

Chapter 13

Interprofessional SLP and Educator Collaboration to Improve Communication for Students With Complex Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Students with complex disabilities require coordinated care to address communication challenges. Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) and educators are in a unique position to jointly support the communication goals of these students through interprofessional clinical practice (IPCP). Unfortunately, most professionals are not prepared during training, nor supported in professional settings, to engage in IPCP. Foundational requirements and best practices in the literature suggest that professionals need guidance, training, and ongoing institutional support to effectively collaborate. Existing interprofessional education (IPE) and IPCP models show promise in training professionals to work more effectively together before and after they enter the field, but they are not prevalent nor well-evaluated enough yet in education to draw strong conclusions. Key characteristics, strategies, and benefits of existing training and practice models for SLPs and educators are reviewed, and an applied example is presented on best practices for collaboratively implementing an AAC device.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a steady increase in the number of children receiving special education services under

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the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act for the last decade (NCES, 2022). As the demand for special education teachers and related services personnel (e.g., Speech-Language Pathology, Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, Applied Behavioral Analysts) is increasing across the United States, there is a critical shortage of professionals trained in interprofessional Clinical Practice (IPCP) to meet the demand (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). While it takes support from multiple professionals to meet the social, behavioral, academic, speech, and physical needs of children with disabilities with high-intensity needs, most professionals work in isolation (Pfeiffer et al., 2019). Ensuring that special educators and related service professionals use a collaborative, inclusive approach in service delivery for students with special needs requires re-envisioning training and education at the pre-professional stage, as well as providing ongoing guidance and institutional support in schools. Both the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (Arner et al., 2022) and Council for Exceptional Children (CEC Standards, 2020) recognize this need and have provided discipline-specific guidance for speech-language pathologists (SLPs) and special education professionals, by encouraging collaborative practice within their professional standards. However, both training for and engagement in IPCP remains limited. This chapter will examine the key characteristics of interprofessional training and practice models that have been used effectively with SLPs and educators to support the communication skills of students with disabilities with high intensity needs.

BACKGROUND

Defining Interprofessional Education and Clinical Practice

Interprofessional Clinical Practice (IPCP; WHO, 2010) is a term used to describe the collaboration process between multiple professionals around common clinical goals. There have been several other terms to describe the professional collaboration. These include collaboration, interprofessional practice, multidisciplinary, integrated services, and interdisciplinary practice. Unfortunately, these terms can represent different activities yielding sometimes unique outcomes (Lord et al., 2020), so IPCP will be used to specifically focus on the professional collaborative process where at least two professionals engage in service provision together to improve outcomes around the communication and literacy needs of children with disabilities with high intensity needs.

Interprofessional Education (IPE; Barr et al., 2005) is the training of multiple related professionals in collaborative training activities before they get into practice. IPE is an opportunity for training programs to model the collaboration process (Heisler & Thousand, 2021), as well as improve the collaborative skills of faculty as well as students (Goldberg, 2015). IPE can include many types of collaborative activities, but are focused on teaching trainees overarching competencies for engaging in interprofessional collaboration (Interprofessional Education Collaborative Expert Panel, 2011; 2016). It is important to consider IPE as a precursor to IPCP, as IPE prepares professionals at the pre-professional stage to both value and engage in interprofessional collaboration.

The idea of interprofessional education and practice is not new. These were first introduced in the 1960s (Powers, 1965), and have largely focused on medical professions until the last decade (Ogletree, 2017). There has been a shift in the field of disabilities toward a focus on IPCP, where comprehensive care for children with disabilities has been recognized as increasingly important (Rosanoff et al., 2015). Professionals are urged to view the child holistically, with multiple needs served by different profession-

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