Written Language & the School-Based SLP: A Preliminary Survey Study

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This pilot study examined the discrepancy between ASHA guidelines for the provision of written language services and school-based SLPs’ current clinical practices in this area. Participants were 12 public school-based SLPs from the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic regions. Data were collected via surveys which included questions pertaining to the participants’ knowledge about written language; their attitudes and beliefs about providing services for written language needs; their written language practices; their collaborative work with teachers in the area of literacy; and the factors they perceive as barriers and facilitators to effective written language service provision. Findings suggested that SLPs generally reported good knowledge of, use of, and positive attitudes about written language practices. While this was the case, almost half of the sample reported time as a barrier to provision of service; yet, only about half of them engaged in collaborative and small group literacy practices (i.e., team teaching and working with students in the classroom). Conclusions and directions for further study are reported.
Background

- 37% of the nation’s fourth-graders are reading below the basic level, and 69% of fourth-grade children are reading below the proficient level (NCES, 2003)
- Literacy skills are critical for academic success and later professional and vocational opportunities
- SLPs have been added to the list of personnel who are responsible for addressing the written language needs of language impaired students (ASHA, 2001; ASHA, 2002)
- Many challenges facing SLPs in school settings: 1) effectively managing large caseloads (Kaegi, Svitich, Chambers, Bakker, & Schneider, 2002); 2) effectively providing services in the classroom (Farber & Klein, 1999); and 3) preserving their identities as highly skilled professionals (Ehren, 2000).
- Caseload survey suggests that school-based SLPs are not successfully implementing written language goals and activities into their service provision (Janota, 2004)
- Though researchers have provided suggestions for addressing this problem (Bashir, Conte, & Heerde, 1998; Ehren & Ehren, 2001; Ehren & Nelson, 2005), to date, there are no studies that offer empirical data to support these recommendations
Research Questions

1. How knowledgeable or prepared do school-based SLPs feel about assessment and intervention practices in the area of written language?

2. What are the attitudes of school-based SLPs toward working with struggling readers and writers?

3. What literacy practices are used by school-based SLPs in working with struggling readers and writers?

4. To what extent do school-based SLPs provide written language intervention in classrooms and collaborate with teachers in working with struggling readers and writers?

5. What do school-based SLPs see as factors that impede and facilitate their written language service provision in the schools?
Method

- **Participants**
  - 12 public school-based speech-language pathologists from rural, suburban, and urban schools in Ohio, Maryland, Michigan, and Pennsylvania
  - 5 in preschools, 9 in elementary schools, 6 in middle schools, 3 in high schools
  - 18 eligible participants who agreed to participate (response rate was 78% (14 surveys completed); though only 12 were returned by the deadline specified

- **Surveys**
  - Surveys contained a variety of question types: 1) fill-in-the-blank items; 2) Likert scale questions; 3) check-list and yes/no response items; and 4) two open-ended questions

- **Data Analysis**
  - Descriptive statistics were employed to explore responses to research questions
  - Open-ended questions were analyzed qualitatively for themes
Self-Rated Knowledge and Preparedness of SLPs in Areas of Written Language

- Overall, SLPs felt they possessed knowledge and expertise to service struggling readers and writers on their caseloads (60%).
  
- Most SLPs felt they were prepared to in the areas of phonemic awareness (90%), reading comprehension (70%), and narrative writing (70%).
  
- Less than half of the SLPs felt prepared in spelling (30%) and expository writing (40%).
Attitudes About Written Language Practices

- Overall, the SLPs in our sample were very positive about practicing in the area of written language.
- The majority of the SLPs (70%) believed that written language was within their scope of practice.
- Only a minority of the SLPs (30%) preferred not to work on written language goals.
- All SLPs reported a willingness to participate in continuing education in literacy.
Collaborative Practices by School-Based SLPs

- The sample was somewhat split in terms of their collaborative and small group practices.
- Slightly more than half of the sample reported collaboration with teachers in the classroom and work with mixed groups (some on caseload, some not) in the classroom.
- The sample was split equally between SLPs who worked and did not work with students on their caseloads in the general education classroom.
Written Language Assessment and Therapy Practices in the Last School Year

- SLPs reported using a wide range of specific written language practices for both assessment and therapy in the areas of phonological awareness (PA), phonics, reading fluency (RF), vocabulary and reading comprehension (Voc/RC), and writing.

- Of all of the practices listed, on average, those targeting PA were most often reported as used. Voc/RC practices were second most frequently reported.

- Of all of the practices listed, on average, those targeting Writing were least often reported as used.
Barriers and Facilitators

- The most frequently reported barrier was limited time.
  - session length
  - large caseloads
  - other school programs/regulations.

- In contrast, a few SLPs reported facilitators that included practices which might allow SLPs to provide a maximize the services they provide given limited time.
  - team teaching (2/9)
  - clustering students with written language needs in several classrooms per grade (2/9)
  - consulting/collaborating with other educators (1/9)
What We Learned and What We Want to Learn

Conclusions

Overall, SLPs reported good knowledge of, use of, and positive attitudes about written language practices.

• A surprising finding given experiences in working and talking with SLPs in the schools as well as previous research findings (e.g., Janota, 2004).

• We expected less knowledge about written language as well as less willingness to provide these services (particularly given many SLPs in our sample who trained prior to written language in our scope of practice).

Almost half SLPs reported time as a barrier to provision of service; yet, only about half of them engaged in collaborative and small group literacy practices, and less than one-third reported these practices as facilitators.

• This suggested that the majority of these SLPs do not see collaboration and small group work, particularly in the general education classroom, as time-savers
Limitations and Future Directions

This small pilot was intended to build on the work of Bashir, Conte, & Heerde, 1998; Ehren & Ehren, 2001; Ehren & Nelson, 2005; and Janota, 2004, and serve as a spring board for a large-scale survey study to explore barriers and facilitators to provision of written language services by SLPs in public schools.

Though our sample was limited in size and positively skewed in age, we gathered enough responses to make informed modifications.

Problems with Reported Practices:
- numbers of practice options listed for each area were not all-inclusive
- number of options was not equal for each area across Dx and Tx categories
- SLPs only identified that they did or did not use the practice; we have no sense of how often it was used
- so, considering other methods for collecting this data (e.g., observation, interviews, and/or SLP logs)

Plan to use data from open-ended questions to ask more targeted questions about barriers and facilitators, including more specific questions about challenges of collaboration and work in classrooms.

Plan to examine pilot data from teachers and include them as participants in the large-scale study to learn about their attitudes and beliefs regarding the roles of SLPs working in school settings.
References