data collection process, allowing participants to share their perspectives on instructional approaches, challenges encountered, and their overall understanding. Through these in-depth discussions, the researcher gained qualitative insights into how educators interpret and apply pedagogy in their classrooms. The interviews also served as a platform for teachers to articulate their teaching experiences, reflect on their instructional methods, and evaluate the effectiveness of various teaching strategies in their subject areas.

Beyond instructional strategies, the interviews helped uncover specific challenges teachers face when integrating effective teaching into their lessons. Participants highlighted obstacles such as limited professional development opportunities, inadequate instructional resources, time constraints, and the difficulty of adapting teaching practices to meet the diverse needs of their students. Exploring these barriers provided the researchers with a deeper understanding of the structural and pedagogical factors that influence applicable teaching implementation.

Additionally, the interviews offered valuable insights into educators' perceptions of student engagement and learning outcomes. Teachers provided firsthand accounts of how students responded to instruction, noting both successes and areas for improvement. These discussions provided a nuanced understanding of the realities of instruction in alternative certification contexts, shedding light on both the potential and the challenges.

The combination of interviews and observations provided a rich and comprehensive dataset, enabling an in-depth exploration of teachers' practices, beliefs, and experiences related to disciplinary literacy instruction. Observations allowed the researcher to document how teachers integrated teaching strategies into their lessons, including scaffolding content, facilitating student discussions, and addressing discipline-specific challenges. The follow-up interviews then gave teachers an opportunity to elaborate on these practices, explaining their instructional choices, reflecting on student engagement, and discussing any adjustments they made to improve learning outcomes.

This dual-method approach not only captured what teachers did in the classroom but also provided insight into their thought processes and professional challenges. Through interviews, teachers shared their perceptions of the effectiveness of their pedagogy, described obstacles in implementation, and identified the support and resources needed to strengthen their instructional practices. Additionally, the discussions revealed how teachers adapted instruction in response to student needs, curriculum requirements, and institutional expectations.

By integrating both observational and interview data, the study offered a well-rounded picture of how teaching is enacted in real classroom settings. This methodological approach strengthened the validity of the findings by triangulating data from multiple sources, leading to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in teaching. The combination of qualitative insights from teacher interviews and real-time classroom observations provided a deeper understanding of both the successes and challenges associated with fostering discipline-specific skills among students.

Field notes taken during observations played a key role in shaping the subsequent interviews, ensuring that discussions were grounded in specific classroom interactions. These notes captured critical aspects of instructional delivery, student engagement, and the teaching strategies teachers employed, allowing the researchers to develop targeted questions that probed deeper into teachers' decision-making processes and instructional challenges.

This approach also provided an opportunity to examine the experiences of alternative certification-seeking teachers, who often face unique challenges as they transition into the teaching profession. Unlike traditionally certified teachers, alternative certification candidates frequently enter the classroom with limited formal training and must learn to teach while actively working with students. By analyzing both observational data and teacher reflections, the study shed light on how these educators adapted to their roles, implemented teaching strategies, and responded to the complexities of teaching diverse learners.

The integration of multiple data sources enabled the researcher to identify patterns in how alternative certification teachers developed their instruction over time. The study also captured variations in instructional approaches, highlighting differences based on subject area, prior professional experience, and access to mentoring or professional development opportunities. Furthermore, this triangulated approach strengthened the credibility and reliability of the findings

by reducing potential biases and ensuring a balanced perspective on how instruction is implemented in classrooms.

Ultimately, this methodological framework contributed to a richer, more holistic understanding of new teacher instruction, offering valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and teacher preparation programs. By grounding the study in both observed classroom practices and teacher reflections, the research provided a clearer picture of the complexities involved in integrating teaching strategies into everyday teaching.

Overall, the combination of observations and interviews allowed for a deeper exploration of the challenges alternative certification-seeking teachers face. By capturing both the external realities of the classroom and the internal struggles of educators, the study highlighted the complexities of becoming an effective teacher in diverse and dynamic educational settings.

### **Findings**

This study offers important insights for educational stakeholders by shedding light on the challenges faced by in-service educators pursuing alternative teaching certification, particularly those enrolled in a Master of Teaching program at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). These educators enter the teaching profession through non-traditional pathways, often with limited formal training in pedagogy and instructional strategies before stepping into the classroom. While their dedication to education and commitment to student success are evident, many struggle to grasp and apply instructional practices. Without a solid foundation in these practices, they may find it difficult to help students engage deeply with effective learning.

Beyond pedagogical challenges, these educators also encounter barriers that impede their ability to implement applicable instruction. Many alternative certification teachers work in under-resourced schools with limited access to high-quality instructional materials and professional development opportunities. The lack of structured training often forces teachers to develop their instructional approaches through trial and error, leading to inconsistent or less effective integration in their teaching. Additionally, balancing the rigorous coursework of a Master of Teaching program with the daily demands of teaching creates additional strain.

Despite these obstacles, the resilience and dedication of these educators highlight the need for stronger institutional support systems. Universities, school districts, and policymakers must collaborate to provide alternative certification teachers with targeted professional development and culturally responsive teaching resources. Addressing the gaps in training and support will help

these educators gain confidence in implementing teaching strategies effectively. Investing in their professional growth not only strengthens their instructional skills but also positively impacts student achievement. This is especially critical in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms, where discipline-specific literacy skills play a key role in fostering academic success.

#### Findings:

1. The application and interview process of each study participant by the staff of the NCFTR was smooth, effective, and valuable. If issues transpired participants signified the staff quickly resolved any concerns.

The application and interview process for each study participant, managed by the staff of the Norman C. Francis Teacher Residency Program, was designed to be efficient, well-organized, and supportive. Participants reported that the process was straightforward and that the staff provided clear guidance at each stage, ensuring a smooth experience from initial application to final selection. The effectiveness of the process was evident in the way the staff promptly addressed any issues or concerns that arose, demonstrating a commitment to responsiveness and problem-solving. Whether participants needed clarification on requirements, assistance with documentation, or had specific concerns about their eligibility, the staff worked quickly to resolve any challenges, fostering a positive and stress-free experience. This level of support not only streamlined the selection process but also reinforced participants' confidence in the program and its commitment to their professional growth.

2. The schools and grade levels matched to the participants aligned with their desired choices. Each participant stated this alignment eased their nervousness of entering a new career/undergoing an unfamiliar process.

The careful matching of schools and grade levels to participants' preferences played a crucial role in easing their transition into teaching, particularly as they embarked on a new career through an alternative certification pathway. By being placed in environments that aligned with their subject area interests and comfort levels, participants felt more at ease and better prepared to focus on developing their instructional skills. This alignment seemed to reduce the anxiety often associated with stepping into an unfamiliar role and allowed them to concentrate on building

relationships with students, adapting to school cultures, and refining their teaching practices. Knowing that they were entering classrooms that matched their desired teaching levels also fostered a sense of confidence and motivation, reinforcing their commitment to both their professional growth and the success of their students. This thoughtful placement process ultimately contributed to a smoother transition, helping participants feel supported and empowered as they navigated the challenges of learning to teach while actively working in the classroom.

3. At entrance to the program each study participant had limited awareness and understanding to the features of pedagogy.

At the start of the program, each study participant indicated they had minimal knowledge of pedagogical principles, instructional strategies, and classroom management techniques, which are essential for effective teaching. Many entered the program from non-traditional backgrounds, meaning they had little to no formal training in lesson planning, student engagement, differentiation, or assessment methods. Their initial understanding of teaching was often based on personal experiences as students rather than a structured knowledge of how to facilitate learning. As a result, they faced challenges in designing instructional activities, managing diverse learning needs, and implementing effective teaching techniques that align with best practices. This lack of foundational pedagogical knowledge made the early stages of their teaching journey particularly overwhelming, as they had to quickly adapt to the demands of the classroom while simultaneously learning educational theories and methodologies. However, as they progressed through the alternative certification teaching program, they gradually built their understanding of pedagogy, learning how to apply evidence-based strategies to support student learning and foster academic success.

4. At entrance to the program each study participant had incomplete comprehension of content being taught in university teacher preparation program courses as well as the content they are to teach students.

Upon entering the program, each study participant indicated they had an incomplete grasp of both the content covered in their university teacher preparation courses and the subject matter they were expected to teach in their classrooms. This

gap in comprehension stemmed from their non-traditional entry into teaching, where many had expertise in their respective fields but lacked the depth of pedagogical knowledge required to effectively translate that expertise into teachable concepts for students. Additionally, the complexity of educational theories, instructional strategies, and curriculum standards introduced in their university courses often posed a challenge, as they were simultaneously learning how to teach while actively instructing students. This dual learning process made it difficult for participants to immediately grasp how to scaffold content, differentiate instruction, and integrate discipline-specific literacy strategies into their teaching. As a result, they initially struggled with lesson planning, student engagement, and assessing student understanding. However, as they progressed through the program, engaged in coursework, and gained hands-on classroom experience, they gradually developed a more comprehensive understanding of both the theoretical and practical aspects of teaching, allowing them to bridge the gap between content knowledge and effective instructional practice

5. This initial unfamiliarity limits each participant's pedagogy, including following best practices of teaching such as lesson cycle steps that can comprise selecting and utilizing appropriate assessments (pre-, during-, post- lesson as well as formal/informal & summative/formative), selecting and utilizing effective instructional techniques, instructional strategies, and instructional activities.

This initial unfamiliarity with pedagogical concepts significantly limited each participant's ability to implement best teaching practices, making it difficult for them to structure effective lessons and facilitate meaningful student learning experiences. Without a solid understanding of the lesson cycle, they struggled to design and sequence instruction in a way that built upon students' prior knowledge and guided them toward mastery of new content. One major challenge was selecting and utilizing appropriate assessments, such as pre-, during-, and post-lesson evaluations, as well as distinguishing between formal and informal assessments or summative and formative assessments to measure student learning effectively. Additionally, participants faced difficulties in choosing and applying instructional techniques, strategies, and activities that aligned with their lesson objectives and supported diverse student

needs. Their limited pedagogical knowledge made it harder for them to differentiate instruction, scaffold complex concepts, and engage students in active learning. As a result, their initial teaching practices often lacked structure and effectiveness, requiring ongoing support, feedback, and hands-on experience to help them develop the necessary skills to implement best teaching practices with confidence and consistency

6. According to the study participants, the university-based alternative certification program courses offer understandings including effectual (1) pedagogy including the selection and effective usage of differentiated instruction, instructional strategies and instructional activities, (2) content mastery in concepts needed to teach such as literacy, students with diverse needs, classroom management, (3) understanding the appropriate types, choices, and procedures of assessments, (4) understanding the steps of a lesson cycle and lesson planning, and (5) classroom management.

According to the study participants, the university-based alternative certification program provided essential knowledge and skills that significantly improved their teaching effectiveness. The courses offered a structured understanding of pedagogy, particularly in selecting and applying differentiated instruction, instructional strategies, and engaging classroom activities to meet diverse student needs. Participants also gained deeper content mastery, learning not only subject-specific material but also critical concepts such as literacy development, strategies for supporting students with diverse learning needs, and effective classroom management techniques. Another key area of growth was their understanding of assessments, including the different types, their purposes, and how to select and implement them appropriately to measure student progress and guide instruction. Additionally, the program helped participants grasp the components of a structured lesson cycle, equipping them with the ability to plan coherent, well-sequenced lessons that maximize student learning. Classroom management, a crucial skill for new teachers, was also emphasized, providing participants with strategies to establish a positive learning environment, maintain student engagement, and handle behavioral challenges effectively. Overall, these foundational understandings allowed



participants to transition from an initial lack of pedagogical knowledge to a more confident and structured approach to teaching.

7. The schools in which the educators teach offer none or very limited additional training or professional development in the best practices in teaching. Four of the six study participants did attend various meetings focused on assessment data (state mandated and benchmark assessments) but each indicated these meetings were informal and no formal assessment training to enhance their understanding had occurred.

The schools where the educators teach provide little to no additional training or professional development on best teaching practices, leaving many alternative certification teachers without the necessary support to refine their instructional skills. While four of the six study participants attended meetings focused on assessment data, including state-mandated and benchmark assessments, they reported that these meetings were largely informal and did not include structured training on how to effectively interpret and use assessment data to drive instruction. Without formal professional development in assessment literacy, participants struggled to make data-informed instructional decisions, adjust teaching strategies based on student performance, and design assessments that accurately measure student learning. This lack of structured training created challenges in understanding how to use assessments not just for compliance but as tools for improving student outcomes. Additionally, the absence of professional development in other critical areas, such as differentiated instruction, lesson planning, and classroom management, left participants to rely heavily on trial and error or seek out resources on their own. The limited training opportunities further reinforced the need for targeted support from both their university-based alternative certification program and their schools to ensure they could effectively implement best teaching practices in their classrooms.

8. Each study participant stated their learning experiences from their assigned mentor was valuable. One participant did divulge they felt their mentor was an asset to their learning but wanted more insight from the mentor especially in the context of best practices in teaching.

Each study participant expressed that their learning experiences with an

assigned mentor were valuable, as mentorship provided them with practical guidance, feedback, and support while they navigated the challenges of teaching. Mentors played a crucial role in helping participants adapt to their new roles by offering insights on classroom management, instructional strategies, and lesson planning. Through observations, discussions, and shared experiences, participants gained a better understanding of how to implement best teaching practices in real classroom settings. However, one participant mentioned that while their mentor was a great asset, they wished for more in-depth guidance, particularly regarding best teaching practices. This suggests that while mentorship was beneficial, the level of support varied, and some participants felt they needed additional, structured mentorship to refine their pedagogical skills further. The desire for more insight highlights the importance of providing mentors with clear expectations and resources to ensure they can offer comprehensive guidance, particularly in areas such as differentiated instruction, assessment strategies, and student engagement techniques. Strengthening mentorship opportunities could enhance the learning experiences of alternative certification teachers, equipping them with the knowledge and confidence needed for long-term success in the classroom.

9. All study participants acknowledged with appreciation the rigorous coaching from the NCFTR program staff. This coaching focused on a multitude of concepts including best practices in teaching, training in working in high-need schools, classroom management, and navigating the path with student caregivers, mentors, school administration, and participant confidence which contributed to the retention of these new teachers.

All study participants expressed deep appreciation for the rigorous coaching provided by the NCFTR program staff, recognizing it as a crucial factor in their development as educators. This coaching encompassed a wide range of essential teaching concepts, including best practices in instruction, strategies for working in high-need schools, and effective classroom management techniques. Beyond instructional support, the coaching also guided participants in building relationships with student caregivers, collaborating with mentors, and effectively communicating with school administrators—skills that are vital for fostering a supportive learning

environment. Additionally, the program staff worked to boost participants' confidence by providing constructive feedback, modeling successful teaching strategies, and addressing challenges they encountered in their classrooms. This comprehensive coaching approach not only strengthened participants' teaching abilities but also played a significant role in their retention in the profession. By equipping them with the skills and resilience needed to navigate the complexities of teaching, the NCFTR program helped ensure that these new educators felt supported, capable, and committed to their roles in high-need schools.

### **Discussion**

The findings from this study shed light on the experiences and challenges faced by participants in a university-based alternative certification program for teachers. These insights provide valuable implications for program developers, educators, and policymakers seeking to address the growing need for effective, well-prepared teachers.

#### **Program Application and Placement Process**

The smooth application and interview process reported by participants suggests that the program's administrative structure effectively supports applicants during this initial phase. This positive experience helps establish a foundation of trust and confidence, which is critical for participants transitioning into a new career. Additionally, the alignment between participants' placement preferences and their assigned schools and grade levels reduced anxiety and facilitated a smoother transition into their roles as educators.

#### **Initial Awareness and Understanding**

Despite their enthusiasm, participants entered the program with limited understanding of pedagogy, content knowledge, and best teaching practices. This finding highlights the steep learning curve for alternatively certified teachers, especially those without prior exposure to education. Their initial unfamiliarity with key teaching concepts such as lesson cycles, assessment strategies, and differentiated instruction demonstrates the need for robust, targeted training in these areas.

#### **Program Benefits and Challenges**

The program's coursework and coaching provided significant support to participants, equipping them with knowledge and skills necessary for effective teaching. Areas of growth included:

1. **Pedagogy:** Participants gained a better understanding of instructional strategies, differentiated instruction, and effective teaching activities.
2. **Content Mastery:** The courses helped participants improve their grasp of essential subjects, including literacy and classroom management.
3. **Assessment Practices:** Participants reported learning about the appropriate use of assessments, including formative and summative techniques.
4. **Lesson Planning:** Structured lessons and the importance of lesson cycle steps were emphasized.
5. **Classroom Management:** Training helped participants navigate challenges in managing diverse classrooms.

However, participants also identified gaps in ongoing support from the schools in which they taught. Limited access to professional development and formal training in best practices hindered their ability to refine their teaching methods. Meetings on assessment data were perceived as informal and lacking in-depth guidance, leaving participants inadequately supported in this area.

### **Mentorship and Coaching**

Mentorship played a crucial role in participants' professional growth, with most expressing appreciation for the insights and support provided by their assigned mentors. However, the desire for more comprehensive guidance underscores the importance of ensuring mentors are well-prepared and actively engaged in their roles. Similarly, the rigorous coaching offered by the program staff was highly valued, contributing to participants' confidence and retention. This coaching addressed critical areas such as navigating high-need schools, classroom management, and communication with stakeholders, which are vital for success in challenging teaching environments.

### **Implications for Alternative Certification Programs**

The findings highlight the necessity of comprehensive support systems in alternative certification programs. Effective mentorship, targeted coursework, and robust coaching are essential to address the gaps in participants' knowledge and skills. Additionally, fostering partnerships with schools to provide ongoing professional development and formal training opportunities can enhance the program's long-term impact.

This study underscores the potential of alternative certification programs to prepare and retain effective teachers, particularly in high-need schools. While these programs provide critical

training and coaching, their success hinges on addressing the challenges of limited initial knowledge, insufficient school-based professional development, and variability in mentorship quality. By addressing these areas, alternative certification programs can further empower new teachers to succeed in their roles and contribute meaningfully to the education system.

### **Conclusion**

Since 1865, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have been pivotal in unlocking educational opportunities for African Americans and advancing society through the preparation of skilled educators. Despite their efforts, a significant disparity remains between the number of teachers of color and their counterparts. Addressing this gap is critical not only for combating the teacher shortage but also for fostering diversity and inclusion in the classroom.

University-based alternative teacher certification programs, in collaboration with HBCUs, play a vital role in tackling this challenge. By prioritizing the recruitment, training, and retention of teachers of color, these initiatives help ensure that the teaching workforce reflects the diverse student populations it serves. Together, HBCUs and these programs exemplify a unified and strategic approach to building an equitable and dynamic education system. Their continued efforts are essential to shaping a future where every student benefits from a diverse and well-prepared teaching force.

Specifically, the Norman C. Francis Teacher Residency (NCFTR) Program is a unique and invaluable asset within the HBCU community, particularly among Louisiana's Historically Black Colleges and Universities. As a pioneering teacher preparation initiative, NCFTR stands out for its commitment to developing highly skilled, culturally responsive educators who are equipped to serve in high-need schools. This program plays a crucial role in New Orleans by addressing the persistent teacher shortage and ensuring that students, particularly those in underserved communities, have access to well-trained, passionate educators who understand their cultural backgrounds and learning needs. By integrating rigorous coursework with hands-on classroom experience, NCFTR not only strengthens the pipeline of diverse educators but also enhances student achievement by providing them with teachers who are deeply invested in their success. The program's emphasis on mentorship, real-world training, and ongoing professional development ensures that new teachers are prepared to make an immediate and lasting impact in their classrooms. As a result, NCFTR is not only transforming the lives of its teacher residents

but also uplifting the broader New Orleans community by fostering educational equity and empowering the next generation of learners.

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