Interweaving Teaching and Emotional Support for Novice Special Educators in Alternative Certification Programs

Leila Ansari Ricci
California State University, Los Angeles
lricci@calstatela.edu

Andrea G. Zetlin
California State University, Los Angeles
azetlin@calstatela.edu

Abstract

As the shortage of special education teachers has led to increasing numbers of teacher candidates enrolled in alternative certification programs, there is a need to provide systematic mentoring and coaching. The relationship between support providers and novice teachers enrolled in an alternative certification program in a diverse, urban university was explored in this study. Sources of data included logs documenting weekly contact between support providers and intern teachers, surveys of support providers, and focus groups with both support providers and interns to determine the types of support received by novice special educators seeking alternative certification. Results showed that interweaving emotional and teaching support and strategies form the cornerstone of the support provider-intern relationship.

Key words: *coaching, mentoring, special education, novice teachers, alternative certification*

Please contact the first author for all correspondence regarding the content of this article.

As increasing numbers of special education teacher candidates enroll in alternative route preparation programs, many of them assume full responsibility of a classroom before they are fully certified as teachers (Wasburn-Moses & Rosenberg, 2008). Research has revealed the critical need for systematic mentoring and coaching of the novice teachers, especially during their first year in the classroom (Bay & Parker-Katz, 2009; Feiman-Nemser, & Parker, 1990; Whitaker, 2000a; White & Mason, 2006). These studies have focused on general aspects of the relationship between the "interns" and the more experienced teachers at their school sites who provide them with support and guidance, thereby highlighting the need for research that probes deeper into the nature of this critical relationship. The present study examines the supportive relationship from both the perspectives of support providers as well as their interns in diverse, urban school districts. Within the literature, some researchers distinguish between mentoring and coaching. Coaching can be defined as specifically focused on improving teaching skills and performance. Mentoring can be more broadly defined as providing general guidance, setting and achieving goals, assisting with decision-making, and facilitating problem solving (Anderson & Shannon, 1988; Lloyd, Wood, & Moreno, 2000; Whitaker, 2000b). In the present study, as described later, the support providers do a combination of mentoring and coaching.

Over the past two decades, increasing numbers of prospective special educators have sought alternative pathways to teacher certification, a phenomenon fueled by the shortage of qualified teachers serving students with disabilities (Griffin, 2010; Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005; Wasburn-Moses & Rosenberg, 2008). A national survey in the early 1990s found that 76% of states had alternative teacher preparation programs for educators at the early childhood, middle, and secondary levels, with nearly two-thirds of states offering alternative certification that addressed the needs of students with disabilities (Buck, Polloway, & Mortoff-Robb, 1995). By 2010, 48 states and Washington DC had some type of alternative teacher certification, with nearly 600 alternative route programs in existence nationwide (National Center for Education Information, NCEI, 2010). Approximately one-third of all new teachers hired nationwide are entering the profession through alternative routes (NCEI, 2010). Given this proliferation of alternative route certification programs, teacher educators and school administrators have emphasized the importance of mentoring and coaching the novice educators who assume full responsibility for a classroom while simultaneously completing their teacher preparation (Esposito & Lal, 2005; Quigney, 2010; Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005).

While little research exists on the mentoring/coaching relationship specifically within the alternative certification pathways for special educators, studies have shown that having more experienced teachers provide teaching support can be an important component of the success of newly certified special educators in their first years of teaching (Shaughnessy & Siegel, 1997). Surveying more than 300 mentors and newly certified special educators across seven national sites, White and Mason (2006) found that mentoring was helpful for the beginning teachers and helped alleviate stressors associated with leaving the field of special education. The majority of the novice teachers needed assistance for special education paperwork (84%); IEPs (84%); referral, placement, and evaluation (75%); obtaining classroom materials (70%); and personal issues (69%). Most teachers felt the help they received from mentors in these areas was moderately to very helpful, with 98.5% of them stating that their districts should continue to provide mentoring programs.

Similarly, a study of 156 first-year special education teachers in South Carolina revealed that mentors frequently provided emotional support and system information related to special education, with the frequency of contact being highly correlated with perceived effectiveness of mentoring (Whitaker, 2003). This study suggested that novice teachers need weekly mentoring with a focus on emotional support, materials, and special education policy information. Furthermore, effective mentors are highly knowledgeable about special education policies and are available to meet with new teachers on a flexible, frequent basis (Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004; Leko & Smith, 2010). Mentors can better assist novice teachers by planning lessons together as well as observing and being observed by their intern teachers while teaching a lesson (Andrews & Quinn, 2005). Holdman and Harris (2003) suggested that mentors and novice teachers develop action plans as a vehicle for professional development. Indeed, researchers call for mentoring to be "conceptualized as joint participation in the authentic tasks of teaching" to improve practice (Bay & Parker-Katz, 2009, p. 18).

Bay and Parker-Katz (2009), in their review of the literature on the induction of beginning special education teachers, identified commonalities in empirical studies exploring the mentoring relationship. They found that participants in the research were overwhelmingly white females, a fact which highlights the need for studies including both male mentor teachers and male interns. The studies also reinforced that mentoring provided critical support for beginning special educators, especially when provided by mentors who were special educators themselves, had excellent professional and interpersonal skills, were prepared for their mentoring role, and had the time for contact with the novice teacher at least once a week in both formal and informal meetings. They uncovered several limitations in the studies reviewed as well. In only one of 10 studies researchers examined additional artifacts related to the mentoring relationship (e.g., action plans, reflective logs, or written reflections). With the exception of two studies, Bay and Parker-Katz (2009) observed that the mentors' voice was noticeably absent from the research; most studies focused on the intern teachers' perspectives on mentoring. Finally, in Casey, Dunlap, Brister, and Davidson's (2011) study of novice special educators from alternative certification programs, many of the 52 beginning teachers experienced difficulties with knowing the curriculum and what content to teach (75%), lesson planning (60.4%), special education procedures (60.3%), and classroom management (54.7%). Teachers noted that they would feel more confident and successful if well supported in these areas. Interviews by Dieker and colleagues (2003) with four culturally and linguistically diverse beginning special educators also revealed that strong mentoring support enabled their successful completion of an alternative certification program. Two of the beginning special educators stated that "my biggest help came from my mentor" and "a well prepared mentor knows what we need to be successful in the program" (p. 334).

Contributing to the knowledge base on mentoring novice special educators, the present study explored, in depth, the specific nature of support provided to intern teachers in an alternative certification program. The authors wanted to know from both the support providers' and the interns' perspectives what types of support and interactions were reported by the novice special educators, who are working hard to meet the challenging needs of students with disabilities in their classrooms, as well as what supports were actually offered by the mentors. The present study utilized several sources of data, including survey results, weekly contact logs, and focus group interviews in which support providers and interns described their relationship in their own

words. The purpose of this study was to inform the professional development of mentors in alternative certification programs in special education, ultimately contributing to the sense of self-efficacy and retention of high-quality beginning special educators. To explain the context for the study, the authors first describe the alternative route certification offered by California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA), with which the support providers and interns in this study are affiliated (Zetlin & Kimm, 2003).

Program Description

More than 70% of the special education credential candidates at CSULA are employed by schools as interns and have full responsibility for teaching students. In California, these special education candidates are considered interns by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC), the state education agency that approves teacher preparation programs that meet standards for educator preparation and competence (Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2013). CSULA interns must have at minimum a bachelor's degree from an accredited university, a GPA of 2.75 or higher, a passing score on the California Basic Educational Skills Test (CBEST), subject matter competence (i.e., passing score on multiple or single subject of the California Subject Examinations for Teachers, CSET), and an offer of employment as a special education teacher in a school district. Once accepted into the program, interns enroll in foundational and specialization courses and complete two formal fieldwork practica with seminars. The coursework is developmentally ordered and meets the competency standards in one of four disability areas (mild/moderate disabilities, moderate/severe disabilities, visual impairments, and physical and health impairments). Courses include instruction in teaching methods, assessment, classroom management, and assistive technology and are designed to enhance interns' theoretical knowledge and teaching abilities.

To support the intern teachers, the university and employing school district each provide extended guidance and supervision while the interns complete, within a two-year period, all educational coursework and fieldwork requirements for the education specialist credential. The school district provides the intern with a full-time teaching assignment and district support. The university provides the intern with two support systems: (1) direct support for their teaching through the mentoring/coaching and collaboration of an on-site support provider and university supervisor; and (2) indirect support through university coursework that supports specialized instructional skill development as well as opportunities for discussion of their teaching.

The on-site support providers are selected by the intern in consultation with the site administrator. The support provider must have at least three years of teaching experience, an education specialist credential in the same disability area as the one being pursued by the intern, a teaching position at the same school site as the intern, and the capacity to mentor/coach a beginning teacher. The on-site support providers attend an orientation session at the university to learn about roles and expectations, including the paperwork that must be completed quarterly to monitor the intern's progress. The on-site support providers also have access to the special education intern program website that features an online support provider training guide and professional resources and materials. Support providers are hired as professional consultants to the intern program and receive compensation of $1000 for each year that they work with the intern. Funding for the support providers is provided by a grant from CTC. During the two-year

internship, the support providers assume the role as "peer coach" and conduct formal observations of the intern's teaching every 10 weeks. Support providers also conduct demonstration lessons as well as share resources and materials with their interns. Together, interns and support providers identify a goal that the intern will work toward during each 10-week period and what resources are needed to help the intern achieve the goal. During weekly meetings, they listen to the interns' concerns and assist the interns in analyzing problems and making decisions on how best to handle them. These meetings are documented in a contact log maintained by the intern. The intern and support provider also attend three workshops each year led by university faculty, focusing on practical topics such as writing IEP goals aligned with grade level standards.

The university supervisors observe the interns' teaching during the two formal fieldwork experiences. They provide constructive feedback and evaluate the intern's competency in terms of assessment, specialized instructional planning and delivery, classroom management, collaboration, and professional attitude. Additionally, during the fieldwork practica, university supervisors maintain contact with the on-site support provider to monitor the intern's progress and provide consistent support as needed by the intern. The collaborative effort of the district and university provide the guidance to help the interns demonstrate professional competencies.

Methods

This study used a mixed methodology incorporating multiple data sources from two perspectives, interns and support providers, to explore the mentoring/coaching relationship. The first part of the study involved (1) soliciting and analyzing survey responses from support providers on their perception of the nature of support they provided to the interns; and (2) collecting and analyzing the contact logs in which the interns documented the kinds of assistance they requested from their support providers during the weekly meetings. The second part of the study involved conducting focus group interviews with a select group of interns and support providers to seek confirmation and additional comment on the categories of support derived from logs and surveys. The intent was to employ triangulation using survey, log, and interview data to document perceptions as well as actual interactions between the interns and support providers.

Participants

For the first part of this study, 42 interns and 42 support providers comprised the sample from which contact logs and surveys were analyzed. Nineteen interns (45%) were seeking credentials to teach students with mild/moderate disabilities; 12 (29%) were pursuing credentials in moderate/severe disabilities; eight (19%) were enrolled in the visual impairments credential program, and three (7%) were enrolled in the physical and health impairments program. Six interns (15%) were in their first year of the intern program and 36 interns (85%) were in the second year of the program. Support providers held credentials in the same disability area in which the interns were seeking special education credentials. In addition, 13 support providers held multiple subject credentials. Support providers had a mean of 11 years teaching experience.

For the second part of this study, nine interns participated in the intern focus group, and six support providers attended the support provider focus group. Only two of the participating interns worked with support providers who attended the support provider focus group; the other

participating interns and support providers were not associated with each other. Of the nine interns, five were pursuing credentials in mild/moderate disabilities and four were seeking credentials in moderate/severe disabilities. Seven interns worked at the same site as their support provider; one was a home teacher and worked at multiple sites as did her support provider and one was assigned to the classroom in which the support provider had previously worked before being moved to a coordinator position. Three interns already held an elementary credential and six were pursuing the special education credential as their initial credential. See Table 1 for demographic information about the interns and support providers who participated in the focus groups.

Table 1
Focus Group Participants

Characteristics	Intern	Support Provider
Age (sd)	32.44 (5.64)	43.00 (7.46)
Gender (male: female)	3:6	3:3
Ethnicity		
Hispanic	4	3
Caucasian	1	1
Asian	3	1
African-American	0	1
Other	1	0
Highest Level of Education		
Bachelor's degree	8	2
Master's degree	1	4
Number of Years as Intern		
1 year	5	
2 years	4	
Number of Years of Teaching		
5-6 years		2
8-10 years		2
> 16 years		2

Of the nine interns participating in the intern focus group, eight reported meeting at least once a week with their support providers and one, an itinerant special education teacher, met every week or every other week due to logistics issues. Eight of the interns also indicated that they were very satisfied with the level of support received from the support provider and one was minimally satisfied. Of the six support providers in the focus group, four held credentials in mild/moderate disabilities and two held credentials in moderate/severe disabilities. Four support providers worked as special education teachers in special day classes, one was an instructional specialist, and one was a Bridge Coordinator. Four support providers had previously coached interns, and two had received training to serve as a mentor as part of California's Beginning Teaching Support and Assessment program. Four support providers mentored interns in their first year of teaching, and two supported interns completing their second year.

Data Sources and Analyses

Three sources of data were collected: support provider surveys, intern contact logs, and

transcripts from the two focus group discussions. All data were submitted to content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The two authors independently reviewed the entries from each data source and coded them into tentative groupings representing categories of support for beginning teachers. Based on the major categories identified in the surveys and contact logs, 12 follow-up questions were asked during each focus group meeting. Each data source is described below.

Survey Data

The 42 support providers who attended the mid-year meeting of the Intern Program were asked to complete a survey at the start of the meeting. The survey consisting of 23 items solicited their ratings on a 3-point scale (seldom, sometimes, often) as to how they used their time assisting their interns across a number of teaching areas and responsibilities. The survey was adapted from the annual survey developed and conducted by the CTC to solicit support provider input about the particular alternative certification program in which their interns were enrolled. Responses were tabulated to determine most frequently mentioned areas of support. The support providers also responded to two open ended questions that asked them to identify the area that their intern most needed support and how often they met with their intern. These were coded and tabulated to identify the top areas of support and frequency of contact.

Contact Log Data

Contact logs were gathered for the 42 interns whose support providers attended the mid-year Intern Program meeting and who had completed the survey. At the end of each 10-week quarter that they were enrolled in the program, interns were required to turn in logs documenting the topics that were discussed during weekly meetings with their support providers and what the outcome of those discussions were. The logs from winter 2010 were analyzed for all 42 interns. There were a total of 370 entries with a mean of 8.8 entries per intern.

Entries were coded using a nine-code categorical scheme. These codes were based on a modification of the six categories that Zetlin and Kimm (2003) had previously identified from similar intern-support provider contact logs as categories of support for beginning special education (General Information; Teaching Supports; IEP Related Issues; Professional Development; Sharing Information; Collaboration; found on pages 63-64). As the log entries were reviewed, a decision was made to further subdivide “Teaching Supports” to better reflect the specific kinds of assistance interns sought from their support providers during their initial years in the classroom and “Sharing Information” was changed to a subcategory of “Teaching Supports.” The final nine categories used to code the logs were: (1) General Systems Information: Giving information related to procedures, guidelines and expectations of the school district; (2) Teaching Supports-Curriculum and Instruction: Providing curriculum and instructional information; (3) Teaching Supports-Assessment: Providing information on assessments, procedures, and progress monitoring; (4) Teaching Supports-Classroom Management/Student Behavior: Providing advice on student management; (5) Teaching Supports-Planning/ Paperwork Management: Giving help with classroom environment, overall organization, and time management; (6) Teaching Supports-Sharing Information: Sharing books, materials, and teaching resources and observing and providing feedback on intern’s performance; (7) IEP Related Issues: Assisting with developing and implementing IEPs; (8) Professional Development: Providing professional development information and emotional support for

teaching and completion of credential program; and (9) Collaboration: Giving ideas related to working with other professionals and parents.

After initial examination and modification of the codes, the two authors independently coded 12 of the 42 logs. Inter-rater agreement was 92% and differences were resolved through subsequent discussion. Each author then coded 15 of the remaining 30 logs.

Focus Group Data

All 42 support providers and interns who attended the December meeting were sent invitations to participate in a follow-up focus group to be held at CSULA. Six support providers and nine interns responded positively that they were available to attend at the designated times of the sessions. The intern focus group was held one month after the support provider focus group. The focus group sessions were facilitated by the authors, both professors of education who teach in the Education Specialist Credential programs. The sessions were held in a university classroom and each lasted approximately two hours. Both groups were asked a set of 12 similar questions and their responses were recorded and then transcribed.

Transcripts from each focus group were submitted to analysis so that patterns explaining regularities between responses became apparent (Johnson & LaMontagne, 1993). The two authors independently reviewed the data and sorted responses from each set of transcripts according to common themes representing teaching supports and coaching strategies. The authors agreed on 89% of the codes assigned to the intern focus group responses and 90% of the codes assigned to responses from the support provider focus group. The authors met to resolve any disagreements regarding the coding of an entry. The categories were refined until all entries fit into nine themes.

Results

Support Provider Surveys

Using a simple frequency count, the top areas of support were identified. Eighty-three percent of support providers indicated that they provide personal support to the interns “often” while 68% responded that they are involved in mentoring and coaching activities “often.” As seen in Table 2, the top four areas in which they “often” share advice are: navigating district policies (67%); problem solving and conflict resolution (60%); classroom management (45%); and communicating with parents, community, district, and staff (45%). When asked which specific teaching areas they support, the areas that over 50% responded to as “often” were: meet intern’s students’ differing needs (70%); understanding performance levels for students (63%); creating supportive and healthy classrooms for student learning (63%); improving intern’s teaching, knowledge, and skills (54%); and using appropriate classroom management strategies (51%).

Table 2
Support Provider Survey Results

	Seldom	Sometimes	Often
In thinking about how you used your time as a support person for interns, how often are you involved in:			
1. Mentoring and coaching activities	0%	32%	68%
2. Providing personal support	2%	15%	83%
In thinking about how you used your time as a support person for interns, how often are you involved in planning and delivering instructional support for:			
3. Differentiated instruction and assessment	0%	61%	39%
4. Content related curriculum support including standards and framework	9%	56%	36%
5. Classroom management, room set-up, safety, and other classroom/learning environment issues	14%	40%	45%
6. Working with EL populations	45%	30%	25%
7. Communicating with parents, community, district, and staff	7%	48%	45%
8. Problem solving and conflict resolution	5%	36%	60%
9. Navigating district policy (requirements, procedures, reporting, paperwork)	12%	21%	67%
10. Time management	24%	50%	26%
How often do you provide support to interns in the following areas:			
11. Improve intern's teaching, knowledge, and skills	2%	44%	54%
12. Improve intern's ability to use standard-based instruction	10%	76%	14%
13. Improve intern's ability to use standard-based assessment	19%	60%	21%
14. Meet intern's students' differing needs	2%	28%	70%
15. Understand performance levels for students	10%	27%	63%
16. Use technology to support student learning	26%	42%	33%
17. Teach English learners	48%	40%	12%
18. Create a supportive and healthy classroom for student learning	17%	20%	63%
19. Address equity and diversity in intern teaching	27%	34%	39%
20. Utilize appropriate classroom management strategies	12%	37%	51%
21. Analyze student work	19%	52%	29%
22. Communicate with families of students	17%	43%	40%
23. Improve student achievement	0%	52%	48%

For the open ended question, classroom management was most frequently noted as the area most in need of support. Next was instructional planning and differentiated instruction; assessment and progress monitoring; IEP goal writing and the IEP meeting; and organizational skills. In terms of how often they formally met with their intern, 8 support providers indicated daily, 13 met two or more times a week, 17 met once a week, and 2 met every two weeks. As presented in the data above, providing emotional support and support in teaching are the two most frequently occurring roles of mentors of novice special educators.

Intern Contact Logs

Almost two-thirds of entries in the Contact Logs were focused on requests by the interns for teaching supports. Of these, queries for help with curriculum and instruction (21%) and classroom management (16%) were most frequent, followed by assessment questions (11%). Another 17% of the entries were focused on IEP issues. See Table 3 for the distribution of the types of supports provided by mentors and examples of contact log entries. As seen in the data below, the interns most often requested teaching support from their mentors.

Table 3

Distribution of Types of Supports Provided by the Support Provider

Log Entry Support Categories and Examples of Entries	Percentage (Frequency reported)
General Systems Information Example: "Prom budget and wish list"	7% (26)
Teaching Supports: Curriculum and Instruction Example: "Increasing reading comprehension, fluency success"	21% (78)
Teaching Supports: Assessment Example: "Assessing students on alternative curriculum"	11% (41)
Teaching Supports: Classroom Management Example: "Review positive classroom management"	16% (59)
Teaching Supports: Planning/Paperwork Management Example: "Paperwork and plan for field trip"	6% (23)
Teaching Supports: Sharing Information Example: "Provided me with curriculum and manipulatives"	8% (31)
IEP-related Issues Example: "Review IEP goals"	17% (63)
Professional Development Example: "Discuss CSULA courses and induction plan"	5% (20)
Collaboration Example: "Collaborating with teachers"	8% (29)

Focus Group Data

At the start of each session, the facilitators shared the two "headline" results of the support provider survey with the support providers and interns respectively. Specifically, 83% of the support providers indicated that they often provide personal support to the intern and 68% indicated that they often are involved in mentoring/coaching activities. Both the interns and support providers reported the results depicted an accurate portrayal of the relationship. When asked in what ways support providers felt they addressed the high level of personal support needed by interns, support providers indicated that they shared and often times modeled teaching supports for instruction and behavior to build skills and confidence so interns could more skillfully address the issues that were causing stress. They also provided advice to help the intern put the immediate problem in perspective and gave direct support for IEP concerns such as sitting with the intern and going page by page through the IEP.

Nine themes from analysis of the focus groups illustrate how support providers responded to intern emotional meltdowns by sharing practical suggestions on how to deal with instructional and behavioral challenges and providing direct instruction on how to prepare an IEP on time, how to report out at the IEP meeting, and how to manage a large caseload.

1. Addressing concerns over outsider observations. Support providers and interns in the focus groups reported that the mentors often addressed the novice teachers' concerns about negative feedback or observations by outsiders, such as administrators, parents, advocates, and investigators from the Office of Civil Rights. For example, one intern reflected on a time when her support provider helped clarify a situation with the administration:

> [My support provider was] just listening to me when the administration wouldn't. The administration would say, "okay, you are the special education teacher. You are supposed to know how to handle that" … [my support provider] supported me with the administration, letting them know it's a tough class.

Other interns in the focus group described how their support providers helped them navigate through difficulties in communication with parents of students in their classrooms, which is essential since many students in the moderate-to-severe classrooms remain with their special education teachers over the span of several years. One intern stated:

> My support provider put in a good word with the parents for me. She laid down the law with the parents. She explained to me why parents are the way they are. She really helped me with getting the job done with parents.

2. Improving collaboration with general education teachers. Support providers discussed helping their interns to work more effectively with general education teachers. One support provider, for example, shared stories of how his intern was treated poorly by general education colleagues who did not view her as a "real" teacher. Another intern stated:

> I learned a lot about the collaborative model by going into a general education class, where the general educators were asking me "why are you here?" My support provider really described my role, how to talk to a general educator, how to teach administration what our purpose was in those classes. That was really helpful.

3. Juggling planning for multiple grades/subject areas. Both interns and support providers in the focus groups discussed the importance of helping the novice teachers to effectively plan for and teach multiple subject areas and grade levels. One support provider whose intern had a class with 2nd through 6th graders said, "I help her with how to juggle that by giving her suggestions on how to cope with the grade span." An intern described how her support provider helped her with the following teaching load:

> I have two periods of middle school and two periods of high school. There is such a range of maturity with students at a non-public school. So one minute I am talking about their horoscope and the next minute it's their shoes for graduation.

4. Addressing concerns about activities related to IEPs. Support providers in the focus group recalled how they spent time with their interns in developing timelines for IEPs and modeling each step of the IEP process from communication with parents to setting up the IEP meeting to navigating IEP software. One support provider described how she sits with her intern to review a

model IEP page by page and give the intern important strategies, such as ensuring that the statements of a child's present levels of performance are written in a positive manner. As one support provider stated, "changes in the IEP software always throw the intern for a loop," prompting the support provider to create a binder of IEP resources for his intern. One intern stated the following:

> IEPs are definitely a challenging task to master even into my second year. It's like in the first year, she basically wrote them for me. I was sitting right next to her … I learned that some of the goals I selected were not the best. Having [the support provider] sit with us through the writing of the IEP was a helpful part of the program.

5. Suggesting teaching supports for instruction and behavior. Support providers and interns both commented on the importance of providing and receiving support for more effective instruction and behavior management. One support provider regularly gave her interns surveys to determine what curricular needs they had, and offered them her suggestions in the form of interactive games. Often, the support providers helped the interns with creating lesson plans, differentiating instruction, and addressing specific questions, such as "how do I teach nouns?" Observing the interns teach a lesson was an important way for support providers to provide the best feedback for improving teaching skills. A support provider stated that she helped her intern "to see that she needed to set up some kind of behavioral management plan and stick to it and not let students manipulate the situation and think that they can do whatever they want and get away with it." One intern described her support provider's role in helping her develop better strategies for behavior management:

> My support provider taught me how to write behavior contracts. With her experience and having done behavior contracts, she really helped me nail those two kids with emotional/behavior disorders…Just always giving a lot of tricks that I didn't really learn in books that were kind of unique to our school, that may or may not work with other schools.

6. Encouraging reflection of the teaching situation and problem solving. Support providers in the focus group emphasized that they encourage their interns to reflect and solve problems on their own. One support provider stated, "A lot of it is giving the intern the opportunity to hear themselves go through the process…then let's talk about other ways to address that situation." Support providers conducted observations of their interns and then asked the interns to reflect before offering feedback. Another support provider stated:

> I try to listen to what my intern is saying and then ask a lot of questions. I hope my questions are a way to model problem solving. I want to help the intern think differently from the beginning…to learn how to problem solve by himself…so I ask a lot of questions and offer up a strategy to help him learn to problem solve…I want to help him to develop solutions that work for him.

*7. Providing emotional support to promote more professional demeanor***.** Support providers reported that they often provide emotional support to their interns, helping them to see the bigger picture, relax, and tackle challenges one at a time. One support provider said that he helps his intern to "chill out, step back, get perspective, and know that it will be okay if you do your best…relax!" and another tells her intern "to pick his battles when things bother him…don't stress over that…it's not worth it…it will work itself out." In their focus group, interns also

stressed the importance of their support providers' emotional support, as seen by the following statements from an intern:

> My support provider helped me maintain professionalism because I would lose it a lot. She would listen to me calmly and say, "I hear you…breathe. This is how you say it to administrators" because I would have gotten fired. She taught me how to deal professionally with situations.

8. Advising on time management and balancing time. Support providers also provide interns with advice on how to manage their time while teaching and completing their courses for certification. One intern said, "My support provider has been there for me when I'm sick of school or need a shoulder to lean on." Another described his relationship with his support provider in this way: "I feel like my support provider from the beginning was like my therapist/principal/teacher. She was an intern herself years ago so she was really understanding…and helps me to juggle it all."

9. Providing tips for managing classroom paraprofessionals. Support providers and interns in the focus groups both described how the support providers provide strategies for effectively working with and managing paraprofessionals in the interns' classrooms. One intern described how her support provider helped her with the following scenario: "We focused not so much on classroom management, but staff management. It really is about trying to figure out that balance between being [the paraprofessionals'] coworker and their supervisor. It can be a very tough line to walk sometimes."

Discussion

As one of few studies exploring the hands-on support process in alternative certification programs, the present study delved deeper into the specific nature of the relationship between support providers and novice special educators in diverse, urban school districts. Representing several credential areas, including mild/moderate disabilities, moderate/severe disabilities, visual impairments, and physical and health impairments, both interns and support providers shared their perspectives in surveys, contact logs, and in their own words.

Consistent across all data sources and the two perspectives is the indication that the relationship between support providers and interns in alternative certification programs is built upon the foundation of interweaving emotional support and teaching strategies to effectively teach students with special needs. Weekly contact logs documenting the content of the meetings between support providers and interns revealed that these interactions center around day-to-day teaching needs and concerns related to the IEP, with 63% of the content relating to teaching support. Support providers reported that they "often" spent time in mentoring and coaching activities with their interns (68% of the time). Focus group interviews with both support providers and interns also confirmed that finding more effective ways to teach are the cornerstone of the support provider-intern relationship.

As found in Whitaker's (2003) earlier study, support providers in the present study "often" spent time in providing emotional support to their intern teachers (83% of the time), thereby emphasizing the need for mentors who are competent communicators, good listeners, and are strong teachers who can effectively teach interns how to teach. As one of few studies that include

the perspectives of mentors, the present study revealed that a significant proportion of the interactions between interns and support providers did indeed focus on students, as shown by the significant time spent in helping meet interns' students' differing needs (70%), helping interns understand performance levels of students (63%), and helping interns create a supportive and healthy classroom for student learning (63%). The focus of support providers and interns seems to be exactly where it should be: the student-centered practice of effective teaching. Although support providers reported providing personal support most frequently, the detailed interactions described in the interns' weekly contact logs reveal a majority of time between intern and support provider was spent on helping the novice teachers develop their teaching strategies. It appears then that what support providers perceive as emotional support is actually perceived as teaching support by the intern teachers. The two appear interchangeable according to the findings of this study.

Consistent with previous research in which novice teachers have reported that their mentors were critical to their successful completion of alternative certification in special education (Casey et al., 2011; Dieker et al., 2003), the present study also shows that support providers help their interns with the survival skills necessary for becoming an effective educator. Support providers in this study frequently shared advice with interns about navigating district policies (67%); problem solving and conflict resolution (60%); classroom management (45%); and communicating with parents, community, district, and staff (45%). All of these mentoring and coaching skills are indeed critical for ensuring performance success as first- or second-year teachers still completing professional certification. Follow-up data of program completers revealed an 80-85% teacher retention rate three years after receiving their certification, which provides evidence of the effectiveness of the intervention of the support provider (Zetlin, 2011).

Surprisingly, although this study's participants were employed in highly diverse, urban school districts with large populations of English Language Learners (ELLs), interns seldom requested help from their support providers for working with or teaching students whose first language is not English. This lack of focus on ELLs could be due in part to a need for further training for the support providers in teaching ELLs or the interns being overwhelmed with so many other aspects of teaching. This study warrants further investigation of and guidance for helping mentors/coaches and interns develop effective instructional strategies for meeting the needs of exceptional children who are English Language Learners.

In addition, although the present study identifies intern concerns and the types of support they receive from their peer coaches, both support providers and novice teachers in the study indicated that their relationship was not systematic and worried if it could be easily replicated. As suggested by these interns and support providers, there is a need, therefore, for the development of structured, systematic support for novice teachers in alternative certification programs, such as prepared curriculum and assessment materials, mentor modeling of effective lessons, and walk-throughs of sample IEPs. The present study highlights the need for future studies in which the specific types of support provided to novice teachers in alternative certification programs are further documented and assessed to determine efficacy.

The limitations of this study must also be considered. This study consisted of a small sample size, which might limit its generalizability to interns and support providers in other alternative

certification programs. Also, in collecting data for the study, the authors did not differentiate between the various credential programs. It may indeed be the case that those interns enrolled in low-incidence disability programs may have unique needs that were not ascertained within the current study.

Nevertheless, as a study exploring the mentoring/coaching relationship from the perspective of both support providers and intern teachers within an urban alternative certification program, the present study contributes to the increasing understanding of the specific types of support needed by novice teachers completing their credentials while employed by a school district. By showing that support providers and interns do focus primarily on effective teaching and survival strategies, this study shows that the mentoring/coaching relationship is indeed functioning how it should be. Only by understanding this relationship can principals and mentors provide beginning special educators with the structured, systematic support they need to become more effective in their teaching roles.

References

Anderson, E. M., & Shannon, A. (1988). Toward a conceptualization of mentoring. *Journal of Teacher Education, 39*(1), 38-42.

Andrews, B., & Quinn, R. J. (2005). The effects of mentoring on first-year teachers' perceptions of support received. *Clearing House, 78*(3), 110-116.

Bay, M., & Parker-Katz, M. (2009). Perspectives on induction of beginning special educators: Research summary, key program features, and the state of state-level policies. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 32*(1), 17-32.

Billingsley, B., Carlson, E., & Klein, S. (2004). The working conditions and induction support of early career special educators. *Exceptional Children, 70*(3), 333-347.

Buck, G. H., Polloway, E. A., & Mortoff-Robb, S. (1995). Alternative certification programs: A national survey. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 18*(1), 39-48.

Commission on Teacher Credentialing. (2013). *California internship teacher preparation programs.* Retrieved from www.ctc.ca.gov/educator-prep/intern/default.html

Casey, P., Dunlap, K., Brister, H., & Davidson, M. (2011). I only wish I'd known: Voices of novice alternatively certified special education teachers. *International Journal of Special Education, 26*(1), 182-190.

Dieker, L. A., McTigue, A., Campbell, G., Rodriguez, J., Savage, M., & Jackson-Thomas, A. (2003). Voices from the field: Teachers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds entering the profession through alternative certification. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 26*(4), 328-340.

Esposito, M. C., & Lal, S. (2005). Responding to special education teacher shortages in diverse urban settings: An accelerated alternative credential program. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 28*(2), 100-103.

Feiman-Nemser, S., & Parker, M. B. (1990). Making subject matter part of the conversation in learning to teach. *Journal of Teacher Education, 41*(3), 32-43.

Griffin, C. C. (2010). A summary of research for educational leaders on the induction of beginning special educators. *Journal of Special Education Leadership, 23*(1), 14-20.

Holdman, L., & Harris, M. M. (2003). Special educators in a regional induction program. *Rural Special Education Quarterly, 22*(3), 12-19.

Johnson, L. J., & LaMontagne, M. J. (1993). Using content analysis to examine the verbal or written communication of stakeholders within early intervention. *Journal of Early Intervention, 17*(1), 73-79.

Leko, M. M., & Smith, S. W. (2010). Retaining beginning special educators: What should administrators know and do? *Intervention in School and Clinic, 45*(5), 321-325.

Lloyd, S. R., Wood, T. A., & Moreno, G. (2000). What's a mentor to do? *Teaching Exceptional Children, 33*(1), 38-42.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1984). Drawing valid meaning from qualitative data: Toward a shared craft. *Educational Researcher, 13*(5), 20-30.

National Center for Education Information. (2010). *Alternative teacher certification: A state-by-state analysis*. Washington, DC: Author.

Quigney, T. A. (2010). Alternative teaching certification in special education: Rationale, concerns, and recommendations. *Issues in Teacher Education, 19*(1), 41-58.

Rosenberg, M. S., & Sindelar, P. T. (2005). *The proliferation of alternative routes to certification in special education: A critical review of the literature.* Arlington, VA: The National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education, The Council for Exceptional Children.

Shaughnessy, M. F., & Siegel, J. (1997). The first year special education teacher: Their desperate need for mentors! *BC Journal of Special Education, 21*(1), 73-80.

Wasburn-Moses, L., & Rosenberg, M. S. (2008). Alternative route special education teacher preparation programs guidelines. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 31*(4), 257-267.

Whitaker, S. D. (2000a). What do first-year special education teachers need? Implications for induction programs. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 33*(1), 28-36.

Whitaker, S. D. (2000b). Mentoring beginning special education teachers and the relationship to attrition. *Exceptional Children, 66*(4), 546-566.

Whitaker, S. D. (2003). Needs of beginning special education teachers: Implications for teacher education. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 26*(2), 106-117.

White, M., & Mason, C. Y. (2006). Components of a successful mentoring program for beginning special education teachers: Perspectives from new teachers and mentors. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 29*(3), 191-201.

Zetlin, A. (2011). [2008-2011 Special Education Teacher Retention Data – State Personnel Development Grant/SIG 3 Special Education Intern Recruitment Retention Project, CALSTAT]. Unpublished raw data.

Zetlin, A. G., & Kimm, C. (2003). Support needs of special education interns. *2003 Yearbook of*

the American Educational Research Association Special Interest Group for Urban Learning, Teaching, and Research, 57-68.

Appendix A

Focus Group Questions

Data from surveys that support providers were asked to complete at the mid-year Intern/Support Provider meeting, indicated that support providers spend a good percentage of time providing personal support to the intern (83% of respondents indicated they provide personal support often).

Intern Focus Group	Support Provider (SP) Focus Group
1. Do you think that's an accurate portrayal?	1. Do you think that's an accurate portrayal?
2. What kinds of issues arise which require personal support?	2. What kinds of issues arise which require personal support?
3. What are the perceived stressors that you, as an intern, express (to account for high level of emotional support needed)?	3. What are the perceived stressors that your intern expresses (to account for high level of emotional support needed)?

In terms of mentoring and coaching activities (68% of respondents indicated this occurs often), please be specific:

Intern Focus Group	Support Provider Focus Group
1. What strategies does your SP use to facilitate acquisition of best teaching practices?	1. What strategies do you use to facilitate acquisition of best teaching practices?
Probe: Do you ever do this together?	Probe: Do you ever do this together?
2. What strategies does your SP use to facilitate acquisition of effective behavioral practices?	2. What strategies do you use to facilitate acquisition of effective behavioral practices?
3. What strategies does your SP use to facilitate acquisition of classroom organization and management?	3. What strategies do you use to facilitate acquisition of classroom organization and management?
4. What are the two most common concerns that you, as an intern, bring to the meetings/contacts that you have with your SP?	4. What are the two most common concerns that interns bring to the meetings/contacts that you have with them?
5. Which of the coaching strategies that your SP uses seems to work best?	5. Which of the coaching strategies that you use seems to work best?
6. Which coaching strategies are not successful? Why do you think that's the case?	6. Which coaching strategies are not successful? Why do you think that's the case?
7. What difficulties do you, as an intern, experience with IEPs?	7. What difficulties do interns experience with IEPs?
8. How and in what ways is the site administrator involved in supporting you as an intern (is he/she supportive/non-	8. How and in what ways is the site administrator involved in support of intern?

supportive)?	
9. What can we do at CSULA to better prepare your support provider as a coach (what would help your support provider to be a more skilled coach)? What can we do to support their coaching over the two years of the internship?	9. What can we do at CSULA to better prepare you as support provider/coach and to support your coaching once you take responsibility for an intern? What would make you a more skilled coach?