

Critical Incident Reviews of Alternatively Certified Special Educators

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Abstract

This qualitative research study used the Critical Incident Technique to determine specific areas in which novice alternatively certified special education teachers need support. Analyzing these critical incidents provides information for teacher preparation programs to bolster areas that can lead to stress, burnout, and attrition among special education teachers. Participants were enrolled in a special education intern program, meaning they taught in special education classrooms full-time, while also taking full course loads leading to special education teacher credentials. Twice per academic quarter, they wrote narratives detailing critical incidents they experienced related to teaching. The critical incident narratives were submitted for scoring purposes and the content was analyzed for recurrent themes.

Keywords: critical incidents techniques, alternative certification, special educators

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Significant challenges in the field of special education include producing qualified, effective educators and promoting work environments that support special educators' skills and commitment to the profession (Billingsly, 2004). For decades, however, maintaining highly capable special educators has been challenging as demonstrated in the nation-wide shortage of teachers in special education (Barth, Dillon, Hull, & Higgins, 2016). Many factors contribute to the shortage, but the effects on students with disabilities are significant and far-reaching: substandard educational experiences and decreased academic achievement.

Special education (SPED) faculty across the nation are mandated with the daunting task of responding to the ever-increasing special education teacher shortage. A report from the National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services (2015) found that in the 2013-2014 school year, 49 states reported special education teacher shortages. In addition, special education teacher attrition is nearly double the rate of general education teacher attrition (12.3% compared to 7.6%), and 51% of school districts across the United States report difficulty recruiting highly qualified special education teachers. The teacher shortage in SPED has resulted in a surge of alternative certification programs over the past 20 years. Teacher shortages are so tremendous that districts frequently hire individuals who are not fully certified via provisional contracts with the agreement that they will concurrently take coursework toward a teaching degree (Rock & Billingsley, 2015). Alternatively certified teachers assume the complete responsibilities of classrooms before they have obtained full teaching credentials (Griffin, 2010; Wasburn-Moses & Rosenberg, 2008).

Problem and Research Questions

This qualitative study used the Critical Incidents Technique (CIT), found in Flanagan (1954), to examine writings reported by first and second year teachers in an alternative special education certification program. It was determined that critical incidents reported by the teachers would provide insight into issues critical to these teachers and assist faculty in improving teacher preparation programs and systems of support for the novice teachers during their initial, often challenging, years of teaching. As many as 30% of new teachers leave the field within three years, and research suggests an even greater percentage of SPED teachers leave the profession within that time frame (Billingsley, 2004). Researchers have examined the causes of special education teacher attrition in broad generalities. However, little, if any, research has examined specific critical incidents experienced by novice, alternatively certified teachers, which likely contribute to stress, burnout, and subsequent attrition. In the critical incidents technique, the participants invite the researcher into their life stories providing a unique glimpse into the struggles and successes of alternatively certified teachers in special education. As Bochner (2009) stated, "stories are the narrative frames within which we make our experiences meaningful" (p. 229). The questions guiding this research were: What are the perceptions of critical incidents for students in an alternatively certified special education program? Are these critical incidents sufficient to address strengths and needs of the program? Will addressing the critical issues assist in retention of special educators in the field? Perhaps if teacher educators can understand the critical stories told by these educators, these educators can be better prepared for the classroom.

Review of Literature

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, the most recent reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, places high demands on teacher quality and high stakes accountability for schools. Since the initiation of NCLB, however, schools have struggled to meet the demands of the law due to increasing teacher shortages (Washington, 2016). Many factors contribute to the teacher shortage such as retirement, restricted school budgets, and better opportunities for mathematics and science majors outside of education (Barth, Dillon, Hull, & Higgins, 2016; Haj-Broussard et al., 2016). However, nearly a quarter of all teachers have entered the profession through alternative programs (Redding & Smith, 2016). The National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services (2015) stated there are consistent critical attrition of SPED teachers across the country. Reasons cited include insufficient resources such as supplies and materials needed for daily teaching activities (Kaufhold, Alvarez, & Arnold, 2006) and feeling isolated, alienated, and unsupported by administration (Schlicte, Yssel, & Merbler, 2005).

To combat the chronic scarcity of SPED teachers, many states developed alternative routes for certification, however, the structure and efficacy of these programs are variable (Karge & McCabe, 2014). There are no national standards for alternative special education programs. Many teacher preparation programs are more akin to a “boot camp” than to mentoring caring special educators (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2017). These teacher candidates may enter the alternative program with no prior teaching experience. They are then placed in a classroom with minimal knowledge of how to teach any children, and most crucially, they have no knowledge of how to teach children with exceptionalities (Ricci & Zetlin, 2013). Nationally, there are differences and similarities in these programs compared to traditional teacher preparation paths. While the content is usually similar in each, the length of time is disparate. Often the students in the alternative programs have fewer requirements for student teaching experience, sometimes consisting of only a brief summer student teaching. Some candidates immediately begin teaching in a classroom in conjunction with their classes. While meeting the need to put a teacher in every classroom, this practice can be detrimental to retention. Connelly and Graham (2009) found that special education teachers who had completed at least 10 weeks of student teaching were more likely to remain in the field than those who had completed less than 10 weeks of student teaching. Likewise, Redding and Smith (2016) contended that insufficient preparation in pre-service training contributes to the high attrition rates for alternatively certified teachers.

In comparison with the substantial amount of research pertaining to SPED teacher attrition, scant research is available pertaining to alternatively certified SPED teachers. Given the increasing number of alternative programs, and in order to strengthen retention, it is imperative that faculty are aware of the unique challenges faced by alternatively certified teachers. Examining critical incidents reported by these teachers may help to understand their experiences and identify variables needing additional support and training.

Methodology

This qualitative study utilized the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) introduced by Flanagan in 1954. This technique helps to signify important, specific events and understand how participants perceive the event (Nassif, Andreassi, & Tonelli, 2016). CIT consists of specific procedures for collecting data about human activity and analyzing the significance of the information to the people involved (Larsson, Sahlsten, Segesten, & Plos, 2011). In fact, Larsson et al. (2011), stated, “The central concept in CIT is a critical incidence which is a major event of great importance to the person involved.” (p. 2). This approach seemed distinctively appropriate in understanding issues of importance to teachers in an alternative special educator program. CIT yields contextualized data reflective of authentic experiences involving significant instances of a specific activity as observed or experienced by research participants. Analysis of the incidents allows researchers to identify patterns, similarities, and differences among participants’ experiences. CIT findings are utilized to support practical outcomes related to education and training and to provide a knowledge base for future research.

Participants

Participants were recruited from a university special education intern program. All participants are over the age of 18 years and all have a bachelor’s degree. This was a purposive sample (Patton, 2014) in that all the participants were teachers of record who enrolled in an alternative special education certification program. They were given an overview of the proposed study at a seminar meeting. After the overview of the study, students were asked if they would like to participate. Those who agreed to participate were provided with a consent form. Students were given the opportunity to read the consent form and ask questions about the study. Students who agreed to participate in the study signed the form.

There were 35 participants in this study. Data were collected during the fall of 2015 and spring of 2016. The alternative special education teacher certification program is at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) located in the western United States. This is a post-baccalaureate program and a majority of the participants were female. The critical incidents were collected during their first or second year of intern teaching on an emergency teaching license. The pre-kindergarten-12th grade schools in which the interns were teaching were also largely Hispanic in population and receive Title 1 funding.

Data Sources and Collection

The participants recorded their critical incidents using a specific template twice per academic quarter. This template contained the following prompts, (a) When did the incident occur?, (b) Where did the incident occur?, (c) Who was involved in the incident?, (d) What occurred?, (e) Why was the incident critical? (f), Outcome, and (g) Reflection. Flanagan (1954) emphasized that sample size should be based on the number of incidents collected rather than on the number of participants. Each participant provided at least one incident report: Fifteen participants completed one critical incidence report, 13 participants completed two reports, one participant

completed three reports, five participants completed four reports, and one participant completed five reports. From the 35 participants, 69 critical incidents were reported.

Analysis

Preliminary data analysis was conducted through an initial reading of each response by each researcher. As recommended by Flanagan (1954), analysis of the CIT does not follow a prescribed set of rules, but is a subjective, “flexible set of principles which must be modified and adapted to meet the specific situation at hand” (p. 335). The first step in data analysis for this study consisted of an initial reading of the incidents, which were coded and analyzed for similarities using a constant comparison method, outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The researchers then looked for concepts and themes within the data to identify preliminary categories of the incidences (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Clarifications were finalized and the incidences were categorized into three main categories and twelve sub-categories. The next step in the analysis was a second reading of the incidents. After the second reading, data in each incident were coded and identified according to categories and subcategories.

The final step in the analysis, as described by Flanagan (1954), was to determine the balance between specificity and generality in reporting the data. The aim was to “determine the optimal level of generality to be used” (p. 347). Mining the incidents took place through color-coding the reports, reviewing researcher notes, discussions between the researchers, and the using an Excel spreadsheet to interpret and report the findings (Flanagan, 1954; Larsson et al., 2011).

Trustworthiness

A triangulation method was engaged to assure the trustworthiness of this study (Patton, 2014). This included the use of member checks, peer review, and observations. One researcher first analyzed the data and to increase the credibility of the data, the researchers discussed the categories together in conjunction with the observations. In the case of crossover of the categories within the incidents, only one category was chosen based on the participant’s emphasis during the “Why” section and the reflection. Specific behaviors were identified and classified and these were discussed by the researchers for trustworthiness (Larsson et al., 2011).

Results

From the results of the analysis emerged three main categories: student behavior, collaboration, and job satisfaction. Within the category of student behavior, subcategories of positive or negative occurrences emerged. Collaboration contained eight subcategories: positive and negative instances with administration, peers, paraprofessionals, and parents. A compelling aspect of the analysis arose during the initial reading of the incidents, some participants seemed focused on a particular category, while others dovetailed into multiple categories. For example, one participant noted a negative occurrence with a student. In the reflection, the participant responded that they were proud of the way they handled the incident and noted it as a positive experience. The final determination was made in the reflection of the incidents to see how the participant reflected on the episode. The last category in Table 1, “Attitude Toward Job” revealed miscellaneous critical incidents that the researchers determined did not fit into any of

the other categories in the table. Instead, in these incidents, the participants were primarily reflecting on their perceptions of the day-to-day realities of teaching. In some instances, the participants were quite pleased with the situation or circumstances. In other cases, that were not. The final category listed attitude toward the job as either negative or positive.

Table 1
Number of Incidents Within Categories

Category	Number of Incidents	Examples of Responses
<u>Student Behavior</u>		
Positive	13	“She was very happy to see her grades and we praised her because we always knew she could do it.” “This was one of the best moments I have had in the classroom. To see Freddy start to smile and realize that he could do something he thought he couldn’t do was the best feeling ever!”
Negative	20	“When the aide intervened, the student became very aggressive, began growling, and attempted to hit and bite the aide.” “I found this event very alarming, what if, God forbid, he had been able to get his hands on a real weapon? This event has put me on a real roller coaster.”
<u>Collaboration</u>		
Administration-Positive	2	“She had very positive things to say about the student interactions and how I implement the program.” “The outcome of this meeting was very positive. We discussed some mistakes and weaknesses, but also my strengths.”
Administration-Negative	6	“I asked about the material (books) I had been waiting on since September!!! He got really mad and told me that I needed to let go of that one.” “Later that evening I received a long email from this admin. She wrote that my students were not in a line when walking from the library to our class...she went on to cc the principle, vice principle, the vice principle she was interim for, and the special ed. Director.”
Paraprofessionals-Positive	1	“My classroom aide is terrific...she truly cares about the students.”
Paraprofessionals-Negative	6	“This incident is critical because it was an example of someone just lying to my face.” “I found my aides still sitting under a tree both scrolling on their cellphones.” “...because my aide’s communication with the mother undermines my authority.”

Parents-Positive	0	
Parents- Negative	2	“She said she instructed her daughter to defend herself and if he bothered her again, she could call him whatever names she needed to call him.”
Colleagues- Positive	2	“... I had the support needed to deal with the crisis situation.” “It is because of her that CHP has not found me walking down the 14 freeway.”
Colleagues-Negative	4	“However, being in the same classroom as her has been very challenging...I believe my experiences as a boy scout and now as a backpacker have given me the ability to survive.” “I let another teacher use my classroom. I came back from lunch and noticed some of my things were missing. Later on during class, I found drugs in my classroom.”
<u>Attitude Toward Job</u>		
Positive	4	“I actually dealt with something without an adverse reaction. I was able to maintain my cool the entire time, use positive direction and lead the lesson...” “This is what teachers strive for, for their students to come back to them reformed and an asset to society instead of a burden.”
Negative	9	“I felt like I personally lost control of my classroom, and my children could have been seriously hurt.” “Even with me being in my classroom by 6 A.M., I feel like there is not enough time to teach my current students...”
<u>Total Incidents</u>	69	

As reflected in Table 1, the category containing the most incident reports was in the area of student behavior. Negative behavior was reported 20 times; whereas positive student behavior was documented 14 times. This concern regarding student behavior is consistent with the literature of alternatively certified teachers in special education and in general education (Lee, Patterson, Vega, 2011). The next category, collaboration, contained 23 reported incidents. Attitude toward the job, with 13 reported incidents, was the most fluid category as some of the incidents were a tapestry of feelings about their profession, student behavior, or collaboration.

Discussion and Limitations

Schonfeld and Feinman, (2012) cited classroom management as the most critical issue that alternatively certified teachers face in their work with students with disabilities. Within this research, the alternatively certified teachers also listed student behavior as the most pertinent issue within their classrooms. Some of the student behavior issues consisted of inattention,

refusal of work, and defiance to the teacher. It was clear from the CIT reports that the participants felt frustrated by negative behaviors and often felt helpless to correct it. For example, this response in reaction to student misbehavior, “I am unsatisfied with my response to the incident...although I did not physically hurt her, I would have because a movement she could have made by moving her head, I could have poked an eye.” In this incident, both the teacher and paraprofessional were inadequately trained to handle the aggressive behavior of the student. This also occurred with another participant as they told about an incident involving a fight between students in a high school, “I need to remember that they always have retaliation on their minds.” This statement indicates the teacher has not received training in positive behavior supports and was relying on assumptions and stereotypes of behavior. The findings from this study using critical incidents confirmed that alternatively certified teacher preparation programs need to focus more heavily on classroom management strategies and behavior modification techniques. There were numerous critical incidences reported regarding student behavior that happened outside of the classroom (e.g., physical education classes, recess, and transition times). It is important for alternatively certified teachers to understand that these incidences, even though they occurred outside of their classrooms, remain issues that the classroom teachers will need to address. For example, training in positive behavior supports such as a token economy could be implemented for problematic students and encourages appropriate behavior when these students are in other classrooms.

The results of this study indicate there is a need for the alternatively certified teachers to understand how to handle negative student behavior without the need for administrative oversight unless the student is in danger of hurting himself/herself or others. If the alternatively certified teachers practiced positive behavior supports in their own classrooms, then the likelihood of the negative collaborative/administrative incidences may also decrease. The authors also suggest that evidence-based practices are better learned within a strong mentorship relationship coupled with open communication and consultation between the preparation programs and the school district.

Finally, critical incidences related to the negative student behavior contained roughly five circumstances noting students with autism spectrum disorders were demonstrating challenging behavior and some of these behaviors caused office referrals. With proper training and understanding of these students’ disabilities, the alternatively certified teachers would recognize these behaviors are a manifestation of the student’s disability and not misbehavior. These teachers are responsible for constructing a classroom behavior modification plan and perhaps an individualized behavior modification plan to serve students with autism spectrum disorders better.

Furthermore, the researchers found that the alternatively certified teachers delineated multiple negative incidences when working with paraprofessionals. Even within the special education certification teacher preparation programs, there was limited time or resources to educate pre-service teachers to the knowledge and skills necessary for working with paraprofessionals. The alternatively certified teacher programs are no exception. Unfortunately, when teachers are faced with challenges from paraprofessionals (e.g., communication, student and parent relationships, and program operation), the alternatively certified teachers are at a disadvantage in “soft” skills requiring collaboration with various stakeholders. According to one participant, as told in the

critical incident report, “I realized communication with my aide is very poor, realized this. I also realized that I should stop ignoring the behavior of my instructional aide as she ignores some of the students.”

Negative incidents with paraprofessionals, peers, and parents seemed to be a decisive source of frustration for many of the participants; however, it was noted that few of them seemed to have the management skills to effectively handle the incidents. One participant reported how her peers were speaking poorly of her behind her back, “I was shocked and saddened by the news that a colleague would slander my name in such a way.” As for the outcome, the participant reported, “The outcome is still underway. We agreed to contact each other more and talk about any concerns we have, but the one teacher is still making hurtful remarks about the other.” The researchers suggest that the alternatively certified teacher programs spend ample time focusing how to work in partnership with the myriad people with whom they come into contact. The researchers also suggested activities such as classroom team meetings, preparation for specific roles, planning and scheduling daily activities for the paraprofessional to complete with students, and reinforcing the paraprofessionals’ contributions.

The researchers understand that the alternatively certified teachers described many positive critical incidents, as well as negative. The researchers were pleased to read these positive circumstances and understand that, even though working with students with disabilities can be challenging, this work is a most rewarding career choice. The researchers felt it necessary to elaborate on the some of the major negative critical incidences delineated by the alternatively certified teachers to bring attention to the ongoing issues within the field of special education and suggest ways to overcome these issues.

The results of this study indicate that alternative special education teacher programs may need to focus on the importance of classroom management, collaboration, mentorship, and evidence-based practices. It is essential for the alternatively certified teachers to be thoughtful reflective practitioners. Alternative certification programs should strive to prepare the alternatively certified teachers to think critically through challenges within their classrooms. Finally, the alternatively certified teachers will need to be consumers of empirical research for those effective evidence-based practices in their work with students with disabilities.

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