I ONLY WISH I'D KNOWN: VOICES OF NOVICE ALTERNATIVELY CERTIFIED SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

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Increasing numbers of special education teachers enter the profession via widely varying preparation programs, also known as alternative certification programs. This article describes a survey of 54 novice special education teachers from alternative certification (AC) programs. In this paper, the authors discuss both challenges and support needs and provide recommendations for administrators who are hiring these AC teachers. Participants reported some of the major challenges faced were, for example, classroom management and knowing what to teach (content/curriculum). In contrast, the participants reported little need for support in the areas of parent communication and entering the school community.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2002), there is a shortage of degreed special education teachers resulting in vacant teaching positions. For this reason, most states offer non-traditional routes to special education certification in order to fill vacancies (Tissington & Grow, 2007) and many novice special education teachers enter the profession via these non-traditional, expedited or alternative routes. Interestingly, as many as one third of new teachers hired in states such as New Jersey, Texas and California are trained via alternative certification programs in order to address existing teacher shortages (Boyd, Goldhaber, Lankford, & Wyckoff, 2007; Feistritzer, 2010). Potential teachers who are licensed through these non-traditional programs enter the profession with widely varying background experiences and training.

Thus, this study investigates the experiences and support needs of novice, alternatively certified special education teachers who have varying, often limited, preparation experiences and background knowledge. Specifically, we seek to understand the teachers' needs for help and support during their first year of teaching and what other educators or administrators can do in order to support these novice teachers.

Literature Review
A review of literature indicates the persistent need for special education teachers giving rise to a variety of alternative routes to special education teacher certification in order to fill the numerous job vacancies that public schools face. The literature describes the purpose of alternative certification programs and offers some insights into related variables such as retention rates, causes for attrition, responsibilities of special education teachers and the quality of teacher candidates from the programs.

Alternative Certification Programs
Numerous studies support the need for special education teachers; (Boe, 2006; Boe, Bobbit, & Cook, 1997; Brownell, Hirsch, & Seo, 2004; Carlson, Brauen, Klein, Schroll, Willig & Westat, 2002) and many argue that alternative certification (AC) programs are needed to address a substantial teacher shortage. In 2010, 48 states in the United States, for example, reported implementation of one or more forms of alternative certification programs (Feistritzer, 2010) up from eight states in 1983 (Kwiatkowski, 1999). It is estimated that about 59,000 people were certified through these programs in 2008-2009 and, overall, nearly half a million teachers have been certified via alternative routes in the

past two decades with nearly 1/3 of all new teachers annually coming from alternative certification programs (Feistritzer, 2010).

The preservice preparation that new teachers receive from alternative certification programs varies widely due to the responsive nature of the programs (Feistritzer & Chester, 2001). Alternative certification programs are developed in response to a demand for new teachers that is known to be highest in certain geographic areas and for certain teaching fields (like special education). Hence, these non-traditional programs are market driven - designed to meet the demands of local areas or school systems and tailored to the needs of people with specific degrees and/or those changing from certain professions.

Furthermore, opinions vary as to how successful these alternative certification programs are for attracting and retaining individuals in the teaching profession, particularly in special education (Tissington & Grow, 2007). For example, in New York, 15% of teachers that complete a Non-University Certification Program (NUCPs) quit after their first year of teaching and by year three a total of 40% have left the teaching field (Steadman & Simmons, 2007). In addition, Shepherd and Brown (2003) testify in their research from Texas that traditionally prepared teachers are better qualified to teach than their AC counterparts. Therefore, identifying problems or obstacles that alternatively certified teachers face can lead to effective guidelines for developing successful alternative certification programs and can also benefit schools that hire these new teachers.

Special education teaching positions are abundant but, unfortunately, the supply of special education teachers is low (Boe, 2006; Boe, Bobbit, & Cook, 1997; Brownell et al., 2004; Carlson et al., 2002). This is especially true in districts where many candidates are interested only in specific, highly desirable positions or schools. This often leaves positions in schools with higher needs (e.g., low socio-economic population, diverse cultural population of learners) vacant, and serves to perpetuate the lack of qualified candidates in the area of special education (Jacob, 2007). Concurrently, special education teachers, as a whole, are more subject to stress and burnout than general education teachers (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010), making high quality preparation and induction practices even more critical.

Special Education Teachers
Novice alternatively certified special education teachers must be familiar with the role(s) of the special education teacher. In the United States, special education teachers must hold additional certification to serve students with special needs, those who have certain identified academic and/or behavioral challenges. Special education classrooms may contain students with a wide range of disabilities, ranging from mild to severe, with varying handicapping conditions (Stanovich, 1996). Additionally, special education teachers must meet federal, state, and local requirements regarding the planning, documenting, and implementation of students' Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs), resulting in more administrative responsibilities than their general education colleagues (Murnane & Steele, 2007).

Special education teachers collaborate with a multidisciplinary team, typically including the general education teacher, parent, diagnostician, and/or therapists (e.g. counselor, physical, occupational), to create the IEP. To develop the IEP, this team considers different forms of assessment and recent evaluations that provide a comprehensive representation of the student's academic and behavioral needs. Thus, while writing an effective, comprehensive IEP may be time consuming, it is ultimately beneficial for both the special and the general education teacher as it dictates the instructional program best suited to meet each student's specialized needs.

Following the development of the IEP, the special education teacher is accountable for its effective implementation. The special education teacher works with other school staff to implement the IEP (through lesson plans), manage discipline, complete paperwork (usually during after school hours), and remain current with changes in local and national policy regarding students with special needs.

Quantity and Quality of Teachers
The literature suggests that shortage of special education teachers (Boe, 2006; Boe et al., 1997; Brownell et al., 2004; Carlson et al, 2002) - is not just about *quantity* of special education teachers but is also about the quality of special education teachers. Boe (2006) defines quality demand as the need to hire teachers with specific certifications, degrees, and teaching experience. The report, *The Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education 2002* (SPeNSE), further clarifies the terms *quantity* and *quality*.

The report identified 12,241 special education teaching jobs unfilled as of October 1999 due to lack of quality or qualified special education teachers. Many times administrators are forced to hire special education teachers who may not be fully certified in the field they are teaching (approximately 33, 262 special education teachers were not fully certified according to the SPeNSE report) (Carlson et. al., 2002).

As one example, the North Carolina Teachers of Excellence for all Children (NCTEACH) challenged school districts to focus on quality of teachers rather than just filling vacancies with warm bodies. The NCTEACH alternative teacher certification program was designed for professionals who wanted to teach and already had college degrees from different disciplines (law, English, psychology) to address the teacher shortage their schools were facing (Cleveland, 2003). Participants holding degrees in psychology and social work were placed as teachers in special education classes. Interestingly, Cleveland found that these degreed participants, even upon completion of course work from NCTEACH, were not qualified to teach in their special education classrooms. Cleveland states, ... *just because individuals know their subject does not necessarily mean they know how to teach the subject.* (p. 17).

The variance in background and training that novice special education teachers from AC programs bring, has given rise to this quantity-quality tension. While classrooms desperately need teachers, there is no question that quality special education teachers have a direct effect on the quality of instruction given to students with special needs (Carlson et. al., 2002). Thus, in order for special education students to be successful, it is vital for novice special education teachers to receive quality preservice training and support in the areas that research establishes as most challenging.

Why special education teachers leave
A study conducted by Singer (1992) focused on intent to leave the field of special education which contained a sample size of 6,642 special education teachers from North Carolina and Michigan. Three major findings from this study showed that young teachers were two times more likely to leave the field than mature teachers; women were more likely to leave than men; and special educators certified in deaf and vision disabilities were more likely to leave than special educators in other areas.

All the preceding studies are in accordance with the SPeNSE national report (Carlson et. al., 2002), which confirms that 6% of special education teachers do not want to continue to teach in the field of special education and plan to leave immediately. Teachers cited reasons including an unreasonable work load (17%), they were not fully certified in the specialized field (13%), there was too much paperwork (76%), and they were unsure about what to teach students (content and curriculum) with disabilities (42%).

Other authors suggest that one of the most predominant reasons for leaving the field of special education is working conditions. Other attrition factors related to leaving the special education profession were: role related factors (e.g., excessive paperwork), lack of support (e.g., administrative, colleague), student factors (e.g., discipline problems), and few recognitions/ rewards (Billingsley, Bodkins, & Hendiricks, 1993; Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004; Brownell, Smith, McNellis, & Miller, 1997; Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001; Littrell & Billingsley, 1994; Singh & Billingsley, 1996).

These factors known to impact the attrition rate, translate into support needs of novice special education teachers. Additionally, Whitaker's (2000) study found that mentoring programs and principal support were highly beneficial to early career special education teachers. Regrettably, in a study of AC teachers, Steadman and Simmons (2007) found that the first year AC teachers needed *significant professional help* from their peers. Yet, typically, the AC teachers did not have mentor teachers assigned to them as did first year teachers who entered teaching via the traditional route.

This study explores those areas that novice special education teachers from alternative certification programs find to be most challenging. The literature suggests novice special education teachers need mentoring and principal support in addition to support in specific areas such as working conditions, classroom management, and content/curriculum.

Research shows that administrators' support of special education teachers plays a significant role in intent to stay or leave special education (Salisbury, 2006; Littrell & Billingsley, 1994). However, even

more importantly, in order to ensure the effectiveness of novice AC special education teachers, models of support need to be developed to address factors known to be challenging for these teachers. Administrators need to know how to support special education teachers from these widely varying preparation programs to promote good educational outcomes for students with disabilities.

Research shows that quality special education teachers have a direct influence on the quality of education students with disabilities will receive (Carlson et al., 2002). Recognizing that teaching excellence is inextricably connected to student achievement and that effective teaching necessarily occurs within a complex set of social, cognitive, and behavioral conditions, it follows that if characteristics and practices of quality induction and support programs for alternatively certified special education teachers can be identified and articulated; these characteristics and practices could provide a foundation to promote teaching excellence in special education classrooms.

Method
This paper describes the results of a survey of novice (one to three years) special education teachers who were alternatively certified. Foci of the study were the challenges faced by the teachers. The study sought to understand the the participants' needs for help and support during their first year of teaching.

The study employed survey data. The survey was designed with both closed-ended, quantitative type questions and open-ended, qualitative type questions about the participants' perceptions of their need for support and preservice experiences. Fifty two special education teachers responded to the survey. The on-line survey procedures allowed for both broad, explicit responses and deeper, more insightful, conversational responses. An overview of the responses provides compelling and exciting insights into an area that has not been widely researched.

Participants
The target population for the present study was novice (first, second and third year teachers) special education teachers from alternative certification programs. The 52 participating special education teachers ranged in age from 23 to 54 with the average age being 34. Almost 80% of the participants were White with about 7% being African American, 7% Hispanic and 7% Asian. All held bachelors degrees and a few held advanced degrees. Their degrees were in very diverse subject areas with the highest number (10) holding degrees in Psychology. A few held degrees in related fields such as Social Work (1), Sociology (2), Counseling (3), Family Studies/Child Development (3), or Education (3). Some (8) held degrees in Business, Finance and Marketing. The other participants held degrees in areas as diverse as Criminal Justice, History, Computer Science, and Biology, for example. The respondents' undergraduate grade point average ranged from 2.5 to 4.0 on a four point scale and the average was 3.4.

Procedures
Potential participants were identified by contacting professional colleagues and were recruited using both E-mail and paper flyers. The invitational flyer contained the purpose of the study, description of the incentive, and a link to the online survey. The electronic invitation also asked participants to refer others by forwarding the invitation. Thus, referrals from study participants might also be provided to the researcher, constituting a snowball sample.

The invitational flyers directed participants to an internet link for an online survey (psychdata.com). The online survey included an online participant information letter that contained the participant consent form**.** The online participant information letter and consent form described the nature and purpose of the study, potential risks, and provided contact information in case participants had questions about the research project. The questionnaire included questions to collect demographic information and questions regarding the background experiences and support needs of the teachers. The questionnaire took a maximum of 30 minutes of the participant's time.

The website containing the study survey was housed on a secure server accessed only by the researcher through a protected user name and password (see psychdata.com for security details). The quantifiable data was then entered into a file for data analysis using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 15 software program. To facilitate data analysis, the rating scale data were collapsed. Answers to open ended questions were transcribed and coded for themes in accordance with qualitative data analysis techniques.

Results

Perceived Areas of Difficulty: Table I

Table 1 denotes the percentage of participants reporting perceived levels of difficulty experienced with the following topics: (a) classroom management, (b) parent communication, (c) time management, (d) knowing what to teach, (e) lesson planning, (f) how to teach (pedagogy/instruction), (g) adaptation to the school community, (h) meeting student academic goals, and (i) meeting student social and emotional goals. Survey participants identified knowing what to teach (content, curriculum) and classroom management as the two most difficult areas experienced during their first years of teaching.

Table I
During your first year of teaching, how much difficulty did you have with…?

	Very few problems…	Some problems…	Frequent problems…
	%	%	%
Classroom Management	41.5	41.5	13.2
Parent Communication	66	24.5	5.7
Time Management	45.3	28.3	22.7
Knowing what to teach (Content, curriculum)	22.7	49.2	24.5
Lesson Planning	35.8	49	11.4
How to teach (Instruction)	47.2	39.6	9.4
Adapting to the school community	73.6	15.1	7.5
Meeting individual student academic needs	47.2	41.5	7.6
Meeting individual student social/emotional needs	56.6	24.5	15.1

Knowing what to teach (content, curriculum)

Approximately 75% of survey participants identified knowing what to teach (content, curriculum) as being the area giving them either some or frequent problems during their novice years. One novice teacher stated, *The curriculum was poor…I had to get creative as the textbooks did not reflect the curriculum…or was non-existent.* Another added, *I had to deal with my lack of subject area/content knowledge as I was assigned to so many different levels.* Finally, a survey participant stated, *I had to depend on myself…I had to deal with receiving the designated curriculum two months late.*

Most participants (60.4 %) indicated they had some or frequent problems with lesson planning. Given the expedited nature of alternative preparation programs, it follows that participants may have lower levels of preparation or background knowledge regarding either content to be taught and/or curriculum. This lack of preparation or background knowledge may cause feelings of anxiety surrounding the writing of lesson plans. Thus, many of the survey respondents made statements such as, *I had to deal with creating lesson plans with specific TEKS of both general and special education students;* and *I had to learn fast how to differentiate instruction and write effective lesson plans with appropriate goals and objectives…I wasn't very good…*

On the other hand, special education lesson plans should come from the IEP developed for the specific student. An IEP is the foundation of an individual student's special education program and should be individualized.   The IEP is based on the student's present level of academics and provides annual and short term goals for the student (Capizzi, 2008). Accordingly, if an IEP is well written, then it should help prepare the teacher to write effective lesson plans.

Not knowing what to teach (content, curriculum) was also a concern of survey participants who worried about meeting students' academic, social, and emotional needs. Forty-nine percent of respondents indicated that they were unsure how to meet students' academic needs, while 39.6 % stated the meeting of students' emotional/social needs gave them either some or frequent problems. As one survey participant related, *Students were very hard on themselves…they were often very apathetic; they didn't care if they passed or failed.* Once more, an IEP should have guided teachers on knowing what to teach and how to meet the students' academic, social, and emotional needs.

Classroom Management
More than half (54.7%) of the alternatively certified novice special education teacher survey respondents identified classroom management as the second greatest area of difficulty. Participants identified issues that caused them some or frequent difficulty during their first years of teaching such as (a) organizing a classroom for the first day of school, (b) dealing with the needs of both general and special education students in a single classroom, and (c) creating rules and procedures for different levels of children. One novice AC teacher stated, *I was not prepared to deal with the challenge of keeping students engaged throughout a lesson.*

Perhaps perceived difficulties with classroom management prompted 51% of the novice AC special education survey participants to state that time management was also a concern to them during their initial years in the teaching profession. One survey respondent related her experience, *Feelings of frustration emerged when my preconceived timeline was either too long or too short for the targeted activity.* Several other novice AC teachers stated they had trouble dealing with the variable rates in which students finish assignments, the lack of specified planning time, and the *...extreme amount of paperwork and the multiple, overlapping deadlines* (participant response).

Other areas
Interestingly, a majority (73.6%) of AC teacher participants identified adapting to the school community as an area in which they experienced little difficulty. Perhaps participants' prior/background experiences contributed to this perception. This participant group was career changers and many were already parenting and, therefore, had exposure to schools as guardians of their own children. Correspondingly, it is also interesting that 66% of the novice AC special education teachers did *not* perceive parent communication as an area of difficulty. Since stereotypically parental relationships are challenging to the novice teacher, it was unusual to find several survey responses stating, *My parents were so personally involved.* Not all participants felt the same way, though. For example, one survey respondent stated, *I had to deal with parental pressures and forces which originate outside the classroom...it affected my students' behavior and achievement.*

Support:Table II
Table II shows how frequently the novice AC special education teachers estimated they either asked for or received support on given topics during their first years of teaching. Most (60.3%) of the

Table II
During your first year of teaching, how often would you estimate you asked for and /or received support on the following topics?

	Infrequently asked or rec'd help/support	Frequently asked or received help/support
	%	%
Time Management	75.5	18.9
Paperwork	41.5	52.8
Lesson Planning	78	21.5
Curriculum	64.1	30.2
Materials	47.2	47.9
Assessment	60.3	33.9
TAKS or other tests	52.8	41.5
Classroom Management	66	28.3
Legal Issues	77.4	17.0
An individual students' learning needs	54.8	39.7
District policies and procedures	75.5	18.9
Campus policies and procedures	71.7	22.7
Campus Expectations	77.4	17
Special Ed procedures/process (e.g. IEP)	34	60.3
Bilingual procedures/process (e.g. LPAC, curriculum)	92.5	1.9
Parent Communication	88.7	5.7
Understanding cultural differences in the classroom	83	11.3

survey participants indicated that special education procedures/processes was the most frequent topic for which they either asked for or received support. This makes sense as the given the complex nature of the related paperwork and administrative tasks.

Infrequently asked for or received help/support
As the literature points out, new teachers initially operate in survival mode where a major concern is acceptance from their colleagues. This driving force often fuels the notion in novice teachers that *seeking help, advice, or support from another is a sign of weakness or incompetence* (Rowley, 2006, p. 45). In this study, 77.4% of respondents indicated they infrequently asked for or received support on either legal issues or campus expectations. A similar percentage stated infrequent support on topics dealing with time management (75.5%), district policies and procedures (75.5%), and campus policies and procedures (71.7%). It is beyond the scope of this study to state whether or not the above percentages are the result of self confidence perceptual issues; however, these topics are certainly worthy of future discussions.

Frequently asked or received help/support
Three areas most frequently cited by the participating AC special education teachers as ones in which they asked for or received help/support were (a) special education procedures/processes (60.3%); (b) paperwork (52.8%); and (c) materials (47.9%). It is interesting that none of the areas in which support was asked for/received were ones in which stereotypically new teachers are afraid to seek guidance for fear of being viewed as incompetent or less than qualified. Issues of classroom management and meeting student learning needs would be examples of such categories in which new teachers may or may not feel confident in seeking assistance for fear of how such a request might be perceived.

Discussion
Acknowledging the high need for support that novice teachers, in general, and special education teachers, in specific, experience coupled with the limited pre-service preparation that AC teachers receive, this study sought to illuminate the challenges and support needs of novice (one to three years) special education teachers who were alternatively certified. Using an online survey of 54 teachers, the study sought to understand the participants' needs for help and support during their first years of teaching.

These data suggest that novice teachers may feel more successful in their early career years if supported in the areas of knowing what to teach (curriculum), lesson planning, and classroom management. Classroom management is known to be a challenge for most new teachers. While curricula and lesson planning are also known to be challenging for new teachers, special education teachers are responsible for implementation of very specific IEPs that should inform their choices of what and how to teach their students. In spite of the guidance from the IEPs, these participants indicated a need for support in these areas. These data suggest that novice AC teachers may benefit from increased support in these areas from peers, mentors, or principals.

In contrast, while most novice teachers need support in the areas of adapting to the school community and parent communication, these participants did not see these as areas of concern. We could only speculate that these teachers came into teaching with established skills in these areas because they were more mature and had experience in a former career. Our participants did not express a need for help or support in these areas.

Novice AC special education teachers, may also benefit from comprehensive peer and principal support as identified in the literature. Research on collaboration and building successful bridges in our schools could lead to greater retention of novice special education teachers. Stanovich (1996) discussed several characteristics of successful collaborative relationships focused on general education teachers and special education teachers. Currently, there is little research available that discusses these types of relationships beyond the scope of mentor/novice teacher relationships.

While this survey was limited by the number of participants, the findings are of interest because they provide a preliminary look at the specific needs of novice special education teachers from AC programs. Given the high rate of attrition/need for special education teachers and the high number of teachers entering the profession via AC programs, further research is needed to clarify the type of pre-service training or in-service support that would serve to ameliorate some of these novice special education teachers' needs. For example, while the special educators had access to students' IEPS, they still did not feel effective in planning lessons for the students. This suggests that pre-service training programs and schools where novice AC teachers are employed may improve teacher quality and, consequently, student outcomes with added support in the area of lesson planning.

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