

RESEARCH

Another Form of Our Clinical Work: Exploring the Collaborative Experiences of School-based Speech-language Pathologists

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Abstract

A qualitative focus group design was utilized to investigate the collaborative experiences of SLPs as members of K-12 special education teams in U.S. public schools. The authors sought to explore how one describes their collaborative experiences as similar or different given an individual's sociocultural identity and background. The participants were 12 school-based SLPs from differing sociocultural backgrounds, including age, geographic location, and racial identity. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to guide participants' discussion around their perceptions of collaboration, factors impacting their ability to collaborate, and recommendations to improve collaboration. This study's findings suggest that SLPs perceive school-based collaboration as highly variable and complex and that many factors impact collaborative outcomes. Preliminary findings also illustrate the need to consider the role an SLP's identity plays in their school-based collaborative perceptions and interactions. Implications for future research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: collaboration, SLPs, schools, special education

In United States public schools, children aged 3-21 years found eligible as having a disability are required by law to be appropriately served by a multidisciplinary team under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) are members of special education teams in schools, providing service delivery to students within the disability category of speech or language impairment (SLI), which is currently the second largest percentage of students who received services under IDEA (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2023). In addition, SLPs may be related service providers on teams where students are demonstrating speech or language challenges secondary to a primary disability that falls into another category, such as specific learning disability (SLD), other health impairments (OHI), or autism. To fulfill their roles and responsibilities on school-based teams, collaboration with stakeholders, such as educators,

administrators, other service providers, and families is recommended (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association [ASHA], 2010).

School-based SLPs and Collaboration

The roles and responsibilities of school-based speech-language pathologists (SLPs), as outlined by ASHA (2010), emphasize collaboration across grade levels, disability areas, and service contexts to support curriculum access and culturally responsive practice. Reflecting these expectations, school-based research has examined collaborative practices such as literacy interventions, teletherapy, and classroom-based service delivery (Brimo & Huffman, 2023; Friedman, 2022; Green et al., 2019; Young & Bowers, 2018), as well as SLP involvement in special education processes, including eligibility and service delivery decision-making (Brandel, 2021; Pfeiffer et al., 2019; Ward et al., 2023). Additional studies have explored collaboration to support specific student populations, including students with complex communication needs, AAC users, and students with hearing loss (Allen & Mayo, 2020; Biggs et al., 2022a, 2022b; Veyvoda et al., 2019).

Across studies, SLPs consistently report valuing collaboration and perceiving it as necessary for effective practice (Buckley et al., 2020; Green et al., 2019; Young & Bowers, 2018); however, reported levels of engagement in collaborative practice vary. For example, Ward et al. (2023) found that SLPs viewed collaboration with families of bilingual AAC users as essential; however, engagement differed across activities, including device and vocabulary selection, setting and monitoring intervention goals, and meetings. More broadly, SLPs report using both collaborative and non-collaborative practices, with variability in frequency and quality influenced by contextual factors such as the task or collaborator (Brandel, 2021; Brimo & Huffman, 2023; Pfeiffer et al., 2019; Wallace et al., 2022; Young & Bowers, 2018).

Barriers to collaboration commonly include interpersonal challenges, communication difficulties, and limited time or schedule coordination (Friedman, 2022; Wallace et al., 2022; Ward et al., 2023). To address these

barriers, researchers recommend mentoring, clearer role delineation, and professional development opportunities (Wallace et al., 2022). When effectively implemented, collaborative practices are associated with positive outcomes for both professionals and students, including increased professional support and improved social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes for students (Alant et al., 2012; Friedman, 2022; Therrien et al., 2021; Young & Bowers, 2018).

Collaboration and Sociocultural Identity

Public school teams in the United States serve an increasingly diverse student population, and students from historically marginalized backgrounds remain disproportionately represented in special education, particularly American Indian/Alaska Native and Black students (NCES, 2023). Although special education teams are expected to provide culturally responsive services (ASHA, 2010), little research has examined how sociocultural or demographic diversity among team members influences collaborative outcomes within speech-language pathology or school-based settings more broadly. While prior studies of school-based SLP collaboration often report participant demographics such as years of experience, race or ethnicity, gender, and work context, differences in collaborative experiences across sociocultural identities have not been a central focus of this literature. A small number of studies suggest that individual characteristics may influence collaborative engagement. For example, Pfeiffer et al. (2019) found that SLPs with more experience reported higher levels of collaboration, and Ward et al. (2023) identified a significant relationship between SLPs' bilingual status and their collaborative engagement with families of bilingual AAC users. These findings underscore the importance of examining how sociocultural backgrounds shape SLPs' collaborative experiences.

Outside of speech-language pathology, research on teamwork increasingly emphasizes sociocultural diversity as a key factor influencing team processes and outcomes (Chang et al., 2023; Feitosa et al., 2018). Studies indicate that cultural differences affect how teams build trust, manage conflict, and engage in shared

decision-making, challenging universal assumptions about effective teamwork (Feitosa et al., 2018). Sociocultural diversity encompasses both observable characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender) and less visible attributes (e.g., beliefs, values, and cultural norms), which together influence team functioning (Chang et al., 2023). Chang et al. further propose that cultural intelligence—the ability to navigate cross-cultural interactions—positively supports collaboration and team performance. Collectively, this literature highlights the need for research approaches that consider sociocultural identity alongside contextual constraints to better understand collaborative practice in school-based teams.

Gaps in Existing Literature

This study addresses several gaps in the existing literature on school-based SLP collaboration. First, much of the research has relied on quantitative, online survey designs that capture self-reported perceptions of collaboration and factors influencing engagement. Although these approaches provide broad insight, they limit opportunities to probe participants' responses and explore nuanced experiences, particularly the frequently noted misalignment between valuing collaboration and reported collaborative engagement.

Second, qualitative studies examining school-based collaboration have often included participants from multiple professional disciplines without disaggregating findings by role (Biggs & Hacker, 2021; Buckley et al., 2020; Friedman, 2022; Therrien et al., 2021; Young & Bowers, 2018). While these studies offer rich descriptions of collaborative practices, it remains unclear which findings reflect shared experiences across disciplines and which are specific to school-based SLPs. Further research is needed to examine how SLPs uniquely describe the benefits of collaboration, including the insights gained through working with other educational professionals.

Finally, several studies have examined collaboration among SLPs across multiple service settings, such as school-based, medical, and private practice contexts (Biggs et al., 2022a, 2022b; Wallace et al., 2022; Ward et al., 2023). Although these studies include large samples and provide a useful overview of collaborative

experiences, they often rely on measures not tailored to school-based practice. Given the distinct organizational structures and constraints of schools, further research is needed to understand how collaborative challenges and recommendations can be effectively applied within school-based environments.

Purpose

To address gaps in prior research related to the discrete role of school-based SLPs and limitations of previous research designs, this study investigated the collaborative experiences of SLPs serving as members of K–12 special education teams in U.S. public schools. A diverse sample of participants was recruited to examine how collaborative experiences were described across sociocultural identities. Accordingly, this study addressed two exploratory research questions:

1. What are the collaborative experiences of SLPs as members of special education teams in U.S. K–12 public schools?
2. Do the experiences of SLPs differ by sociocultural identity?

Methods

Research Design

A qualitative design was utilized to explore the research questions. Participants were arranged into focus groups to allow for interaction across participants on a specific topic of discussion. We utilized focus groups to explore similarities and differences across perspectives among individuals who shared a professional discipline but differed in sociocultural identity. Focus groups are a permissive, non-threatening environment that fosters the participation of stakeholders from historically marginalized groups (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Ryan et al., 2014).

Participants

A total of 12 school-based SLPs participated in this study. A description of each participant's demographic information is provided in Table 1. All participants identified as women. Five participants described their race or ethnicity as Black or African American (AA), and seven participants reported identifying as White or Caucasian. While there is no known data source about the racial composition of SLPs in U.S.

schools, recent data show that only 3.7% of all SLPs self-identify as Black or African American (AA; ASHA, 2022), which indicates that our participant pool was more racially diverse than the national population. Participants represented the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, Southeast, and Western regions of the United States. Participants' ages ranged from under 30 years to over 50 years. Their years of experience varied from 2-27 years. All participants were currently direct hires of their school district, reported working in either urban or suburban settings, and reported previously or currently working across various grade levels (e.g., Kindergarten-2nd, 3rd-5th, 6th-8th, and 9th-12th). Individuals were recruited using purposeful sampling.

To participate in the study, individuals had to meet the following inclusion criteria: (1) must have been a fully licensed SLP working in a K-12 public school setting in the U.S., (2) employed as direct hires or contracted with a school or district, and (3) currently held a caseload of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), participants were recruited between November 2022 and January 2023. Given the study's goal of recruiting a diverse sample of participants from various sociocultural backgrounds, online recruitment tools were utilized to recruit participants from diverse geographic locations and social networks.

Table 1

Description of Participants

	Pseudonym	Race/ Ethnicity	Age	Years of Experience	State	Work Setting	Grade levels
Focus Group 1	Amber	Black or AA	Under 30	6	TX	Suburban	All
	Crystal	Black or AA	Under 30	3	TX	Urban	K-2, 3-5, 6-8
	Alicia	Black or AA	41-50	13	MD	Urban	6-8
Focus Group 2	Tracey	Black or AA	Under 30	2	TX	Urban	K-2, 3-5
	Rachel	White or Caucasian	41-50	16	VA	Suburban	K-2
	Heather	White or Caucasian	41-50	22	MA	Suburban	K-2, 3-5
	Michelle	Black or AA	Under 30	5	NY	Urban	K-2, 3-5
	Cynthia	White or Caucasian	51-60	27	MA	Urban	All
Focus Group 3	Maggie	White or Caucasian	51-60	23	CA	Suburban	All
	Charlotte	White or Caucasian	51-60	10	NY	Suburban	K-2
	Taylor	White or Caucasian	41-50	26	NC	Suburban	K-2
	Christine	White or Caucasian	51-60	10	MD	Urban	K-2, 3-5, 6-8

Data Collection

Interested participants completed a screening and demographic questionnaire via Google Forms. Participants responded to three questions to determine if they met the above-stated inclusion criteria for the study. Participants who met the inclusion criteria provided their demographic information and availability for a virtual focus group meeting via Zoom. The composition of focus groups was based on the timing of participants' completion of the Google form and shared availability for attendance. Three focus groups, each comprising 3-5 participants, were conducted between December 2022 and January 2023. Table 1 visually represents the membership of each focus group (e.g., Focus Group 1, Focus Group 2, Focus Group 3). Each focus group session was held over Zoom to eliminate barriers to in-person attendance. The focus group sessions ranged from 78 to 88 minutes, with a mean session length of 85 minutes. The lead author used a semi-structured interview protocol for each focus group session, which involved asking a consistent set of interview questions and optional follow-up prompts, providing flexibility to ask any relevant follow-up questions. Questions centered on participants' perceptions of collaboration, factors that impacted their ability to collaborate, and desired or suggested supports to enhance collaboration (see Table 2).

At the start of each session, the lead author reminded participants of the purpose of the research study, the steps that would be taken to protect their privacy, and the voluntary nature of the study. Participants were also encouraged to engage in discussion by responding to one another during the focus group. Each focus group session was audio- and video-recorded after gaining verbal consent from each participant. Following the completion of each

focus group, the lead author conducted member checks by emailing each participant a summary of the group discussion and asking for changes or suggestions. No participants who responded to the member checks requested changes.

Data Analysis

All focus group sessions were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using line-by-line coding. A three-member data analysis team, consisting of the lead author and two additional researchers, engaged in a collaborative, consensus-based coding process to incorporate multiple perspectives and strengthen interpretation (Saldaña, 2021). The team independently open-coded one transcript and met to resolve discrepancies and establish consensus codes, which were used to develop a preliminary codebook. Using this codebook, the lead author coded the remaining transcripts and refined the codebook to include emerging codes. The final codebook consisted of six parent codes—Perceptions, Roles & Responsibilities, Factors, Discipline, Identity, and Consequences—and 36 subcodes. Codes were then examined for relationships and organized into themes aligned with the research questions.

Trustworthiness

Multiple strategies were employed to enhance trustworthiness (Tracy, 2010). Member reflections were conducted by sharing post-focus group summaries with participants to ensure accurate representation of perspectives. Audio and video recordings were used to capture participants' voices directly and support rich, evidence-based findings. Multivocality was further supported through the intentional recruitment of a diverse participant sample, the use of focus groups to elicit multiple viewpoints, and a semi-structured interview protocol that was responsive to both group and individual differences.

Table 2

Focus Group Interview Questions

Background Information	Can you share what inspired you to become a school SLP?
	<i>Optional Prompts:</i> How did you learn about the field of speech-language pathology?

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- Did you or someone you know receive speech or language services?
-

Perceptions

- Can you describe your current collaborative roles and responsibilities?
- What thoughts and feelings first come to mind when you think about collaborating as a member of the special education team?
- How would you generally describe how you are viewed by other members of the special education team?

Optional Prompts:

- Would anyone like to describe a different collaborative experience that stands out to you? It could be in your current role or in a previous role.
 - Have you had any negative collaborative experiences? What made it negative?
 - Have you had any positive collaborative experiences? What made it positive?
-

Factors

- What factors have the greatest impact on your ability to collaborate with members of the special education team?
- Does your identity or the identity of team members impact how you collaborate with others or how others collaborate with you?
- Do you feel any demographic factors, such as years of experience, age, gender, culture, race or ethnicity, or disability status impact collaboration among members of the special education team?

Optional Prompts:

- How would you describe the role you play in team decision-making?
 - What members of the special education team do you collaborate with most? What members do you collaborate with least? What factors impact who you are able to collaborate with?
-

Supports

- What makes a supportive environment for collaboration?

Optional Prompts:

- Given the opportunity, would you make any changes to your current school to further support collaboration? If so, what changes?
 - Is there anything else you'd like to share about your collaborative experiences?
-

Positionality and Reflexivity

The lead author identifies as a millennial, Black woman without a disability and a former school-based SLP. Her professional experiences across settings informed the study's focus on school-based collaboration as a distinct context. Drawing on her sociocultural identities and lived experiences, the lead author acknowledges that identity influences professional perspectives and collaborative interactions. These experiences, along with gaps in the existing literature, informed the study's conceptualization and the intentional recruitment of a diverse national sample. To support reflexivity and minimize bias, two additional analysts—White, millennial women with

professional backgrounds in special education—participated in data analysis, contributing differing insider and outsider perspectives. Collectively, the research team employed reflective, equity-oriented practices to foster authentic dialogue and rigorous interpretation of participants' experiences.

Findings

The findings from this study were organized into three main themes: (1) ways that organizational and interpersonal factors impacted collaboration, (2) impact of collaboration on job and student performance, and (3) prominent differences in collaborative experiences based on the sociocultural markers of age and racial identity. A summary

of the themes and findings is presented in Table 3.

Theme 1: When describing their collaborative experiences, participants considered the ways that organizational and interpersonal factors impacted collaboration

Organizational Factors

Organizational factors included systemic and structural characteristics that participants perceived as largely outside their control. Key factors included the prioritization of collaboration within their school culture, roles and responsibilities, time and scheduling, proximity, and staffing.

Prioritization of Collaboration. Participants described a range of experiences related to their workplace culture. While collaboration was often emphasized in evaluation tools or initiatives, participants commonly described this prioritization as inconsistent or symbolic rather than embedded in practice. Christine explained, “Yes, in my county, I feel like it’s the Wild West. In our goal-setting and evaluation tools, collaboration with teammates is prized...There’s lip service to this priority...For me, it is very ad hoc and kid-dependent.” Others similarly noted that expectations for collaboration varied across districts, schools, and individual cases. When offering recommendations, participants emphasized the role of leadership in articulating a clear vision and providing oversight to ensure collaboration was implemented consistently rather than supported only in theory.

Roles and Responsibilities. Participants described challenges related to the scope and clarity of their collaborative roles and responsibilities. Many noted difficulty balancing direct service provision, compliance-related tasks, and expectations for consultation, particularly with large caseloads. Cynthia highlighted the impracticality of meeting consult expectations across a large caseload, stating, “If I have 95 students, there’s no way that I’m doing 10 minutes per month [of consult] for every single student,” and describing collaboration as “almost pro forma.” Participants emphasized the need for clearer delineation of roles among team members to support effective collaboration. This need was further complicated by the

structural positioning of SLPs, who often operate outside typical school hierarchies, are supervised externally, and are not embedded within curriculum teams. Cynthia explained, “I think it’s because in some ways we fly under the radar...it’s like we are sort of this little planet or universe over here that most people don’t really understand.”

Participants also discussed variability in how others understood the role of the school-based SLP. Some described narrowly defined perceptions of their work, such as being viewed primarily as articulation providers, which limited their involvement in broader decision-making. Heather noted that her input was often sought only for speech-language testing rather than for interdisciplinary discussions. She stated, “...They think I should review the speech and language testing...I don’t think they are necessarily looking for my opinion if we’re thinking about whether this is an intellectual disability, developmental disability, or other areas.” Conversely, participants also described overreliance on SLPs due to limited understanding of their scope of practice, resulting in inappropriate referrals. Michelle illustrated this tension by describing how clarifying her role in addressing both speech and language led to an influx of referrals. She recounted, “I had a teacher telling me, ‘[The student’s] articulation is fine. He doesn’t need speech.’ I’m like ‘well, I’m speech and language.’ And then once I told him that, now everyone is getting a referral.” Across groups, participants indicated that unclear or misaligned role expectations constrained their ability to collaborate effectively.

Time and Scheduling. All participants identified time and scheduling as major barriers to collaboration. Although some schools allocated time for collaboration, participants reported that this time was often designated for general education priorities rather than special education. Rachel shared, “There is a lot of time given for collaboration. However, it’s not meant for special education...we spend so much time on regular education curriculum items.” Participants emphasized that collaboration was often treated as an add-on rather than an integral component of service delivery. Cynthia proposed

that collaboration be formally structured and protected, describing:

In an ideal world, there would be a structure that's sacred and built in so that you can do collaboration and consult, which isn't an extra, add-on, afterthought, but truly another factor in the form of our work. It's another form of our clinical work.

In the absence of scheduled time, collaboration frequently occurred informally, which participants viewed as insufficient and unsustainable. Overall, participants agreed that meaningful collaboration required organizational changes to scheduling and the redistribution of time.

Proximity and Staffing. Overall, participants felt they collaborated more with individuals in their school building with whom they shared close physical proximity, such as sharing a workspace with occupational or physical therapists or with certain educators given grade-level assignments. In contrast, collaboration was more limited when itinerant staff were involved or when participants themselves were assigned to multiple sites. Staffing shortages exacerbated these challenges by increasing caseload sizes and reducing opportunities for coordinated scheduling. After sharing that her county was 30 SLPs short of being fully staffed, Taylor described being assigned to seven schools with a caseload exceeding 100 students. She stated, "I don't even get to go to the bathroom. That is the biggest time constraint, especially in this area. Unless the person is willing to do it on their own time, [collaboration] is not going to exist, unfortunately." Staffing shortages resulted in increases in caseload size and itinerant positions, further limiting time and coordination of schedules for collaboration.

Interpersonal Factors

Interpersonal factors refer to relational characteristics among team members, including value and respect, communication, relationship-building, shared goals and decision-making, and connectedness to their school community.

Value and Respect. Participants emphasized that feeling valued and respected is essential for collaboration. Much collaborative work occurs behind the scenes and

often goes unrecognized. While the impact on students is acknowledged, the effort required is less frequently appreciated. Taylor described the planning involved in carrying out a collaborative communication activity with students and other team members, stating:

Fifteen minutes of great work took a lot of effort...All the little things that in the end add up to a valuable communication experience, but sometimes that's not given the weight. The administrators or your supervisor...They like to see that end result, but we're not given enough credit for doing the back end of that."

Overall, participants highlighted the need for the shared value of engaging collaboratively across team members. In addition, participants varied on the extent to which they felt they were respected as a school-based SLP. Some SLPs felt their expertise was integral to team decisions, whereas others felt secondary to teachers or administrators. Participants who had work experience as an SLP in different settings felt their perceived value was less in school-based settings than in others, like medical or private practice settings.

Communication and Relationship-building.

Each focus group discussed their experiences related to communication, relationships, and the interconnection between the two. Michelle described having more collaboration with other related service providers because they often possess a greater understanding of the roles and responsibilities of an SLP, and are more easily able to communicate with each other. "It's easier to collaborate with them and bounce ideas compared to the teachers and admin[istrators], because they don't really know what we do," she stated when describing her collaborative relationships with occupational and physical therapists. Furthermore, trust and relationships built over time enabled open, honest dialogue, which supported team alignment and more effective planning for IEP and eligibility meetings. Maggie described:

Being able to work together in a space that's brave, where we can express our independent ideas and take feedback from the team- now that took a little bit longer to come to a place where we

could do that- but that was really productive for the treatment and assessment that we did for our students.

Participants recalled experiences where communication had both positive and negative influences on the formation of relationships with colleagues. Participants emphasized the timeliness of communication and the importance of aligning the team before IEP or eligibility meetings.

Shared Goals and Decision-Making.

Collaboration was enhanced when teams shared goals and made decisions equitably. Participants described challenges when their perspectives were excluded or undervalued, sometimes requiring strategic choices to prioritize student needs. Rachel described, "I kind of pick my battles. I think about the child and about the situation, and sometimes have to choose whether to speak up or go with what the team wants." Discussion of topics, such as cultural or racial identity, highlighted instances where collective team alignment was needed. Christine stated:

I work in a majority African American community...So I spend a lot of time talking about language and dialect, and all of my colleagues in the school system have different, strong opinions...I get all of these different people coming to me about children, and whether they have disabilities or differences...We have to talk about our differences, choices, and priorities in terms of race and dialect, because they really matter for the kids.

Connectedness and Community. Participants' sense of inclusion in the school community influenced collaboration. Feeling connected fostered engagement and meaningful participation in classroom and school activities. Heather described:

We did things within the school itself. I think it was about planning together, really being a part of what was happening within their classroom and the community, being part of that team, including the students and the teachers- it felt different. I didn't feel like an add-on. I felt like I was a member of the teaching staff in that room.

On the other hand, isolation reduced motivation and collaboration. Across groups, participants used terms like "our little island," "separate," "pushed to the side," "afterthought," "add-on," and "disconnected" to describe the extent to which they felt connected to their school community. Connectedness was often linked to organizational and interpersonal factors such as scheduling, roles, and mutual respect.

Table 3

Organization of Themes and Findings

Theme	Findings
Factors	Organizational: • Prioritization of collaboration • Roles and responsibilities • Time and scheduling • Proximity and staffing Interpersonal: • Value and respect • Communication and relationship-building • Shared goals and decision-making • Connectedness and community
Outcomes	• Increased individual and team job performance • Increase student performance
Differing Experiences	• Age or years of experience • Racial identity • Additional identity markers

Theme 2: Participants described the impact of collaboration on job and student performance

Two main findings emerged as participants described the impact of their collaborative experiences. First, effective collaboration was essential to enable optimal job performance and allow everyone on the team to do their most meaningful work. Second, whether teams engaged in

collaboration ultimately impacted student performance. When school-based teams are collaborative, Christine explained, "It makes my life so much better as a professional, and it really amplifies the effect of our services in the building." Similarly, Cynthia summarized, "I feel like the treatment has the most-wide impact, and I feel really good about it." Rachel further emphasized the benefit of collaborative teamwork for all parties involved, "It kind of is a two-way street, where I take what they have to say and use it to help me do my best work, too." Several participants mentioned a relationship between collaboration, job satisfaction, and decisions to stay or leave their positions. Because participants valued collaboration and viewed it as necessary to fulfill their job responsibilities, after describing perceived negative experiences, they often considered leaving or left their jobs.

When discussing the positive outcomes for students, participants mentioned that collaboration between professionals resulted in increased problem-solving, support, and carryover of speech and language skills across environments. Heather described "see[ing] the kids making progress because they're getting what they need across the day." Charlotte, too, discussed the impact of collaborative service delivery by saying, "There's a lot of value to being able to take the co-teaching that I'm doing and pushing into the classroom and using language, concepts, and communication in a functional way." Participants also noted that it is beneficial for students to witness their educational team on the same page. Charlotte stated, "I think when we're doing [co-teaching] and we have a nice rapport, it's really good for the students to see we really believe in it."

Theme 3: Participants described prominent differences in collaborative experiences based on age and racial identity

When comparing responses across participants' sociocultural identities, two factors seemed the most significant: (a) differences based on age or years of experience and (b) differences based on racial identity.

Age/Years of Experience

Many participants described the impact of years of experience on their collaborative interactions with other team members. Cynthia noted, "I have found the longer I've worked somewhere, the better the collaboration is over time." Seniority also factored into other team members' perceptions of one's value and knowledge during collaborative interactions, affecting team dynamics, particularly in decision-making. Cynthia explained, "...I'm the oldest person there, and I've been there a long time...I feel like I'm treated differently...I think I'm given some positional power." Michelle illustrated the contrast of Cynthia's point, expressing:

It really depends on who you are and how long you've been in the school. There is a new SLP here at my school, and she spoke up, and her opinion was different from the rest of the team. There was no discussion. They just kind of glided over her. That's one factor in terms of how you're viewed...seniority in the field.

Racial Identity

Participants in this study who identified as Black or African American described unique differences in collaborative interactions, specifically naming that their racial identity played a role in how others perceived or collaborated with them. One participant felt that dimensions of their culture, such as their style of dress or hairstyle, impacted others' perceptions and willingness to collaborate. Amber explained, "...Just because of how I wear my hair to work, how I dress to work, sometimes I wear sneakers, Nike's- so sometimes I felt like they think that they don't have to collaborate with me." Other participants fulfilled the role of a cultural broker between their special education team and students' families, given their racial identity or cultural background, including the use of a non-mainstream dialect. Michelle noted, "We have a different grammar system and how we speak, so they kind of hang onto me and really look for guidance in terms of that." There were instances where they participants had to prove their title as an SLP to other team members by being overly prepared or demonstrating excellent oral or written skills. Amber expressed:

I really pride myself on my ability to write good

reports, to write good IEPs. And so I feel like those people that may think less of me or may not want to collaborate with me, when they see my written work it's like, 'Oh, she's the real deal. So she does know what she's talking about.' Which is sad, because my title should speak for itself. I shouldn't have to prove it to you that way. But in some cases, you do.

Power dynamics were also present at IEP meetings due to cultural differences, and participants discussed their role in increasing the team's awareness of power disparities. Black or African American participants under the age of 30 frequently discussed the intersection of their racial identity and age when considering their collaborative interactions. Feelings of being expected to prove their capabilities to others who may have preconceptions about their role or skill set are compounded based on these intersecting identities. Collaborative experiences varied greatly depending on the sociocultural makeup and population of staff and students in their district. Participants contrasted experiences of being the only Black or African American SLP working in a district or racially minoritized team member with working in districts with more staff from diverse backgrounds.

Discussion

This study sought to explore the collaborative experiences of SLPs as members of special education teams in U.S. K-12 public schools. The first research question examined how SLPs describe their collaborative experiences on special education teams in schools. Overall, variability across SLPs' collaborative experiences, both across and within participants was found. This finding is consistent with previous literature, which has reported varied findings on the frequency with which participants describe engaging in collaboration, whom they report engaging in collaboration with, and the rated quality of those collaborative interactions (Brandel, 2021; Brimo & Huffman, 2023; Pfeiffer et al., 2019; Wallace et al., 2022; Young et al., 2018). These findings extend previous studies by providing qualitative evidence to illustrate experiences through more descriptive means, as quantitative measures have been previously employed. The findings from this study also

demonstrate that when asked to speak in detail about their collaboration in the school setting, many factors may impact how SLPs describe their experiences. Although the data were separated into categories and single factors in this analysis, these factors often influenced each other or co-occurred. The interrelatedness between factors suggests that, in practice, multiple aspects of collaboration or collaboration as a whole can be improved through intentional changes to a single component.

The second research question explored how school-based SLPs may or may not share collaborative experiences across sociocultural identities. Overall, participants across groups agreed that identity can play a role in collaborative interactions. The impact of age and years of experience on collaborative experiences, specifically in terms of how others perceived SLPs' knowledge and expertise in interactions, was examined across groups and among participants with differing sociocultural identities. However, participants who identified as Black or African American perceived their racial identity as a salient aspect of their identity that impacted collaborative experiences. On the other hand, participants who identified as White or Caucasian rarely discussed racial identity when considering how their identity or the identity of others may impact collaborative interactions.

Although the composition of the focus groups was based on the order in which participants responded to the screening form, it is worth noting that the racial makeup of each focus group varied. Participants in Focus Group 1 identified as Black or African American, while participants in Focus Group 2 varied in their racial identity, and participants in Focus Group 3 identified as White or Caucasian. Participants in Focus Group 1 engaged in the most robust discussion around racial identity. In Focus Group 2, a participant who identified as Black or African American raised the topic of racial identity, and other participants who identified as White or Caucasian responded to her comments, agreeing with its relevance in collaborative interactions. One participant in Focus Group 3 raised the importance of discussing differences between staff and students' families regarding race and dialect. However, the group changed the topic of discussion after

that participant shared her experiences on that topic. These marked differences in discussion highlight the need to explore further how the sociocultural composition of groups influences what participants share about their identity and collaborative experiences. It also highlights the importance of establishing trust and creating safe spaces when conducting focus groups that discuss identity.

Limitations

A limitation of the current study is its small sample size, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Although this exploratory study was intended to provide an initial qualitative examination of shared and divergent collaborative experiences, the limited sample constrains broader application. While efforts were made to recruit a diverse sample, participants did not represent a range of gender identities or racial identities beyond White/Caucasian and Black/African American.

Implications

There are several implications for policy, practice, and future research. First, participants' shared perceptions that collaboration is shaped by organizational factors underscore the need for more explicit policies and expectations for collaboration in school settings. Establishing a school culture that prioritizes interdisciplinary interaction and clearly delineated roles and responsibilities is critical. Findings suggest that defining roles should itself be a collaborative process among special education stakeholders to promote shared and realistic expectations. Concerns related to workload, time, scheduling, proximity, and staffing further highlight the need for advocacy at multiple levels. At the national and state levels, policies should better reflect the unique context of school-based

SLP practice to support collaborative environments. At the district and school levels, SLPs' voices must be included in decision-making to increase administrative understanding of their expertise. Organizational changes are necessary given their influence on interpersonal dynamics such as perceived value, communication, shared decision-making, and connectedness.

Second, the range of interpersonal factors identified highlights the importance of centering relational dynamics in the study and practice of school-based collaboration. This includes intentional attention to both shared and differing sociocultural identities. Researchers should disaggregate data by identity markers and intentionally recruit participants from diverse, minoritized, and historically underrepresented backgrounds. In practice, special education teams must remain reflective of how sociocultural identities shape interactions with colleagues, students, and families. Administrators and team leaders play a critical role in fostering spaces for open and critical dialogue that are responsive to team context.

Finally, preliminary findings related to age, years of experience, and racial identity point to the need for more focused research on specific subgroups of school-based SLPs. Future studies should examine the collaborative experiences of early career SLPs, as well as pre-service preparation for collaborative school-based practice. Given ongoing calls to diversify the SLP workforce and strengthen collaboration to better serve increasingly diverse student populations, additional research is needed to support the recruitment, retention, and inclusion of historically minoritized SLPs in equitable and collaborative school environments.

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