

Speech Language Pathologist—Educator Collaboration in Early-Years Language and Literacy Instruction

Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) have an extensive and unique wealth of knowledge regarding both typical and atypical language development and expertise in effectively teaching early language and literacy skills (Gillam et al., 2014). It is well-recognized that a strong foundation in language and literacy is important for later school success. One approach to improving language and literacy skills in elementary school-aged children is to have SLPs provide intervention in regular classroom settings (Justice, 2006; Nippold, 2011). There is a wealth of research demonstrating positive outcomes for students following SLP-led classroom interventions (Gillam et al., 2014; Hadley, Simmerman, Long, & Luna, 2000). However, it is also recognized that classroom-based SLP-led intervention may not be feasible or the most effective way to support classroom educators who possess an additional wealth of knowledge regarding language and literacy instruction. Collaboration between SLPs and educators is a possible solution to addressing classroom needs and supporting all students.

During the 2018/2019 school year, the Department of Speech-Language Pathology at the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) piloted a Grade 1 Language and Literacy Project. This project aimed to improve grade one literacy outcomes through classroom-based SLP partnerships with teachers regarding targeted assessment, interpretation, collaborative planning and differentiated instruction.

The purpose of our research collaboration with the TDSB was to evaluate the efficacy of the project by observing it in action and by collecting various quantitative and qualitative measures of progress throughout the school year. Our study captured the project as it unfolded in 22 different schools across the TDSB.

Research Question: Beyond the quantitative growth seen in both student reading success and educator/SLP knowledge regarding language and literacy instruction, the current study took a grounded theory approach to examining the barriers and facilitators that participants saw as affecting their successful collaboration and co-instruction as part of this project.

Method: The “Grade 1 Language and Literacy Project” was implemented by 22 educator-SLP pairs over one school year. This program involved three single-day whole-group professional development (PD) workshops, spread over the year, led by the second and third authors. Between PD sessions, SLP-educator pairs met individually to review the concepts covered and to plan for classroom implementation. Following every PD session, all participants were invited to complete online questionnaires addressing the topics covered in the session and their plan for implementation. At the half-way point between PD sessions, all participants were invited to complete online questionnaires regarding the specifics of strategy implementation (e.g. how often they were using the PD strategies, etc.). Field notes were collected by trained research assistants who were present during some collaborative meetings between SLPs and educators and during classroom co-instruction. Finally, participants were invited to provide reflections on the whole-group sessions, collaboration, and classroom implementation at the end of the school year. A qualitative analysis, employing grounded theory, was conducted to evaluate this wide variety of data.

Results: The analysis identified several different facilitators to collaboration including: openness and approachability of collaborative partners, supportive school administration, the incorporation of in-class training opportunities leading to a gradual release of responsibility,

etc. Additionally, several different barriers to successful collaboration were also identified and included: a lack of confidence in teaching language/literacy concepts, a lack of buy-in regarding all aspects of the project, heavy caseload/classroom demands that prevented participants from focusing the amount of time and energy on the project as they felt necessary for proper implementation, etc.

Implications: The findings of the current study provide a critical narrative regarding the barriers and facilitators that are seen as influential in successful SLP-educator collaboration in early language and literacy instruction.