

Research Article

Perceptions of a Collaborative Professional Learning Program: Seeing the “Bigger Picture”

P. Charlie Buckley,^a Kimberly A. Murza,^b and Tami Cassel^c

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of special education practitioners (i.e., speech-language pathologists, special educators, para-educators, and other related service providers) on their role as communication partners after participation in the Social Communication and Engagement Triad (Buckley et al., 2015) yearlong professional learning program.

Method: A qualitative approach using interviews and purposeful sampling was used. A total of 22 participants who completed participation in either Year 1 or Year 2 of the program were interviewed. Participants were speech-language pathologists, special educators, para-educators,

and other related service providers. Using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to data analysis, open, axial, and selective coding procedures were followed.

Results: Three themes emerged from the data analysis and included engagement as the goal, role as a communication partner, and importance of collaboration.

Conclusions: Findings supported the notion that educators see the value of an integrative approach to service delivery, supporting students' social communication and engagement across the school day but also recognizing the challenges they face in making this a reality.

The most recent re-authorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) ensures that all students with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Although free appropriate public education and LRE in principle support the communication rights of students with disabilities, the interpretation and execution are left to the Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams. For many students with disabilities, especially those with complex communication needs, communication supports are necessary to achieve educational services in the LRE. However, research has consistently shown that educational team members often do not feel they have the knowledge or skills to provide communication supports to

students with disabilities (e.g., National Joint Committee [NJC], 2002; Siegel et al., 2010). Siegel et al. (2010) surveyed school-based speech-language pathologists (SLPs) with an instrument created from the NJC for the Communication Needs of Persons With Severe Disabilities quality indicators. They found that school-based SLPs valued the NJC indicators of quality communication assessment and intervention to a higher degree than their actual practice. SLPs and other special education professionals have reported a number of factors (e.g., educational setting, collaborative culture of school, leadership, student and teacher characteristics) that influence their ability to use evidence-based practices to support the communication needs of students with disabilities in an inclusive setting (Kent-Walsh & Light, 2003). These factors often become barriers to students with disabilities realizing their communication rights in school.

^aDepartment of Special Education, Early Childhood, and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Education, Metropolitan State University of Denver, CO

^bDepartment of Audiology and Speech-Language Sciences, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley

^cExceptional Student Services, Colorado Department of Education, Denver

Correspondence to Kimberly A. Murza: kimberly.murza@unco.edu

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Evidence-Based Practices

As Agran et al. (2018) noted, the field of special education, specifically the body of research informing educational practices for students with disabilities, has grown

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substantially since the passage of PL 94-142 (National Education Association of the United States, 1978). Through this work, best practices for supporting the communication and engagement of students with disabilities have emerged. For students with complex communication needs, a focus on establishing an appropriate and effective system of communication is paramount. Students should have access to their communication system at all times to engage with others (Sigafoos et al., 2004). Communication instruction should be intentional and meaningful and should occur across multiple communicative partners and in natural contexts (Pennington et al., 2016; Snell et al., 2010). Equally important is how communication attempts are responded to by educators and peers (Kent-Walsh & McNaughton, 2005). Though knowing how to effectively interact with a person who has complex communication needs is not intuitive for most people (Light et al., 1985; Simmons-Mackie, 2000), communication partners such as family members, teachers, para-educators, and peers can be taught to effectively support the communication of these individuals (Kent-Walsh et al., 2015). Collaboration across all stakeholders is critical to provide students with social communication and engagement needs with meaningful opportunities to communicate throughout the school day.

Students who have complex communication needs may have a variety of diagnoses, but by essence of their alternative and/or augmentative form of communication, engagement with others is a challenge. Similarly, students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) experience difficulty with social communication and engagement as core features of the disability (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Currently, there is strong evidence to support the use of naturalistic developmental behavioral interventions (NDBIs) to target social communication and engagement in children with ASD (see Murza et al., 2016; Schreibman et al., 2015). These interventions share several characteristics. They all

1. occur in natural environments;
2. target naturally occurring social activities;
3. are more child-directed than traditional applied behavior analysis approaches;
4. use strategies to promote spontaneity, initiative, and generalization;
5. focus on developmental targets such as joint attention and imitation; and
6. incorporate collaboration with family members.

Demchak (n.d.) argues for an integrative service delivery approach to meet the challenge of providing intensive and coordinated services for students with severe and multiple disabilities:

When support staff and educators combine forces to provide an integrative approach to service delivery, the learner benefits from a holistic type of intervention that does not segment him or her into

isolated strengths and weaknesses. It is recommended that all staff responsible for a learner's education work cooperatively to achieve common goals and objectives. The integrative service delivery approach makes use of support staff primarily as consultants to the primary teachers, but also incorporates the expertise of these individuals into the functional and daily scheduled activities for the learners (p. 1).

We believe this type of integrative service delivery approach could be beneficial to all students with disabilities, but especially those students with disabilities who have difficulty with social communication and engagement. Clearly, collaboration among IEP team members is essential to support the communication success of these students. Students with disabilities have the right to communicatively engage with their teachers and peers in the LRE so they can express who they are and what they know.

The researchers created the Social Communication and Engagement Triad (SCET; Buckley et al., 2015) to address the professional learning needs of the IEP team to support the communication rights of students in the LRE using a theoretical framework based on the NDBI approach (Schreibman et al., 2015) and best practices in communication partner training in augmentative and alternative communication (Kent-Walsh et al., 2015). The researchers developed the program with an integrative service delivery approach in mind. The content of the SCET program (Buckley et al., 2015) was developed around three principles described further in the methods below: (a) Communication is everyone's job, (b) build on strengths, and (c) increase the opportunity for engagement. The "triad" component was included to emphasize the importance of the student, the communication partner, and the environment when assessing and supporting the social communication and engagement of individual students.

Although the content of the SCET Professional Learning Program (Buckley et al., 2015) is not necessarily novel, the packaging of the content in a collaborative, focused, ongoing, and supported learning opportunity may be. The program was designed with principles of "high-quality professional learning" in mind. The researchers used Learning Forward's (2011) standards for high-quality professional learning and current research to design the program. For instance, each of the factors determined to positively impact the success of professional learning activities according to Dunst et al.'s (2010) meta-analysis was core pieces of the SCET program (Buckley et al., 2015). These included active engagement and experiential learning, instructor support/facilitation and feedback, learner reflection and critical thinking, real-world relevance and immediate applicability, and self-assessment of progress.

Ongoing, high-quality professional learning programs, which include teams of educators and related service providers, are fairly uncommon. We were interested in the reasons why some participants dropped out and why others persisted, what content was most meaningful to participants, and how participants' attitudes and behaviors

changed throughout the program. These questions were addressed using a quantitative methodology and are reported in a separate manuscript (see Murza et al., 2019). In an effort to understand how SLPs, special education teachers, para-educators, and other related services providers “responded” to the SCET program (Buckley et al., 2015) content, a qualitative study was conducted. Qualitative research methodology was chosen because it allows a deeper investigation into the complexities of a yearlong professional learning program. We were interested in understanding how participants reacted to the content and the method of the professional learning program. We felt that exploring the reactions and perceptions of our participants through interviews would provide us with a richer and more complete understanding of the program. This article focuses on a single major research question: What are participants’ perceptions of the SCET Professional Learning Program (Buckley et al., 2015)?

Method

Researcher Positionality

Researcher positionality, or their worldview, and the position they adopt in relation to their research may influence the research process at all stages (Foote & Bartell, 2011). We recognize this and have used a reflexive approach to articulate our positionality here (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). The first two authors of this article were involved in both the data collection and analysis for this study. All of the authors collaborated over several years to create the SCET (Buckley et al., 2015) and were active in its delivery. Each of us are certified SLPs who have practiced in the public schools. The positionality of the first two authors is described below. The third author did not participate in the data collection or analysis of this study.

The first author conducted all of the interviews with the participants. She has 30 years of experience working as an SLP and has worked primarily with children with complex communication needs, including students with ASD. During the time of this study, she taught communication content for general and special education preservice teachers. The second author worked with the first author to analyze the interview data. She has 15 years of experience working as an SLP and taught in a university speech-language pathology program during the time of the study. Both authors had similar beliefs related to communication development and collaboration. Their practice is informed by their belief that all learning, including communication and language learning, occurs in engagement with others. The authors worked throughout the study to focus on student and practitioner strengths when working in coaching roles, and both are advocates for inclusion. All three authors served as facilitators and coaches during both Years 1 and 2 of the study. They developed relationships with many of the participants in these roles. The first author’s relationships with the participants likely contributed to the candid conversations that were captured in the interviews.

Research Method

A qualitative approach using interviews and purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) was used for this study. We recruited 22 participants who completed participation in either Year 1 or Year 2 of the SCET Professional Learning Program (Buckley et al., 2015). Eleven of the 206 Year 1 participants completed interviews for this study (5% response rate), whereas 10 of the 37 Year 2 participants completed interviews (27% response rate). Participants were all special education practitioners and included SLPs, special educators, para-educators, and other related service providers. SCET (Buckley et al., 2015) Years 1 and 2 participants were asked to participate in this study through an e-mail. Interested participants e-mailed the first author and scheduled a time for an interview. Follow-up e-mails were sent to those who did not initially respond by the first author to recruit additional participants after the completion of Year 1 and then again after completion of Year 2 of the SCET program (Buckley et al., 2015). Although the recruitment procedure was the same for both groups of participants, the context in which the program was delivered was different and is described below. The development of the program content is also described below.

Program Development

The authors of the SCET program (Buckley et al., 2015) developed it to address a need reported to the department of education by IEP teams across the state: how to increase communicative engagement and decrease unwanted behavior for all children with disabilities. Communication goals for students with disabilities were often determined to be the primary responsibility of the SLP while much of the instructional attention was focused on task completion and isolated skill development. The researchers set out to support teams to increase opportunities for communicative engagement and then to extend the length and quality of communicative opportunities regardless of the language level or the means of communication used by the student.

Evidence-Based Framework of the SCET Program

The content of the SCET Professional Learning Program (Buckley et al., 2015) was developed to address best practices for students with social communication and engagement needs. The researchers used an integrated service delivery approach as described by Demchak (n.d.; see above) as a framework for the program. The program was organized and delivered as described in Table 1.

The works of Schreibman et al. (2015) and Rubin (2015) were used to provide a rationale for a naturalistic developmental behavioral approach to providing student interventions and supports. The SCET program (Buckley et al., 2015) content also included evidence-based practices related to communication partner training (e.g., Kent-Walsh et al., 2015; Weitzman et al., 2017). Communication partners may include parents, peers, special educators, para-

Table 1. Social Communication and Engagement Triad Program content and requirements.**Program description**

The Social Communication and Engagement Triad Program is designed for school teams supporting Individualized Education Programs for students with communication disorders. Participants will work collaboratively to support communicative engagement for students at all language levels, using all means of communication.

Participant learning objectives

1. Identify how communicative engagement is impacted by theory of mind, joint attention, and emotional regulation.
2. Identify naturally occurring opportunities to support communicative engagement for each part of the school day with different communication partners using a variety of communicative functions.
3. Recognize and use communication partner strategies to promote full engagement.
4. Create communication goals that align with standards, link to assessment information, and promote opportunities for engagement.
5. Collaboratively collect and analyze meaningful data that increase communication and engagement.

Module	Participant learning outcomes	Activities/assignments	Total time
Module 1: Introduction to the course	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Define the course purpose. 2. Successfully navigate the online learning platform. 	Student Goal and Lesson Plan Scavenger Hunt	4 hr
Module 2: Big Ideas of Engagement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify how communicative engagement is impacted by theory of mind, joint attention, and emotional regulation. 	Introduction Module 2 Discussion Board Module 2 Reflection Question Module 2 Knowledge Check	9 hr
Module 3: Communication Partner and Environment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recognize and use communication partner strategies. 2. Modify and adapt communicative environment. 	Module 3 Discussion Board Module 3 Reflection Question Module 3 Knowledge Check Assessment of Communication Partner Strategies	12 hr
Module 4: The Child and Communicative Assessment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Apply knowledge of communication, language, and engagement to determine under which circumstances a child is communicatively engaged. 2. Evaluate what kinds and levels of support are needed to facilitate communicative engagement across contexts. 	Module 4 Discussion Board Module 4 Reflection Question Module 4 Knowledge Check Assessment of Communicative Functions Social Communication Engagement Tool	18 hr
Face-to-Face Workshop: Bringing It All Together	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Collaboratively create a diagnostic teaching session plan based on assessment data. 	Diagnostic teaching assessment plan	8 hr
Module 5: Goals and Progress Monitoring	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Design progress-monitoring goals that align with standards, link to assessment information, and promote opportunities for communicative engagement. 2. Collaboratively collect and analyze meaningful data that inform instruction to increase communicative engagement. 	Module 5 Discussion Board Module 5 Reflection Question Module 5 Knowledge Check Diagnostic Teaching Session (Social Communication Goal and Intervention Plan 2)	12 hr
Module 6: Collaboration and Coaching	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Design and carryout a professional learning community plan with your team. 2. Support colleagues in their adoption of the social communication and engagement triad using the Appreciative Inquiry framework. 	Module 6 Discussion Board Module 6 Reflection Question Module 6 Knowledge Check Professional Learning Community Plan	12 hr

educators, and related service providers. They can increase access to communication by providing “a communication ramp,” which may require new or additional skills (Kagan, 1998). However, adults supporting individuals with severe communication disorders often respond in ways that do not facilitate language or communication development. For example, they might ask only yes/no questions, take the majority of the conversational turns, or allow insufficient response time, all of which allow fewer opportunities for the individual to engage in reciprocal communication (Kent-Walsh et al., 2010).

Communication Is Everyone’s Job

Though it is clear communication is a basic human right and necessary for students to access curriculum and interact with peers and teachers, teachers may not have the knowledge and/or skills to adequately support the unique needs of all students in their classrooms, or they may feel that communication goals on the IEP are the sole responsibility of the SLP. The Council for Exceptional Children makes clear in their initial preparation standards that communication is within the scope of responsibility of special education professionals as illustrated by the following two standards:

- 5.3 Beginning special education professionals are familiar with augmentative and alternative communication systems and a variety of assistive technologies to support the communication and learning of individuals with exceptionalities.
- 5.4 Beginning special education professionals use strategies to enhance language development and communication skills of individuals with exceptionalities (Council for Exceptional Children, 2015).

In order to ensure individuals with disabilities have increased opportunities for communicative engagement throughout the school day, the program focused on developing participants' understanding of key foundational concepts, including intentionality, joint attention, emotional regulation, and functions and means of communication. For example, it is critical for the IEP team to recognize that the term *communication* includes output modes that may not be conventional (e.g., vocalizations, gestures). A key of the SCET program (Buckley et al., 2015) was to support participants' abilities to recognize communicative attempts, no matter the mode, so that students' communication is acknowledged and supported. Following this, participants learned about evidence-based practices for establishing and expanding joint attention abilities (e.g., Green et al., 2010; Kasari et al., 2006; Kent-Walsh et al., 2015) and attending to students' emotional regulation (Mundy, 1995; Prizant et al., 2006).

Build on Strengths

Building on this foundation of knowledge, the program then moved to dynamic assessment to determine how to best support communicative engagement by determining factors contributing to successful interactions (i.e., student, communication partner, and environmental factors). Dynamic assessment has been used successfully with students with severe disabilities to determine the student's optimal level of functioning when provided adult assistance (e.g., Olswang et al., 2013; Snell, 2002). This approach follows Vygotsky's theory of the "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978), which allows educators to determine the distance between a student's independent performance and his or her potential. Focusing on the zone where a student is successful with adult support can be especially powerful for students with severe disabilities who may face barriers to showing educators what they know due to sensory and motor limitations (Crais, 2011).

Using a dynamic assessment approach, participants learned how to identify what was working with their students' social communication and engagement by closely examining successful interactions throughout the school day in a variety of environments and with a variety of communication partners. The researchers created an observational tool to support this learning. The tool emphasized the triad (i.e., the student, the communication partner, the environment) so that supports already in place were accounted for. The META Map was created by the researchers to provide a scaffolding structure for participants to build on what

was already working. It also emphasized the triad components so that all supports could be accounted for and eventually faded.

Increase the Opportunity for Engagement

Both the Observation Tool and META map (resources of the SCET program; Buckley et al., 2015) were used to support the IEP team participants in determining ways to extend student engagement and also expand opportunities for engagement. These tools were developed based on findings from the previously mentioned research related to the naturalistic developmental behavioral approach (Rubin, 2015; Schreibman et al., 2015) and communication partner training (Kent-Walsh et al., 2015; Weitzman et al., 2017). Specifically, the observation tool supported teams in determining when students were most successful, and the META map was used to help team members capitalize on this success by focusing on naturally occurring opportunities and communication partners.

Professional Development Contexts

The SCET Professional Learning Program (Buckley et al., 2015) was originally designed to be delivered across an entire academic year to educators, para-educators, and related service providers across the state of Colorado. After the completion of the first year delivery, the researchers worked with a single school district to provide the professional learning experience to their educators, para-educators, and related service providers in either the fall or the spring. Participants of this study attended either the Year 1 or Year 2 iteration of the program. Additional information about each of these deliveries is provided below.

Year 1

Recruitment for participation in the first iteration of the SCET Professional Learning Program (Buckley et al., 2015) began in the spring prior to the fall program start. Specifically, an e-mail announcement was sent to educators across the state previewing the program and asking educators to look out for additional information to be sent out after summer break. In August, a flyer with more specific participation information was e-mailed to educators across the state. The flyer listed several requirements for participation: (a) registration as part of an educational team, (b) completion of four online learning modules in the fall, (c) attendance at a single face-to-face workshop in their region with their team, and (d) completion of two additional online modules. Participants had the opportunity to earn either Colorado Department of Education contact hours or university credit for completion of the program components. A total of 206 SLPs, special education teachers, para-educators, and other related service providers participated in the SCET (Buckley et al., 2015) Year 1 program. A manuscript that describes Year 1 at length is currently under review (see Murza et al., 2019). Due to the scale of Year 1's program and a lack of additional funding, the

authors were unable to continue a statewide implementation after Year 1.

Year 2

During Year 1, a Special Education Coordinator from a medium-sized metropolitan district (approximately 7,500 students) in Colorado reached out to the researchers to express interest in bringing the program to his district the following year. The researchers were interested in this opportunity so they could work with participants in person more frequently than possible in Year 1 and provide individualized coaching to participants. District special educators, para-educators, and SLPs were randomly assigned by schools to participate in either the fall or the spring of the Year 2 implementation. This Year 2 implementation differed from Year 1 in that most of the content was delivered in person instead of online, participation was required by district administrators, and the researchers worked with teams in classrooms to coach around the SCET (Buckley et al., 2015) content. Similar to Year 1 participants, Year 2 participants had the option of earning contact hours or university credit for completion of program activities. A total of 37 SLPs, special educators, para-educators, and other related service providers participated in the Year 2 program.

Data Collection Procedures

Years 1 and 2 participants were initially asked to complete an online demographic survey. This survey was created in Qualtrics, an electronic survey development, distribution, and management system. An explanation of the research study was provided at the start of the survey according to University of Northern Colorado institutional review board approval (study approval secured June 6, 2016). Participants answered the question “Do you wish to take part in this research study?” before moving on to the remaining survey questions. This served as their informed consent documentation. Only those participants who indicated “yes” were interviewed. See Table 2 for demographic information on the study participants.

Interviews

Interview lengths lasted from 5 to 28 min and averaged 15 min per interview. Only three interviews lasted less than 10 min. The first author conducted each interview either in person or over the phone based on the preference of the participant. Four of the 22 participants were interviewed in person. Each of these four participants were part of the Year 2 cohort. They were recorded using a digital audio recorder using a semistructured interview technique. An online transcription service was used to transcribe each audio recording. The first two authors reviewed 25% of the transcriptions and determined they were transcribed with 100% accuracy.

Data Analysis

Using a grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) approach to data analysis, open, axial, and selective coding

procedures were followed (see Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The first two authors independently reviewed 10 of the 21 interview transcripts. They used an open coding process to repeatedly answer the question “What is this about?” The goal of this step in the data analysis process was to label phenomena and discover categories of concepts that emerged. Following this procedure, the first two authors met to discuss the codes of those 10 transcripts and found significant overlap across the individually determined codes. After discussion, the researchers coded the remaining 11 transcripts together. They then read over all of the codes and each transcript again to apply an axial coding system. Open codes were reviewed and grouped according to the conceptual categories that had emerged. A total of 19 axial codes emerged through this process. Finally, the transcripts were reviewed once again to determine which axial codes were most prominent within and across interviews. Conceptual categories of axial codes were developed through extensive discussion by the first two authors. For example, the following open codes were grouped into the axial code “valued content”: “great course for SLPs,” “excited about content,” “important info,” and “valuable info to engage most emergent communicators.” Following these procedures, three major themes emerged: engagement as the goal, their role as a communication partner, and importance of collaboration.

Interview data were the only data collected and analyzed for this study. To include some measure of triangulation, the researchers chose to, at first independently and later collaboratively, develop codes and themes. This also helped to increase the reliability of the coding process. Through discussion, the researchers were able to acknowledge bias and come to consensus on what the data revealed.

Findings

The interview participants in both Years 1 and 2 of the SCET program (Buckley et al., 2015) openly shared their thoughts and experiences. Data analysis revealed three major themes related to the content of the program. Regardless of their role on the IEP team, participants talked about (a) engagement as the goal, (b) their role as a communication partner, and (c) the importance of collaboration.

Engagement as the Goal

In the SCET program (Buckley et al., 2015), communicative engagement was presented as a dynamic interaction between two people where one person’s turn is contingent on what the other person does or says, as a shared experience with no predetermined agenda. This idea of engagement as the goal, rather than targeting a specific skill, resonated with most of the participants. They reported changes in their perceptions and practices in supporting communicative engagement when seeing “the big picture.” An SLP compared traditional speech and language therapy to focusing on engagement. “I’m just like there’s, there’s

Table 2. Participant demographics.

Cohort year	Age (years)	Gender	Race/ethnicity	Position/title	Highest degree	No. of schools	Years in field	Grade levels	No. of students with ASD directly work with	Self-reported level of knowledge in SCE at start	Self-reported level of skill in supporting SCE at start
1	50–59	F	White	Specialist AAC	Master's	≥ 3	26	K–12	10	Novice	Novice
1	30–39	F	Hispanic	SLP	Master's	2	4	PK, 6–12	5	Intermediate	Intermediate
1	< 30	F	White	SLP	Master's	1	7	K–5	5	Intermediate	Novice
1	50–59	F	Hispanic	Specialist ASD	Master's	2	16	PK	1	Intermediate	Intermediate
1	< 30	F	White	SPED teacher	Bachelor's	1	5	K–5	7	Intermediate	Intermediate
1	50–59	F	White	SLP	Master's	≥ 3	15	PK	1	Novice	Novice
1	< 30	F	Asian	SLP	Master's	2	4	PK–5	10	Intermediate	Novice
1	30–39	F	White	Inst. Coach	Master's	1	13	NA ^a	0	Novice	Novice
1	40–49	F	White	SLP	Master's	2	17	PK–5	4	Intermediate	Intermediate
1	< 30	F	White	SLP	Master's	1	5	K–5	7	Novice	Novice
1	40–49	F	White	Specialist ASD	Master's	≥ 3	13	NA ^a	NA ^a	Intermediate	Intermediate
2	30–39	F	White	ECSE teacher	Master's	1	15	PK	8	Novice	Novice
2	30–39	F	White	SPED teacher	NR	1	NR	6–12	NR	NR	NR
2	50–59	M	White	SLP	Master's	≥ 3	33	6–8	4	Intermediate	Advanced
2	30–39	F	White	SLP	Master's	2	8	6–12	8	Advanced	Advanced
2	30–39	F	White	SPED teacher	Master's	1	1	K–5	8	Novice	Novice
2	30–39	F	White	SPED teacher	Master's	1	7	K–5	8	Intermediate	Intermediate
2	40–49	F	White	SLP	Master's	1	12	K–5	16	Intermediate	Intermediate
2	30–39	F	Hispanic	ECSE para	Bachelor's	1	1	K–5	16	Intermediate	Intermediate
2	30–39	F	Black	SPED para	High school	1	4	K–5	16	Intermediate	Intermediate
2	50–59	F	Hispanic	SPED para	Associate's	1	9	K–5	16	Intermediate	Intermediate

Note. ASD = autism spectrum disorder; SCE = social communication and engagement; F = female; AAC = augmentative and alternative communication; SLP = speech-language pathologist; SPED = special education; NA = not applicable; ECSE = early childhood special education; NR = no response; M = male; K = kindergarten; PK = prekindergarten.

^aDid not directly work with students.

more to this than just like taking data and doing repetitions and therapy, you know, that we're really looking for something that's like a bigger picture of engagement and independence."

One special education teacher stated,

It really helped us to see the big picture of where kids should be going in their life. And it helped you kind of think beyond just the academics of school, but what's going to help these kids when they are out in the real world. What's really meaningful to teaching these kids, and I think that opened my eyes to what we could be doing to get the biggest bang for our buck, to really making them successful.

An autism specialist described the importance of targeting social communication and engagement as having the greatest impact for students throughout their life:

To me, it'll have the biggest impact on the students' lives. We can't say where they're where [*sic*] going to go academically, or where they're going to go, but if they can communicate, not just their needs... but if they can communicate how they're feeling, and engage with another person, that will make their quality of life better, no matter where they're at.

An SLP described social communication and engagement "as the basis for so many other areas of communication" and said, "it's critical for learning."

An SLP explained how focusing on engagement rather than targeting a specific skill or focusing on challenging behavior improved her relationship with a student. She said, "I've been feeling very stuck...that I'm not effective. And that was really impacting our relationship, because I'm already entering the classroom feeling like, oh my gosh. What am I going to try today? I've tried everything that I know."

Participants noted how their overall perceptions of communicative engagement changed following the training. One participant said, "So, it's really broadened my view and understanding of what engagement can look like, what it is, what it can be, and uh and that's a good thing." A special education teacher described how focusing on social communication and engagement changed the way she views teaching.

It totally changes your mindset and the way you think about how you will interact and how you will write goals and how you will create sessions for these kids, because sadly enough, I've never thought about, I mean I want things to be fun and I want, you know, the kids to like the things that we're doing, but you know, it's never been about them and what they're engaged in. It's always about my objective, my prerogative, what do they need to learn.

Another special education teacher said, "I sat down, and I had a purpose, but it wasn't what the kid needed, you know? And it wasn't going off of what they were trying to gain from being in school and being in this commu-

nity. So, it definitely changed my idea of engagement and what that should look like."

Many participants talked about how they changed their practice individually or collaboratively. A special education teacher described a change in her teaching by focusing on engagement.

I think our expectations are still just as high, but they've just changed a little bit, so you know, instead of having to read through an entire book in 15 minutes, now our focus is more on talking about the book and, you know, hearing what they have to think about the book, maybe not what the words are on the page.

An SLP stated the importance of a team approach. Training helped change practices by focusing on engagement "I had said for years, you know, you don't learn to communicate in two 30-minute sessions a week. So how do you create that environment where everybody's supporting it." A special education teacher noted that, because the program facilitators expected teams to meet and work on the training together, it promoted a change in practice. She said, "Because of the structure of it. You know, essentially required us to meet so much to complete the work, but I think as a result of that, that's what's really changed our practice."

Another idea that promoted change in the participants' practice was an increased use of students' interests. One team began writing lessons that included students' interests. The teacher reported that, "It's changed a lot because we—we went more with focusing on the kids first and seeing their interests and their likes and then kind of planning the skills around that."

Finally, participants talked about how they have started changing how they write social communication goals that focus on engagement. An SLP said, "I'm starting to be that advocate for that little one in a different way of moving away from task-oriented objectives and...more into engagement type." Another team talked about how they were using the program to think about the many variables of engagement and including that information in their goals.

We had talked about man, you want wordy goals, like nobody wants to write a wordy goal for an IEP, right? But we've been through and we used META. It was like you have to, because you need to know exactly what it is that you're measuring.

The Role of a Communication Partner

A key target of the SCET program (Buckley et al., 2015) included analyzing interaction styles and identifying the skills used to be a responsive communication partner. Participants discussed how they perceived their role and the benefits of specific strategies. One participant described how joint attention strategies taught in the course helped her to be less directive and focus on engagement. She said,

“I was just maybe directing the kid, I mean, that’s my, uh, in my short period of attention a short joint attention. I thought that was joint attention.”

An early childhood special education teacher reported the importance of following the child’s lead. She valued the idea of not “Trying to get them to...always like conform to me. It was more like a viewpoint of...I need to...be conforming more to them...and that’s what’s going to form more of the drawing attention, and the talking will come out.”

An overarching idea that impacted one’s role as a communication partner was the idea of building trusting relationships with students in order to promote social communicative engagement. Participants learned about this idea from program modules and a video of a keynote address by Rubin (2015). Participants valued this idea with one saying, “Never did I once think that I would need to build a relationship first before I would need to teach them.” A special education teacher stated her value of relationships as, “I think one of the biggest things came from the Emily Rubin video...really helping kids fall in love with people, because when you fall in love with people, they are going to be more willing and encouraged and they want to communicate more.”

Another SLP described a change in her use of many of the communication partner strategies. She stated that she is now “looking for more joint attention.” She is using “more wait time for students to respond to my questions or even if I make a statement I’ll wait and see if they are going to respond.” She said that now, if students do not respond, she is more likely to provide a model. She also mentioned that she is more often using the strategy of match plus one, where she says the same thing as the child and then adds one more piece of information.

Although these communication partner strategies are not novel, these participants noted that they were intentionally using them more following the training. One participant explained this saying, “Attaching specific names to some of these...techniques and interventions...it’s been helpful for me because I can be a little bit more self-critical with how I’m doing and the way I’m doing it.”

Several participants noted specific changes in how they perceived their role as a communication partner. A general education instructional coach described a change in her perception of her role as a communication partner for general education and special education students. She now recognizes the importance of targeting communicative engagement and said, “I think coming from like, a general education setting, my goal was just, we have this standard that needs to be mastered, or we have—this kid has this IEP goal that needs to be met, and that was my focus.”

An SLP described a change in how she perceived her own ability to be authentically engaged and how that impacts an interaction by saying,

It also really made me feel like I need to be present in my sessions more. Like I need to really focus on

am I, am I engaged? You know, with my student because if I’m not, why would they be? Well, I think the most positive thing for me was just the realization of, of having a different focus in therapy, and reframing my goal for social skill.

These participants all spoke of the need to recognize that their students are half of the communication dyad. This participant described the importance of the student, the communication partner, and the communicative environment.

I think that that has the biggest potential for positive change because now I feel like maybe I can tune into what does that student need? And you know, what’s going on in his environment that, that could be resulting in...That’s what the teacher sees in a large group, but that, you know, you wouldn’t see in a small group or one-on-one.

When talking about the role of a communication partner, one participant said, “I think it makes sense that you have to be that partner, and not just that teacher, not constantly teaching them, trying to be there with them.” Others talked about using student interests to promote trust and, therefore, communicative engagement. A para-educator appreciated, “knowing that we can get interested in subject matter that they are highly interested in.” A general education teacher described the importance of capitalizing on student motivation. She said, “We still knew what standard or skill we needed to teach, but it was within the realm of what the kid wanted to do.”

Other participants talked specifically about the changes they have made as communication partners. An SLP talked about seeing immediate improvements in engagement when she used the communication partner strategies that she thought she had been using. All participants completed a video review of their own interaction style while supporting communicative engagement at least once during the program.

Initially when we were doing the recordings, the video recordings, I had it in my mind that I was doing things that I wasn’t doing. And when I really reflected on that and actually did what I thought I was doing and changed my practice; the results were immediate.

Importance of Collaboration

Collaboration was a key theme that arose from the interviews. Participants shared positive collaborative experiences, the need for collaboration, and a desire to share skills and knowledge to stakeholders who had not taken the training. Many of the participants expressed their excitement about completing the training as a team and discussed the benefits of working on new skills with their team. A special education teacher stated,

Yeah, I think it [collaboration] was probably one of the best things because of lot of ties, when you take

classes you take them by yourself, and you're like oh, I have this thing I wanna do, whatever, but since our team was doing it together, then there was more buy in from everybody to you know to talk about it at least and maybe try a couple of things.

Two other participants found it to be empowering to take the training with their team. A special education teacher stated,

It was empowering for me to see everybody take it on themselves and, you know, use it how they needed to use it. So, I think that gave us the motivation to keep coming back to training after training and learn more.

An SLP described,

That was another big thing I didn't mention, that my team was gonna do it with me and I felt like that was just going to really empower us to, to work more collaboratively, so have more of a center focus.

Several participants discussed the benefits of sharing the training experience with their team. One participant described,

Having somebody else taking the course with you that you have access to whether face to face or electronically to be able to brainstorm and process and problem solve with was really helpful. Because I've done a ton, a ton of trainings over the years that I do feel like how you guys designed this has changed what I've actually taken to practice.

Another noted the shared experience being more efficient.

I think with uh again, with the shared language um, when again, when others, somebody like myself is in a moderate needs class or even a severe needs class, if all the people in the room I work with have a shared language, I think we can do a lot of short cutting in terms of effective language modeling.

Some participants noted the value of having dedicated time for collaboration. One participant stated, "We met at least twice a month and had dedicated time, so you know, we knew what we needed to do in between those times and came back with, you know, new ideas or new thoughts and reflecting on our process." Whereas others noted a lack of time for collaboration as a barrier to implementation: "I think time is still a barrier. I think if we had more time as a whole team, um, we could do even more than what we've been doing."

Another participant said, "Well it takes time, intensive time and training and repetition and, um, I think that can be really tricky for a general education teacher to think about that when they're focused on so many academic requirements." Whereas another noted the challenge to find time to meet:

And I think just the time. I work part-time, my OT works part-time, our teacher is full-time. And so, trying to find time when all three of us can meet

is very challenging. Because our schedules don't always, our schedules don't match.

Another felt they could have done more if they had more time to collaborate. She said, "Within the classroom the staff did use the strategies that we were taught, but we just didn't ever really have time to debrief as a team about what we were doing, about what was working and things like that."

Several participants noted the desire to collaborate with more stakeholders, one saying that she would like to see training for the entire school. An SLP said, "I've found that these techniques have been most useful when they're shared as opposed to my just in, individually applying them."

A special education teacher described,

You know, offering it as a professional development for anyone, even I know that we're special education providers but general education teachers who might be interested in increasing their skill set, at least those two, if it could be like two face to face meetings over the two semesters, I think that would be great.

Several participants noted the need for para-educators to be involved in this training. They discussed feeling that para-educators needed to be acknowledged as important members of the team and that they play a key role in helping students achieve their goals. One teacher noted, "And I, I mean, they spend just as much, if not more, time with the kids than [the other teacher] and I, so I think it's important to have everybody onboard and on the same page." One participant discussed her experience in sharing the training with parents, the key members of the team.

And I think with the lens of a parent that I just worked with, I had a meeting a couple weeks ago with a preschool parent that just moved from Florida, so we did a reevaluation. And really kind of reshaped the types of goals that were on the IEP, and I kind of wondered how she would feel about that, because you know there were things like [inaudible 00:21:56] directions and he doesn't have joint attention. And so, we really went back, and she was just like crying at the end. She was like "this makes so much sense"... but he can't communicate with me.

Discussion

The right for an individual to "affect, through communication, the conditions of their existence," as stated in the Communication Bill of Rights (Brady et al., 2016, p. 1), seems reasonable for educators to buy into. However, supporting the complex communication and social engagement needs of students with disabilities to achieve this right in schools is not simple. In essence, the goal of the SCET Professional Learning Program (Buckley et al., 2015) was to address this reality so that IEP team members would have the knowledge and skills to better support the communication rights of students in the LRE. As seen in previous research, communication partners can be taught to

support communication of individuals with complex communication needs (e.g., Kent-Walsh et al., 2015). Findings supported the notion that educators see the value of an integrative approach to service delivery (Demchak, n.d.), supporting students' social communication and engagement across the school day but also recognizing the challenges they face in making this a reality.

Engagement as the Goal

Participants described changes in perceptions and practices that could be summarized as a realization of the importance of focusing on engagement first. They commented that they started to think more about what was going on in the moment instead of completing an instructional task. They described letting go of an agenda and focusing on the students' interests and their own behaviors as communication partners. There were several parts of the content that resonated consistently with participants and also reflect best practices. For example, most of the participants commented that their experience helped them to see the value of focusing on engagement and social communication. As Schreiber et al. (2015) point out, there is strong evidence to support using NDBIs to target social communication and engagement. Participants discussed specific features of NDBIs that were targeted in the program, such as the importance of joint attention, targeting naturally occurring social activities, working on skills in the natural environment, and using a child-directed approach. For many participants, focusing on engagement instead of targeting isolated skills was a new and important idea. This idea is also consistent with using an NDBI approach and is contrary to approaches many participants were familiar with.

Keeping the focus on engagement seemed to more easily allow participants to see themselves as a part of the "bigger picture" for the student. As we discuss in the next section, they seemed to own their role as a communication partner and also valued the collaborative nature of the program. This suggests participants were open to an integrative service delivery approach and interested in applying it. For individuals with complex communication needs, research suggests that communication instruction be intentional and meaningful and should occur across multiple communicative partners and in natural contexts (Pennington et al., 2016; Snell et al., 2010). Findings from this study show that participants bought into this idea of an integrative service delivery approach.

Their Role as a Communication Partner

Research has shown that educational team members do not feel that they have the skills and knowledge needed to support communication (NJC, 2002; Ogletree et al., 2000; Siegel et al., 2010). The literature also suggests that communication partners of individuals with complex communication needs do not intuitively know how to best facilitate interactions (Light et al., 1985; Simmons-Mackie, 2000).

This study provides additional evidence that this is the case. Participants consistently commented that they did not previously consider how their own behaviors as a communication partner could impact the social communication and engagement of the students they worked with. The data also consistently showed participants valued the content that addressed establishing joint attention, following the child's lead, and building relationships. Each of these components of instruction/intervention has been explored extensively as foundational to supporting social communication development (e.g., Green et al., 2010; Kasari et al., 2006; Kent-Walsh et al., 2015; Mundy, 1995; Prizant et al., 2006).

The Importance of Collaboration

Participants described the importance of supporting students collaboratively as a team, which aligns well with the notion of an integrative service delivery approach (Demchak, n.d.). However, the challenges of collaborating in the schools were also described by the participants. Learning Forward, the national organization devoted to promoting high-quality professional development in the schools, emphasizes the importance of collaboration in professional learning (Learning Forward, 2011). They note that high-quality professional learning should occur in learning communities in which educators practice parity and actively collaborate to learn. The participants of this study commented that the collaborative aspect of the program was very different from most of their previous professional development experiences. Participants described the collaborative aspect as empowering and beneficial to the team's implementation of what they were learning. Though participants overwhelmingly valued the collaborative approach to the SCET program (Buckley et al., 2015), they also noted time for collaboration as a barrier. Though they participated in the program together, finding the time for discussion and collaborative planning was often a challenge. This is also consistent with previous research, which has shown that a lack of time for collaboration is a serious barrier to effective adoption of an innovation (e.g., Murza & Ehren, 2015).

Supporting students with complex communication needs across the school day and when communicating with a variety of partners is a fundamental part of special education and an integrative service delivery approach. We know that educators and related service providers do not always feel confident in their own knowledge and skills in supporting students, but they recognize the importance of communication. The SCET program (Buckley et al., 2015) provided professional learning experiences to address this gap. The findings suggest the program content was valuable to participants of a variety of roles and experiences and led to changes in both their perceptions and practices.

Implications for Practice

It is important school leaders ask whether we are asking teams to support communication when they do not

have the strategies or knowledge to do so. We know professionals can learn to support communication if high-quality communication partner training is provided (e.g., Kent-Walsh et al., 2015), but where do they receive this information and/or training? Even if practitioners receive pieces of information in their preservice coursework, it is likely not part of an integrated service delivery approach that looks at authentic communication opportunities for communication across partners and across settings. If educational teams were trained to support social communicative engagement, it is likely that we would see more opportunities for students to learn and use language, especially those students who struggle with generalization.

School leaders need to know that communication is everyone's job and must buy into the big idea of communicative engagement. Only then will they provide teams with the time to collaborate and plan for communicative interactions for their students. Advocacy is needed to support this notion so that IEP teams understand the importance of planning for communication as they do for academics and behavior. When teams are supported and have the knowledge and skills they need to support social communication and engagement, students will have more opportunities to show us what they know and who they are.

Based on the findings from this study, there are also important implications for SLPs. The themes suggest that, with similar professional learning opportunities, educational team members buy into the integrative approach to service delivery. As school-based SLPs continue to face a variety of challenges, including high caseload/workload, large amount of paperwork, and limited time for collaboration (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2018), moving to a more collaborative and consultative role is warranted (see Murza, 2019). This shift may not be as difficult to "sell" to special education teams as SLPs have previously thought. When teams have the right information and opportunity, a more inclusive approach to service delivery appears achievable for SLPs.

Limitations and Future Research

The purpose of grounded theory research is to generate a theory for a specific phenomenon, not to generalize findings to a larger purpose (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Considering this, the sample size of 22 participants is sufficient to answer the research question. The program participants represented a variety of professional roles (i.e., special educator, para-educator, SLP, instructional coach, specialist). Participants also represented a wide span of experience levels (1–26 years in their fields), grade levels (preschool to high school), and age ranges (under 30 to 50–59 years). Although participants' perceptions of the SCET program (Buckley et al., 2015) were revealed through the study, it remains unclear whether practices or perceptions actually changed. Certain aspects of the program seemed more difficult than others to teach and for practitioners to understand. For example, one of the most difficult

components of the program for participants appeared to be the content of Module 5 (see Table 1). The researchers plan on revising the program to provide more support to practitioners in goal writing and data collection specifically. Despite this, the current study provides a foundation for future researchers interested in exploring professional learning on supporting social communication and engagement. The participants in this study were extremely receptive to the content they learned and bought into the ideas. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring which specific components of the SCET program (Buckley et al., 2015) delivery facilitated learning best and whether the experience resulted in changes in practice and student outcomes.

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