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ABSTRACT

Designed for high school students interested in careers in special education and related services, this flyer outlines the role of the speech-language pathologist. It addresses the nature of the work, the education and personal qualities required to become a speech-language pathologist, job outlook and advancement, and how to prepare for a career as a speech-language pathologist. Speech-language pathologists are described as using a variety of interventions to help students understand their speech or language impairments and to help them achieve more normal communication. In addition to working with students with disabilities, they may also work with students who have limited English proficiency or dialect speakers who need communication instruction. School speech-language pathologists spend most of their time diagnosing disorders, and providing direct services. A master's degree in speech-language pathology is the minimum requirement to become a speech-language pathologist in almost every state. School speech-language pathologists are described as enjoying working with children, mature, patient, resourceful, and skillful in managing detailed paperwork. A profile of a school speech-language pathologist is provided to illustrate the challenges and benefits of the job. (CR)

Eight-year-old Danny happily waves his arm when his teacher points to pictures of animals. "It's a wabbit!" he proudly announces. His classmates giggle. Danny is embarrassed and withdraws from the discussion for the rest of the morning.

Speech-Language Pathologist

Jose was a premature baby who had several developmental delays the first 3 years of life. Although he is now an active and healthy 8-year-old, Jose's language skills are markedly slower than most children his age. Reading aloud is difficult and he cannot keep up with his classroom work. Martha, a middle school student, received a brain injury in a car accident. She is returning to school, but her speech is slow and labored.

Danny, Jose, and Martha have speech or language impairments. They are among the 10 million Americans with speech or language disorders. Disabilities range from simple sound repetitions or misarticulations, to the complete inability to speak. The problems can be caused from hearing loss, brain injury, mental retardation, emotional problems, cerebral palsy, and other conditions or illnesses. Through a variety of interventions, speech-language pathologists in schools help students understand their particular disabilities and help them achieve more normal communication. In addition to working with students with disabilities, they may also work with limited English proficient students or dialect speakers who need communication instruction.

Nature of Work

School speech-language pathologists spend most of their time diagnosing disorders, preparing for, and providing direct services. Most caseloads range from 20 to 70 children, and the majority of speech-language pathologists work in more than one school. To diagnose problems, speech-language pathologists use written and oral tests as well as special instruments. They may use sign language or computer technology to communicate with students who cannot speak at all.

These professionals are trained to diagnose a variety of disorders.

Speech disorders include:

- fluency disorders. The flow and rhythm of speech is interrupted by hesitations, repetitions, and prolongations of sounds. Stuttering is a fluency disorder.
- articulation or phonological disorders. Sounds are pronounced with difficulty, sounds are omitted (ha for hat), sounds are distorted (sirt for shirt), or one sound is substituted for another (wabbit for rabbit).
- voice disorders. Pitch is inappropriate (too high, too low); or the quality of the voice is inappropriate (harsh, breathy, or nasal).

Language disorders include:

- aphasia. Person has lost speech and language ability, caused by a brain injury
- delayed language. Child is slow in developing age-appropriate language skills.

Once a problem is diagnosed, the speech-language pathologist may consult with classroom teachers, other health professionals in the school system, and the student's parents. Together, they determine goals for each student and record them on the Individualized Education Program (IEP). As long as the student receives services, the speech-language pathologist is required to track the student's progress with detailed written records.

Treatment is generally administered in one of three different locations—in a private area set aside for the student and speech-language pathologist, in a resource room, or in the student's regular classroom. In the first option, called the "pull out" method, one or more students are pulled out of class to receive services. Articulation skills are commonly practiced in pull out sessions. One speech-language pathologist achieved some desired articulation results when she played a board game with three fourth graders. Players took turns rolling dice, advancing to a particular spot on the board, selecting a word card, and then articulating the word correctly. Words became harder as the child progressed toward a "pot of gold." The first child to reach the end was the winner.

A resource room is comprised entirely of special needs students who spend up to 3 hours a day in the resource room and the rest of their school day in a regular classroom. Students with learning disabilities, for example, receive speech-language services because their speech and language skills need improving. The speech-language pathologist might teach a unit on speech for social occasions. Students would practice "turn taking" etiquette, learn how to interrupt appropriately ("Excuse me, please"), observe and interpret nonverbal communication (body language), and do role playing conversations with different audiences. "Persons use different words and tones while speaking to their best friend than they would if they were talking to the school principal or the President of the United States," noted one speech-language pathologist. "Children are not born with these skills. Some learn them easily, and others need help."

Sometimes an entire classroom can benefit from the services of a speech-language pathologist. One speech-language pathologist (who is also a certified teacher) enjoys preparing a language lesson occasionally for an elementary class rather than pulling out a single child. One of her students, for example, had a moderate hearing loss. Because the youngster was a good reader, but had difficulty speaking, the speech-language pathologist prepared a lesson for everyone using lots of visual clues and then asked them to draw pictures and write interpretations of their drawings. Together, all these activities enhanced the children's language skills.

As communications technology advances, speech-language pathologists can serve more students than ever before. A few school systems maintain an inventory of assistive technology devices. They loan equipment such as "talking computers" for students with severe speech and language disabilities.

Education Required

In this profession, a master's degree in speech-language pathology is the minimum requirement in almost every state. The 45 states that have state licensure or regulatory requirements for speech-language pathologists require a master's degree, 375 hours of supervised clinical experience, a passing score on a national examination, and a supervised clinical fellowship—a post-graduate professional experience. Candidates who successfully complete those requirements are awarded the Certificate of Clinical Competence (CCC) by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA). The CCC is the only professional credential for speech-language pathologists that is recognized by every state. However, many states do not require ASHA CCCs in order to work in public schools. In lieu of the above requirements, some of these states require a master's degree and a teaching license to work in the schools.

A few states permit school systems to employ persons with bachelor's degrees in speech-language pathology, but federal legislation has mandated that in the next few years almost all speech-language pathologists in schools will need a master's degree to practice.

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association recommends that undergraduates in this field have a strong liberal arts and sciences background and possess excellent oral and written communication skills. Students should enroll in basic speech-language pathology courses. Master's degree programs typically include courses in anatomy and physiology; the development of normal speech, language, and hearing, and the nature of disorders; psychological aspects of communications; and evaluation and treatment methods.

Persons who want to study and do research even further can pursue a doctoral degree in communication sciences.

PRACTITIONER PROFILE

Yvette Bullock
Speech-Language Pathologist
Arlington County Public Schools
Arlington, Virginia

Yvette Bullock is a speech-language pathologist at a middle school in Arlington, Virginia. She considered medicine as a profession (her mother is a nurse, her father was an attorney, and her grandfather was a doctor) but her fascination with words and language attracted her to speech pathology. She earned both a bachelor's degree and master's degree in speech-language pathology from Florida State University, and has completed some post-graduate classes. For the past 14 years, Yvette has been employed by the Arlington County school system.

The enrollment at her school is about 575 students in the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. Three-fourths of the students are minorities (Hispanic, African American, and Asian) and more than two dozen languages are represented. Yvette has studied both Spanish and French, which she finds useful in this strong international setting. Unlike many school speech pathologists who work privately with single students or small groups, Yvette spends up to 90 percent of her day in the classroom. Outside the classroom, she provides therapy to only five students. Her remaining hours are spent in testing, consultation, and meetings.

Daily Schedule: At Yvette's, special education students attend resource classes and integrated classes. Although Yvette could provide speech and language treatment in math or science classes, she believes that English and language arts classes lend themselves more creatively to the spoken language. In one recent 45-minute English class, the students finished reading a novel with a large cast of characters. The classroom teacher then opened the discussion, calling on various students. Yvette, who had been listening to everyone's comments, concluded the teaching. She encouraged the students to use critical thinking and to be articulate as they discussed the novel. One student referred to every male character in the story as "a guy." Yvette helped the student organize his thinking, broaden his vocabulary, be more specific with his descriptions of the characters. "Children who can express themselves well and be understood—as well as make sense of their world—will make better progress in school," she believes. In her lessons, Yvette also incorporates role playing, comparing and contrasting exercises, listening skills, and proper control of the vocal and respiratory systems.

Challenges: "We have many students with different language backgrounds. Some are not fluent in their native language, yet are now learning English. We have children who came from refugee camps, and some who are adjusting to a totally different culture here in the United States. One child, for example, spoke an incorrect sound for every letter of the alphabet. As the speech pathologist, I receive requests from classroom teachers who need advice on how to work with students who having difficulty learning English. Providing as much support as I can, we are learning together how to help these youngsters. The literature in the field increases constantly on this issue, so it's even a challenge to keep up with the most recent research. Another challenge is helping students with poor reading skills. They are often already weary of speech therapy and/or academic failure so I try to find new and different ways to reach them."

Satisfaction: "When I work very closely with the classroom teacher, I can see real change in certain children during the school year. And over a 3-year period here, the progress is very evident. Except for moderate to severe articulation, voice, or fluency problems, when a pull-out is valid, I think it's wiser not to pull kids out of their classroom and do therapy in isolation. In middle school, many kids don't want to be singled out for any kind of treatment. Providing speech therapy in a classroom is more work for me and requires more creativity, but it really is effective. I see the kids improve and enrich their language just by listening to one another."

Personal Qualities

Since speech-language pathologists working in schools provide services primarily to students under age 12, persons considering this career should genuinely enjoy working with children. Speech-language pathologists are mature, patient, resourceful, and skillful in managing detailed paperwork. They are good team players who frequently collaborate with classroom teachers, parents, and other health professionals. If their caseload includes children who are learning English as a second language, speech-language pathologists can expect to work closely with classroom teachers and be up-to-date with the current professional literature on the subject.

Job Outlook and Advancement

Employment of speech-language pathologists in all settings is expected to increase faster than average for all occupations through 2005. In 1992, U.S. schools employed 37,164 speech-language pathologists and audiologists. The Department of Labor predicts that as many as 49,000 will be needed by schools in 2005. The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association polled a representative sample of its school-based members in 1996 about the shortages of speech-language pathologists in their school districts. Sixty percent of the respondents said their district had funded but unfilled positions. The need was greatest in urban districts.

Speech-language pathologists are also employed full-time or part-time in hospitals and rehabilitation centers, clinics, nursing homes, home health agencies, research laboratories, state and federal agencies, colleges, and in private practice.

How to Prepare for a Career

High school students considering a career in speech-language pathology will benefit from a strong background in science and by developing excellent communication skills. Classes in public speaking and English are especially recommended. Students can also volunteer to work with children in a variety of settings. Speech-language pathologists employed in schools can suggest particular organizations or clubs that work with special needs children. Some of these might welcome teenage volunteers.

Resource Information

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association

10801 Rockville Pike
Rockville, Maryland 20852
1-800-638-8255
URL: http://www.asha.org

National Information Center on Deafness
Gallaudet University

800 Florida Avenue, N.E.
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 651-5051
URL: http://www.gallaudet.edu/~nicd

National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education

1920 Association Drive
Reston, Virginia 20191-1589
1-800-641-7824
E-mail: ncpse@cec.sped.org
URL: http://www.cec.sped.org/ncpse.htm

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