

## **“What Doesn’t Kill You, Makes You Stronger!” Alternative Certification Programs: Interns Perspectives About Mentorship**

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Given the national shortage of special educators, many are entering the profession through alternative certification, assuming full responsibility for classrooms or caseloads before they are fully licensed as special education teachers. This qualitative study explores the support provided to beginning alternative certification teachers in a special education program. Through several sources of data, we describe the perspectives of first-year versus second-year interns about the frequency, helpfulness, and nature of support they received from their assigned mentors, other sources of support at their school sites, and their university intern program. The findings illustrate the need for universities and schools to immediately identify a school site mentor for first-year interns and the need to provide more intensive support for an initial period when the intern first assumes responsibility at a school.

*Keywords:* alternative certification, teacher education, mentorship, university and district partnerships

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Schools today are dealing with a critical teacher shortage, especially in the area of special education, and relying heavily on emergency permits and waivers to staff classrooms. Although this is not the first national shortage (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019), a major contributing factor to the shortage was the U.S. economic recession that began in 2008. The recession led to teacher layoffs and a freeze on new hires. As a result, there has been a steep decline of 73% enrollment in teacher preparation programs (LPI, 2017). Coupled with teachers leaving the field within the first five years of teaching (Zhang & Zeller, 2016), this has led to a need to revisit how teachers are trained. Therefore, teacher education programs and school districts have begun looking for new ways to attract qualified people into the teaching profession, including recruiting candidates for alternative certification programs (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Dee & Goldhaber, 2017).

Alternative certification programs, as they are known in California, provide a pathway for individuals to be hired by schools before they are fully certified as teachers. Other states refer to these programs as alternative route programs. Given the ongoing staffing challenges in special education, more often than not, newly hired special education teachers are recruited through alternative certification programs (Wasburn-Moses & Rosenberg, 2008; Whitford et.al, 2018; Zhang & Zeller, 2016). Typically, these alternative certification candidates or interns complete their teacher preparation coursework while simultaneously assuming full time teaching responsibilities. To be effective in their roles, novice special educators need systematic mentoring and coaching, especially during the first few months in the classroom (Bay & Parker-Katz, 2009; Whitaker, 2000; White & Mason, 2006; Whitford, Zhang, & Katsiyannis, 2018). Special education alternative certification programs typically take up to two years to complete. The present study set out to examine the nature of support needed and received by special education interns who were enrolled in an alternative certification program at a southern California university that partners with diverse, urban school districts. Specifically, this study sought to discern differences in needs and supports that first and second-year special education interns experience.

### **Teacher Education and Retention**

Nationally, special education is the number one field grappling with teacher shortages. In a recent report, Sutchter, Darling-Hammond, and Carver-Thomas (2016) noted that while special educators should have well-rounded preparation to address the pedagogical, psychological, and medical needs of their students, too often as novice teachers, they enter the field with less than adequate preparation. Considering the changing demographics and expansion of alternative certification teacher preparation programs for individuals interested in special education, scholars have evaluated best practices and partnerships between schools and universities (Hunt, 2014; Wasburn-Moses & Rosenberg, 2008).

In the state of California, mentorship and supervision have become an essential component of alternative programs to help address the retention of special education teachers (Karge & McCabe, 2014; Kearney, 2013). Ricci and Zetlin (2013) did not specifically examine the retention of interns, however, they found that 80-85% of those who completed a special education intern program were still teaching three years after receiving their certification (Ricci & Zetlin, 2013; Zetlin, 2011). More specifically, they assessed the nature of relationships between support providers and special education interns who were teaching in diverse, urban school districts. They found that extensive mentoring and supervision were paramount in helping these new teachers acquire the skills necessary to become effective educators. Their findings were aligned with earlier findings which indicated that teacher educators and school administrators agreed that beginning teachers require mentoring and coaching even while they are receiving support from their teacher preparation program (Esposito & Lal, 2005; Quigney, 2010; Ricci & Zetlin, 2013; Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005).

In a survey of 124 California State University interns, Karge and McCabe (2014) found that 96 percent of teachers who were at one time interns had been teaching for 10 years or longer. They attributed that success to 11 attributes and while six of the attributes pertained specifically to the teacher preparation program, five considered the role that school districts play. The five attributes that extended beyond the supports provided in teacher preparation programs were: 1) extensive mentoring and supervision, 2) extensive pedagogical training in instruction and curriculum, 3) frequent and substantial evaluation, 4) meaningful collaboration,

and 5) working with diverse students. While these five attributes are addressed in teacher education programs, school sites and districts play a greater role in the effectiveness and accessibility of these supports to first- and second-year interns.

Recently, Stanulis et al. (2018) examined how supervising teachers viewed their roles as mentors. One of the most significant findings was that mentors who viewed themselves as merely being cooperating teachers were more likely to perceive themselves as cheerleaders and were less likely to provide targeted support. Therefore, they recommended a shift from cooperative teachers to educative mentors, someone who “emphasizes growth-producing experiences rather than cooperating to simply provide a placement to practice teaching” (Stanulis et al., 2018, p. 2). Moreover, Zhang and Zeller (2016) suggested that the type of preparation the new teacher received, access to teaching resources, perceived support from school districts, and competency knowledge should also be considered as contributing factors in teacher short-term attrition from the field (Zhang and Zeller, 2016).

To facilitate more successful alternative certification programs, Wasburn-Moses and Rosenberg (2008) recommended a set of guidelines to promote best practices in teacher education. Among the seven guidelines they provided, they offered three that were specific to the local education agency (LEA) and the university. The first guideline was to promote initial classroom survival, which they related to providing mentorship, devising a mentorship plan, introducing new teachers to the school culture, and giving special attention to organization, communication, and classroom management. The second, was to require collaboration and teaming. For example, they suggested both personal and professional support, teaming within candidates’ workplace, and allowing for critical reflection of discussion with colleagues. The third applied to both the LEA and university and emphasized the skills needed to improve practice. In other words, they argued that new teachers should be encouraged to observe other teachers and engage in dialogue about the practices they observe and be given opportunities to compare children’s work.

To better understand how universities have attempted to partner with school districts during the first years of teaching, Hunt (2014) conducted a literature review of 25 studies. One of the emerging themes highlighted the fact that the ideologies between the schools and

universities are disjointed. Hunt cited six separate studies that suggested collaborations between teacher education faculty and school practitioners could lead to conflict between theory that credential candidates are taught in their preparation program and practices they observe in the schools in which they are assigned to teach. One solution provided was to allow new teachers to have regular discussions with mentors about more than mere procedures. Furthermore, Hunt suggested keeping the lines of communication open between the schools and universities to prevent the divide between theory and practice and to promote effective problem solving and collaboration.

Contributing to the knowledge base on mentoring beginning special educators, the current study explored, in-depth and over time, the specific nature and helpfulness of support provided to intern teachers in a two-year alternative certification program. Specifically, this study explored the perspectives of first-year versus second-year interns about the frequency, helpfulness, and nature of support they received from their assigned mentors, other sources of support at their school sites, as well as the support provided by their university intern program and professors. The current study utilized several sources of data for year one and year two interns spanning the beginning and end of an academic year, including a two-part intern questionnaire, focus group interviews, and weekly logs documenting the hours and type of support received.

### **Background of Alternative Certification Program**

The context for this study is the alternative certification program offered by a large, urban public university in Southern California and specifically intern teachers, those employed by schools before they are fully licensed. These individuals are given full teaching responsibility for students while simultaneously taking classes toward their teaching licensure. These beginning teachers are considered interns by California's Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC), the state education agency that approves teacher preparation programs that meet standards for educator preparation and competence (CTC, 2013).

The university requires interns to have at minimum a bachelor's degree from an accredited university, a GPA of 2.75 or higher, a passing score on California basic educational skills test, subject matter competence (e.g. passing score on the multiple or single subject of

the California Subject Examinations for Teachers), and an offer of employment as a special education teacher from a school district. Once accepted into the two-year credential preparation program, these interns enroll in foundational and specialization courses and complete two formal fieldwork practicum with seminars. The coursework is developmentally sequenced and meets the competency standards in one of five disability areas (mild/moderate disabilities, moderate/severe disabilities, early childhood special education, 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 the employing school district each provide extended guidance and supervision while the interns complete, within the two-year period, all educational coursework and fieldwork requirements for the special education teaching credential. The school district provides the intern with a full-time teaching assignment, district support through an on-site mentor, and staff development. The university provides the intern with two support systems: 1) direct support for their teaching through mentoring/coaching by a university supervisor who also collaborates with the on-site mentor, and 2) indirect support through university coursework and seminars that support specialized instructional skill development and opportunities for discussion of their teaching challenges.

The on-site mentors are identified by the intern in consultation with the site administrator. The mentor must have at least three years of teaching experience, a special education teaching 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. Per the requirements of the CTC, interns must receive at least 144 hours of support across an academic year, roughly translating to two hours of support per week. In addition, if interns have not held a prior teaching credential with authorization to teach English learners, they must also receive 45 hours of support per year related to skills in teaching English learners.

Supervisors from the university observe the interns teaching during their formal fieldwork experiences which occur each year of the program. 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 mentor to monitor the intern's progress and provide consistent support as needed by the intern. The collaborative effort of the district and university is intended to provide guidance to help the interns demonstrate professional competencies.

### **Aims**

Earlier studies have outlined strategies that could be implemented to better prepare teachers in these programs (Hunt, 2014; Wasburn-Moses & Rosenberg, 2008; Zhang and Zeller, 2016). The aims of the current study are to highlight the supports and resources that novice teachers participating in alternative credential programs need to be better equipped to be effective teachers, and to prevent them from prematurely leaving the classroom. The research questions were: 1) What supports and resources do novice teachers benefit from during their first and second year as interns? and 2) What are the changes in the level of support and resources between the first and second year of teaching?

### **Method**

This qualitative study was conducted at a large, urban public university in Southern California that was identified by the CTC as one of the teacher preparation programs that issued the most special education intern credentials in 2016-2017. According to a recent report by CTC (2018), the number of special education intern credentials increased by 16.9 percent between the 2015-16 and 2016-17 school year. Additionally, the California Department of Education (CDE) projected that 20 percent of the estimated number of special education teacher hires for 2018-19 will be from the county where this study was conducted (CDE DataQuest, 2018).

We developed two distinct case studies based on the circumstances and experiences of first- and second-year interns and then compared the first- and second-year cases. Considering that cases are complex by nature (Yin, 2009), we used a comparative case study design to offer a deeper understanding of the needs and supports that interns have during each year of their internship (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The comparative case study design allowed us the opportunity to create a meta-matrix for each year separately and then compare and

analyze the particular types of support interns had or needed for the two-year span of the program. We used purposeful sampling that included all first and second-year interns enrolled during the 2014-2016 school years for whom we had complete data sets. Since interns typically enrolled in two to four classes each term (based on which courses they had already completed before entering the program), not all interns were enrolled in the supervision seminars during the fall and spring semesters when the intern questionnaire was administered and logs were required. If interns were enrolled in one of two fieldwork practicums, they did not participate in the supervision seminars. Using data from the interns with complete data sets, we developed first and second-year case studies.

### **Participants Characteristics and Data Collection**

Participants in this study represented interns from four special education credential programs (Early Childhood Special Education, Mild to Moderate Disabilities, Moderate to Severe Disabilities, and Visual Impairment). The final study sample reflects 21 participants who completed the fall and spring intern questionnaire and intern log of support hours. From those 21 participants, a subset of 11 interns participated in the focus groups; five were in their first year of teaching and six were in their second year (see Table 1). The participants in this study were drawn from a larger population of 70 interns enrolled in the supervision seminars taught by the third author during the academic year. Of these 70 interns, 51 were females, and 19 were males, with 66% in their first year as an intern and 34% in their second year. These interns were enrolled in five teaching credential programs: early childhood special education ( $n = 8$ ), mild/moderate disabilities ( $n = 37$ ), moderate/severe disabilities ( $n = 12$ ), visual impairments ( $n = 12$ ), and physical/health impairments ( $n = 1$ ; since a complete data set was not available for this intern, she was not included in the final sample). Of these 70 interns, 64% were of Hispanic descent, 16% Caucasian, 5% Asian American, 6% African American, and 9% who identified themselves as being of mixed or other ethnicities.



Table 1  
*Demographics of total sample and focus group participants*

	Total sample <i>n</i> =21	Year one <i>n</i> =5	Year two <i>n</i> =6
<b>Gender</b>			
Female	13	4	5
Male	8	1	1
<b>Ethnicity</b>			
Hispanic	12	4	3
Asian	3	-	-
African-American	1	-	1
Caucasian	3	1	1
Mixed Race	2	-	1
<b>Credential Type</b>			
Early Childhood Special Education	2	2	-
Mild/Moderate Disabilities	12	3	1
Moderate/Severe Disabilities	4	-	3
Visual Impairment	3	-	2
<b>Placement Sites</b>			
Public School/District	14	3	3
Charter/Private School	7	2	3
<b>Grade Level</b>			
Pre-School	2	2	-
Elementary	8	2	3
Middle School	7	-	2
High School	4	1	1

The data for this study were collected over the course of one school year from September 2015 to June 2016. To ensure the trustworthiness of data used to construct each case, we collected responses from three primary data sources: (1) intern log of support hours, (2) two-part intern questionnaire, and (3) transcripts from focus groups. Each set of data allowed us to capture a variety of features of the interns' overall experience and supports received throughout their course of study.

### ***Intern Logs***

As part of their internship and university requirements, interns completed a weekly online log documenting the hours and nature of support they received at their school sites and from the university. The logs were an assignment in the interns' supervision seminar, in which they recorded hours of support they had received from various designated categories of support, including options for writing in types of support not explicitly included in the log. The interns were to document types of support and duration of support by Friday of each week. While the interns knew that the university could communicate with their mentors regarding the amount and nature of support received, we chose not to ask mentors to complete the logs each week, as this would have added to the mentors' workload. The logs were used to assess the types of supports that each group relied on and found most meaningful throughout the school year (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Top supports documented by year one and year two interns in weekly logs*

Year one interns	Category of support	Source of support	Average minutes per week
	Course or seminar problem solving issues related to students, curriculum, instruction, IEPs	University	129.04
	Content-specific coaching (e.g. math coaches, reading coaches, EL coaches)	School site	79.68
	Activities, lectures, discussions specifically addressing issues in the intern's classroom	University	79.66
	Grade-level or department meetings related to curriculum, planning, and/or instruction	School site	71.79
	New teacher trainings/orientation	School site	65.68

Year two interns	Category of support	Source of support	Average minutes per week
	New teacher trainings/orientation	School site	136.15
	Other types of support: Unspecified	School site	116.47
	Grade-level or department meetings related to curriculum, planning, and/or instruction	School site	89.21
	Co-teaching activities with mentor, coach, or program supervisor	School site	74.89
	Classroom observation of intern and coaching/feedback from mentor, coach, or program supervisor	School site	68.27

### ***Intern Questionnaire***

A two-part questionnaire was developed by the third author to determine the types and frequency of support received by interns enrolled in her intern supervision seminars. Part One of the two-part intern questionnaire required interns to identify the frequency of contact with an assigned school site mentor, and also rate the perceived helpfulness of support received from (a) the school mentor, (b) other individuals at their school sites, and (c) university advisors and instructors (see Tables 3). Part Two of the questionnaire consisted of four open-ended questions about challenges/areas of need, and types of support they expressed interest in receiving from mentors and university instructors and advisors. These data focused on the unique and personal experiences of each group. The open-ended questions allowed interns to independently share (1) their most significant challenge(s)/area(s) of need related to their intern position, (2) what they needed from their support providers at the university and district, and (3) what the “favorite” aspect of their current teaching position was. Six areas of support needs were revealed and are described in Table 4 (Time Management; Collaboration; Health; Differential Supporters; Classroom support; Teaching Resources).

Table 4  
*Emerging themes*

	Year one Interns	Year two Interns
Balancing Work, School, and Personal Lives	"It took two terms to really balance how to manage their university classes with their full-time teaching job. I had to enroll in a reduced course load one term."	"School and university work always get done, but it's always at the last minute and because of my workload, my social life is on the backburner."
Balancing Work, School, and Personal Lives	"I did not want to bug her mentor because I know that she was also busy"	<p>a. "As the teacher, I supervise but I'm not the "BOSS" – I need to develop good relationships [with instructional aides]"</p> <p>b. "Teachers are more willing to work with me."</p>
Balancing Work, School, and Personal Lives	"When you love your job, you tend to put everything else aside, e.g. your health... you focus so much on [the job] and tend to ignore the other things in life."	<p>a. "I jumped in the deep end. The first year I was out of my comfort zone everyday – there was no parachute."</p> <p>b. "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger!"</p>
Collaboration and Guidance	"I learned how to ask for support, but I'm still unsure about how to advocate for me and my students without throwing people under the bus"	"It's OK if you don't get it all right" a support provider told her it takes 5 years to get it.
Collaboration and Guidance	"Over the summer I will plan with colleagues to be better prepared for the following year."	"There were too many (people) coming in and giving suggestions. I want to be able to pick and choose what works for me.
Collaboration and Guidance	"It would help if [the school] provided more workshops."	"This year, I know the curriculum/program, resources, strategies from [university] coursework"

**Focus Groups**

Once we identified the 21 participants for whom we had complete data sets (i.e., logs, intern questionnaires), emails were sent to each intern requesting participation in either the first year or second year focus group to gather knowledge about their experiences as an intern. From the group of 21 interns, a subset of year one and year two interns volunteered and participated in their respective focus groups led by the study's authors. Each group met for about an hour in a small classroom and responded to questions related to their challenges, needs, and nature of support they received from school site mentors and the university. Both focus groups were provided the same set of questions to help determine any similarities and differences between first- and second-year interns' experiences and perceptions. Focus group sessions were tape-recorded and later transcribed by the first author (see Appendix A for focus group questions).

**Data Analysis**

Cross-tabulation of the data in Part One of the questionnaire indicated substantive differences in availability and use of supports by first and second-year interns. The data revealed that 68% of first-year interns reported contact of at least one time a week, as compared to 80% of second-year interns. For the helpfulness of mentors, 83% of first-year interns reported their mentors as being somewhat to extremely helpful, as compared to 90% of second-year interns. For frequency of contact with other supportive individuals, 74% of first-year interns reported contact of at least one time a week with others who provided them with support, as compared to 89% of second-year interns. Regarding the helpfulness of these individuals, 94% of first-year interns reported them as being somewhat to extremely helpful, as compared to 100% of second-year interns. Finally, 77% of first-year interns reported university support as being somewhat to extremely helpful, as compared to 97% of second-year interns (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Frequency and helpfulness of support received by interns*

Items	Year one interns <i>n</i> = 14	Year two interns <i>n</i> = 7
Frequency of contact with mentor		
On daily basis	32.15%	42.9%
Several times a week	14.3%	14.3%
At least 1time week	21.4%	35.65%
2-3 times/month	10.7%	0%
1 time a month/less	3.55%	0%
No contact yet	17.9%	7.15%
Helpfulness of support from mentor		
Extremely helpful	39.3%	50%
Very helpful	28.55%	28.55%
Somewhat helpful	14.25%	14.3%
Not helpful	0%	0%
No contact yet	17.9%	7.15%
Frequency of contact with other individual		
On daily basis	32.15%	38.1%
Several times a week	21.45%	23.8%
At least 1time week	10.7%	23.8%
2-3 times/month	17.85%	7.15%
1 time a month/less	3.55%	7.15%
No contact yet	7.15%	0 %
Did not respond	7.15%	7.15%
Helpfulness of support from other individual		
Extremely helpful	53.55%	57.15%
Very helpful	25%	21.4%
Somewhat helpful	7.15%	7.15%
Not helpful	0%	0%
No contact yet	7.15%	0%
Did not respond	7.15%	14.3%
Helpfulness of university support		
Extremely helpful	28.55%	14.3%
Very helpful	39.3%	50%
Somewhat helpful	14.3%	28.55%
Not helpful	3.55%	0%
No contact yet	7.15%	0%
Did not respond	7.15%	7.15%

**Matrices**

For Part Two of the questionnaire and focus group data, our analysis was ongoing, and throughout the data collection we created case summary sheets that were eventually converted into meta-matrices with categories based on an earlier study (See Ricci & Zetlin, 2013). This process was done with data from the focus groups and open-ended questions from the intern questionnaire. We regularly discussed our findings and periodically met to review the data and modify the categories to be more inclusive of what the participants were reporting. Miles and colleagues (2014) suggest a time-ordered meta-matrix to distinguish any trends or concerns that may change over time or to identify the variation between concerns. Miles and Huberman (1994) refer to this process as meta-matrices analysis which involves the assembling of master charts with descriptive data from each case in a standard format.

Once the meta-matrices were developed, similarities, differences, frequency, and responses for each of the participants were compared to explore how interns' experiences aligned with one another throughout the process. From the resulting meta-matrices, a summary table was developed to include the emerging themes based on evidence from the focus groups and open-ended questions (see Table 4). The emerging themes are referenced in descriptions of each case study below.

**Results and Discussion****Case Study of Year One Interns**

Year One interns had the double challenge of being both a first-year teacher at a new school and a credential candidate enrolled in a rigorous alternative certification program. For the most part, these interns, just like first-time college students, started out bright-eyed and full of hope and aspirations for what they could do as teachers. Unfortunately, for the interns, this sentiment was short-lived as the overwhelming demands of their jobs quickly set in. Their number one concern was not knowing how to access information and appropriate school resources for their students.

In general, from a review of the logs and the table documenting frequency and helpfulness of support received, we found that first-year interns were more likely to lean on university resources or people other than their mentors for support. Initially, there was a delay

in the assignment of a mentor for some first-year interns although later in the school year, both first- and second-year interns had the same access to their on-site mentors. In particular, for questions or concerns related to individual students, curriculum, instruction, or IEPs, they reported relying on university courses or seminars at the university to address their concerns (see Tables 2 and 3). With respect to school supports, they shared anxieties about not always feeling confident as to who to ask for support regarding school procedures. One participant remarked that *“she did not want to bug her mentor because she knew her mentor was also busy.”* Several interns noted they were not immediately assigned a support provider and they reluctantly had to seek out an administrator when they had questions and needs. During the focus group, one person shared that when she first began her assignment and had not yet been assigned a support provider, she took it upon herself to select a district specialist as her *“go-to”* person for everything. Another intern reported that while the new general education teachers were assigned mentors at her charter school, she, as new the special education teacher, had to learn who to go to for specific information. For example, when it came to questions about the Individual Education Program (IEP) she would ask a fellow special education teacher, but when she had a legal question she went to the Director of Special Education. Interestingly, another first-year participant shared that although he eventually learned how to effectively ask for support, he was still unsure about how to advocate for himself and his students without *“throwing people under the bus”*, in other words, he was struggling with not making anyone look bad when his students’ needs were not being met.

While these first-year interns varied somewhat in how they organized themselves and asked for help, a second serious and recurrent concern was learning how to juggle school and work. One participant shared that it took her two terms to really balance how to manage her university classes with her full-time teaching job. This participant finally chose to enroll in a reduced course load the next term in order to *“survive.”* Another intern reported that she *“never felt like she was doing anything well.”* While she was at work she was focused on school and while she was at the university, she focused on what she had to do at work. In the open-ended questionnaire responses, the first-year interns reported that time management and organization were among their most significant challenges for them.



During the year one focus group, one intern said: *“when you love your job, you tend to put everything else aside, e.g. your health... you focus so much on [the job] and tend to ignore the other things in life.”* This comment struck a chord, not only with us, the researchers, but for the other interns as well. The same intern shared that he stopped working out for four to five months or eating healthy because the job was all-consuming. His remark triggered a turn in the focus group conversation, and other interns began sharing how their overall health had taken a toll from the stress of their situation.

Overall, despite these trying findings, the year one interns were optimistic and hopeful for their second year. They reported that as the year progressed, they became more familiar with the procedures and team rituals at their school. Several interns noted that they had arranged a time to plan with colleagues over the summer to be better prepared for the following year. They felt accomplished and proud of making it through their first year. One person shared *“[I] feel like it was rough, and I am on top of the mountain now.”* Another shared that *“it feels good to say I did it! 20 IEPs and none are in the red.”*

### **Case Study of Year Two Interns**

Interns in their second year of the program seemed more confident overall, and especially regarding approaching their mentor to ask for support. By their second year, interns relied less on university resources to answer their questions and more on their mentors and other supports at the school. They took advantage of grade-level or department meetings and worked with their mentors and coaches to get feedback on their own instructional practices (see Table 3). While they were still struggling with their classroom demands, at least they felt that they knew who to go to for support at their school site.

During the year two focus group, interns shared stories about how their mentors had given them solid advice throughout the year. A few interns sang their mentors' praises, acknowledging that their mentors were an outstanding resource to have in close proximity. One exclaimed that her mentor *“helps me get the bigger picture.”* Another shared that she had her mentor's cell number and felt comfortable calling her whenever she needed to. This remark led another intern to share how her mentor would even come to her classroom or send her instructional aide to allow the intern time to assess individual students. Interestingly, one intern

noted that it was in a university course during her first year that she discovered she should have been assigned a support provider. Her university instructor encouraged her to speak with her administrator and eventually, a mentor was assigned. For that intern, once connected to a mentor, she found the mentor to be a valuable resource.

Some of the more significant challenges for this year two groups of interns related to the need for more targeted support (see Table 4). For example, in their open-ended questionnaire responses they asked for help: (1) with the management of instructional aides, (2) to improve their instruction, and (3) with collaboration with their colleagues. One intern highlighted that working with paraprofessionals was particularly problematic. Similarly, another participant shared that six paraprofessionals were assigned to her students and even though, as the teacher, she was responsible for supervising them, she was unable to make substantial changes in how they functioned in her classroom. When she sought advice from her support provider, she was told it was their administrator who could make changes and she had to let go of some control. She told the group that having a university supervisor come into her room and give feedback on her teaching was especially reinforcing. She needed to hear that *“yes, you are doing a good job.”*

While fewer year two interns felt they needed support with time management and balancing school and work, they shared that they continued to struggle. One noted that she would always get her school and university work done, but it was always at the last minute and as a result of her workload, her *“social life [was] on the backburner.”* Another reported that she had health issues as a result of struggling to maintain the quality of teaching in her classroom. For this group of interns, between school, meetings, events at work, and meeting deadlines, it was evident that time management was a continuing, though less severe challenge during this second year of teaching.

Over time, the interns had learned a great deal from their experiences in the classroom and enrollment in university courses. One important lesson was that they could not do everything. In the focus group, one intern shared, *“I wanted to give students everything they needed as I took over the class and it was a lot...I need to try to not have to do what everyone tells me.”* Reflecting back on the first year of teaching, another intern noted that because they

felt less pressure to get it all right, their teaching had improved. They shared that their mentor told them *“it takes five years to get it”* which had put them at ease. As a result, not only did they feel more comfortable, but they felt as if the students were more relaxed. At the end of the focus group session, one intern concluded, *“what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger!”*

### **Support Changes Between Year One and Year Two**

Differences were evident in who the intern groups went to for support and the types of support they sought. A milestone for interns appeared to be learning which support person to go to for which need. The year one interns initially relied more heavily on faculty and university supervisors to address their questions while year two interns took advantage of resources and training offered by their district and school site. Year two interns were becoming more confident in their role as teachers and had established a support base at the school – mentors and other support staff who they could tap depending on need. Moreover, from year one to year two, as they became more knowledgeable about the school culture, the types of support they sought also changed. As reflected in Table 3, as they progressed through their first school year, interns moved away from wanting university support toward wanting more school site-specific support. During the focus group, a first-year intern shared that he was not always satisfied with the advice he received at his school. He shared that he would ask veteran teachers and administrators for support but either they did not know how to help him or told him to make sure his students were kept busy and doing something. To survive in his classroom, he had sought help from university resources. By and large, by the end of the spring semester, the first-year interns were reporting that they were ready for more targeted assistance and would benefit from targeted assistance as well as from workshops and formal trainings.

Establishing rapport and trusting relationships happened over time and subsequently, mentorship and support looked different for each group. The first-year interns reported that the activities, lectures, discussions with faculty and their classmates at the university provided them with the assistance they needed in relation to addressing issues in their classroom. For these first-year teachers, their primary support, for the most part, was from university resources. During the focus group, when first-year interns spoke about interactions with their

mentors, it was more about how their mentors helped them learn the school culture. Second-year interns had developed a good understanding of the school culture and were more focused on the need for grade-level or department meetings related to curriculum, planning, and/or instruction. At this time, these resources were more meaningful to their teaching needs.

For both year one and year two interns, they reported that good mentors were vital for success. Two of the year one interns, who were able to identify strong mentors early on, reported fewer challenges and concerns during their focus group session. One first-year intern noted that her mentor teacher was excellent and another shared that, once she identified who her mentor teacher was, she was given valuable advice on how to match her students' present levels of performance with goals. Year two interns reported that they not only had more frequent contact with their mentor but that they perceived their mentor as very helpful.

### **Emerging Themes**

#### ***Balancing Work, School, and Personal Lives***

Learning to balance school, work, and their personal lives eased somewhat by the end of the first year but lingered into their second year. The year one interns found themselves struggling with balancing work, school, and personal life. During the year one focus group session, one participant indicated her intention to pay more attention to detail during her second year (see Table 4). Another intern's strategy was to pre-plan over the summer as well as read books to further her learning and be better prepared. Overall, it appeared that first-year interns grappled more with juggling all their multiple responsibilities, whereas second-year interns seemed more confident with their teaching responsibilities and were more focused on seeking targeted support such as working with instructional aides and improving content instruction.

#### ***Collaboration, Guidance, and Co-teaching***

Collaboration, guidance and co-teaching were topics mentioned by year one and year two interns, in different ways. The first-year interns did not include co-teaching in their weekly logs as one of the top five areas in which they needed support (see Table 2). They did, however, indicate wanting to know more about the topic in the open-ended questionnaire. One first-year intern shared that he would like more information on strategies to support students in a co-

taught setting. Another first-year intern, during the spring semester, expressed an interest in meeting with the general education teachers, principal, and service providers to make sure that everyone was on the same page. Year two interns specifically identified co-teaching as a major area of need and provided some detail in describing the issue. With this group, they were more concerned about initiating co-teaching with general education teachers and what their role should be in the general education classroom. One second-year intern noted, *"push-in model, sometimes I feel and seem like a 'teacher assistant' with this model, it's difficult to provide support for [my] caseload."* Comparing the needs and the way that interns discussed collaboration and co-teaching reflected their level of need and the evolution that took place between their first and second years of teaching.

### **Implications/Directions for Future Research**

These data seriously call into question the effectiveness of the current intern-mentor system and how we support individuals in an alternative certification program as they assume full classroom responsibilities. Although data collection was limited to interns at one university program, the study included a diverse group of participants who were enrolled in different types of special education credential programs, taught different grade levels and varied in the types of disabilities and in public and charter schools. In general, these data show that the interns needed ongoing support and deep mentorship in order to be successful in their role as teachers. In particular, as noted in the experiences of year one compared to year two interns, differential support is needed by teachers in each of these years. More concentrated support is needed especially in the first few months of an intern assuming classroom responsibilities. Merely assigning mentors is not enough for year one interns when they begin their role as teachers. A more powerful support structure such as an apprenticeship or team-teaching approach would be beneficial to these novices who are at the stage of just beginning their teacher education programs.

Moving forward and considering the teacher shortage crisis (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Hunt, 2014), universities would benefit from continuing to partner with local school districts and schools. Closely monitored partnerships could improve the quality of mentorship new teachers receive. Partnerships between Universities and School districts warrant further

exploration. Researchers should explore how universities work with schools to provide continued professional development to mentors and other teachers on topics such as co-teaching, collaboration, and tiered systems of support to keep them current with evidence-based practices. Wasburn-Moses and Roseburg (2008) have outlined seven guidelines for universities and school districts to consider when working with beginning teachers in alternative credential programs. Ultimately, the better-prepared schools are to help beginning teachers the less likely they are to have high teacher turnover rates.

Given the significance of mentorship, this study has illustrated the need for universities, schools, and districts to strengthen memos of understanding to ensure that newly hired teachers enrolled in alternative certification programs are immediately assigned a school site mentor and have direct access to their mentor throughout their alternative certification program. A key difference between the year one and year two interns was the ability of second-year interns to check in with someone on their campus. Mentors alleviated the stress and anxiety associated with the challenges and concerns of the beginning. Mentor teachers were able to not only help the interns with issues related to their teaching but with how the campus worked as a whole.

Limitations of this study include a small sample size of interns. Conducting focus groups with a larger number of interns across the various credential areas may have yielded further information related to the needs of first versus second-year interns. A larger sample of interns could have also ensured more equivalency in intern characteristics among the first versus second-year interns. Also, a longitudinal analysis of intern experiences with interviews at various points across the academic years would have strengthened this study. A further limitation of this study is that the two-part questionnaire was not validated by content area experts, as it was designed specifically to assess the support received by interns enrolled in the third author's supervision seminar rather than based on prior literature. Another possible limitation is that the students who volunteered for the focus groups may have not been representative of the larger university intern population. However, based on one of this paper's authors' interactions with the students in the intern supervision seminar, these interns did not qualitatively differ from those who did not participate in the study. The students' responses to

focus group interview questions were similar to conversations among the larger university intern population enrolled in the supervision seminar. Researcher bias could have also influenced the findings of this study, as one of the paper's authors was the instructor of the intern supervision seminar; however, the focus group data was coded and analyzed by the two authors who did not have previous direct contact with the interns in this study.

This study has contributed to the existing body of literature on this topic and validates earlier findings about effective teacher preparation and mentorship. Future studies should look at the effectiveness of school and university partnerships and what support structures would best serve interns as they assume classroom responsibilities. Future studies should also explore the types of professional development that schools would value most in order to strengthen support for the intern/mentor relationship. Such studies could help inform how universities could more effectively collaborate with K-12 schools to create meaningful mentorship sites that support interns and promote quality teaching.

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Appendix

Special Education Intern Program

Year one Focus Group

1. **What were your two greatest challenges this year?** Probe: Elaborate; Why were these challenges?
2. **In what ways did your SP/Mentor help you address those challenges?** Probe: Be specific
3. **What are two things you'd do differently next school year?** Probe: Be specific
4. **Since becoming an intern, was there a shift for you from feeling totaling overwhelmed to feeling like you could manage your teaching and university responsibilities with some sense of confidence? Where are you now?**

If yes, Probe: What do you think was responsible for this transformation?

If no, Probe: Why not? What could have helped you feel more confident about being a new teacher?

Special Education Intern Program

Year two Focus Group

1. **What were your two greatest challenges this year?** Probe: Elaborate; Why were these challenges?
2. **In what ways did your SP/Mentor help you address those challenges?** Probe: Be specific
3. **What are two things you'd do differently next school year?** Probe: Be specific
4. **Since becoming an intern, was there a shift for you from feeling totaling overwhelmed to feeling like you could manage your teaching and university responsibilities with some sense of confidence?**

If yes, Probe: What do you think was responsible for this transformation?

If no, Probe: Why not? What could have helped you feel more confident about being a new teacher?