

# Responding to the Communication Needs of Children and Families in the U.S. Virgin Islands

Karen Harris Brown, Ph.D., CCC-SLP

Kimberly R. Mills, Ph.D., BCBA-D

Virgin Islands University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (VIUCEDD)

## INTRODUCTION

Remarkably, **50% of USVI children in their first year of public school tested below age-level expectations for language skills** on the Learning Accomplishment Profile assessment. Similarly, **34% of USVI children in their first year of public school tested below age-level expectations for cognitive skills** on the Learning Accomplishment Profile assessment during (Kids Count Data Book, 2013). Only 28% of parents for children under the age of six years had predictive concerns about their child's development and almost half (46.4%) of our 18 -19 year olds in the US Virgin Islands do not have a high school diploma (Kids Count Data Book 2013). It is well known that language development is predictive of reading skills and third grade reading skills are predictive of high school graduation. Further, developing cognitive skills at an early age helps young children to build skills necessary for later school years and adulthood. The inadequacy of services caused by the absence of qualified personnel and the lack of well-coordinated programs in the US Territory is contributing to lower than desired academic achievement levels, resulting from equity and access issues.

VIUCEDD has developed a new initiative, focused on providing training and technical assistance to school-based speech-language pathologists, district and school administrators, and parents/guardians, in an effort to address these startling statistics and significant challenges.

## PURPOSE OF RESEARCH & METHODS

• Increase emphasis on early identification and speech and language development

• Determine the needs of school-based speech-language pathologists and educational administrators, and parents to better develop the communication skills (speech and language) of children in the U.S. Virgin Islands

• Mixed methods (surveys, focus group and individual interviews, and participant observation)

• Semi-structured interviews

- Purposeful sampling
- Member checks
- Determined themes

• Surveys

- Multiple-choice
- Open-ended

• Participants

- Special education administrators (6)
- Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) (8)

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are USVI school-based speech-language pathologists' perceived supports to provide effective service delivery necessary to enhance the speech and language skills of the children they serve?
2. What are USVI school-based speech-language pathologists' perceived barriers that prevent effective service delivery necessary to enhance the speech and language skills of the children they serve?
3. What are USVI school-based speech-language pathologists' knowledge and skills related to providing clinical service delivery in the areas of speech and language development?
4. In what ways can school-based administrators be supported in their leadership of USVI school-based speech-language pathologists?

## RESULTS

• USVI school-based SLPs overwhelmingly (67%) expressed the need for more professional development focused on topics related to speech and language, and presented by a speech-language pathologist.

• Perceived barriers by the SLPs included a lack of (1) therapy materials and resources (60%) and (2) collaboration with other professionals (40%).

• Knowledge and skills varied, particularly in the area of cultural and linguistic diversity. Professional development needs related to speech and language were great. All respondents identified multiple topics in which professional development was needed.

• School-based administrators overwhelmingly (100%) expressed the critical need for both school-based SLPs and special educators. Additionally, they expressed the desire to learn about a value-added system specifically designed for assessing the performance of speech-language pathologists.

## DISCUSSION

• SLPs primarily participated in professional development not related to speech and language. The SLPs ranged in experiences from novice, completing the Clinical Fellow experience to veteran SLPs with 10 years of experience. While it is important for SLPs to engage in professional learning experiences focused on more than speech and language service delivery, the importance of in-field continuing professional development is critical for growth in clinical skills and competencies and to remain current with evidence-based practices, as well as technological and other advances.

• Research on value-added assessment (VAA) has traditionally focused on teachers, raising concerns about how applicable it is to SLPs (ASHA, 2014). Currently, SLPs are evaluated by their district administrators using measures designed for classroom teachers. The roles and responsibilities between the two professionals differ significantly. The PACE Performance Assessment was specifically designed for SLPs with the goal of ensuring that evaluation of performance would accurately reflect the unique roles played by SLPs in facilitating children's overall academic performance and their success in the school community (ASHA, 2014).

• There is a dire need for SLPs and special educators in the U.S. territory. To address this critical need, a graduate speech-language pathology program proposal was developed and will undergo the review process at the local university. Additional collaborations with the local DOE has resulted in a partnership to establish special education programs as well. The Virgin Islands DOE has agreed to fund the first cohort.

## NEXT STEPS

• Provide training and technical assistance based on results

• Conduct focus group interviews (parents/legal guardians)

- Semi-structured interviews
- Purposeful sampling
- Verbatim transcripts
- Conduct member checks
- Determine themes

• Call for public comment (post on VIUCEDD website)

- Verbatim transcripts
- Conduct member checks
- Determine themes

## REFERENCES

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. (2014). Performance Assessment of Contributions and Effectiveness of SLPs.

U.S. Virgin Islands Kids Count Data Book (2013). Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands, Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.