Chapter 14
Exceptional Education and Language Disorders:
Interdisciplinary Collaboration to Create New Experts in Special Education

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ABSTRACT

With 71% of students with disabilities (SWD) eligible for speech/language services and dismal outcomes in reading for SWD, the exceptional student education program at a large Florida university created a partnership with the speech/language program to educate new practitioners who are well prepared to support SWD's language and literacy needs. This chapter describes the creation of a partnership undergraduate program at a large Florida university that prepares students for special education and language disorders. The non-certification track in the Exceptional Education Program features coursework in the School of Communication Sciences and Disorders, which is not typically available to education majors. Students graduate with an undergraduate degree in exceptional student education and a certificate in language development and disorders after the program. The authors present specific course and program components and the theoretical framework anchoring the partnership.

INTRODUCTION

Language, precisely oral language skills, are the precursors to both emergent and later literacy skills, and language development deficits in children can lead to reading deficits. Preparing future educators and other pre-service professionals to understand typical linguistic construction is critical to aid in identifying children who are not achieving essential language development milestones, which are indicators for subsequent academic progress.

According to the U.S. Department of Education's 43rd Annual Report to congress, 71% of students with disabilities (SWD) fall into a category qualifying them for speech and language services (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). In 2019, the most prevalent disability categories receiving speech-language services were developmental delay (40.1%) for children ages three through five and specific learning disability (37.1%) for students ages 6 through 21. Under IDEA Part B, 39.9% of students ages 3 through 5 and 16.3% of students ages 6 through 21 were in the primary disability category of speech or language impairment. Additionally, 11.8% of students ages three through five and 11% of students ages six through 21 received special education services in the disability category of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Educators are often the first to recognize a delay or deficit in a particular skill. Additionally, a teacher's impact is vital in facilitating language development in young children, directly contributing to later literacy skills. Considering these high stakes, the ability of teachers and related personnel to support language and early literacy skill development is crucial (McDonnell et al., 2014; Odom & Wolery, 2003), especially for young children. Communication disorders are considered to be a high incidence disability category for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. When children experience deficits in oral language, they usually carry them into the elementary classroom, leading to persistent deficits in reading and writing skills (NICHD, 2005). These oral language skills, which include receptive and expressive language and vocabulary, combine with phonological skills in kindergarten to account for approximately half of the variance in reading comprehension in second grade and later in eighth grade (Catts et al., 2014).

Essentially, speech-language pathologists (SLPs) evaluate, diagnose, and treat speech, language and swallowing disorders. Children with speech/language impairment (SLI) and developmental delays comprise the largest segment of children served under IDEA Parts C and B. For infants and toddlers, 89% received their early intervention services primarily in the home (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). However in school settings, SLPs partner with a team to provide students who qualify for services with a range of support. The interdisciplinary collaboration described in this chapter was created with the understanding that increasing training in language development and disorders for educators of all types, parents, non-profit and early childhood employees, and others working with young children can lead to increased recognition of language disorders, more support for students who struggle with language skills, and more specific training in skills that lead to literacy for SWD.

BACKGROUND

The 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act cleared the way for SWD to have a place in schools and support their needs. From its inception, a core component of this law was a collaboration with related support systems in the special education field and included related services in a child's individualized education plan (IEP). An amendment to the legislation in 1986 formally required all

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