



Integration of literacy into speech-language therapy: A descriptive analysis of treatment practices



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of the present study was: (a) to examine the extent to which speech-language therapy provided to children with language disorders in the schools targets code-based literacy skills (e.g., alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness) during business-as-usual treatment sessions, and (b) to determine whether literacy-focused therapy time was associated with factors specific to children and/or speech-language pathologists (SLPs).

Method: Participants were 151 kindergarten and first-grade children and 40 SLPs. Video-recorded therapy sessions were coded to determine the amount of time that addressed literacy. Assessments of children's literacy skills were administered as well as questionnaires regarding characteristics of SLPs (e.g., service delivery, professional development).

Results: Results showed that time spent addressing code-related literacy across therapy sessions was variable. Significant predictors included SLP years of experience, therapy location, and therapy session duration, such that children receiving services from SLPs with more years of experience, and/or who utilized the classroom for therapy, received more literacy-focused time. Additionally, children in longer therapy sessions received more therapy time on literacy skills.

Conclusions: There is considerable variability in the extent to which children received literacy-focused time in therapy; however, SLP-level factors predict time spent in literacy more than child-level factors. Further research is needed to understand the nature of literacy-focused therapy in the public schools.

Learning outcomes: Readers will be able to: (a) define code-based literacy skills, (b) discuss the role that speech-language pathologists have in fostering children's literacy development, and (c) identify key factors that may currently influence the inclusion of literacy targets in school-based speech-language therapy.

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1. Introduction

A large and convergent body of work shows that children with language impairment (LI) have a high susceptibility for reading difficulties (e.g., Botting, Simkin, & Conti-Ramsden, 2006; Catts, Fey, Zhang, & Tomblin, 2001; Morgan, Farkas, & Wu, 2011; Skibbe et al., 2008). Recent data indicate that as many as 25% of kindergarteners and first graders receiving

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speech-language services in the public schools also receive reading services (e.g., Gosse, Hoffman, & Invernizzi, 2012). Consequently, over the last decade, leaders within the speech-language pathology community, including its governing association [American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA)], have encouraged speech-language pathologists (SLPs) to be integrally involved in the identification, prevention, and intervention of literacy difficulties for children with LI either by directly targeting literacy skills or by collaborating closely with others who do (e.g., special educators, classroom teachers; see ASHA, 2001; Catts & Kamhi, 1987; Gerber, 1987; Kamhi, Allen, & Catts, 2001).

Most current theories of reading acquisition postulate that successful reading comprehension is conditional upon one's achievement of both *code-based skills* (e.g., phonological awareness, letter-sound correspondence, print concepts, and alphabet knowledge) to decode printed words and *meaning-based skills* (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, and narrative) to comprehend written language (e.g., Gough & Tunmer, 1986). Fostering the development of meaning-based skills may be inherent in speech-language therapy; however, SLPs also have been encouraged to support the development of children's code-based skills, such as phonological awareness and print knowledge (e.g., Kamhi et al., 2001). Research consistently finds that children who are proficient in code-based skills in the early stages of reading (kindergarten and first grade), including children with LI, have better reading outcomes than those with deficits in these skills (Adlof, Catts, & Lee, 2010; Catts, 1993; Hogan, Catts, & Little, 2005; Wagner et al., 1997). As indicated by ASHA's policy statements (ASHA, 2001, 2002), SLPs can play a particularly critical role in supporting code-based skill development for children with LI.

To date, despite numerous reports in the professional literature that have drawn attention to the ways in which SLPs can be more involved in enhancing children's literacy acquisition (e.g., Kamhi et al., 2001; Lance, Beverly, Evans, & McCullough, 2003; Marvin, 1987; Staskowski & Rivera, 2005; Ukrainetz & Fresquez, 2003), it is unknown whether SLPs include explicit attention to developing children's code-based skills within the therapy they provide to primary-grade children. The purpose of the present study, which can be considered exploratory in nature, was to examine the extent to which speech-language therapy provided to kindergarten and first-grade children in the public schools includes attention to code-based literacy targets (hereafter referred to as *literacy*), and the extent to which inclusion of those targets may be associated with child- and/or SLP-level characteristics.

1.1. Literacy targets in speech-language therapy

For some time, SLPs have been encouraged to include a focus on literacy when providing therapy to children with LI (e.g., Kamhi et al., 2001; Lance et al., 2003). Largely, such efforts have not been prescriptive; for instance, ASHA's statement outlining the *Knowledge and Skills Needed by Speech-Language Pathologists With Respect to Reading and Writing in Children and Adolescents* (ASHA, 2002) noted that SLPs should determine the role that works best in their individual work setting in order to provide the optimal level of literacy support to the children they serve. A number of articles have provided guidelines and suggestions for SLPs with respect to how best to integrate literacy targets in therapy for school-aged children (e.g., Justice, 2006; Kamhi et al., 2001; Lanter & Watson, 2006; McFadden, 1998; Schuele, Spencer, Barako-Arndt, & Guillot, 2007; Staskowski & Zagański, 2003), and several studies have explored whether SLPs incorporate such suggestions into their practice. For example, a recent nationwide survey (Fallon & Katz, 2011) gathered information from 693 school-based SLPs to determine whether they routinely provide "written language services" to children who exhibit difficulties in reading and/or writing. Of note is that all responding SLPs had some children on their caseload with written language deficits, and 65% of the SLPs reported that they provide reading or writing services to some or all of the children who had deficits in these areas. In other words, these findings suggest that over one-third of children exhibiting poor literacy skills were not having these problems addressed by their SLP. Statistics reported in the 2012 ASHA schools survey (ASHA, 2012) were much more concerning, however, indicating that over 80% of responding SLPs served children with language disorders, but only 30% addressed literacy skills for children on their caseload.

The survey data described above implies that a considerable proportion of children with LI do not receive literacy supports from their SLP, at least based on SLP report. Although these studies provide valuable information regarding the number of SLPs who report to be addressing literacy for young school-age children on their caseloads, the data available present mixed evidence regarding how much therapy time is actually spent explicitly focused on supporting literacy skills. The mixed evidence may be a result of the methodology employed, in that self-reported practices may have limited concurrence with what professionals actually do. A recent evaluation of teachers' report of using certain language-facilitating techniques during literacy instruction, which compared teachers' self-reported practices to their observed practices (coded by researchers), showed that teachers tended to have inflated perspectives of their use of these techniques during instruction (Pentimonti & Justice, 2010). It may be that use of self-reported survey data to assess the extent to which SLPs include literacy targets in therapy is imprecise and therefore contribute to mixed results in the literature. Thus, the present study employed direct observation of business-as-usual speech-language therapy sessions to determine the extent to which literacy, particularly code-based literacy skills, is explicitly targeted within the context of speech-language therapy.

1.2. Predictors of literacy targets in speech-language therapy

The extant literature suggests that there may be some degree of variability with respect to whether and to what extent individual SLPs integrate literacy-related targets into their therapy for children with LI. For instance, Fallon and Katz (2011) reported considerable variability with respect to SLPs' practices, with 35% of SLPs not providing any support and about 20% of

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