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Elementary Teacher Perceptions Regarding Language Impairments, the Referral Process, and Working with SLPs in the Schools

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Abstract

Utilizing semi-structured interviews, teachers were asked about their knowledge of language development (LD), language disorders (LI), the referral process (RP), and their experiences collaborating with SLPs. Qualitative methods were utilized to code the teacher responses and to develop overall themes. As a whole, teachers reported limited coursework covering LD and LI, confidence in the overall referral process, and positive strategies and outcomes related to collaborating with SLPs.

Introduction

While teachers are likely the first to recognize and identify a child who demonstrate behaviors of a speech and/or language delay, previous research has indicated that they often struggle with identifying a speech and language disorder (Cameron, 1989). Researchers have discovered numerous benefits for students when members of the learning community collaborate including the SLP and teacher (Hatcher, 2017). Former research has also shown that there is a need for more education opportunities for teachers that are focused on typical speech and language development (Boswell, 2017). With education, teachers could confidently identify students with speech and language disorders or delays. Although previous research has shown there are challenges involved, they state a strong need for more collaboration (Biggs, 2022).

Purpose

The purpose of our study was two-fold:
1. First, to examine elementary (K-5th grade) teachers' perceptions of their knowledge on the signs of LI, and how to proceed with the referral process.
2. Second, to explore teachers' attitudes towards collaboration with their school SLP and the barriers they perceive.

Methodology

Participants
- Elementary school teachers (K-5th), range of experience from 2-25+ years

Methods & Procedures
- Qualitative Collective Case Study Approach (Stake, 1998; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011)
  - Phone interviews included 10 Open-ended questions focused on LD and LI knowledge, RP knowledge, and collaboration

Methodology cont.

- All of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy of the provided information
- Significant statements related to speech/language development and SLP collaboration were identified and coded using the ATLAS program. Relevant themes across cases were identified.

Results

Table 1
Summary of Themes, Related Codes, and Example Quotes

Common Themes	Codes	Example Quotes
Teacher Knowledge of Speech and Language Development and Impairments	Knowledge/Education Related to Speech/Language Development	"I mean we had we have like a phonemic awareness course" "I think like briefly it (speech/language development) was hit on during like some of our ELA classes and a few other special ed classes but no classes specifically for it"
	Knowledge/Education Related to the Signs of Speech/Language Impairment	"I just don't always recognize it- what it is exactly I just know something's not there something's not quite right" "I mean it was just one course so we had to be aware of I guess the different types (of speech delays) and like what to look for and how to support them but it was just one course so it wasn't like heavily embedded into our curriculum at all"
The Referral Process	Referral Process Confidence	"Fill out the referral form give it to um the school counselor and then she sends it on"
	Referral Process Satisfaction	"I mean I feel satisfied because I mean she was very willing to you know just (ha* just you know kind of get um) you know take the time (to) to talk with the student and kind of just to form her opinion and then give me some feedback on it. I don't feel the most confident I feel like I know what I need to do but I don't feel confident in it in my abilities to do it."
Teacher Perceptions of SLPs	Many Roles of the SLP	"So I know that she develops her IEPs for her kiddos. I know that she spends a good deal of time collaborating with other teachers. (um) she supervises at least one para sometimes two it just depends on the work load."
	What the SLP Does	"She knows what unit we are on and what we're working on. Um but then she has his individual (goals) goals too which fit right into our reading unit er our writing units. And then if it's reading um she can just have him like there's we always write about our reading. Like we have to stop and jot and so and gather our thinking and retell stories so then she just has him communicate that to her during reading time."
Communication and Collaboration	Impact of Teacher/SLP Collaboration	"Now we're being more thoughtful about how we collect data and what we are using to collect it."
	Strategies and Suggestions provided by the SLP	"She brought in a communication device for one of my students to share with in the morning"

Conclusion and Discussion

SLPs can benefit from understanding that teachers may have minimal training in identifying the signs of a LI, thus emphasizing the importance of information sharing and collaboration. While most teachers are comfortable with the referral process itself, there was a desire to understand better "when" to refer. It was also notable that teachers felt that there was a lack of time spent in collaboration and this is ultimately detrimental to the children receiving services. The primary goal with speech-language-hearing service in the school is generalization for the students to the classroom. Collaboration with teachers is a necessary component of meeting the goal of generalization. Collaboration can take on many forms and have a positive impact on all involved.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations:
- Single conversation over the phone limited opportunities for researcher interactions and follow-up with participants.
- Convenience sample with limited regional diversity.

Suggestions for Future Research:
- Increase diversity of sample to include participants from across the U.S. and across varying types of school settings.
- Collect data over the course of several months and include a follow-up conversation to ensure greater accuracy of data and allow participants time to elaborate on their experiences.
- Interview teacher-SLP dyads to learn more about their collaborative experiences together.
- Interview with SLP to gain their perception.

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