Written Language & the School-Based Speech-Language Pathologist: A National Survey

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Abstract

The purpose of this national survey study was to gather data from a large sample (n = 693) of school-based speech-language pathologists (SLPs) to learn about their levels of knowledge and their attitudes regarding provision of written language services to students on their caseloads. Additionally, we sought to gain a better understanding of the extent to which SLPs serve students in the area of written language and the factors that may influence their provision of these services. Overall findings suggested that the majority of SLPs have positive attitudes around providing written language services, and they feel that they have the knowledge to do so. However, despite the strong knowledge and positive attitudes, SLPs reported that a large percentage of their students who require these services do not receive these services. More specific results, implications, and future directions will be presented.

Background

- The ability to acquire reading and writing skills is critical to academic success as well as higher education and/or vocational opportunities (Barton, 2000; Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw & Rycik, 1999).
- Results of the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicate that 36% of the nation’s fourth-graders are reading below the basic level, and 69% of fourth-grade children are reading below the proficient level (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005).
- 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).
- Caseload survey suggests that school-based SLPs are not successfully implementing written language goals and activities into their service provision (Janota, 2004, Katz, Fallon, Van Der Linden, & DiDonato, 2006).
- 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/prepared do school-based SLPs feel about providing written language assessment and intervention services to students who demonstrate written language difficulties?

2. What are the attitudes of school-based SLPs toward providing written language services to struggling readers and writers?

3. To what extent are SLPs’ knowledge and attitudes about provision of written language services related? And, to what degree do SLPs’ knowledge and attitudes relate to the percentage of students to whom they provide needed written language services?
Method

Participants

- 717 public school-based SLPs completed the survey (38% response rate). Participants indicating work in preschools only were excluded from the dataset resulting in a sample of 693 SLPs.
- 95% female.
- SLPs from forty-nine states (with the exception of Hawaii) represented.
- Rural (44%), suburban (35%), and urban (21%) schools represented.
- 73% of SLPs reported having CCCs.
- Range of years of experience: from less than one to 30+. 71% of SLPs reported at least 10 years of work experience.
- Services provided at a variety of age levels (65% working with more than one age level): 47% in preschools, 91% in elementary schools, 38% in middle schools, 18% in junior high schools, and 30% in high schools.
- 59% of SLPs reported working in more than one school: 30% in two schools, 17% in three schools, 6% in four schools, and 6% in five or more schools.
- Participants reported serving a wide variety (between 2 and 10) of disability groups (e.g., AAC, ASD, SLI, etc.). The most frequently reported disability categories were language-learning disabilities and articulation disorders, with a mean of 14.9 and 20.2 students, respectively.

Other Participant Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>684</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caseload Size</td>
<td>613</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Those participants indicating part-time work status were excluded from the caseload-size analyses.

Surveys

Electronic, web-based surveys were emailed to school-based SLPs between April and May 2007. Question formats included: 1) choices presented in drop-down boxes 2) Likert-type questions; 3) check-list items; and 4) yes/no response items. No open-ended questions were included. Estimated time to complete the survey was 15-20 minutes.

Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to explore responses to research questions.
Results

Research Question #1: Knowledge

Participants were asked to rate their knowledge and preparedness in the area written language (reading and writing). Results are as follows:

• Just over half of the participants felt that did have the overall expertise to help struggling readers and writers (52% strongly agreed or agreed)
• With respect to specific areas of knowledge, there was variability in the amount of preparedness across the different skill areas. The greatest amount of knowledge was reported for phonological awareness (92% strongly agreed or agreed) the least amount of knowledge was reported for spelling (58% strongly disagreed/disagreed or were neutral), expository writing skills (54% strongly disagreed/disagreed or were neutral), and narrative writing skills (49% strongly disagreed/disagreed or were neutral).
• Participants also reported the ways by which they received training to work with students in the area of written language. Overall, 78% of SLPs reported receiving at least some kind of training to work with struggling readers and writers.
Research Question #2: Attitudes

- Overall, the SLPs in our sample reported positive attitudes about providing written language services to struggling readers and writers.
- The majority of the participants reported a willingness to participate in continuing education activities that focus on provision of written language services (85% strongly agreed/agreed).
- Despite overall reports of good knowledge and attitudes, 72% of the SLPs reported feeling that there were other specialists in their schools who were better equipped to provide written language services to struggling readers and writers.

![Attitudes About Providing Written Language Services](image)

Research Question #3: Knowledge and Attitudes and Relationship to Students Served

- Although a large percentage of SLPs reported high levels of knowledge and positive attitudes regard provision of written language services, SLPs reported providing written language services to only 43% of students who needed these services. Moreover, 225 (33%) of the SLPs who identified students on their caseload as having written language needs did not provide any services to these students in the area of written language.
- There was a significant positive correlation between those SLPs who reported high levels of knowledge about providing services in the area of written language and those who reported positive attitudes toward providing these services \((r = 0.34, p < .01)\).
- Both knowledge and attitudes were significantly related to the percent of students struggling with written language who actually received written language services from the SLPs surveyed. Those SLPs reporting higher levels of knowledge and more positive attitudes provided written language services to a larger proportion of their students who needed them.
### Proportion of Struggling Readers and Writers Who Receive Written Language Services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Attitude</th>
<th>Proportion of Struggling Readers and Writers Serviced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>18 (20.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>61 (23.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>54 (36.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>67 (50.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>24 (75.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>224 (33.6%)</td>
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</table>

### Association of Service for Struggling Readers and Writers with Knowledge to Help Struggling Readers and Writers

<table>
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<th>Have Knowledge</th>
<th>Proportion of Struggling Readers and Writers Serviced</th>
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</table>

### Association of Service for Struggling Readers and Writers with Attitudes Toward Helping Struggling Readers and Writers

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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>15 (12.2%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>38 (18.6%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>65 (38.2%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>74 (50.0%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>31 (77.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>223 (33.5%)</td>
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</table>
Conclusions, Implications, and Further Questions

• It is a positive sign that participants reported having good knowledge and attitudes in the area of written language service provision, and that overall, they are willing to learn more about provision of written language services.

• Still, despite good knowledge and attitudes, of great concern is that an overwhelming percentage of struggling readers and writers were not receiving written language services from these SLPs. Are these students receiving the help that they need from other skilled professionals in their schools?

• Both knowledge and attitudes significantly relate to the proportion of struggling readers and writers who receive written language services from these SLPs; the greater the knowledge and more positive the attitudes, the more students serviced. How can ASHA help to promote greater knowledge and more positive attitudes among SLPs in the schools?

Next Steps

1. Conduct cluster analysis to examine profiles of SLPs who are most likely to provide written language services to students who require them.

2. Analyze data on collaborative practices in relationship to knowledge and attitudes. Does interdisciplinary collaboration help to increase the proportion of students serviced in the area of written language?

3. Develop recommendations and investigate methods for improving the ease with which SLPs can provide written language services to struggling readers and writers.

References


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