

SLP Student Perceptions of Working in Schools

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Barriers and Facilitators

About the Authors



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Our Research Partnership

For the past several years, we have been partnering to help answer some of the workforce related questions that impact each of us in different ways.

Through this partnership, we have completed a pilot study looking at the perceptions of SLP students at USC related to working in a school-based setting.

Our hope is that by better understanding the perceptions of students and the things that impact their decisions about where to work, we can empower supervisors and school districts to recruit and retain new SLPs in the workforce,

And learn more about how to present information to students to give them the most accurate information when making their career decisions.

Why are we each invested:



I am invested in knowing the perceptions of our students toward school-based work settings because I started my career as a school-based SLP. I have personally seen a trend away from SLP students at USC being interested in school-based settings and am curious why that is and if there is anything we can do to change it. As the person who schedules school-based practicum experiences, I want to know if there is a way that I can guide supervisors to providing an experience that will draw students toward school-based jobs after graduation. Additionally, as the person who manages our Meet & Greet career fair, I would like to know if there are ways that school districts can, based on research, alter their approach to new SLPs to recruit and retain them in the school-based workforce. Part of my responsibility as a clinical educator is to provide students with accurate information about potential work settings so that they can decide where they would like to work post-graduation. This research helps me know where student perceptions may not match workplace realities and specifically address those with students.

Why are we each invested:



In August 2021, USC COMD posted a celebratory Facebook message that 62 students had just graduated their program - and in that post-COVID year, that was a huge success to share! Of those 62 though, only TWO graduates - one from the in-residence program and one from the distance ed program - even applied for a position in Richland Two. I hired them both. But as a district that hosts many USC graduate students for practicum - during the school year and as a summer practicum site for distance ed students - I was curious why we didn't see more come back as colleagues.

Ultimately, though, my investment in this research is two-pronged: to figure out the best ways to support and retain our excellent team of school-based SLPs, and also to recruit and hire competent, motivated SLPs to join our group. If there are no ready and willing candidates for school-based positions, it's a lose-lose-lose situation: current staff get stretched thin with increased workloads, the students they serve don't get the high-quality speech services they deserve, and my stress grows exponentially!

Why are we each invested:



I am invested because of my larger motivation in working to improve literacy outcomes for all students, including those with speech and language impairments. As an associate professor at USC, my workload includes research, teaching, and service activities, and most of these relate back to children's language and literacy. My early-career experience as a public school speech-language pathologist in Kansas City, Kansas gave me an in-depth view of the impact that school SLPs can have on children's development as well as the challenges that school SLPs often face in managing large caseloads of children with varying needs. As an instructor in our graduate program, I've often been curious why our students who express interest in working with pediatric populations don't go on to take school positions. I'm also aware of the shortage of school SLPs both locally and nationally. I am grateful to collaborate with Joanna and Michelle to better understand factors that influence students' decisions and potentially help schools fill these gaps.

What motivated our work



Each year, USC practicum administrators, calculate and share data about where our students gain employment after graduation.



Each year, local school districts, including Richland Two, are looking to hire new graduates to fill vacancies for SLPs.



Each year, researchers are eager to partner with school-based SLPs to support their efforts serving students with speech and language impairments.

What motivated our work

What each of us was seeing, was that there were relatively few students graduating and entering the field in school-based settings.

This made it harder for local school districts to recruit new graduates to be CFs.

It also made building relationships with school districts more difficult for researchers because fewer recent alumni, with whom we have relationships, are working in school-based settings.

What could we do about it

What are student perceptions and experiences

In order to know what guidance to provide, we need to know more about what student perceptions are and what experiences from school-based rotations made working in a school post-graduation most attractive and least attractive.

Design school practicum to help recruitment

If we can provide guidance to school districts and school-based SLPs about ways the school-based practicum experience could help improve recruitment of new graduates, we may be able to attract more recent graduates to school-based settings.

More SLPs working in schools

Our long-term goal is to see more recent graduates choosing to work in school-based settings. But how do we get there?

What we already know

- 50% of practicing SLPs work in schools (ASHA, 2021)
- SLP shortages in school-based settings were reported in SC for 19 years between 1990-2017 (Cross, 2017)
- 101 vacant school SLP positions at start of 2023-2024 school year in SC (CERRA, 2023)
- Among students graduating from USC, only 22-38% enter the workforce in school-based settings (based on the last 6 years of internal data)
 - We saw a marked uptick in graduates getting CFs in the schools in 2023, which is encouraging
 - Went from approximately 25% for 2019-2022 to 37.5% in 2023
- Research completed with SLPs already working in the schools indicates specific barriers to retention (ASHA, 2020) :
 - High caseloads - 56.5% of respondents
 - Paperwork - 81.7%
 - Meetings - 53.5%
 - Low Salary - 30.1%

What we want to know

What are student perceptions of working in a school-based setting as an SLP?

What lessons can we learn from their perceptions that influence student's decisions whether or not to pursue a career in a school-based setting?



What we did

- Surveyed students to ask about:
 - What their perceptions were, prior to completing their school rotation, about:
 - Working in a school-based setting
 - How different aspects of working in a school compared to other settings (paperwork, salary, benefits, etc.)
 - What their experience had been in their school rotation:
 - What they enjoyed the most
 - What they enjoyed the least
 - Things they experienced that may draw them to a school-based work setting
 - Things they experienced that may deter them from a school based work setting
 - If their school rotation made them more or less likely to choose a school-based work setting in the future
 - What would make them more likely to choose a school-based work setting in the future

How we did it

Cohort 1

- Received one survey about perceptions
- After they had completed their school-based practicum rotation
- Asked to “remember back” to before their school-based rotation to tell us about their perceptions of working in a school
- Asked questions about their school-based rotation and how it influenced their decision to work in a school-based setting post graduation
- Demographic data was collected in a separate survey so that identifying information cannot be linked to specific answers

Cohort 2 (ongoing)

- Received two surveys:
 - One administered before they began their school-based rotation about their perceptions of a school-based work setting as an SLP
 - One administered after they ended their school-based rotation about their experience and how it influenced their choice of a school-based work setting in the future
- Again, demographic data was collected in a separate survey so that identifying information cannot be linked to specific answers

Who participated in our study - Background

On-Campus, Full-Time Program

- Admit approximately 35 in each cohort
- All students complete a school rotation in 1 of their first 2 semesters (Fall or Spring)
- Students take a full course load including a clinical practicum course each semester
 - ~12 hours of coursework, plus
 - 2-3 credit hours of practicum (2 full days of practicum in a school rotation)

Distance-Education, Part-Time Program

- Admit approximately 35 in each cohort
- Most students complete a school rotation in the 1st summer (after 1 year of graduate coursework)
- Students take a part-time course load in fall /spring
- In summer, they complete a full-time clinical rotation and a minimal course load
 - 0-3 hours of coursework, plus
 - 5-6 credit hours of practicum (full-time for 6-8 weeks)
- We often get students in this program who already work in a school-based settings and may be funded to receive further education

Who participated in our study

Cohort 1

- Students enrolled at USC in our on-campus, full-time program
- 31 students participated
 - 82% response rate (31/38 invited students)
- All had completed a school-based rotation in 1 of the previous 2 semesters

Cohort 2 (ongoing)

- Students enrolled at USC
 - Due to timing, we were able to open up Cohort 2 to our distance-education, part-time program
 - We also included newly admitted students in our on-campus, full-time program
- 13 students participated in both pre- and post- rotation surveys
 - 3 distance-education students
 - 10 on-campus students

Pre-rotation perceptions of working in schools

Prior to students completing their school rotation, we asked them about how they thought working in a school setting compared to working in other settings.

We asked about 11 different areas:

- Atmosphere
- Salary
- Benefits
- Other Responsibilities (duties, etc)
- Working with Children
- Collaboration
- Daily Schedule
- Time off Throughout the Year
- Variety of Disorders
- Location of Job Opportunities
- Paperwork

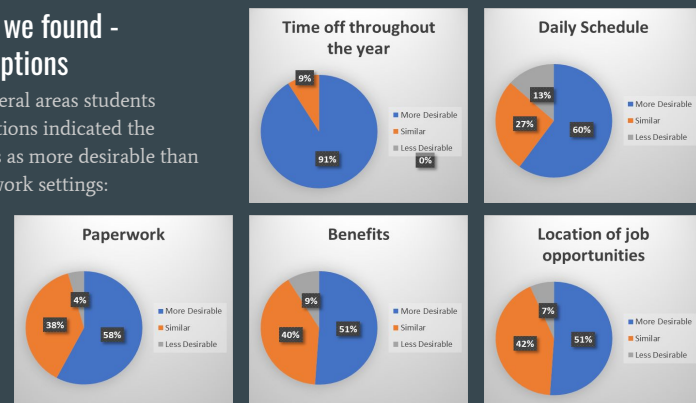
Other settings defined

It should be noted that for the purposes of this research, the “other work settings” to which students were asked to compare the school setting include:

- Hospitals
- Skilled Nursing Facilities
- Private Practice Clinics
- Academia/Research

What we found - Perceptions

For several areas students perceptions indicated the schools as more desirable than other work settings:

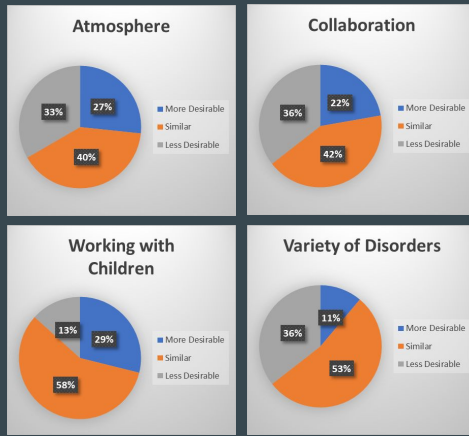


What we found - Perceptions

Four areas scored were somewhat neutral.

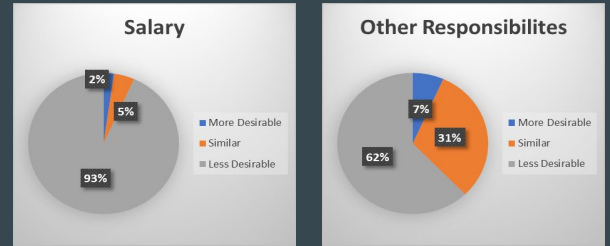
Two (top row) scored fairly equally between those who thought a school setting was more, less, or similarly desirable than other settings:

Two (bottom row) were rated as being similarly desirable to other settings by the majority of respondents:



What we found - Perceptions

For two areas students perceived the schools as less desirable than other settings:



What we found - Perceptions

Conclusions:

On the whole, students perceive many aspects of working in a school setting as either more desirable than, or similar to other settings.

Aspects of working in a school that students perceive as being less desirable than in other settings, are aspects of working in a school that research surrounding SLP job satisfaction also identify as being detrimental to retention of school-based SLPs. (ASHA, 2020; Edgar & Rosa-Lugo, 2007)

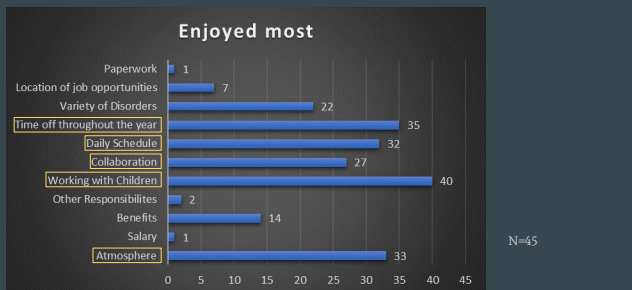
Post-rotation experiences of working in schools

Additionally, after students completed their school rotation, we asked them about the things that:

- They enjoyed most (from our 11 aspects of working in a school based setting),
- They enjoyed the least (from our 11 aspects)
- They experienced that made them more inclined to working in a school,
- They experienced that made them less inclined to working in a school

What we found - Experiences

Areas most enjoyed (of our 11 aspects of working in a school based setting)

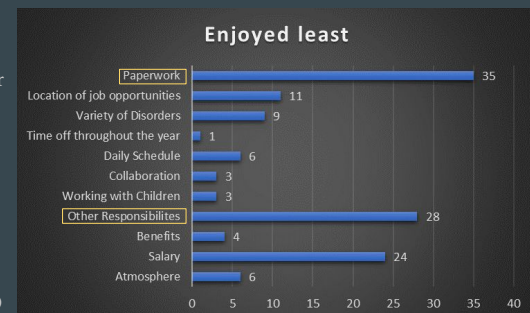


What we found - Experiences

Areas least enjoyed (of our 11 aspects of working in a school based setting)

Comments included:

- High caseloads (1)
- Negative atmosphere (1)
- Restraints on scheduling (1)



What we found - Experiences

Things that made students more inclined to choose a school based setting after graduation (3 most frequent responses):

- Diversity of the clients they served
- Schedule (both throughout the year and day-to-day)
- Collaboration with other professionals

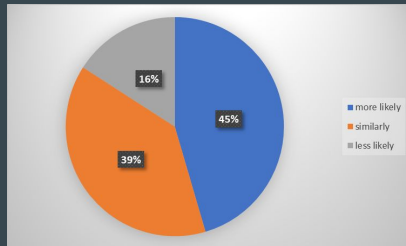
What we found - Experiences

Things that made students less inclined to choose a school-based setting after graduation (3 most frequent responses)

- Salary (both within schools and compared to SLPs in other settings)
- Paperwork
- Politics
 - Within-school politics (support from administration, respect from other professionals, with parents/caregivers)
 - Within-district politics (oversight of SLPs, communication from district level)
 - Within the system (how services are regulated)

What we found - Experiences

- Likelihood of choosing a school as a work setting following school practicum rotation



What we found - Experiences

- For those who were **more likely** to choose a school (n=20):
 - Schedule (7) was the most common factor in this decision
 - Student loan forgiveness, diversity of caseload, collaboration opportunities (1 student each)
 - Other things that may increase their likelihood to choose a school setting:
 - Salary (11)
 - School specific knowledge, fewer duties, more manageable caseloads, and more support from other professionals/administration (1 student each)

What we found - Experiences

- For those who were **less likely** to choose a school (n=7):
 - Things that may increase their likelihood to choose a school setting:
 - Salary (4)
 - More manageable caseloads (3)
 - School specific knowledge, expense budgets commensurate with caseload, reduced paperwork, respect of other professionals (1 student each)

Where are we going

We have 6 students who are currently completing their school-based rotations and who have taken a survey about their pre-rotation perceptions of working in a school. They will be invited to take a survey post-rotation about their school-based practicum experience.

As Cohorts 1 and 2 gain additional practicum experience in multiple settings, we plan to send a follow-up survey, closer to the time of graduation, to assess the perceptions of working in a school-based setting compared to the other settings they have experienced.

- Cohort 1 will be offered the opportunity to take this survey in April/May 2024.
- Cohort 2 will be offered the opportunity to take this survey in April/May 2025 or 2026, depending on their program.

Given what we have found...



What are practical things that we can do in higher education and as school-based SLPs to help entice new graduates to school-based work settings?

Salary and Benefits

- Make sure that we are comparing apples to apples (and teaching students to do the same)
 - Break discussions about salary down to pay per hour as opposed to pay per year
 - Per hour, SLPs working in the schools may make more than SLPs in other settings because there are fewer days worked (180 days as opposed to 250-260) even though the yearly salary may be lower
 - This does not diminish the fact that many districts do not pay SLPs commensurately with other professions with similar levels of training (which we should advocate for)
 - Include the benefits employers pay as part of the overall package of what schools provide
 - Many other pediatric work settings do not guarantee benefits, or they require employees to pay a larger percentage of their benefits (health insurance, retirement)
 - Look at not just take home pay, but what the organization pays for an SLP to work for them (typically anywhere from 1.25 - 1.5 times salary)
 - Talk to students about benefits, not just salary
 - Another benefit of working for a public school is student loan forgiveness programs.
 - This is something we can focus on in higher education
 - School SLPs can also talk about this as a benefit

Play on the strengths of the school setting

- Diversity
 - In addition to needing a diverse experience to meet graduation and certification requirements, students want to see diverse clientele
 - If you have diverse types of clients, give opportunities to work with those clients where possible. If not possible, try to provide opportunities to observe
- Collaboration
 - Many students enter our field because they want to work with other professions
 - Allow students to observe your interactions with other professions and provide them opportunities to take the lead in those interactions as appropriate

Be realistic, but positive about the drawbacks to the school setting

- We want students to have an accurate understanding of what working in a school looks like
- We need to continue advocating for better pay and better working conditions for school SLPs,
- We also need to be aware of the social media “echo chamber” that may emphasize negative views more than positive,
- We can intentionally provide opportunities for students to ask questions and to discuss these topics so that they are well informed when deciding on a future position

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