

An Examination of the Practice of Aligning Speech-Language Therapy Goals to the
Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts

by
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Abstract

Evaluating the Practice of Aligning Speech-Language Therapy Goals to the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts. Gerard F. Shine, 2016: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, College of Health Care Sciences. ERIC Descriptors: Speech Language Pathology, Speech Therapy, Common Core State Standards, English, Language Impairments

Implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is now a curriculum priority for school districts across the United States. Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) are exploring ways to incorporate the CCSS into their assessment and therapy practices. Literature centered on the development of language goals aligned with the CCSS for English language arts (ELA) was limited. The purpose of this study was to identify if SLPs working in public elementary and middle school settings had adopted the practice of aligning their language-intervention goals to the CCSS for ELA for students on their caseloads. Perceived feasibility of language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA was also examined in this study.

Results of a survey of 175 SLPs indicated that the majority of SLPs were at the middle or advanced stage of language goal alignment and that the majority of SLPs viewed the process of language goal alignment as being somewhat or very complicated for students on their caseloads. These findings support the belief that more professional collaboration among SLPs, as well as more professional development time, is needed to alleviate the perceived complexity associated with language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA.

Table of Contents

	Page
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	2
Definition of Terms.....	14
Purpose of the Study.....	16
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	17
Theoretical Framework: Diffusion of Innovations.....	18
The CCSS and Education.....	23
Role of the SLP.....	25
The CCSS and ELA.....	27
IEPs and the CCSS.....	31
Difference Between IEPs and Standards-Based IEPs.....	34
Development of Standards-Based IEPs.....	35
Aligning SLP Goals to CCSS.....	39
Difficulties Associated With Goal Alignment.....	41
Conflicting Views Regarding the Use of Standards-Based IEP.....	43
Standards-Based IEPs and Functional Life Skills.....	44
CCSS Instruction for Students With Severe Disabilities.....	45
Research Questions.....	48
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	49
Participants.....	49
Instruments.....	51
Procedures.....	55
Design.....	56
Data Analysis.....	57
Chapter 4: Results.....	60
Participants.....	60
Survey Questions.....	63
Theoretical Framework.....	64
Research Question 1.....	65
Research Question 2.....	67
Research Question 3.....	74
Research Question 4.....	75
Research Question 5.....	76
Research Question 6.....	80
Chapter Summary.....	82
Chapter 5: Discussion.....	84
Research Question 1.....	85
Research Question 2.....	86
Research Question 3.....	91

Research Question 4	92
Research Question 5	93
Research Question 6	97
Implications and Findings.....	99
Limitations of the Study.....	101
Recommendations for Future Research	103
References.....	104
Appendix	
Common Core Feedback Tool for SLPs.....	109
Tables	
1 Grade Level of Participants' Service.....	62
2 Participants' Years of Experience Working as a Speech-Language Pathologist in Public Schools	63
3 Percentage of Respondents ($N = 175$) Indicating Level of Knowledge	66
4 Descriptive Statistics for Survey Items 6, 8, and 13 Regarding Knowledge.....	66
5 Percentage of Respondents ($N = 175$) Indicating Agreement With Survey Belief Statements	68
6 Descriptive Statistics for Survey Items 9, 12, and 16 Regarding Beliefs.....	68
7 Reasons Speech-Language Pathologists Believe Language Goal Alignment to the Common Core State Standards Benefits Students.....	70
8 Reasons Speech-Language Pathologists Believe Language Goal Alignment to the Common Core State Standards Does Not Benefit Students.....	72
9 Percentage of Respondents ($N = 175$) Indicating Preparedness	74
10 Ways to Help Prepare Speech-Language Pathologists to Align Language-Therapy Goals to the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts	75
11 Percentage of Respondents ($N = 175$) Indicating Alignment Is Complicated.....	77
12 Reasons Speech-Language Pathologists Believe Goal Alignment to Grade-Level Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts Is Complicated.....	78
13 Reported Levels of Complexity of Goal Alignment to Grade-Level Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts, by School Level	80
14 Descriptive Statistics for Survey Item 20 by School Level.....	81

Chapter 1: Introduction

Forty-five states, the District of Columbia, and four U.S. territories have committed to implementing the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS), with the goal of graduating students from kindergarten through Grade 12 (K-12) programs who are ready for college and careers (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2016; Roberts, 2012). An additional state has adopted the CCSS for English language arts only (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2016). The CCSS specifically define the knowledge and skills students should have within their K-12 education. Students are expected to acquire the knowledge and skills outlined in the CCSS at each grade level. The vision is that students will be successful in school, leave high school with common knowledge and skills, and be prepared for postsecondary education and employment (Ehren, Blosser, Roth, Paul, & Nelson, 2012). The education reformers behind the development and implementation of the CCSS posit that schools should prepare students to achieve specific education standards. Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) are poised to play an integral role in the implementation of the CCSS (Zygouris-Coe & Goodwiler, 2012).

Knowing the academic content standards can help SLPs better assess students, develop intervention goals and objectives, provide intervention, and collaborate with teachers (Ehren et al., 2012). The CCSS could allow SLPs the opportunity to better integrate the academic curriculum with language-therapy goals for students on their caseloads. Communication, language, critical thinking, and collaboration skills are all given high importance throughout the CCSS (Staskowski, 2012). The usage of CCSS by SLPs in clinical practice needs to be determined and examined (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012).

Statement of the Problem

Implementation of the CCSS is now a curriculum priority for 45 states (Blosser et al., 2012). The CCSS provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn and are designed to be robust and relevant to the real world (Robinson, 2012). The CCSS categorize the knowledge and skills that students will need to acquire in order to be successful in college and careers. Now that the CCSS are being implemented in school districts across the United States, there is a clear need for SLPs to become proficient at incorporating the CCSS into their assessment and therapy practices (Roberts, 2012). The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) supports the notion of SLPs designing interventions that address the linguistic and metalinguistic foundations of school curriculum for students on their caseloads and in a consultative role for students outside of their caseload (ASHA, 2010). As leaders within their organizational settings, SLPs must become fluent in the CCSS and understand the organizational context in which they make decisions to implement interventions and initiatives (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012).

Throughout the CCSS, the importance of language is highlighted. The CCSS represent a considerable increase in the demands of language knowledge and use for K-12 students (Roberts, 2012). According to Roberts (2012), beginning in the primary grades, the standards set high expectations for students' interaction with informational text. Roberts discussed how many of the new language standards are significantly more linguistically demanding than the informational texts they replace. The increased linguistic demands of informational text are likely to pose difficulties not only for students currently receiving language support, but also for students without identified

delays or disabilities (Roberts, 2012). The standards place an increased emphasis on informational text, critical reading, disciplinary literacy, comprehension, oral language, writing about text, and technology in literacy (Zygouris-Coe, 2012). The language section of the CCSS explicitly delineates the exact skills on which SLPs should focus (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012). According to Dunkle and Flynn (2012), those same skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing are embedded throughout the standards in multiple content areas. The increased expectations for language, literacy, collaboration, and critical thinking make SLPs especially valuable to schools (Staskowski, 2012).

The language goals on a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) are now expected to match the academic expectations outlined by grade-level core standards. The move towards a standards-based curriculum for students with language disabilities is controversial. According to Blosser (2012), clinicians may have different views about where the standards-based curriculum fits into educating and treating students with disabilities. Students with deficient language skills will struggle to achieve the grade-level core standards outlined in the CCSS. Some education professionals have expressed concern that strategies that have been successful for students with disabilities in the past will be lost if grade-level academic standards become the focus of the IEP (Ahearn, 2006). The CCSS are now requiring students with language disabilities to meet the same grade-level core standards as their general education peers. According to Ahearn (2006), educators who work with special education students have expressed an aversion to changing the current approach for developing IEPs for fear of losing the focus on each child that is characteristic of special education's traditional approach.

Now that the CCSS are being implemented in school districts across the United

States, SLPs are faced with many difficult problems regarding how to effectively incorporate the standards into their assessments and therapy practices. In theory, the benefits of the CCSS are obvious, but many challenging tasks and questions remain for SLPs. SLPs now have to determine how to develop goals and objectives that are aligned with the academic curriculum for each grade level. SLPs also must make the distinction between what is grade-level appropriate and what is developmentally appropriate work for students on their caseloads. SLPs have to determine which of the CCSS they can effectively incorporate into IEP goals for students on their caseloads. A set of established grade-level learning standards provides increased pressure on SLPs working in the school setting to be focused on curriculum and to demonstrate an academic impact. According to Murza, Malani, and Hahs-Vaughn (2014), SLPs want to learn more about the CCSS and are concerned about the demands of incorporating the CCSS into their practice.

The CCSS propose that language should not be taught in isolation, but instead should be developed and incorporated across the day so that conversations, vocabulary strategies, and other techniques become a seamless part of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in the classroom (Zygouris-Coe & Goodwiler, 2013). According to Zygouris-Coe and Goodwiler (2013), students need to learn content-specific language and literacy strategies as well as when and how to apply them. Unfortunately, students with language difficulties may not have mastered low-level skills, which contributes to later problems in higher order processing (Bulgren, Graner, & Deshler, 2013). SLP leaders should provide school-based SLPs with the “what” and the “how” of the CCSS in the context of supporting students in meeting the standards (Murza et al., 2014). SLPs who are familiar with the CCSS and the applicability of this framework for school-based clinicians are

wondering why it is so difficult to get fellow SLPs to adopt the use of this initiative (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012). Information regarding the possible benefits of applying this framework may not have been effectively disseminated to school-based SLPs. Information regarding how the CCSS could be effectively incorporated into language-therapy practices and evaluations in the school setting may not have been effectively diffused.

A review of the available literature revealed a collective problem that SLPs are now experiencing in regards to the adoption and implementation of the CCSS in their schools. The problem is that SLPs working in the school setting are now experiencing a sense of uncertainty regarding how to effectively incorporate the CCSS into their speech-language therapy practices for students on their caseloads when underlying language skill deficits need to be addressed.

Topic. Across the nation, state departments of education are adopting the new K-12 CCSS for ELA, literacy, and mathematics. For the first time in U.S. history, the educational system is moving to a national standard for education, learning, and achievement (Murza et al., 2014). These new standards provide clear descriptions of what K-12 students should learn. According to Murza et al. (2014), school-based SLPs in states that have adopted the CCSS should be familiar with the standards and know how to align their intervention and goal planning with them. School districts are now encouraging SLPs to incorporate CCSS into their speech-language assessment practices. For SLPs, the CCSS provide an opportunity for curriculum alignment. According to Floyd (2013), curriculum alignment allows for transfer of learning between the therapy room and classroom settings. By increasing curriculum alignment, SLPs may be able to

demonstrate a positive academic impact for students on their caseloads.

Curriculum alignment with speech-language assessment practices is the core of providing appropriate treatment in schools (Floyd, 2013). Alignment of SLPs' assessments with the CCSS will uncover deficient language abilities as they relate to each grade level. This process shows administrators and teachers how the curriculum standards align with communication skills such as semantics, pragmatics, auditory skills, and syntax (Floyd, 2013). The implementation of the CCSS provides ripe opportunity for increased involvement and collaboration of SLPs in schools (Staskowski, 2012). The integrative nature of the CCSS provides tailor-made opportunities for teachers and SLPs to combine their expertise and experience to create high-quality instruction (Blosser et al., 2012; Ehren et al., 2012). Change, however, is not easily adopted and implemented and can prove to be difficult in educational settings (Murza et al., 2014).

The mission of the CCSS is to implement educational consistency and quality for students across the United States. Developing quality, educationally consistent IEP goals that are aligned with the CCSS for students can be problematic for SLPs. According to Ahearn (2006), some educators reject the use of the standard-based IEPs because they feel that it violates the individuality that the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) requires for each IEP. Developing a standards-based IEP that maintains individuality for a student is a complicated task. Clinicians may have different views about where the standards-based curriculum may fit into educating and treating students with disabilities (Blosser, 2012). Many questions have surfaced recently, including how SLPs can link their intervention goals to the standards when students have communication skill deficits to address (Blosser, 2012).

In order to develop IEP goals that are aligned with the CCSS, SLPs are encouraged to understand the structures and content of the ELA, literacy, and mathematics grade-level core standards. Blosser (2012) identified the ELA CCSS as a logical starting point for SLPs to link their therapy goals because they include reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language, all of which require critical communications skills for attainment. SLPs are uniquely trained to develop the language and literacy skills for students on their caseloads. Learning about and incorporating the ELA standards into SLPs' school practice is supported by the ASHA (2010) schools policy document.

The research problem. The CCSS initiative within public school education is designed to provide uniform guidelines for academic standards, including more explicit language targets (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012). Implementation of CCSS is now a curriculum priority in school districts across the United States. The CCSS requires students to access increasingly complex text, across multiple genres, with a higher proportion of informational text (Murza et al., 2014).

When transitioning, elementary students encounter the elevated curriculum demands of the middle school, and they are required to expand upon previously acquired grade-level core standards in order to effectively access this new curriculum. If students have not mastered the grade-level core standards in elementary school, they could present with more pronounced difficulties attempting to master grade-level standards in the middle school setting. According to Nippold (2014), when providing language intervention for middle school students, SLPs should consider the language demands of the classroom, the CCSS, later language development, and situations in which speakers

and writers are most likely to use complex syntax. Unfortunately, students may not have mastered low-level skills, contributing to later problems in higher ordered processing (Bulgren et al., 2013). The CCSS require students in middle school to demonstrate a deeper understanding of the concepts previously learned in elementary school. Due to the higher order demands and the lack of necessary skills that are required to support higher level thinking, it is often a struggle to prepare adolescents to respond to curriculum challenges at the middle school and high school levels (Swanson & Deshler, 2003).

The focus on higher order reasoning skills can be found throughout the CCSS. Students in earlier grades may not have mastered the lower level reasoning skills outlined in the CCSS, which in turn directly relates to the student's difficulty or inability to master higher ordered reasoning skills in later grades (Bulgren et al., 2013). When the academic demands of grade-level core standards are paired with student deficiencies in the necessary skills required to meet them, a performance gap can occur. A performance gap is considered to be a gap between what students are expected to do and what students are actually capable of doing (Deshler et al., 2001). The CCSS may be requiring students with specific language impairments to meet grade-level core standards when they have not yet acquired the necessary language skills to do so.

According to Rudebusch (2012), many states and local school districts are embracing a standards-based approach to IEP development so that the content of the IEP is linked to academic grade-level standards for the students. As these new standards are being implemented in public schools across the country, SLPs are debating how to serve those students who are at risk for failure in school, those with communication challenges that interfere with literacy, and those with severe disabilities who have been working

toward functional goals (Murza et al., 2014). Murza et al. (2014) discussed how SLPs are concerned about the demands of incorporating the CCSS into their practice. The CCSS do not define advanced work beyond the core or the interventions needed for students below grade level, and they do not provide guidance on the full range of support for English language learners and students with special needs (Zygouris-Coe, 2012).

School districts across the United States have adopted and implemented the new CCSS, and they are now a curriculum priority (Blosser et al., 2012; Murza et al., 2014; Roberts, 2012). The ASHA supports and promotes the practice of incorporating the CCSS into SLPs' school-based therapy practices, as indicated by the ASHA (2010) schools policy document. School districts now require the implementation of the CCSS, and the ASHA supports the incorporation of the CCSS into school-based therapy practices. However, several conflicting views continue to be expressed by SLPs regarding the use of the CCSS during language-therapy sessions (Ahearn, 2006; Blosser, 2012).

It is possible that the necessary information on how to effectively incorporate the CCSS into SLP therapy practices and evaluations has not been successfully diffused to SLPs working in school-based settings. According to Dunkle and Flynn (2012), diffusion is the process by which a new practice (an innovation) is communicated over time among members of a social system. It is possible that dissemination of information by SLP leaders regarding the relatively new practice of incorporating the CCSS into speech-therapy sessions has not been successful. According to Murza et al. (2014), SLPs working in school-based settings have many questions regarding how to effectively incorporate the CCSS into their therapy sessions so that students are effectively

supported.

Background and justification. Students with disabilities are a heterogeneous group with one common characteristic: the presence of disabling conditions that significantly hinder their abilities to benefit from general education (IDEA, 2004). Understanding the process in which SLPs effectively align their goals to the CCSS may help students with specific language impairments achieve grade-level core standards and thrive academically while participating in a general education classroom. What works for some students may not work effectively for others. The process of aligning SLP goals to a student's current grade-level core standards is only effective if the student has acquired the core language skills outlined for the student's previous grade.

Zygouris-Coe (2012) discussed how the CCSS are designed to be rigorous, clear, specific, teachable, learnable, measurable, and coherent, with limited repetition across grades. The CCSS present a call to higher standards and increased student ability to meet them (Zygouris-Coe, 2012). Meeting grade-level standards assumes that students can read and comprehend grade-level text in order to gain the necessary knowledge (Nippold, 2014). How the standards will be taught and assessed is of vital importance in reaching students with disabilities (Zygouris-Coe, 2012). Deshler et al. (2001) discussed the performance gap that highlights what students are expected to do and what they can do; over time, this gap can grow, and it is especially exacerbated in the later grades when the academic growth of students with learning difficulties plateaus. If a student has not mastered the grade-level core language standards highlighted in earlier grades, a performance gap could occur and grow, thus making it harder to learn and acquire the language standards in the later grades.

The CCSS are established at each grade level to assure that all students meet the type of standards necessary for success in future grades and postsecondary education (Murza et al., 2014). If students do not present with necessary language skills required to meet their current grade-level standards, then the act of aligning their language therapy goals to the CCSS becomes meaningless. According to Dunkle and Flynn (2012), determining the usage of the CCSS by SLPs in clinical practice needs to be examined.

The SLP's link to the CCSS opens the door to classroom service delivery and increases SLPs' ability to serve students in the least restrictive environment by tying what SLPs do to improvement on highly valued high-stakes assessments (Flynn, 2010). The SLP who is tasked with considering CCSS not only has to acquire the specific knowledge base to become competent integrating the CCSS, but also has to consider a myriad of personal and organizational factors (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012). How does this new information fit in within the SLP's current beliefs and understanding of clinical practice (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012)? How difficult will it be for the SLP to implement the changes to clinical practice needed to incorporate this new information (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012)? What are the benefits versus consequences of integrating this into the SLP's clinical practice (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012)? Do the school principals, teachers, other professionals, and parents understand what integrating the CCSS entails, and do they support this movement, or will the SLP be attempting this task alone (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012)? The personal and organizational factors highlighted by Dunkle and Flynn (2012) are significant and help justify the need for additional research focused on the practice of aligning SLP goals to the CCSS.

Deficiencies in the evidence. Studies have been conducted emphasizing the link

between language and literacy skills and academic achievement (Richards, Sturm, & Cali, 2012; Roberts, 2012; Robinson, 2012; Staskowski, 2012; Zygouris-Coe, 2012; Zygouris-Coe & Goodwiler, 2013). Results of these studies indicated that the CCSS place an increased emphasis on informational text, multiple texts, critical reading, disciplinary literacy, comprehension, oral language, writing about text, and technology in literacy and language (Zygouris-Coe, 2012). There is currently a lack of research centered on the practice of aligning SLP therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA. Much of the information about standards-based IEPs has been generated in special education practice by state and district staff (Ahearn, 2006). There is a lack of evidence-based research developed by SLPs that focuses on standards-based IEP development that align language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA.

Researchers have examined the concerns that school-based SLPs are experiencing regarding the implementation of the CCSS. According to Murza et al. (2014), many SLPs want to learn more about the CCSS and are concerned about the demands of incorporating the CCSS into their therapy practice. Results from the Murza et al. study suggested that high-quality professional development is necessary for many SLPs to understand the structure and content of the CCSS. In addition to increasing SLP structure and content knowledge of CCSS, Murza et al. discussed the need for professional development to focus on how SLPs can effectively develop specific and individualized therapy goals aligned to the CCSS.

With an increased number of students with disabilities included in general education classrooms, it is becoming more important to determine the expectations that will be placed upon these students as they progress through school in order to determine

how to provide them with the support they need to be successful in this setting (Richards et al., 2012). According to Dunkle and Flynn (2012), determining if SLPs are using the CCSS within their clinical practice needs to be examined.

Audience. SLPs working in the school setting are most affected by this dissertation topic. Aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA is a relatively new concept. SLPs working in the school setting will find this information interesting. The results of this study may help SLPs gain a deeper understanding of the potential benefits and challenges associated with aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA.

Special education teachers as well as general education teachers also may find this information interesting. Special education teachers are responsible for supporting students with IEPs in the general education classroom. Special education teachers are now required to align their educational goals to the CCSS for ELA and mathematics. Many of the same challenges SLPs are facing in regards to aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA may be experienced by special education teachers when they are generating academic goals for their students.

General education teachers work to educate all students in their classroom, including those receiving speech-language therapy support. The information presented within this dissertation reveals the supportive role that SLPs play in the general education classroom. Through collaboration and support, SLPs could work to generalize language goals aligned with the CCSS for ELA into the general education classroom and help narrow the academic achievement gap between students with specific language impairments and their general education peers.

Administrators employed in public schools may find this information interesting. In order for SLPs to effectively develop individualized therapy goals aligned to the CCSS, high-quality professional development is necessary to understand both the structure and content of the CCSS.

Definition of Terms

Alignment. The term *alignment* is widely used by educators in a variety of contexts, most commonly in reference to reforms that are intended to bring great coherence of efficiency to a curriculum, program, initiative, or education system (“Alignment,” 2013).

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA). The ASHA is the national professional, scientific, and credentialing association for 182,000 members and affiliates who are audiologists; SLPs; speech, language, and hearing scientists; audiology and speech-language pathology support personnel; and students (ASHA, 2015a).

Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The standards were developed through a state-led effort coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers in collaboration with their members, and teachers, school administrators, and education experts (CCSS Initiative, 2013). The CCSS establish clear and consistent goals for learning that will prepare our children for college and the workforce. They define the knowledge and skills students should have mastered during their K-12 education so that they graduate from high school ready to succeed in postsecondary education and the workforce (CCSS Initiative, 2013).

Diffusion. This term refers to the process by which a new practice (an innovation) is communicated over time among members of a social system (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012).

English language arts (ELA). ELA include the ability “to read, write, speak, listen, and use language effectively in a variety of content areas” (CCSS Initiative, 2010, p. 3). ELA standards include attentive reading of literature and nonfiction texts.

Free, appropriate public education. This term is used in IDEA (2004) to refer to the right of all students, regardless of disability, to have access to a free and appropriate public education (ASHA, 2015a).

Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP is a written document required for each child who is eligible to receive special education services. It is provided to a student who has been determined to (a) have a disability and (b) to need special education services because of that disability. The IEP is developed, reviewed, and revised in a team meeting that specifies the individual educational needs of the child and what special education and related services are necessary to meet the child’s educational needs (Virginia Department of Education, 2011).

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). NCLB (2002) is federal legislation that enacted the theories of standards-based education reform. NCLB requires that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments.

Performance gap. The performance gap is the gap between what students are expected to do and what they can do (Deshler et al., 2001).

Relative advantage. Relative advantage is the degree to which an innovation is seen as better than the idea, program, or product it replaces (Kaminski, 2011).

Response to intervention. This system of intervention integrates assessment and

intervention within a multilevel prevention system to maximize student achievement and reduce behavior problems (ASHA, 2015a).

Speech-language pathologist (SLP). The SLP is the professional who engages in clinical services, prevention, advocacy, education, administration, and research in the areas of communication and swallowing across the life span from infancy through geriatrics (ASHA, 2007).

Standards-based IEP. This term refers to the process and document that is framed by the state standards and that contains goals aligned with, and chosen to facilitate the student's achievement of, state grade-level academic standards (Ahearn, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify if SLPs working in public elementary and middle school settings had adopted the practice of aligning their language-intervention goals to the ELA CCSS for students on their caseloads and to what extent this language-goal alignment practice had taken place. More specifically, this study had three objectives: to examine (a) if SLPs working in public elementary and middle schools have adopted the standards-based approach to IEP development so that SLP language goals are aligned with the ELA grade-level core standards, (b) the perceived feasibility of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA from the perspective of an SLP, and (c) the extent to which SLPs are developing standards-based IEPs that align language goals with the CCSS for ELA.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, the researcher presents literature discussing the development of the CCSS as well as literature exploring the role that SLPs are expected to assume with the standards' implementation in public school settings. The researcher presents literature in support of and in opposition of the practice of developing standards-based IEPs that align language-therapy goals with the CCSS for ELA. Literature discussing the impact of language-therapy goal alignment to the CCSS on the educational experiences of students with special needs is presented in this chapter. The researcher focused on primarily using current literature pulled from educational databases.

Aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA has the potential to be a significant benefit for SLPs working in the school setting. According to Roberts (2012), students receiving speech and language support are more likely to struggle with the linguistic demands of the informational text found within the CCSS ELA standards. Flynn (2010) discussed how the process of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS opens the doorway to effective classroom delivery services.

The CCSS represent a considerable increase in the demands of language knowledge and use. The CCSS set high expectations for students' interaction with linguistically demanding informational text. According to Swanson and Deshler (2003), due to the higher order demands, it is a struggle to prepare students who lack the skills needed to support higher level thinking to respond to curriculum challenges. Aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA may prove to be problematic for SLPs if their students lack the necessary grade-level language skills, which in turn can widen the performance gap between what students are expected to do and what they are able to do.

A need exists to evaluate the practice of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA across grade levels. School-based SLPs should be familiar with the standards and how to align their intervention and goal planning with the CCSS (Blosser, 2012; Murza et al. 2014). Murza et al. (2014) discussed how SLPs want to learn more about the CCSS and how to effectively incorporate the standards into their practice. Floyd (2013) discussed how aligning language-therapy goals with the CCSS provides an opportunity for curriculum alignment, which would allow for transfer of learning between the therapy room and the classroom setting. Dunkle and Flynn (2012) discussed the need to determine if SLPs are using the CCSS within their clinical practice.

Theoretical Framework: Diffusion of Innovations

The diffusion of innovations theory provided the theoretical framework for this study. The diffusion of innovations theory helped to explain why some SLPs who are familiar with the potential applicability of the CCSS framework may be hesitant to align language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA. Diffusion is the process by which a new practice (an innovation) is communicated over time among members of a social system (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012). According to Dunkle and Flynn (2012), the social system is a critical component of this theory; it is actually the social system that drives which interventions are used, regardless of the strength of the innovation's research base.

The diffusion of innovations theory is one of the oldest social science theories (Kaminski, 2011). According to Kaminski (2011), the diffusion of innovations theory originated in the contextual field of communication to explain how, over time, an idea or product gains momentum and diffuses (or spreads) through a specific population or social system. The end result of the diffusion is that people, as part of a social system, adopt a

new idea, behavior, or product (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012; Kaminski, 2011). The diffusion of innovations theory offers a plausible explanation for why some ideas or behaviors are adopted rapidly and others with difficulty, despite strong evidence of their potential benefits (Swanson-Fisher, 2004).

The concept of diffusion was first discussed historically in 1903 by the French sociologist Tarde (Kaminski, 2011). Tarde's view in regards to diffusion research was that social change requires penetration of inventions that diffuse through the process of imitation (Kinnunen, 1996). Tarde is credited with first discussing the concept of diffusion, but he did not specify or clarify key diffusion concepts (Rogers, 1995). Tarde's insights would serve to inspire the work of future researchers working to expand upon the concept of diffusion.

The theory of diffusion was applied to rural sociology in the midwestern United States in the 1920s (Wejnert, 2002). According to Wejnert (2002), agriculture technology was rapidly advancing, and researchers were starting to examine how farmers were utilizing equipment, techniques, and hybrid seeds. Tarde's research was expanded upon by communication studies professors Ryan and Gross (1943) when they conducted a study on the adoption of hybrid corn seeds. According to Kaminski (2011), it was Ryan and Gross who introduced the five categories of adopters of an innovation: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. The five categories of adopters can be used to better understand the different characteristics of a target population that will help or hinder the adoption of a new innovation (Swanson-Fisher, 2004). According to Wejnert (2002), the Ryan and Gross study on the adoption of hybrid corn seeds in Iowa worked to solidify prior work on the diffusion theory into a distinct paradigm.

Diffusion is the process by which a new practice or innovation is communicated over time among members of a social system (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012; Rogers, 2003). According to Kaminski (2011), the diffusion of innovations theory explains how an idea or product gains momentum and diffuses through a specific population or social system with the end result being the adoption of a new idea, behavior, or product. The diffusion of innovations theory is often regarded as a valuable change model for guiding innovations (Kaminski, 2011). According to Kaminski, adoption means that a person does something differently than what that person had done previously. The key to adoption is that the person must perceive the idea, behavior, or product as new or innovative (Kaminski, 2011).

There are four key components within the decision-making framework: dissemination, adoption, implementation, and maintenance (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012). According to Dunkle and Flynn (2012), the four components within this framework illustrate that the decision whether to use a new intervention is not quick and straightforward, but undergoes a systematic process. The first step begins with awareness of the intervention, or dissemination (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012). This is followed by an administrator's attitude about the intervention; the administrator's attitude determines whether the organization will commit to initiating the intervention, known as adoption (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012). Once an administrator decides to adopt the intervention, implementation of the intervention within the organization occurs (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012). Dunkle and Flynn discussed how a breakdown at any one of the stages can preclude sustained use and acceptance of the newly introduced initiative.

Rogers (1995) produced the theory of adoption of innovations by synthesizing

research from diffusion studies across the fields of anthropology, sociology, rural sociology, education, and medical sociology. Rogers developed one of the better-known theoretical approaches to diffusion of innovation by incorporating the five adopter categories established by Ryan and Gross and combining them with the five elements of a new clinical behavior (Swanson-Fisher, 2004). By combining the five adopter categories with the five elements of clinical behavior, Rogers identified with greater detail the different factors that affect a person's ability to complete diffusion by adopting a new innovation (Swanson-Fisher, 2004).

The five categories of adopters can be used to better understand the different characteristics of a target population that will help or hinder the adoption of a new innovation (Swanson-Fisher, 2004). Innovators are people who want to be the first to try the innovation (Kaminski, 2011). Early adopters are people who represent opinion leaders and enjoy leadership roles while embracing change opportunities (Kaminski, 2011). The early majority includes people who are rarely leaders but who adopt new ideas before the average person (Kaminski, 2011). The late majority includes people who are skeptical of change and will adopt an innovation only after it has been tried by the majority (Kaminski, 2011). Laggards are people who are bound by tradition and very conservative; they are the most resistant group to adopting an innovation (Kaminski, 2011)

Five elements of a new or substitute clinical behavior each partly determine whether adoption or diffusion of a new activity will occur: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability (Rogers, 1995). The stages by which diffusion is accomplished include awareness of the need for an innovation,

decision to adopt or reject the innovation, initial use of the innovation to test it, and continued use of the innovation (Kaminski, 2011). Each component in the four stages of the diffusion of innovations model can be influenced by any of the five elements of a new or substitute clinical behavior (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012).

1. The first element is relative advantage, the degree to which an innovation is seen as better than the idea, program, or product it replaces (Kaminski, 2011).

2. Compatibility is how consistent the innovation is with the values, experiences, and needs of the potential adopters (Kaminski, 2011).

3. Complexity is how difficult the innovation is to understand or use (Kaminski, 2011).

4. Trialability is the extent to which the innovation can be tested or experimented with before a commitment to adopt is made (Kaminski, 2011).

5. The last main element that influences adoption is observability, which is the extent to which the innovation provides tangible results (Kaminski, 2011).

Diffusion of innovations theory has been applied to numerous contexts, including medical sociology, communications, and marketing developmental studies (Dingfelder & Mandell, 2011). According to Dingfelder and Mandell (2011), the guiding principle for the diffusion of innovation framework is that an innovation's reception is dependent on social context, which explains why at times proven-efficacious interactions are not used in community practice, whereas other interventions with minimal evidence-based research gain widespread acceptance. Dingfelder and Mandell applied the diffusion of innovation theory to help researchers understand why efficacious interventions for autism are rarely adopted or successfully implemented in public mental health education

systems. The use of the diffusion of innovations as the theoretical framework for this study provided valuable insights into the relatively new practice of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS in the field of speech-language pathology. The diffusion of innovations theory as a theoretical framework helped to determine if information regarding the practice of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA has been effectively disseminated by SLP leaders and if SLPs working in school-based settings have adopted this relatively new practice. .

The CCSS and Education

Across the nation, states have adopted standards that describe the content that schools are expected to teach and students are expected to master (Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2008). According to Hamilton et al. (2008), standards-based reforms have become widespread across the United States, particularly in the wake of NCLB. According to Hamilton et al., there is no universally accepted definition of standards-based reforms, and most discussions of standards-based reforms include some or all of the following features: academic expectations for students, alignment of the key elements of the education system to promote attainment of these expectations, the use of assessments of student achievement to monitor performance, decentralization of responsibility for decisions relating to curriculum and instruction to schools, support and technical assistance to foster improvement of educational services, and accountability provisions that reward or sanction schools or students on the basis of measured performance. According to Hamilton et al., the standards-based reform movement reflects a convergence of policy trends with a growing emphasis on using tests to monitor progress and a belief that school reforms are likely to be effective when all components of the

education system are designed to work in alignment toward a common set of goals. Many of the standards-based reforms had their origins in state and federal initiatives from the 1980s and 1990s (Hamilton et al., 2008). Hamilton et al. discussed the emphasis on using standards to promote instruction that is academically challenging rather than focused on attainment of low-level academic skills. The goal of standards-based reforms is to promote increased opportunity for all students to receive high-quality standards-based instruction throughout their K-12 academic years.

The development of the CCSS is the most recent chapter in the standards-based reform initiative. The purpose of the CCSS is to improve U.S. educational outcomes, standardize educational opportunity, and focus on fewer and more rigorous standards that are internationally benchmarked (Zygouris-Coe, 2013). The adoption and the implementation of the CCSS are meant to transform education (Staskowski, 2012). According to Staskowski (2012), The CCSS are intended to update the way schools educate and the way students learn and ultimately to prepare the nation's next generation for the global workplace. Richards et al. (2012) discussed how the standards-based shift in U.S. education has caused many education professionals to reexamine their roles in regards to the application and use of the CCSS with their students. SLPs working in public schools across the United States are not exempt from participating in the reflective process of figuring out how to incorporate the CCSS with students on their caseloads. SLPs have a direct role in implementing the CCSS with students who have communication disorders and may struggle with language and literacy as well as in supporting classroom teachers (ASHA, 2010).

Broadly speaking, the specific content of the standards at each grade level was

informed by the highest and most effective standards from both individual states in the United States and nations around the world (Roberts, 2012). According to Roberts (2012), the CCSS were created to intentionally motivate students to apply knowledge, use higher order thinking skills, and master complex content. The present school culture increasingly values acquisition of the CCSS (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012).

Role of the SLP

The role of the SLP is to enable the academic success of students with speech-language impairments using the standards and general curriculum that are well established (Haskill, 2004; Power-deFur, 2010; Wallach, 2002). The ASHA suggested and IDEA mandated that school-based speech and language services be relevant to the curriculum and underlying standards (Staskowski, 2012). SLPs are uniquely prepared to provide therapy-based services to address the specific CCSS for ELA across all grade levels. SLPs evaluate current levels of performance for students on their caseloads and then compare their abilities to those of general education peers. SLPs develop language-therapy goals and provides specialized instruction designed to treat the underlying language problems that are preventing students on their caseloads from achieving grade-level ELA standards. The goal of the specially designed instruction is to accelerate progress and close the gap between the current level of performance and grade-level standards (Rudebusch, 2012).

The implementation of the CCSS provides ripe opportunity for increased involvement and collaboration of SLPs in schools (Staskowski, 2012). SLPs are equipped with the knowledge and training to assist classroom teachers in their efforts to address the language needs of special education students participating in general education

classrooms. According to Zygouris-Coe and Goodwiler (2013), SLPs offer a potential alleviation of teachers' wariness of the increased language and literacy demands of the CCSS. SLPs' roles and responsibilities include supporting their colleagues by offering continuing education and assistance in curriculum development and topics related to language and literacy (ASHA, 2010). SLPs should develop an understanding of how the CCSS for ELA relate to what is expected of students who present with diverse abilities and needs. Connecting speech-language services with the CCSS for ELA will require knowledge of the effect a student's communication disorder has on his or her functioning in the classroom (ASHA, 2010). According to Zygouris-Coe and Goodwiler, the CCSS support the need for SLPs to revisit, reflect upon, and reframe their role. SLPs need to educate school administrators and other educators about SLPs' language and literacy knowledge and skills and how SLPs can support student and teacher needs (Zygouris-Coe & Goodwiler, 2013). The task of assessing and assisting students with language-learning disabilities access the CCSS for ELA is compatible with major roles for school SLPs (ASHA, 2010; Robinson, 2012). As SLPs tie their services to the CCSS and demonstrate to the school community their part in supporting students' acquisition of those standards, SLPs increase their value to the community (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012).

According to Dunkle and Flynn (2012), the CCSS can help SLPs become more welcomed into the classroom environment. As SLPs align their services to the educational standards, teachers and administrators may welcome their expertise as partners in providing curriculum-based inclusive services where only pullout services were once valued (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012). Dunkle and Flynn discussed how teachers may seek or become more willing to accept the collaboration of SLPs. Throughout this

collaborative effort, the SLP in turn may be able to decrease the number of isolated pullout sessions in the restrictive environment of the therapy room (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012).

The CCSS and ELA

Murza et al. (2014) discussed the emphasis on language and critical thinking skills throughout the CCSS for ELA, literacy, and mathematics. SLPs working in public schools should be starting to examine possible ways to align their therapy goals to grade-level core standards. The ELA CCSS are a logical starting point for SLPs to align their therapy goals because they include reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language, all of which require critical communications skills for attainment (Blosser, 2012; Nippold, 2014). Important aspects of the ELA standards include the emphasis on informational text, complex text, advanced writing, and communication (Staskowski, 2012). According to Staskowski (2012), the CCSS raise the expectations for the use of formal language and communication as well as stress the importance of general academic and domain-specific vocabulary.

The CCSS for ELA outline the grade-level expectations for K-12 students in the essential areas of literacy: reading, writing, speaking, and listening (CCSS Initiative, 2010). The CCSS language standards propose that language should not be taught in isolation, but instead should be developed and incorporated across the day so that student conversations, vocabulary strategies, and other techniques become a seamless part of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in the classroom (Zygouris-Coe & Goodwiler, 2013). Aligning language-based therapy goals with ELA grade-level core standards is a logical starting point for SLPs who are beginning to incorporate the CCSS into their

therapy practices for students on their caseloads (Nippold, 2014; Roberts, 2012).

According to ASHA (1993), a student with a language disorder presents with impaired comprehension or use of spoken, written, or other symbol systems. In order to meet the grade-level language standards outlined in the CCSS, students must be able to read and comprehend grade-level text (Nippold, 2014). The ELA standards set high expectations for students' interaction with informational text (Roberts, 2012). The CCSS represent a considerable increase in the demands of language knowledge and use (Roberts, 2012).

Language skills are at the center of the CCSS, including narratives, comprehension, phonological awareness, conversation and discourse, grammar, sentence structure, and vocabulary (Lozo, 2012). The ELA grade-level standards are the ideal starting points to align language-therapy goals and objectives (Blosser, 2012; Lozo, 2012; Nippold, 2014; Roberts, 2012). According to Lozo (2012), ELA standards are organized into strands: language, listening and speaking, reading, literacy, and writing. Oral language is the foundation for the development of reading and writing skills (Lozo, 2012). The ELA standards provide a clear set of shared goals and expectations for what knowledge and skills will help students succeed (Lozo, 2012). For kindergarten through fifth grade, the standards are presented in two broad categories, (a) anchor standards and (b) range, quality, and complexity, as well as five specific categories: Reading Literature, Reading Informational Text, Foundational Skills, Writing, and Speaking and Listening (Roberts, 2012).

Anchor standards are skills that high school graduates should have in order to be ready for entry into the world of work or postsecondary education (Dunkle & Flynn,

2012). Throughout the CCSS for K-12, anchor standards are explained by specific grade level. According to Boyd-Bastone (2015), *range* is a term used to describe the types of texts, topics, time periods, cultures, and genres corresponding to specific grade-level reading material. In regards to the CCSS, *quality* is the term used to describe literary selections as being current, valid, reliable, and comprehensive reference materials (Boyd-Bastone, 2015). *Text complexity* is a term associated with the CCSS used to describe the inherent difficulty of reading and comprehending a text (Boyd-Bastone, 2015).

The reading category of the CCSS specifically targets a student's ability to apply grade-level phonics and word-analysis skills in decoding words (CCSS Initiative, 2015). According to the CCSS Initiative (2015), the reading category addresses the need for students to use context to confirm or self-correct word recognition and understanding, rereading as necessary. The Reading Literature and Reading Informational Texts categories address the need for students to interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining literal and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone (CCSS Initiative, 2015). The Writing category addresses the student's need to use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to convey experiences and events (CCSS Initiative, 2015). The Speaking and Listening category addresses a student's need to adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate (CCSS Initiative, 2015). The Language category addresses the need for students to apply knowledge or language functions in different contexts and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening (CCSS Initiative, 2015). The Language category also addresses the need for students to acquire and use accurately a

range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college- and career-readiness level (CCSS Initiative, 2015).

According to Lozo (2012), language and literacy skills have a reciprocal relationship, with oral language development occurring first and literacy development not far behind. Throughout the CCSS for ELA for each grade level, language and critical thinking skills are emphasized (Murza et al., 2014). SLPs have unique skills that contribute to the development of language and literacy skills that help students meet the standards (Lozo, 2012). Important aspects of the ELA standards include the emphasis on informational text, complex text, advanced writing, and communication (Staskowski, 2012). According to Staskowski (2012), the CCSS raise the expectations for the use of formal language and communication as well as stress the importance of general academic and domain-specific vocabulary.

The standards are complex texts and need to be read carefully and analyzed. Standards usually have three components: (a) content, what students must know; (b) process, what students should be able to do; and (c) performance, how well the students must demonstrate the ability (Lozo, 2012; Wiggins, 2011). The standards also include college and career-readiness anchor standards, which progress throughout elementary, middle, and high school levels (Lozo, 2012). According to Lozo (2012), the Language standards address conventions of Standard English, knowledge of language, and vocabulary acquisition and use; the standards include language skills such as syntax, grammar, sentence structure, and conversation. The Listening and Speaking standards address comprehension and collaboration; presentation of knowledge and ideas; and

language skills such as discourse, pragmatics, describing, retelling, summarizing, presenting, speaking, and examining the point of view (Lozo, 2012). The Reading standards address key ideas and details; integration of knowledge and ideas; foundational reading skills; range of reading and text complexity; and language skills such as comprehension, narratives, questioning, summarizing, analyzing, inferencing, and determining theme or central idea (Lozo, 2012). According to Lozo, the reading Foundational Skills stretch across grade levels, with print concepts and phonological awareness focused on in kindergarten and Grade 1 and phonics, word recognition, and fluency focused on in kindergarten through Grade 5. Separate standards exist for Reading Literature and Reading Informational Text for Grades 6–12.

The standards are complex and need to be unwrapped or broken down into more discrete language skills (Lozo, 2012). Both Blosser (2012) and Lozo (2012) discussed how SLPs can translate ELA standards into goals and objectives for students with deficit skills. According to Lozo, SLPs can use the CCSS to guide their curriculum-based therapy. If a student is in the fifth grade but functioning closer to the second-grade standard, the SLP can look back at earlier grade-level expectations and analyze the skills needed for the student to progress towards the grade-level standard (Lozo, 2012). Lozo discussed how knowing the standards for the levels of students on their caseload can help SLPs to prioritize which are the most important for therapy to focus on. With the strong language base of the CCSS, SLPs now may have more opportunities to collaborate with teachers and others on developing these skills (Lozo, 2012).

IEPs and the CCSS

The requirement in federal law to provide students with disabilities access to the

general education curriculum was first adopted in 1997 (Ahearn, 2006). According to Ahearn (2006), the IDEA Amendments of 1997 added requirements related to access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities. Ahearn discussed how the IEP statement of goals must be related to how the child's disability affects the child's involvement and progress in the general curriculum. Ahearn identified how the IEP must contain a statement of the program modifications or supports for school personnel that will be provided for the students with disabilities. According to Ahearn, IDEA of 2004 updated the research from the previous 20–30 years and expanded the term *access* to the general education curriculum by adding “in the regular classroom” (p. 2). The purpose of the amendments and changes to IDEA was to allow students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum. Access to general education is provided for students (a) to meet developmental goals, to the maximum extent possible, and (b) to be prepared to lead productive and independent adult lives, to the maximum extent possible (Ayres, Lowrey, Douglas, & Sievers, 2011). According to Ayres et al. (2011), IDEA requires that educational targets be based on what students can currently do, both academically and functionally.

Significant support for a relationship between IEPs and state standards arrived with the implementation of NCLB, which tied the assessment of students with disabilities to state accountability systems (Ahearn, 2006). Following the passage of the NCLB, state education agencies began to interpret and react to stipulations that all students (including those with severe cognitive disabilities) should have an educational program or IEP tied to grade-level standards (Kohl, McLaughlin, & Nagle, 2006). According to Ayres et al. (2011), NCLB requires that students with severe cognitive disabilities be part of the

systemic accountability measures of NCLB as well as involving them in the general education curriculum.

Prior to 1975, children with disabilities were either barred from attending their local public schools, minimally accommodated in special classes, or living in institutions (Ahearn, 2006). According to Ahearn (2006), it is commonly observed that the federal Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 that established the guarantee of a free, appropriate public education for students with disabilities focused almost exclusively on providing access to the public schools for this population.

In the initial implementation of the special education law, IEPs stressed a developmental approach that focused on attaining skills related to readiness, and little attention was paid to chronological age in designing educational programs, especially for children with more severe disabilities (Ahearn, 2006). Gradually, attempts to include students with all types of disabilities in general education classrooms drew attention to approaches for including them in the academic curriculum of the classroom (Ahearn, 2006).

The most basic and fundamental purpose of the IEP is to identify and describe the child's unique educational needs in the form of the present levels of performance, to determine what services are needed to address those needs, and to establish reasonable goals the student will be able to accomplish if the services are appropriate (Rudebusch, 2012). The CCSS now drive the general education curriculum in public schools across the United States (Blosser et al., 2012; Ehren et al., 2012; Rudebusch, 2012). As a result of this educational shift, many states and local school districts are now embracing the development and use of standards-based IEPs in order to align special education and

speech-language therapy goals to grade-level core standards (Blosser et al., 2012; Ehren et al., 2012; Rudebusch, 2012).

Students with disabilities are required by IDEA to have an IEP (Rudebusch, 2012). Before the CCSS were implemented in schools across the United States, a student's IEP was developed by highlighting the academic skills the student already had achieved (Blosser et al., 2012; Rudebusch, 2012). According to Rudebusch (2012), before the practice of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS, diagnostic tests were used to develop goals and objectives to address academic weaknesses. According to Ahearn (2006), IEP goals are the plan for bridging the gap between where the student is and where the student needs to be in relation to the state or district content standards. The CCSS are now changing the traditional process in which a student IEP is developed (Blosser et al., 2012; Rudebusch, 2012). With the CCSS driving the general education curriculum, IEPs are now required to outline measurable, standards-based educational goals that appropriately reflect the student's skill level and academic capabilities (CCSS Initiative, 2013).

Difference Between IEPs and Standards-Based IEPs

According to Ahearn (2006), involving state content standards in the development of IEPs for students with disabilities is a practice referred to as standards-based IEPs development. Traditionally, IEPs have focused on a student acquiring basic academic, access, and functional skills and have had little relationship to a specific academic area or grade-level expectations (Virginia Department of Education, 2011). Using the CCSS as the framework for an IEP is a vastly different approach from what traditionally has been followed in special education (Ahearn, 2006). The shift towards CCSS has changed the

traditional development of an IEP. According to the Virginia Department of Education (2011), the process used to develop a standards-based IEP is directly tied to the state's content standards. Both the student's present level of performance and some of the annual IEP goals are aligned with and based on the state's grade-level standards, which creates a program that is aimed at getting the student to proficient level on the state standards (Virginia Department of Education, 2011).

The CCSS for ELA can support SLPs as they write educationally relevant IEPs by their explicit definition of educationally relevant speech and language skills (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012). Dunkle and Flynn (2012) discussed how IEPs can be written to focus on the underlying speech and language skills that lead to competent, globally competitive learners as defined by the standards. In order to construct standards-based IEP goals, the SLP needs to consult the CCSS for ELA and communicate with the classroom teacher about what skills are currently being targeted to tailor intervention to the specific content being taught (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012).

Development of Standards-Based IEPs

According to Rudebusch (2012), many states and local school districts are embracing a standards-based approach to IEP development so that the content of the IEP is linked to academic grade-level standards for students. When developing a standards-based IEP, the discussion of current student levels starts with a dialog centered on the state standards the student already has achieved (Blosser et al., 2012; Rudebusch, 2012). The conversation then shifts towards identifying the knowledge and skills the student needs to achieve in order to meet the academic standards outlined for his or her specific grade level (Rudebusch, 2012). According to Rudebusch, standards-based IEPs allow

educators to shift from low expectations to high expectations for students with disabilities by clarifying the learning outcomes that can be measured. For students with language needs, a standards-based IEP could be used to effectively support the grade-level curriculum. Standards-based IEPs can be used to help identify where educators want the student to be academically, where the student is relative to grade-level standards, and the plan for how to support accelerating learning to move the student from where he or she is to where he or she needs to be (Rudebusch, 2012). If SLPs can incorporate CCSS into their IEP goal writing, they then can tie the individual needs of their students to the state standards in a way so that students can access and achieve success in general education curricula. Standards-based IEPs should not be viewed as a new curriculum for students with language and learning disabilities but rather as an effective tool SLPs can use to help support the curriculum (Rudebusch, 2012). The development of a standards-based IEP allows for goals and objectives to be aligned with state grade-level academic standards. Seven steps are involved in developing standards-based IEPs as proposed by the Project Forum or the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (2007).

1. In order to develop a standards-based IEP, SLPs should review both the content standards for the student's current grade level as well the standards for the prior grade level in order to identify any standards the student might not have mastered and for which he or she will need continued intervention (Flynn & Power-deFur, 2012).

2. The next step the SLP should take when developing a standards-based IEP involves closely examining classroom and student data to determine where the student is functioning in relation to grade-level standards (Rudebusch, 2012). A student profile should be developed by the SLP that includes work samples, grades, and a copy of the

student's IEP.

3. After the SLP has examined the data, the next step towards developing a standards-based IEP is to determine the student's present performance level. The SLP should determine where the student is currently performing in relation to the grade-level standards. The SLP should focus on student data from interventions, classroom work samples, classroom observations, and teacher and clinician probes to determine how the student's performance compares to standards for the grade (Flynn & Power-deFur, 2012). The descriptions of strengths and needs should be based on evidence; how the disability or skill deficits affect involvement in the general education curriculum; multiple current forms of assessment data; the status of prior IEP goals; and input from teachers, parents, and the student (Rudebusch, 2012). Clearly stated present levels of student performance are important to the creation process of standards-based IEPs because they are the foundation for the development of the other components.

4. The next step in creating a standards-based IEP involves developing measurable goals. According to Flynn and Power-deFur (2012), the SLP should develop annual goals that relate to the communication skills needed for success on the standards. Instructional goals and strategies need to be individually adjusted based on the academic, social, behavioral, and communication skills exhibited by each student (Blosser et al., 2012). According to Rudebusch (2012), the SLP should analyze the student's needs as identified in the present levels of performance and ask questions such as the following: Does the goal have a specific timeline? What can the student reasonably be expected to accomplish in one school year? Are the conditions for meeting the goal addressed? How will the outcome of the goal be measured?

5. After the student's needs have been identified, the next step involved in developing a standards-based IEP involves assessing and reporting the student's progress throughout the academic school year. A student's IEP will include a section that describes when progress reports will be shared with parents and other members of the education team.

6. Once progress recording has been addressed, the next step involves integrating specifically designed instruction with the student's grade-level academic curriculum (Blosser et al., 2012; Flynn & Power de-Fur, 2012). According to Blosser et al. (2012), the amount and type of services, as well as the location and provider of those services, should be matched to each student's ability and disability. The goal of the specially designed instruction is to accelerate progress and close the gap between the current level of performance and grade-level standards (Rudebusch, 2012). According to Flynn and Power-deFur (2012), successful intervention will involve collaboration between the SLP and the classroom teachers, with some language-therapy sessions provided in an integrated fashion within the classroom and others in a pullout setting to teach specific skills.

7. The final step involved in developing standards-based IEPs is to determine the most appropriate assessment option. According to Rudebusch (2012), in order to determine the most appropriate assessment option, the SLP should ask questions such as the following: Has the student received standards-based, grade-level instruction? Was the instruction evidence based? What was the student's instructional level, and how different is that level from typical peers? Can the student make progress on grade-level standards in the same timeframe as other students? Can the student demonstrate what he or she

knows on the assessment option under consideration?

Aligning SLP Goals to CCSS

The process of aligning the educationally relevant services that SLPs provide to students across grade levels and across content areas is a timely concept (Flynn & Power-deFur, 2014). According to Flynn and Power-deFur (2014), the opportunity to connect to the CCSS begins with assessments that test the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing that students will be accountable for on high-stakes testing. SLPs will need to determine how best to address the specific language deficits their students present with by aligning language-therapy goals with appropriate grade-level ELA standards. Zygouris-Coe and Goodwiler (2013) noted that the CCSS language standards should not be taught in isolation, but rather developed and incorporated across the day so that conventions, vocabulary strategies, and other techniques become a seamless part of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in the classroom.

In order to align the CCSS with language-therapy goals, SLPs need to obtain a summary of the progression of expectations for the content areas from grade to grade and then determine the communications skills required to meet those expectations (ASHA, 2010). Once an SLP has reviewed the ELA grade-level standards, the SLP should compare them to the current language abilities of students on the SLP's caseload (Blosser et al., 2012). After an SLP has identified the language skill deficits that students present with, the process of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS begins. Justice (2013) emphasized that therapeutic goals should not be the standards verbatim. SLPs are uniquely prepared to intervene with students who lack the language foundations necessary to succeed with these rigorous standards and match (or align) intervention

targets to specifically address the knowledge, skills, and strategies with the ELA standards (Justice, 2013).

By aligning therapy-intervention goals to CCSS, SLPs are working to ensure that students on their caseloads have access to the general education curriculum, are held to appropriately high academic standards, and receive support to help them achieve their highest potential and independence (Blosser et al., 2012). According to Henneberry, Kelso, and Soto (2012), developing standards-based intervention goals with the current emphasis on achievement in academic subjects requires the educational team, including the SLP, to engage in a process of comparing the demands of the general education activities with the abilities and the needs of the student. The integration of the CCSS enables SLPs to align their programs and intervention goals with educational expectations and to identify and measure a student's functional communication in the context of the curriculum standards (Blosser, 2012). Standards-based IEPs that are clearly stated, tied to grade-level standards, and yet customized to meet individual needs based on the student's disability blend the best of special education and standards-based education (Rudebusch, 2012).

When developing standards-based IEP goals, SLPs should not take speech-language goals directly from the CCSS, especially those specified for the grade level at which the student is currently performing (Justice, 2013). According to Justice (2013), SLPs cannot use grade-level core standards as their IEP language goals because the use of grade-level core standards as IEP goals implies that the student does not require special education. The CCSS are grade-level standards that are applied to general education students. General education students are expected to meet grade-level

standards by the conclusion of their academic year. Students with language and learning disabilities are not expected to achieve grade-level core standards without specialized instruction and support. Justice discusses how SLPs need to develop standards-based goals that address the underlying deficit that prevents students on their caseloads from effectively meeting grade-level core standards.

Difficulties Associated With Goal Alignment

According to Bulgren et al. (2013), the focus on higher order reasoning skills is at the core of the CCSS and long has been recognized as a challenge for students with learning difficulties. According to Bulgren et al., in earlier grades, students with learning disabilities may not have mastered low-level skills, which contributes to later problems in higher order processing. According to Swanson (2001), one of the most important aspects of cognitive development during adolescence is problem solving, which requires increased efficiency in specific information-processing skills, cognitive learning strategies, and metacognitive skills. Students with language and learning difficulties may be experiencing problems accessing grade-level curricula due to a combination of higher order demands and a lack of necessary skills to support higher level thinking (Bulgren et al., 2013; Swanson & Deshler, 2003). Due to the higher order demands and the lack of necessary skills to support higher level thinking, it is often a struggle to prepare adolescents to respond to curriculum challenges at the middle school and high school levels (Swanson & Deshler, 2003). Closing the educational gap between what students can do and what they are expected to do can become more difficult as the student ages (Deshler et al., 2001).

According to Deshler et al. (2001), the performance gap is the gap between what

students are expected to do and what they can do. Over time, this gap grows larger and larger and is especially exacerbated in the later grades when the academic growth of students with learning difficulties plateaus (Warner, Schumaker, Alley, & Deshler, 1980). As a result of the performance gap, students with language and learning difficulties are having problems meeting the demands of required courses in content areas in middle and high school. According to Deshler et al., many educators struggle to prepare students with learning disabilities to successfully respond to heavy curriculum demands at the middle and high school levels. Students with language-based learning difficulties enrolled in the middle school setting are at risk for achieving lower grade-point averages as well as higher course-failure rates when they are compared to their general education peers (Deshler et al., 2001). As students with educational disabilities advance in grade levels, it can become more difficult to align language-intervention goals to grade-level core standards because of a combination of higher order demands across content areas and a lack of necessary skills to support higher level thinking (Swanson & Deshler, 2003). The educational gap for students with language-based learning difficulties widens at the middle and high school levels (Swanson & Deshler, 2003). For students with language-based learning difficulties, the CCSS may be highlighting a performance gap because of a potential lack of lower level language skills required to meet grade-level core standards.

Grade-level core standards that do not include lower level skills are based on the assumption that the students either already know how to demonstrate these skills or that these skills are easily learned and therefore do not need to be included within the context of achieving higher level skills (Best & Cohen, 2013). Best and Cohen (2013) discussed

how a student's academic grade-level core standards are based on the assumption that the student is in possession of the lower grade-level skill sets required to achieve higher level skills by the end of the academic year. However, many students with language-based learning difficulties participating in general education classrooms may not have mastered previous grade-level core standards. According to the Response to Intervention Action Network (2013), because higher level goals can never be achieved unless the student acquires the basics first, a disconnect will remain between what is expected of students and what may be practical and achievable.

According to Roberts (2012), beginning in the primary grades, the standards set high expectations for students' interaction with informational text, many of which are significantly more linguistically demanding than the standards that they replace. The bar for educational achievement continues to rise in core content areas, and significant pressure is felt by students diagnosed with having language-based learning disabilities (Bulgren et al., 2013). Simply setting higher standards does not ensure that students with language-based learning disabilities, or other struggling learners, will meet them (Murza et al., 2014).

Conflicting Views Regarding the Use of Standards-Based IEP

There are barriers to the use of standards-based IEPs for students with language and learning disabilities. Some educational professionals reject the use of the standards-based IEPs because they feel that it violates the individuality that IDEA requires for each IEP (Ahearn, 2006). Other professionals feel that strategies that have been successful for students with disabilities in the past will be lost if grade-level academic standards become the focus of the IEP (Ahearn, 2006). Several conflicting views remain regarding the

development and use of standards-based IEP in the field of education (Ahearn, 2006; Blosser, 2012). Many educators argue that holding students with language and learning disabilities to the same academic standards as general education students is unrealistic and unfair (Bulgren et al., 2013). Students with language disabilities qualify for an IEP. The IEP is designed to help students with educational disabilities access the general education curriculum. Bulgren et al. (2013) noted that students with educational learning disabilities have difficulties with tasks that require higher order processing, organizing information, making inferences, and understanding relationships. According to Ayres et al. (2011), the desired outcome of independence and transition to adult life can be best assured by focusing on teaching functional skills that are personally relevant, and time should not be wasted on teaching academic skills that are too far out of reach for some students. Developing an IEP in which every goal aligns to a state standard either will overlook some important life skill needs the student has or will result in some impractical alignment (Courtade, Spooner, Browder, & Jimenez, 2011).

Standards-Based IEPs and Functional Life Skills

For some students who are working to achieve independence, standards-based IEPs may not be appropriate, due to the need for specific instruction that focuses on the learning of functional skills (Ayres et al., 2011). For students with special needs, IEPs also include critical life skills such as self-efficacy, critical thinking, and social and emotional skills that are not addressed by the CCSS (CCSS Initiative, 2013). Thus, it can prove to be difficult to construct standards-based IEPs that focus on academic goals aligned with the CCSS for students who require critical life skills (Ayres et al., 2011; Courtade et al., 2012; Fisher & Frey, 2001; Samuels, 2013). According to Samuels

(2013), teachers working with students who have special needs reported that often the academic goals outlined by the CCSS cannot be adequately or appropriately incorporated into an IEP.

There continues to be much debate regarding the development of standards-based IEPs for students with severe disabilities (Ayres et al., 2011). According to Courtade et al. (2012), *severe disabilities* is a term used to refer to students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities who also may have physical disabilities, sensory disabilities, or autism. Even though the appropriateness of standards-based IEPs continues to be debated, the role of the SLP working with students with severe disabilities is clear. The role of the SLP is critical in supporting the student's access to the general curriculum (Henneberry et al., 2012). According to Henneberry et al. (2012), most classroom activities require a wide range of communication and language skills as well as understanding the teacher's explanations, descriptions, and instructions, in both spoken and written modalities. Even though there are concerns associated with the development and use of standards-based IEPs, many educators have worked to identify the potential benefits of this new IEP development approach (Blosser et al., 2012; Courtade et al., 2012; Henneberry et al., 2012; Murza et al., 2014).

CCSS Instruction for Students With Severe Disabilities

Currently, a focus on functional curriculum for students with severe disabilities is being reexamined and to a large extent altered, if not abandoned, in favor a more general education or standards-based curriculum (Ayres et al., 2011). According to Ayres et al. (2011), standards-based curriculum has an outcome of grade-level achievement that may or may not lead to more independent functioning. Ayres et al. identified that students

with severe disabilities can learn objectives related to grade-level standards but discussed the cost associated with a standards-focused education. Ayres et al. posed the following questions in regards to following a standards-focused education for students with severe disabilities: “Will these skills help the students get a job? Will these skills help students actively participate in their community?” (p. 11).

According to Ayres et al. (2011), all educators should have high expectations for their students and seek to challenge their students at appropriate levels, but learning fragments of higher level academic skills should not be achieved at the cost of learning how to function independently in society. Federal legislation has increasingly mandated that students with disabilities have access to the general education curriculum (Henneberry et al., 2012). Henneberry et al. (2012) discussed how the general education curriculum should be the primary content and context of the education and therapeutic intervention for students. According to Ayres et al., it is important to examine at what point working toward fragmented, watered-down academic standards becomes less important than working toward meaningful individualized curricula directly tied to increasing independence in identified and future environments. Ayers et al. discussed how functional skills are not identified as priority skills under NCLB and therefore potentially may be moved to lower instructional priority. Ayres et al. acknowledged that students with severe disabilities can learn some grade-level standards in the general education curriculum but expressed concerns as to whether or not the learning of grade-level standards increased independence in the postschool environment. Ayres et al. argued that a special education that abandons an individualized curriculum and moves toward a single curriculum (i.e., grade-level competencies), which then may be watered

down to mere fragmented splinter skills, neglects a student's right to an appropriate education.

Courtade et al. (2012) proposed that a standards-based curriculum provides students with severe disabilities a full educational opportunity and need not preclude instruction that is personally relevant. The fact that a standards-based education is not embraced by all teachers and parents is true for not only students with severe disabilities but also all students in the overall standards-based reform in today's schools (Courtade et al., 2012). Courtade et al. (2012) discussed how a standards-based curriculum is relevant to students with severe disabilities. The purpose of state standards for all students is to prepare them to be functioning as adults in the community, as well as preparing some to pursue college (Courtade et al., 2012). Courtade et al. identified how increased academic competence adds to the options students with severe disabilities will have as adults for jobs, leisure activities, and overall independence. The CCSS address the needs of students with disabilities. The CCSS provide an opportunity to improve access to rigorous academic content for students with disabilities with the outcome of preparedness for success in their postschool lives, including college or careers (Courtade et al., 2012). Courtade et al. noted the potential students have to learn more complex academic content and how they may use it in their lives is currently unknown. According to Courtade et al., students with moderate intellectual disabilities can learn to read, and students with severe intellectual disabilities can acquire early literacy skills, define content vocabulary, and comprehend adapted grade-level passages. Courtade et al. discussed how functional skills are not a prerequisite to academic learning and how students can learn academic content when functional skills have not yet been mastered. A standards-based curriculum

education is not a replacement for functional curriculum (Courtade et al., 2012).

Research Questions

This study was guided by five research questions:

1. To what extent has the information regarding the CCSS and the practice of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA been effectively disseminated to SLPs working in public schools with students enrolled in kindergarten through Grade 8 (K-8)?

2. To what extent do SLPs view the alignment of language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA as a relative advantage that will improve a student's learning?

3. To what extent do SLPs feel prepared to develop standards-based IEPs that align intervention goals with the CCSS for ELA?

4. What is the extent to which SLPs have adopted the practice of developing standards-based IEPs that align language goals with the CCSS for ELA for students on their caseloads?

5. What are the challenges SLPs face when developing standards-based IEP language goals that align with the CCSS for ELA?

6. How complex is it for SLPs working with students across K-8 to align language-therapy goals with the CCSS for ELA?

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study was designed to gather information regarding the practice of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA. A review of the available literature indicated a lack of research examining the practice of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA. Aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA could allow SLPs the opportunity to integrate the academic curriculum with language-therapy goals for students on their caseloads. According to Dunkle and Flynn (2012), the usage of CCSS by SLPs in clinical practice needs to be determined and examined.

SLPs must be familiar with the grade-level core standards and be able to effectively incorporate them into their goals so that relevant language goals are aligned with the core curriculum. Language-therapy goals should not be taken directly from the CCSS but rather aligned with them. This study was designed to collect information regarding the instructional practices and feasibility of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA.

Participants

The target population for this study was SLPs with a Certificate of Clinical Competence and working in public schools with K-8 students. For the purpose of this study, SLP members of the ASHA Special Interest Group (SIG) 16, School-Based Issues, and SLP members of the New York State Speech-Language-Hearing Association (NYSSLHA) were invited to participate. SIG 16 SLP members were chosen specifically for their interests in exploring educational issues that affect both SLPs and students in the school setting. NYSSLHA SLP members who were working full or part time in the school setting also were asked to participate in this study. SIG 16 and NYSSLHA were

chosen not only for their members' interests in school-based issues, but also for their large memberships. NYSSLHA had 16,935 members at the time of this study. SIG 16 had 6,199 affiliates. Currently, 97.5% of SIG 16 members are female and 2.5% are male (ASHA, 2015b). In regards to race and ethnicity, 3.3% of SIG 16 members have self-identified as Hispanic or Latino, and 96.7% self-identified as being not Hispanic or Latino. In regards to race, 93% of SIG 16 members identified as White, 3.6% as Black, 1.6% as Asian, 1.3% as multiracial, 0.3% as American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.02% as Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (ASHA, 2015b). Both NYSSLHA and SIG 16 were chosen to help ensure an adequate number of potential participants for this study.

Members of ASHA SIG 16 and NYSSLHA who were SLPs with their Certificate of Clinical Competence and at least 1 year of experience working in the public school system with K-8 students were invited to complete an electronic survey. Members of both NYSSLHA and SIG 16 were invited to participate in this study through a message posted to their respective websites. SLP members of NYSSLHA and SIG 16 who were employed full or part time in a public school setting were asked to complete the online survey. Members of SIG 16 and NYSSLHA who were audiologists were excluded from this study. Retired members of NYSSLHA and SIG 16 as well as members who did not work with students in the public school system were excluded from this study. Participation in this study was voluntary, and no compensation was offered. Participants who were included in this study were SLP members of SIG 16 or NYSSLHA holding a master's degree or higher.

Instruments

The primary objectives of the study were to explore, from a quantitative perspective, if SLPs working in public schools were aligning their language-intervention goals to the CCSS for ELA and to examine the resulting difficulties associated by this goal alignment by specific grade level. An online survey research method was chosen. The Common Core Feedback Tool for Educators is an implementation survey developed through the collaborative efforts of the U.S. Education Delivery Institute, Achieve, and Education First. The Common Core Feedback Tool for Educators was developed to support states in their CCSS implementation (U.S. Educational Delivery Institute, 2015). According to the U.S. Educational Delivery Institute (2015), the tool was designed to help ensure that the implementation of the CCSS in every state, district, and classroom is as effective as possible. The purpose of administering the Common Core Feedback Tool for Educators is to support CCSS implementation efforts by giving state education leaders a voluntary means to gather rapid, real-time feedback on the quality of implementation of the CCSS (U.S. Educational Delivery Institute, 2015). This survey was designed for voluntary use by state agencies in order to gather information relative to CCSS implementation. According to the U.S. Educational Delivery Institute, the Common Core Survey Tool for Educators was designed to be used by state education agencies, but education leaders interested in gathering feedback in the field are able to adapt and use the survey to gather information at the district level. Many of the questions on the Common Core Feedback Tool for Educators are applicable to leaders at the district and school levels who may wish to obtain feedback on their own CCSS implementation efforts (U.S. Educational Delivery Institute, 2015). The Common Core Feedback Tool

has not been used in any formal studies. According to the U.S. Educational Delivery Institute, state education agencies have used questions from the Common Core Feedback Tool question bank in their own individually generated questionnaires to gather feedback from the education field.

Included in the Common Core Feedback Tool is a variety of question types, with different implications designed to elicit information regarding the implementation of the CCSS in schools. The U.S. Educational Delivery Institute (2015) discussed how the survey questions in the Common Core Feedback Tool for Educators were designed to accomplish the following objectives: (a) assess respondent's awareness and support of the CCSS, (b) gauge a respondent's understanding of the CCSS, (c) assess a respondent's satisfaction with the CCSS resources that have been provided, (d) identify effective communication and outreach for CCSS information and resources, (e) identify challenges to effective CCSS implementation, and (f) assess changes in classroom practice that result from CCSS implementation.

According to the U.S. Educational Delivery Institute (2015), the Common Core Feedback Tool is designed so that specific questions can be selected in order to match the exact needs of the researcher. The Common Core Feedback Tool for Educators is a template meant to be customized by the researcher (U.S. Educational Delivery Institute, 2015). Questions that are most likely to generate the required information should be chosen by the researcher. According to the U.S. Educational Delivery Institute, after specific survey questions are chosen, the researcher then can customize or remove language in order to gather the desired information. Associates at the U.S. Education Delivery Institute granted permission to customize and remove language from the

Common Core Feedback Tool for Educators. For the purpose of this research study, associates at the U.S. Education Delivery Institute permitted the following changes: (a) the title of both teacher and educator was changed to SLP, and (b) questions designed to collect information regarding the implementation of CCSS for all subjects were reworded so that specific information regarding the alignment of language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA could be obtained. The final survey tool is located in the Appendix.

For the purposes of this study, the survey questions yielding information regarding the instructional practices and feasibility of implementing CCSS in schools were selected. The chosen questions were then edited so that information regarding the instructional practices and feasibility of SLPs aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA were obtained. Twelve survey questions were designed to elicit information from SLPs regarding instructional practices of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA. Four survey questions were designed to elicit information regarding the feasibility of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA.

The Common Core Feedback Tool survey questions that focused on instructional practices and feasibility of aligning language-therapy goals to CCSS were made available to SLPs working in the school setting through a posting on the NYSSLHA and ASHA SIG 16 websites. In order to validate the constructed survey, a pilot group consisting of 10 SLPs who worked in the school setting took the survey. The pilot group members had at least 3 years experience working in the school setting as well as experience developing IEP goals. The pilot group was asked to review the survey questions and determine if the Likert-type statements addressed the instructional practices and feasibility associated with IEP language-goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA. The pilot group of SLPs was

then asked to offer feedback on the survey in written form regarding the readability and clarity of the survey questions. The pilot group of SLPs had similar characteristics as the SLPs in the target population of this study. The target characteristics that both the pilot group and the target population had in common were SLPs who had worked in the school setting for at least 1 year with K-8 students and with experience developing IEPs for language.

The self-completed survey (see Appendix) was designed to measure two constructs related to the practice of aligning CCSS for ELA with language-therapy goals for students with specific language impairments: instructional practices and feasibility. Questions in the Instructional Practices section inquired (a) if SLPs were using the CCSS to create standards-based goals while adhering to the IDEA (2004) requirement that allows students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum and (b) the extent to which SLPs were developing standards-based IEPs that align with ELA grade-level standards. At the beginning stage, the SLP would still be working through the challenges; at a more advanced level, the SLP would have expertise at aligning goals with the CCSS. Questions in the Feasibility section inquired (a) about the perceived challenges SLPs face when developing standards-based IEP goals to address the CCSS for ELA and (b) about the experiences, between grade levels, that SLPs encountered when aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA.

Identifying information of potential participants was not collected for the purposes of this study. Only the participant's affiliation to either ASHA SIG 16 or NYSLHA was recorded in order to differentiate survey results. Participants were assured confidentiality and anonymity.

Procedures

This research study was submitted to the Institutional Review Board for approval. The Institutional Review Board determined that this study met the criteria for Exempt Category 2: research that involved the use of survey procedures and obtained information from human subjects in such a way that did not pose a foreseeable risk to study participants. This study did not put participants at risk and was constructed in a way that could not be damaging to participants' financial standing or employability.

Potential study participants from ASHA SIG 16 were invited through a post to the discussion board on the SIG 16 discussion board. As per the guidelines for SIG 16, a link to a survey can be embedded in the posted message, or a poster can provide an e-mail address for contact (ASHA, 2015b). Researchers are not to include any information to the effect that the research project is under the sponsorship of the ASHA. Potential study participants from NYSSLHA were invited to participate in this study through an invitation posted to the members' Research Opportunities web page.

The invitation to participate in this study included information about the purpose of the study as well as information about the primary investigator. If those contacted decided to participate in the study, they were instructed to follow the link on the invitation page. The participants were then taken to the informed adult consent letter. After indicating that they consented to take the survey, the participants were then granted access to the survey. The survey was open for 3 weeks. A reminder was posted to the ASHA SIG 16 Discussion Board during the first 2 weeks of this survey. At the beginning of the 3rd week, a reminder was posted to the SIG 16 Discussion Board indicating that the study would be open for 7 more days. There were no time limitations on the taking of

the survey. Once potential participants completed the survey, the answers were stored on the SurveyMonkey website.

The secure website SurveyMonkey was used to distribute the survey instrument to the participants for this study. The survey took 10–15 minutes to complete. The website SurveyMonkey allowed for the collection and storage of the survey as well as the results. The use of SurveyMonkey allowed for information to be collected and analyzed in a secure and confidential manner. Only the researcher was able to view the results of this survey after the information had been collected. Survey answers were sent to a link at SurveyMonkey.com, where data were stored in a password-protected electronic format. Information that would make respondents personally identifiable was not included in the survey results. The data collection on SurveyMonkey was set to make responses anonymous, which excluded personally identifiable information from being collected. Identifying information such as participant names, e-mail addresses, or Internet protocol addresses was not collected.

Design

A quantitative, nonexperimental design methodology was used in this study. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the results of the Common Core Feedback Tool for SLPs. When applicable, a qualitative examination of written responses by participants was used. For the purpose of this study, a survey research design was chosen. The purpose of this study was to examine the practices associated with aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA. According to Creswell (2008), survey research designs are procedures in which investigators administer a survey to a sample or to the entire population of people to describe the attitudes, opinions,

behaviors, or characteristics of the population. A modified version of the Common Core Feedback Tool for Educators was used in this study. This feedback tool examined the instructional practices, as well as perceived feasibility, associated with aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA. An electronic questionnaire was utilized for this study. An electronic questionnaire is a survey instrument for collecting data that is available on the computer (Creswell, 2008). Participants in this study logged onto a computer, used the Internet to follow the link provided, completed the Common Core Feedback Tool for SLPs, and had their results stored on the established website SurveyMonkey.

Data Analysis

Statistical analysis of survey questions was conducted to (a) determine the participants' awareness and support of the CCSS, (b) gauge the participants' understanding of the CCSS, (c) assess participants' satisfaction with the CCSS, (d) identify challenges to effective CCSS implementation, and (e) determine if SLPs found the process for aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA feasible for elementary school students and difficult for students enrolled in middle school. Statistical analysis of survey questions was conducted to answer the research questions pertaining to SLPs working in public schools with K-8 students. Statistical analysis was used to help determine if there were any patterns or trends embedded in the responses of SLP participants to the survey questions presented in this study. Some survey items were yes-no items, some had multiple responses, some had Likert-type scales, and a few items were open ended. Survey items were aligned to the six research questions:

1. To what extent has information regarding the practice of aligning language-

therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA been effectively disseminated to SLPs working in public schools with students enrolled in K-8? Research Question 1 focused on examining if the first stage of the diffusion of innovations theory (dissemination) had occurred. Research Question 1 was answered by analyzing responses to Survey Items 6, 7, 8, 13, and 14 (see Appendix).

2. To what extent do SLPs view the alignment of language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA as a relative advantage that will improve a student's learning? Research Question 2 focused on examining the attitudes and beliefs associated with the relatively new practice of language goal alignment with the CCSS for ELA. Research Question 2 was answered by analyzing the responses to Survey Items 9, 10, 11, 12, and 16.

3. To what extent do SLP feel prepared to develop standards-based IEPs that align intervention goals with the CCSS for ELA? Feelings of preparedness as well as identification of factors that affect SLPs' feelings of preparedness were examined by analyzing responses to Survey Items 18 and 20.

4. What is the extent to which SLPs have adopted the practice of developing standards-based IEPs that align language goals with the CCSS for ELA for students on their caseloads? The fourth stage of the diffusion of innovations theory, implementation, was examined by analyzing the results to Survey Item 17.

5. What are the challenges SLPs face when developing standards-based IEP language goals that align with the CCSS for ELA? The fourth stage of the decision-making framework of the diffusion of innovations theory, maintenance, was examined by analyzing the answers to Survey Items 20 and 21.

6. How complex is it for SLPs working with students across K-8 to align

language-therapy goals with the CCSS for ELA? The fourth stage of the decision-making framework of the diffusion of innovations theory, maintenance, was examined by this research question. Research Question 6 was answered by analyzing responses to Survey Item 20.

Chapter 4: Results

This study examined the practice of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA. A quantitative, nonexperimental design methodology was used in this study. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the results of the Common Core Feedback Tool for SLPs (see Appendix). When applicable, a qualitative examination of written responses by participants was used.

Participants

The target population for this study was SLPs with a Certificate of Clinical Competence and at least a year of experience working in public schools with K-8 students. The researcher posted an invitation to participate in this study on the NYSSLHA website in the Research Opportunities section. The researcher also posted an invitation to participate in this study in the Discussion section of the ASHA SIG 16, School-Based Issues, website. At the time of the study, NYSSLHA had 16,935 members. ASHA SIG 16 had 6,199 affiliates. There were 206 total respondents to the invitation. Of the 206 respondents, 10 identified as not belonging to either NYSSLHA or ASHA SIG 16, and 1 identified as not being an SLP. Those 11 respondents did not fit the criteria for inclusion in this study, and their responses were not included in the data analysis.

Margin of error. A survey's margin of error is an indication of how well the sample population represents the larger population (Simon & Goes, 2013). Minimizing a survey's margin of error increases the sample's representativeness of the larger population. A low margin of error indicates that the results from a sample population would be similar to the results obtained if an entire population had been studied. A high margin of error indicates less confidence that the results obtained from a sample

population would be reflective of the entire population.

Of the 16,935 SLP members of NYSSLHA who were invited to participate in this study, 6 SLPs responded, and these members of NYSSLHA also identified as belonging to ASHA SIG 16. The margin of error for NYSSLHA participants in this study was 43% with a confidence interval of 95%. The high margin of error indicated less confidence that the results obtained from the sample population of SLP NYSSLHA members would be reflective of the entire population of SLP NYSSLHA members. Given how the low response rate from NYSSLHA members resulted in a high margin of error index and how the six NYSSLHA participants also identified as belonging to ASHA SIG 16, the researcher made the determination to identify ASHA SIG 16 as the only sample population for this study.

Of the 6,199 ASHA SIG members who were invited to participate in this survey study, 192 responded. Of the 192 participants, 175 participants completed the survey in its entirety by answering each survey question. With this level of participation from ASHA SIG 16 members, the margin of error for this study was 8% with a confidence interval of 95%. A margin error of $\pm 8\%$ is acceptable at the 95% confidence level. The results of this study could be considered to be reflective of the entire population of SLPs who are ASHA SIG 16 members.

In sum, the respondents ($N = 175$) to this survey identified as being SLPs with a Certificate of Clinical Competence working with public school K-8 students and belonging to ASHA SIG 16. The educational levels of the participants were not recorded. In order to participate in this study, participants were required to have their Certificate of Clinical Competence. In order to obtain a Certificate of Clinical Competence, participants

must have earned a master's degree in communication disorders sciences from an ASHA-accredited educational institution. Participants in this study were considered to have at least a master's degree.

Grade levels. The participants in this study were asked to indicate the grades in which they provided speech-language therapy support. Participants were able to select multiple grade levels. Table 1 shows the distribution, by grade level, of SLPs who participated in this study.

Table 1

Grade Level of Participants' Service

Grade level of service	<i>n</i>	%
Kindergarten	122	69.7
Grade 1	123	70.3
Grade 2	123	70.3
Grade 3	127	72.5
Grade 4	131	74.9
Grade 5	121	69.1
Grade 6	94	53.7
Grade 7	72	41.1
Grade 8	77	44.0

Note. *N* = 175. Participants could select multiple options.

The majority of participants indicated that they provided speech-language support to students in fourth grade (*n* = 131) and third grade (*n* = 127). The majority had provided service to students in kindergarten through Grade 5. The fewest number of SLPs (*n* = 72) indicated that they provided speech-language support to students in seventh grade.

Reported years of experience. Participants were asked to indicate years of experience working as an SLP in public schools. Results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Participants' Years of Experience Working as a Speech-Language Pathologist in Public Schools

Years of experience	<i>n</i>	%
1–5	21	12.0
5–10	22	12.6
10–15	33	18.9
15–20	40	22.9
20–25	18	10.3
25–30	11	6.3
30–35	18	10.3
35–40	11	6.3
40–45	1	0.6

Note. *N* = 175.

Many of the SLP participants (22.9%) indicated that they had 15–20 years of experience working as an SLP in public schools. Thirty-three participants (18.9%) indicated that they had 10–15 years of experience providing SLP services in public schools. Of the 175 participants, 41 indicated that they had over 25 years of experience. Based on responses, the average reported years of experience by SLPs fell between 15 and 20 years.

Survey Questions

Survey study questions were crafted to investigate the practice of aligning speech-language goals to the CCSS for ELA for K-8 students. This study utilized survey questions consisting of yes–no responses, “check all that apply,” and Likert-type items indicating level of agreement or rating. Question skip logic was used for some survey questions. Based on a participant’s response to a survey question, the question’s skip logic function would skip to the next survey question. When applied to a specific

question, the skip logic function automatically sent participants to another question based on the answer choice that was selected. Some survey questions allowed for open-ended responses.

Theoretical Framework

The data were analyzed following the key components of the decision-making framework in the diffusion of innovations theory. Dunkle and Flynn (2012) identified four key components within the decision-making framework of the diffusion of innovation theory: dissemination, adoption, implementation, and maintenance.

Statistical analysis of survey questions was conducted to (a) determine the participants' awareness and support of the CCSS, (b) gauge the participants' understanding of the CCSS, (c) assess participants' satisfaction with the CCSS, (d) identify challenges to effective CCSS implementation, and (e) determine if SLPs found the process for aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA feasible for elementary school students and difficult for students enrolled in middle school. Statistical analysis of survey questions was conducted to answer the research questions pertaining to SLPs working in public schools with K-8 students. Statistical analysis was used to determine any patterns or trends embedded in the responses of SLP participants to the survey questions presented in this study.

According to Rogers (1995), relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability are elements of a new or substitute clinical behavior. Rogers (1995) discussed how elements of a new or substitute clinical behavior can partly determine if adoption or diffusion of the new behavior will occur. Each component in the four stages of the diffusion of innovations model can be influenced by any of the five

elements of a new or substitute clinical behavior. For the purposes of this study, relative advantage and complexity are discussed as factors that could hinder or promote the practice of language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA. Attitudes regarding a new innovation can determine whether an organization will commit to adopting it (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012). The attitudes and beliefs of SLPs regarding the practice of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA were examined.

Research Question 1

To what extent has information regarding the practice of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA been effectively disseminated to SLPs working in public schools with students enrolled in K-8? Research Question 1 focused on examining if the first stage of the diffusion of innovations theory (dissemination) had occurred. Research Question 1 was answered by analyzing responses to Survey Items 6, 7, 8, 13, and 14.

Table 3 shows the percentage of responses to the four Likert-type options given to Items 6, 8, and 13. Table 4 provides basic descriptive statistics on the responses. Item 6 on the Common Core Feedback Tool for SLPs asked respondents how much they knew about the departments of education's transition to the CCSS. Only 13 respondents (7.4%) indicating having little knowledge of the transition to the CCSS, and no respondents had no knowledge of the transition (see Table 3).

Survey Item 8 asked SLPs to identify how much they know about the CCSS and their responsibility to incorporate them into speech-language therapy sessions. Responses and statistics are shown in Tables 3 and 4, respectively. Only 21 respondents (12%) indicating having little knowledge, and none indicating having no knowledge. The

majority (52.6%) indicated having some knowledge.

Table 3

Percentage of Respondents (N = 175) Indicating Level of Knowledge

Survey item: "How much do you know about...?"	Comprehensive knowledge	Some knowledge	Little knowledge	No knowledge
6. Departments of education's transition to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)	38.9	53.7	7.4	0.0
8. The CCSS and speech-language pathologists' responsibility to incorporate them into speech-language therapy sessions	34.4	52.6	12.0	0.0
13. The English language arts core standards	36.0	54.9	8.6	0.6

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for Survey Items 6, 8, and 13 Regarding Knowledge

Survey item: "How much do you know about...?"	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	Min.	Max.
6. Departments of education's transition to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)	1.69	0.60	2	1	3
8. The CCSS and speech-language pathologists' responsibility to incorporate them into speech-language therapy sessions	1.77	0.65	2	1	3
13. The English language arts core standards	1.74	0.63	2	1	4

Note. $N = 175$. Based on a scale of 4 = no knowledge, 3 = little knowledge, 2 = some knowledge, and 1 = comprehensive knowledge.

Survey Item 13 asked how much respondents knew about the ELA core standards.

Responses and statistics are shown in Tables 3 and 4. Fifteen respondents (8.6%)

indicated having little knowledge, and one respondent indicated having no knowledge.

The majority of respondents indicated that they have either some knowledge or comprehensive knowledge of the ELA core standards, suggesting that this information has been effectively disseminated.

Common Core Feedback Tool for SLPs Item 7 asked respondents if they had read the CCSS that relate to the grade levels and subject area in which they work. Ten participants stated no, but the vast majority ($n = 165$, 94.3%) answered yes. More specifically, Survey Item 14 asked SLP respondents if they had read the ELA core standards for the grade levels they work with. The vast majority ($n = 160$, 91.4%) answered yes. Fifteen SLPs (8.6%) answered no.

Research Question 2

To what extent do SLPs view the alignment of language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA as a relative advantage that will improve a student's learning? Research Question 2 focused on examining the attitudes and beliefs associated with the relatively new practice of language goal alignment with the CCSS for ELA. Research Question 2 was answered by examining the responses to Survey Items 9, 10, 11, 12, and 16 on the Common Core Feedback Tool for SLPs. Responses are shown in Table 5; descriptive statistics are shown in Table 6.

Survey Item 12 asked participants to identify their level of agreement that the act of aligning students' language-intervention goals to the CCSS and creating standards-based IEPs does not violate the requirements in IDEA of 2004 to create IEPs. Results are shown in Table 5. The majority of participants (63.3%) agreed that the act of aligning students' language-intervention goals to the CCSS and creating standards-based IEPs does not violate the requirements in IDEA to create IEPs. However, 24.5% disagreed. The remaining participants (12%) indicated that they did not know.

The majority of participants (61.1%) agreed with the statement in Survey Item 16 that aligning students' language-intervention goals to the ELA CCSS will lead to

improved student learning for the majority of students they serve. Again, 23.4% of participants disagreed.

Table 5

Percentage of Respondents (N = 175) Indicating Agreement With Survey Belief Statements

Survey item: "I believe that..."	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
9. Aligning language-intervention goals to the CCSS will lead to improved student learning.	18.3	44.6	20.6	4.0	12.6
12. Aligning language-intervention goals to the CCSS and creating standards-based IEPs does not violate IDEA requirements for IEPs.	16.5	46.8	20.0	4.5	12.0
16. Linking students' language-intervention goals to the ELA standards will lead to improved student learning.	13.1	48.0	19.4	4.0	15.4

Note. CCSS = Common Core State Standards; ELA = English language arts; IDEA = Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004; IEP = Individualized Education Program.

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics for Survey Items 9, 12, and 16 Regarding Beliefs

Survey item: "I believe that..."	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	Min.	Max.
9. Aligning language-intervention goals to the CCSS will lead to improved student learning for the majority of students I serve.	1.74	0.63	3	1	5
12. The act of aligning students' language-intervention goals to the CCSS and creating standards-based IEPs does not violate the requirements in IDEA to create IEPs for the majority of students I serve.	2.50	1.19	2	1	5
16. Linking students' language-intervention goals to the ELA core standards will lead to improved student learning for the majority of students I serve.	2.61	1.23	2	1	5

Note. *N* = 175. Based on a scale of 5 = *don't know*, 4 = *strongly disagree*, 3 = *disagree*, 2 = *agree*, and 1 = *strongly agree*. CCSS = Common Core State Standards; ELA = English language arts; IDEA = Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004; IEP = Individualized Education Program.

On Survey Item 9, the majority of participants ($n = 110$, 62.9%) agreed or strongly agreed that aligning students' SLP language-intervention goals to the CCSS will lead to improved student learning for the majority of students the SLPs serve (see Table 5). However, 43 participants (24.6%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. Twenty-two participants indicated that they did not know if they agreed or disagreed with the statement.

Based on the participant's answer to Survey Item 9, the question logic function on SurveyMonkey led the participant to the appropriate, designated next question. If the participant answered "agree" or "strongly agree" to Survey Item 9, the participant was directed to the follow-up question, Survey Item 10. Participants who answered "disagree" or "strongly disagree" were directed to Survey Item 11. Participants who answered "I don't know" were directed to Survey Item 12.

Survey Item 10 asked respondents who answered "agree" or "strongly agree" to Item 9 to identify the reasons they believe that aligning SLP language goals to the CCSS will benefit the majority of the students they serve. Participants were asked to check all options that apply. Many participants ($n = 110$) answered "agree" or "strongly agree" to Survey Item 9. Results are shown in Table 7.

The largest majority of participants (65.4%) indicated that aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS will give students the opportunity to master key competencies, rather than just being superficially exposed to them. A large number of participants (60%) indicated that aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS will provide students a clearer understanding of what they must know in order to succeed. Further, over half the participants indicated that aligning with the standards will allow educators to focus on

what is most important (see Table 7).

Table 7

Reasons Speech-Language Pathologists Believe Language Goal Alignment to the Common Core State Standards Benefits Students

Answer choices	%	<i>n</i>
Common Core State Standards will give students the opportunity to master key competencies, rather than being superficially exposed to them.	64.6	71
They will provide students a clearer understanding of what they must know in order to succeed.	60.0	66
They will help educators focus on what is most important.	52.7	58
They will help the school system ensure standards are vertically aligned from kindergarten through Grade 12.	41.8	46
They will help educators better prepare students to compete in the workforce.	22.7	25
They will help educators better prepare students for college.	20.9	23
They will provide educators a manageable amount of curriculum to teach in a school year.	19.1	21
They will ensure that a high school diploma has meaning.	10.9	12
Other	10.9	12

Note. *N* = 110 for Survey Item 10. Participants could check multiple responses.

Twelve participants in this study generated open-ended responses to this question, as follow:

1. "They are designed to develop critical thinking skills, rather than general knowledge."
2. "Educators will more clearly see SLPs' contributions toward students achieving skills in the Common Core Standards."
3. "This practice clarifies the relationship between what we do as SLPs and how it relates to the goals of public education."
4. "They will provide the general education teachers an understanding [of] how

our speech-language goals align with the Common Core.”

5. “Increases teacher buy-in to therapy services.”

6. “Alignment will allow students to see the connection between what skills addressed with SLP connect to the classroom as well as [are] needed/used in the future. Creates image for ‘why’ I need to know/learn/practice what the SLP is teaching.”

7. “It will allow me to target my therapy to the specific skills that will be most useful for the students in the classroom.”

8. “Many of the CCSS are language based in many areas, and I believe in providing curriculum-relevant therapy. Our sessions should be classroom-based in order to ensure academic achievement for our students.”

9. “The CCSS will ensure SLPs target what is expected of the students in the classroom setting.”

10. “Many have language comprehension and production foci, enabling me to share knowledge and techniques in the classroom for all students, using a collaborative model.”

11. “If students are assessed and graded based on these standards, I need to make sure that I am supporting them by providing interventions that target underlying language deficits that impact student ability to meet these standards.”

12. “It makes my goals more functional for the student, as I am addressing concepts being taught in the student’s general education classroom.”

If participants answered “disagree” or “strongly disagree” to Survey Item 9, then the question logic feature led them to follow-up Survey Item 11. Survey Item 11 asked participants who disagreed to identify the reasons they believe that aligning SLP

language goals to the CCSS will not benefit the majority of students they serve.

Participants could check all options that apply. Forty-three participants disagreed and were directed to Survey Item 11. Responses are shown in Table 8.

Table 8

Reasons Speech-Language Pathologists Believe Language Goal Alignment to the Common Core State Standards Does Not Benefit Students

Answer choices for Survey Item 11	%	<i>n</i>
The standards do not provide educators the flexibility needed to help students who are not on grade level.	72.1	34
The Common Core embraces a “one size fits all” approach that will not help the students on my caseload.	67.4	29
The Common Core is too rigorous for many students I teach.	55.8	24
The Common Core excludes important concepts that students should learn.	30.2	13
Our current state standards are better than the Common Core.	9.3	4
Other	23.3	10

Note. *N* = 43 for Survey Item 11. Participants could check multiple responses.

The majority of participants (72.1%) indicated that the standards do not provide educators the flexibility needed to help students who are not on grade level. Many participants (67.4%) indicated that the CCSS embrace a one-size-fits-all approach that will not help students. Other participants (55.8%) indicated that the CCSS are too rigorous for many students. Survey Item 11 allowed participants to provide their own reasons they believe that SLP language goal alignment to the CCSS does not benefit the majority of students they serve. Ten participants generated open-ended responses to this question:

1. “Curriculum should not control disabilities. Our goals and objectives should be based on language development, delayed development or gaps in development.”

2. “There are foundational skills my students need to learn that they will not get anywhere else, and these are not addressed in the standards.”

3. “Our goals should target speech/language skills not academic skills, for some grade levels will not be appropriate.”

4. “I am there to ‘fix’ basic, developmental skills not addressed by the Common Core.”

5. One respondent addressed poverty and parent education:

Many of the goals I’m working on are developmental skills. I think “by age 4, grammar and sentence structure should sound like adult speech” is more easily understood by my high poverty (99.9%) adult population than the Common Core standard I am now required to copy and paste into my IEP. Common Core is meant to set higher standards for children in poverty, which is lovely. However, it is not at all user friendly for parents who have lower levels of education. I’m never sure if I should laugh or cry at the absurdity of being required to include it in a document that is supposed to be “family friendly” to read.

6. Another stated,

I am to give them the ability to reach standards. If they had goals written to standards, they don’t need me—they’re at/close to grade level. I do work on skills necessary to aim for success on core, but do not write my goals.

7. Another SLP wrote,

Goals for my students with special needs have always been rigorous for them; I don’t think aligning to CCSS will improve student outcomes any more than my treatment prior to alignment; and I can keep working towards a standard with the knowledge that some of my students simply will not achieve them, not even with the most skilled and intensive support.

8. “Standards are taught by classroom teachers; SLT [speech-language therapy] remediates developmental speech-language issues in order to provide *access* to the teaching of the CCSS that takes place in the classroom.”

9. “Most need life skills [and] functional input and practice [are] not aligned with Common Core.”

10. “The standards expect students to do things they aren’t developmentally ready to do (even typical students!).”

Research Question 3

To what extent do SLPs feel prepared to develop standards-based IEPs that align intervention goals with the CCSS for ELA? The attitudes and beliefs of SLPs regarding their perceived level of preparedness regarding this innovation were examined through analysis of Research Question 3. Feelings of preparedness as well as identification of factors that affect SLPs’ feelings of preparedness were examined by analyzing responses to Survey Items 18 and 20.

Survey Item 18 asked SLPs if they felt prepared to develop standards-based IEPs that align intervention goals with the CCSS for ELA. Results are shown in Table 9. The majority (56%) of respondents indicated feeling somewhat prepared.

Table 9

Percentage of Respondents (N = 175) Indicating Preparedness

Survey item	Completely prepared	Somewhat prepared	Not prepared at all	Don’t know
18. Preparedness to develop stands-based Individualized Education Programs that align goals with the Common Core State Standards for English language arts.	28.5	56.0	10.8	4.5

If participants answered “completely prepared” or “somewhat prepared,” question logic directed them to Survey Item 20. If participants answered “not prepared at all” or “I don’t know,” question logic directed them to Survey Item 19.

Twenty-seven participants were directed to Item 19, which asked respondents what would help them feel prepared to align language-therapy IEP goals to the CCSS for

ELA. Participants could choose more than one answer. Responses are shown in Table 10.

Table 10

Ways to Help Prepare Speech-Language Pathologists to Align Language-Therapy Goals to the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts

Answer choices for Survey Item 19	%	<i>n</i>
More information about how the standards change what is expected of speech-language pathologists' instructional practice	80.8	21
More information about how the standards change what is expected of students	65.4	17
Access to assessments aligned to the Common Core	57.7	15
Access to curricular resources aligned to the Common Core	53.9	14
Other	3.9	26

Note. *N* = 27 for Survey Item 19. Participants could check multiple responses.

The majority of participants (80.8%) indicated that more information about how the standards change what is expected of their instructional practices would help them feel more prepared. Many participants (65.4%) indicated that in order to feel more prepared, they would need more information about how the standards will change what is expected of the students they work with. Other participants (57.7%) indicated that access to curricular resources aligned to the CCSS would help them feel prepared, and 53.9% indicated needing access to assessments aligned to the CCSS.

Based on results from this survey, the majority of SLP respondents indicated that they feel at least somewhat prepared to align language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA. The SLPs who indicated that they did not feel prepared reported that the primary reason was they needed more information regarding how the standards changed what was expected of their instructional practices.

Research Question 4

What is the extent to which SLPs have adopted the practice of developing

standards-based IEPs that align language goals with the CCSS for ELA for students on their caseloads? The fourth stage of the diffusion of innovations theory, implementation, was examined by analyzing the results to Survey Item 17. Item 17 asked SLPs about the extent to which they were developing standards-based IEPs that align language-intervention goals with the CCSS for ELA. Item 17 provided three possible answers: (a) the beginning stage, becoming familiar with how to align IEPs with the CCSS; (b) the middle stage, still working through the challenges; and (c) the advanced stage, able to align IEP goals with the CCSS for students on the SLP's caseload.

A large percentage of participants (40.5%) indicated that they were at the middle stage, still working through the challenges. Less than a third of respondents (30.8%) indicated that they were at the advanced stage. Some respondents (28.5%) indicated that they were at the beginning stage, familiarizing themselves with how to align IEPs with the CCSS. Based on the results, the majority of SLP participants indicated that they had progressed beyond the beginning stage.

Research Question 5

What are the challenges SLPs face when developing standards-based IEP language goals that align with the CCSS for ELA? The fourth stage of the decision-making framework of the diffusion of innovations theory, maintenance, was examined by analyzing Research Question 5. To determine if there are complex challenges affecting the current implementation and possible future maintenance of the practice of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA, responses to Survey Items 20 and 21 were analyzed.

Survey Item 20 asked SLP respondents if they feel that the process of aligning

language-therapy goals to grade-level CCSS for ELA is complicated for the grade levels they work with. Responses are shown in Table 11.

Table 11

Percentage of Respondents (N = 175) Indicating Alignment Is Complicated

Survey item	Very complicated	Somewhat complicated	Not at all complicated	Don't know, have not tried yet
20. Process of aligning language-therapy goals to grade-level Common Core State Standards for English language arts is complicated.	12.5	59.4	24.0	4.0

The majority of participants (59.4%) indicated that they feel the process of alignment is somewhat complicated, and only 12.5% feel that the process is very complicated. Some participants (24%) indicated that they do not feel that the process is complicated at all. A few participants ($n = 7$, 4%) indicated that they do not know if the process is complicated because they have not yet tried to align language-therapy goals to grade-level CCSS for ELA.

For those participants who answered Survey Item 20 with either “I don’t feel the process is complicated at all” or “I don’t know, I have not yet tried,” question logic directed them to the end of the survey to submit their answers. For those participants who answered Item 20 with either “very complicated” or “somewhat complicated,” question logic directed them to Survey Item 21.

Survey Item 21 asked SLPs to identify the reasons they believe that the process of aligning language-therapy goals to grade-level CCSS for ELA is complicated for the students they work with. Participants could choose more than one answer. Results are shown in Table 12.

Table 12

Reasons Speech-Language Pathologists Believe Goal Alignment to Grade-Level Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts Is Complicated

Answer choices for Survey Item 21	%	<i>n</i>
Need more time to collaborate with my colleagues	67.5	85
Students' prior knowledge	60.3	76
Need more quality professional development to learn how to align language goals to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English language arts (ELA)	46.0	58
Need more therapy materials aligned with the CCSS for ELA	42.1	53
Need more time to help students really learn the standards	37.3	47
Need more information about the standards	26.2	33
Other	15.1	19

Note. *N* = 126 for Survey Item 21. Participants could check multiple responses.

Respondents indicated in particular they need more time to collaborate with colleagues and that students' prior knowledge complicates the process of language-therapy goal alignment to grade-level CCSS in ELA. Survey Item 21 also allowed for participants to provide their own reasons they believe the process of aligning language-therapy goals to grade-level CCSS for ELA is complicated for the students they work with. Nineteen participants generated responses to this open-ended question:

1. "Student's language needs may not be addressed in CCSS at all or not addressed in CCSS for student's grade level."
2. "Aligning to standards instead of development will create gaps in development."
3. "I think our traditional Speech/Language goals fit perfectly with the CCSS. Some more severely involved students will require alternative standards that fit their needs."

4. "Need to teach students the underlying skills before they apply them in CCSS activities. You need to understand how to sequence before you can organize an essay."
5. "I just use 'goalbookapp.'"
6. "High numbers of ELD or students living in poverty at my school. Many students need support on more foundational skills before focusing on Common Core."
7. "Cognitive levels of some students with IEPs."
8. "Some students are not at academic grade level curriculum."
9. "Standards for five grade levels are too many to keep track of!"
10. "I don't agree with the process of aligning, we should be targeting what each individual needs."
11. "There is conflicting information on whether we should align to CCSS."
12. "Our system does not have developed curriculum that aligns with the CCSS, so the units of study and materials are being developed as we move through the year, making alignment of therapy difficult."
13. "Students functioning below grade level."
14. "Adapting my language/jargon to Common Core language. My interventions, using curriculum materials, will support student success."
15. "When the student is significantly off grade level, it can be very complicated to know where to start and even if it is appropriate in that situation."
16. "How to scaffold the standards to meet the student's level of understanding."
17. "Sometimes we need to be more specific about the skills targeted."
18. "Students' cognitive levels, slower learning."
19. "CCSS is not a relevant orientation to many of [the lowest percentile]"

students!”

Research Question 6

How complex is it for SLPs working with students across K-8 to align language-therapy goals with the CCSS for ELA? The fourth stage of the decision-making framework of the diffusion of innovations theory, maintenance, was further examined by analyzing Research Question 6. A challenge that could affect an SLP’s ability to maintain the practice of language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA is alignment complexity. It may become more difficult for SLPs to align language-intervention goals to the CCSS for ELA as students matriculate to middle school. To determine if the practice of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA is more difficult for middle school students compared to elementary school students, responses to Survey Item 20 were further examined. Results are shown in Table 13. Results were remarkably similar across grade levels. Table 14 shows descriptive statistics. Looking at mean scores (Table 14), SLPs working in middle schools indicated slightly greater complexity in the process of alignment.

Table 13

Reported Levels of Complexity of Goal Alignment to Grade-Level Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts, by School Level

Answer choices for Survey Item 20	Elementary school		Middle school	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Very complicated	13.1	19	13.9	14
Somewhat complicated	61.0	89	61.4	62
Not complicated at all	21.9	32	20.8	21
Do not know, have not tried yet	4.1	6	4.0	4

Note. Elementary school $N = 146$; middle school $N = 101$. Respondents could indicate both school levels.

Table 14

Descriptive Statistics for Survey Item 20 by School Level

Survey Item 20: Complexity of alignment to grade-level standards	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	Min.	Max.
Elementary school	2.17	0.69	2	1	4
Middle school	1.49	0.69	2	1	4

Note. Elementary school $N = 146$; middle school $N = 101$. Respondents could indicate both school levels. Based on a scale of 4 = *do not know, have not yet tried*; 3 = *not at all complicated*; 2 = *somewhat complicated*; and 1 = *very complicated*.

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to determine if there were any significant differences between the means of SLPs working across grade levels in regards to their perceived complexity involving the process of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA. The sample population was divided into five groups according to grade levels that SLPs reported working with: (a) kindergarten and first grade, (b) second and third grades, (c) fourth and fifth grades, (d) sixth and seventh grades, and (e) eighth grade. A one-way ANOVA was used to compare the means between the five groups of SLPs and to determine if any of the means were significantly different from each other. The one-way ANOVA was specifically used to test the researcher's postulated alternative hypothesis: SLPs will view the process of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA as being easier for students in elementary school and more difficult for students in middle school. The null hypothesis was as follows: SLPs working across grade levels find it difficult to align language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the views of SLPs, working across grade levels in elementary and middle school, regarding the feasibility of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA. An analysis of the standard weighted

means revealed the following: $F(4, 568) = 0.07$, $MSE = 0, 4758$, $p = .991$. Results were not significant at the .05 level. There was not a statistically significant difference between groups as determined by a one-way ANOVA.

Chapter Summary

The practice of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA was examined in this study. The results of this quantitative, nonexperimental study indicated that the educational shift towards the CCSS in school districts across the United States has affected the way SLPs develop language-intervention goals for students on their caseloads. Analysis of the results indicated that the majority of SLPs agreed with the practice of developing standards-based IEPs in a way so that language-therapy goals are aligned with ELA CCSS. In regards to the extent to which this relatively new practice has been adopted, the majority of SLPs indicated that they were at the middle stage, still working through the challenges, or the advanced stage, able to align IEP goals with the CCSS for students on their caseload. The perceived feasibility of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA was reported to be somewhat complicated by the majority of SLPs working in elementary and middle school settings. In summary, the majority of SLPs who participated in this study agreed with the practice of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA but viewed the process as somewhat difficult.

In the next chapter, the implications of the data collected in this study are discussed. Factors that could hinder or promote the practice of language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA are identified. Possible reasons and explanations for the findings of this study are examined. The limitations of this study are identified, and ideas for future

research studies centered on examining the practice of language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA are presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify if SLPs working in elementary and middle school settings have adopted the practice of aligning their language-intervention goals to the CCSS for ELA and to what extent this language goal alignment is taking place. More specifically, this study had three objectives: (a) to examine if SLPs working in public elementary and middle schools have adopted the standards-based approach to IEP development so that SLP language goals are aligned with the ELA grade-level CCSS, (b) to examine the perceived feasibility of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA from the perspective of an SLP, and (c) to examine the extent to which SLPs are developing standards-based IEPs that align language goals with the CCSS for ELA. Additionally, the researcher sought to determine if SLPs view the process of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA as being easier for students in elementary school and more difficult for students in middle school. A discussion of the study findings is provided in this chapter.

An online survey research method was chosen for this study. Survey questions were selected from the Common Core Feedback Tool for Educators (U.S. Educational Delivery Institute, 2015). Selected questions were modified in an effort to clearly focus on obtaining information from SLPs. For the purposes of this study, the modified survey was called Common Core Feedback Tool for SLPs. The modified survey was then pilot tested to ensure that survey questions were clearly stated and easy to understand. The survey was then made available to potential participants. The survey data were collected and analyzed to achieve the purpose of this study. In this chapter, the conclusions of the study are discussed as well as possible implications to the field of speech-language

pathology. Recommendations for possible future research are presented in this chapter.

Research Question 1

To what extent has information regarding the practice of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA been effectively disseminated to SLPs working in public schools with students enrolled in K-8? According to Murza et al. (2014), SLP leaders should provide school-based SLPs with the “what” and the “how” of the CCSS in the context of supporting students in meeting the standards.

The first step towards adopting a new idea or innovation begins with awareness of the intervention (Dunkle & Flynn, 2012). Based on the results of this study, the majority of participants (54.7%) indicated that they have “some knowledge,” and 37% indicated that they have “comprehensive knowledge” of the departments of education’s transition to the CCSS. The majority of participants (94.4%) indicated that they have read the CCSS that relate to the grade levels and subject area that they work with. The majority of respondents (91.6%) indicated that they have read the ELA CCSS for the grade levels they work with, and the majority of respondents indicated that they have either “some knowledge” or “comprehensive knowledge” of the CCSS and their responsibility to incorporate them into their speech-language therapy sessions.

Based on the results of the Common Core Feedback Tool for SLPs, evidence collected supports the belief that SLPs working in the school setting with K-8 students are not experiencing a sense of uncertainty regarding their comprehension of the CCSS for ELA. The results indicate that SLPs are aware of their responsibilities to incorporate the CCSS for ELA into their therapy practices. Results of this study further indicate that information regarding the CCSS and the practice of aligning language-therapy goals to

the CCSS for ELA has been effectively disseminated to SLPs working with K-8 students.

According to Blosser (2012) and Murza et al. (2014), school-based SLPs should be familiar with the standards and how to align their intervention and goal planning with the CCSS. The evidence collected from this study indicates that the majority of SLPs working with elementary and middle school students are familiar with the standards and are aware of how to align their goals with the CCSS. Based on the evidence collected from this study, the majority of SLPs now have the information necessary to incorporate the CCSS for ELA into their therapy practices. In regards to Research Question 1, the evidence suggests that information regarding the CCSS and the practice of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA has been effectively disseminated to SLPs working in public schools with K-8 students.

Research Question 2

To what extent do SLPs view the alignment of language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA as a relative advantage that will improve a student's learning? Relative advantage is the degree to which an innovation is seen as better than the idea, program, or product it replaces (Kaminski, 2011). According to Rogers (1995), whether a new practice is perceived to be a relative advantage could partly determine if a social system adopts that new practice. Blosser (2012) discussed how SLPs may have different views about where the standards-based curriculum fits into educating and treating students with disabilities.

Attitudes and beliefs of SLPs regarding language goal alignment to the CCSS. The attitudes and beliefs of SLPs regarding the alignment of language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA were collected and analyzed in this study. As identified by

Dunkle and Flynn (2012), determining attitudes is important because the attitudes of a social system regarding a new innovation help determine if the social system will commit to ultimately adopting it. Dunkle and Flynn discussed how SLPs who are familiar with the CCSS and the applicability of this framework for school-based clinicians are wondering why it is so difficult to get fellow SLPs to adopt the use of this initiative. The decision to adopt or reject an innovation is a vital stage by which diffusion is accomplished.

Based on evidence collected in this study, the majority of SLPs indicated a level of agreement (44.5% agreed and 18.2% strongly agreed) that aligning a student's language-intervention goals to the CCSS will lead to improved student learning for the majority of students they serve. Of those SLPs who agreed, the following were the most popular reasons they held this belief: (a) The CCSS will give students the opportunity to master key competencies, rather than just being superficially exposed to them; (b) the CCSS will provide students a clearer understanding of what they must know in order to succeed; and (c) the CCSS will help educators focus on what is most important.

Text analysis of the open-ended responses to Survey Item 10, regarding reasons SLPs believe aligning SLP language goals to the CCSS is beneficial, revealed similar views expressed by SLPs. SLPs indicated that aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS will help students develop critical thinking skills and allow SLPs to provide curriculum-relevant therapy. Language goal alignment will provide general education teachers with an idea of how SLPs work with the CCSS and allow SLPs to work on specific skills that will be most useful in the classroom. The general consensus of the open-ended responses from SLP participants was that language goal alignment to the

CCSS is functional and will help students better access the classroom curriculum.

It is important to note that even though the majority of SLPs believe that aligning a student's language-intervention goals to the CCSS will lead to improved student learning for the majority of students they serve, some SLPs disagreed (20.5%) or strongly disagreed (4%). Those who disagreed provided the following as their primary reasons for this belief: (a) Language goal alignment to the CCSS does not provide educators the flexibility needed to help students who are not on grade level, (b) the CCSS embraces a one-size-fits-all approach that will not help students on their caseloads, and (c) the CCSS are too rigorous for the students they teach.

Text analysis of the open-ended responses revealed a central theme in the answers provided by SLPs who disagreed with aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS. SLPs reported that they believed that goals and objectives should be based on speech-language developmental gaps and not on standards. SLPs identified that foundational skills that students need to master are not found in the CCSS. SLPs indicated that the CCSS are grade-level standards that should not be used to write goals for students in special education receiving speech-language therapy. SLPs reported that if students were able to meet grade-level standards, they would not require speech-language therapy support.

Some (12.5%) participants indicated that they did not know if aligning students' SLP language-intervention goals to the CCSS will lead to improved student learning for the majority of students they serve. Based on the percentage of SLPs who disagreed with or did not know about language goal alignment with the CCSS leading to improved student learning, more professional development and collaboration is evidently required

so that SLPs can share their views and come to a greater consensus regarding this relatively new practice.

Blosser (2012) discussed how educators have different views about where the standards-based curriculum fits into educating and treating students with disabilities. The evidence collected in this survey supports Blosser's claims but also demonstrated that the majority of SLPs in this study view the CCSS as a relative advantage. Based on the evidence collected, the majority of SLPs view the relatively new practice of language goal alignment to the CCSS as a better practice that will lead to improved student learning for the majority of students on their caseloads.

Attitudes and beliefs regarding standards-based IEPs. Some educational professionals reject the use of the standards-based IEPs because they feel that it violates the individuality that IDEA requires for each IEP (Ahearn, 2006). According to Ahearn (2006), educators who work with special education students have expressed an aversion to changing the current approach for developing IEPs for fear of losing focus on each child's educational needs. There are several conflicting views regarding the development and use of standards-based IEP in the field of education (Ahearn, 2006; Blosser, 2012). In this study, SLPs were asked to identify their level of agreement that the act of aligning students' language-intervention goals to the CCSS and creating standards-based IEPs does not violate the requirements in IDEA to create IEPs for the majority of students they serve. The majority of participants expressed a degree of agreement (46.8% agreed and 16.5% strongly agreed) that the act of aligning a student's language-intervention goals to the CCSS and creating standards-based IEPs does not violate the requirements in IDEA (2004).

Although the majority of SLP participants did not believe that language goal alignment to the CCSS violates the requirements in IDEA, some SLPs expressed a different view. Of the SLPs surveyed, 19.4% disagreed and 15.4% strongly disagreed. Those participants who disagreed maintained that language goal alignment to the CCSS and creating standards-based IEPs does indeed violate the requirements in IDEA. Based on the evidence collected, conflicting views remain regarding the practice of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS and creating standards-based IEPs.

Of the participants who were surveyed, 15.4% indicated that they did not know if aligning language goals to the CCSS and creating standards-based IEPs violated IDEA. Based on the percentage levels of SLPs who responded that they disagreed or did not know, updated information regarding what constitutes a violation to IDEA should be made available to SLPs working in elementary and middle school settings. Based on the observed level of disagreement among SLPs regarding this statement, more professional development and peer collaboration are required in order for SLPs to come to a higher level of agreement regarding what constitutes a violation of IDEA of 2004.

It is important to discuss that standards-based IEPs should not be viewed as a new curriculum for students with language and learning disabilities but instead should be viewed as an effective tool SLPs can use to help support the curriculum (Rudebusch, 2012). Standards-based IEPs should be clearly stated, tied to grade-level standards, and yet customized to meet individual needs based on the student's disability to blend the best of special education and standards-based education (Rudebusch, 2012). SLPs should not use grade-level core standards as their IEP language goals because the use of grade-level core standards as IEP goals implies that the student does not require special education

(Justice, 2013). Based on the evidence collected in this study, information regarding the CCSS and goal alignment has been effectively disseminated, and the majority of SLPs surveyed believe that developing standards-based IEPs does not violate the guidelines established in IDEA. The extent to which SLPs feel prepared to develop these standards-based IEPs is discussed next.

Research Question 3

To what extent do SLPs feel prepared to develop standards-based IEPs that align language-intervention goals with the CCSS for ELA? The attitudes and beliefs of SLPs regarding their perceived level of preparedness can affect whether or not the practice of language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA will be diffused and ultimately adopted. SLPs were asked if they feel prepared to develop standards-based IEPs that align intervention goals with the CCSS for ELA. The majority (56%) of participants indicated that they feel somewhat prepared, and 28.5% indicated that they feel completely prepared. Some SLPs (10.8%) reported that they did not feel prepared, and 4.5% did not know if they were prepared to align language intervention goals to the CCSS for ELA. For those who indicated that they were not prepared or that they did not know if they were prepared, the majority (81.4%) indicated that in order to feel more prepared, more information is needed about how the standards will change what is expected of their instructional practices. Based on the evidence collected in this study, the majority of SLPs feel prepared to develop standards-based IEPs that align language-intervention goals with the CCSS for ELA.

Murza et al. (2014) discussed how school-based SLPs need high-quality professional development to understand the structure and content of the CCSS in order to

align their intervention and goals with the CCSS. Based on the high percentage rate of SLPs who indicated they were prepared to align language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA, the majority of SLPs understand the structure and content of the CCSS. The evidences suggests that SLPs do not view the content of the CCSS for ELA as being complex, as they feel prepared to align language-therapy goals to those standards.

Research Question 4

What is the extent to which SLPs have adopted the practice of developing standards-based IEPs that align language goals with the CCSS for ELA for students on their caseloads? Research Question 4 served to identify the current level of implementation SLPs are engaged in regarding language goal alignment with the CCSS for ELA.

Many of the SLP participants (40.5%) indicated that they were at the middle stage, still working through the challenges, whereas 30.8% indicated that they were at the advanced stage, able to align IEP goals with the CCSS for students on their caseload. The remaining SLPs (28.5%) indicated that they were at the beginning stage, becoming familiar with how to align IEPs with the CCSS. Based on information collected in this study, the majority of SLPs indicated that they were at the middle or advanced stage of developing standards-based IEPs that align language intervention to the CCSS for ELA. SLPs in the study are currently aligning language goals to the CCSS for ELA in K-8, which enables them to align their therapy programs with grade-level curriculum standards. Based on the evidence collected, the majority of SLPs are currently implementing this relatively new practice of language goals alignment. The following section discusses the how SLPs view the process of aligning language goals to the CCSS

for students on their caseloads.

Research Question 5

What are the challenges SLPs face when developing standards-based IEP language goals to address the CCSS for ELA? Rogers (1995) identified perceived complexity as a factor that could promote or hinder the adoption of a new practice. The perceived complexity of developing standards-based language goals aligned to the CCSS for ELA could partly determine if this practice will be adopted and maintained by SLPs. The majority of SLPs indicated that they have adopted or have begun to adopt the practice of language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA. The perceived complexity of language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA could affect the future maintenance of this practice.

Perceived complexity associated with language goal alignment. SLPs were asked if they feel that the process of aligning language-therapy goals to the ELA CCSS was difficult for the grade levels they work with. The majority of participants (59.4%) indicated that they feel the process is somewhat complicated, and 12.5% feel that the process is very complicated. Some SLPs (24%) indicated that they do not feel that the process is complicated at all, and 4% indicated that they do not know if the process is complicated because they have not yet tried to align language-therapy goals to grade-level CCSS for ELA. With such a high percentage of participants indicating that they believe the process of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA as being somewhat or very complicated, further investigation as to the possible reasons is warranted. Based on the evidence collected in this study, the following can be reported:

1. The majority of SLPs indicated that they have some or comprehensive

knowledge of the CCSS.

2. The majority of SLPs view language goal alignment to the CCSS as a relative advantage.

3. The majority of SLPs believe that creating standards-based IEPs that align language goals to the CCSS does not violate IDEA of 2004.

4. The majority of SLPs feel prepared to align their language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA.

5. The majority of SLPs indicated that they are at the middle or advanced stage of developing standards-based IEPs that align language intervention to the CCSS for ELA.

6. The majority of SLPs view the process of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA as being somewhat or very complicated. Possible reasons for the reported complexity associated with language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA need to be examined.

Reasons for language goal alignment complexity. SLPs have indicated that they believe they are ready, willing, and able to align language goals to the CCSS for ELA. However, the majority of SLPs expressed that they feel the process of language goal alignment is at least somewhat complicated for the grade levels they work with. It is important to understand why SLPs view the process of language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA as complicated for the grade levels that they work with, because this perceived complexity could affect the current implementation and future maintenance of this innovation.

The majority of SLPs (67.2%) indicated that the need for more time to collaborate with colleagues was a reason goal alignment is difficult. Murza et al. (2014) discussed the

need for more collaboration among professionals to focus on ways SLPs can effectively develop specific and individualized therapy goals aligned to the CCSS. Based on the evidence collected, many of the SLPs agreed that more professional collaboration among SLPs is needed to alleviate the perceived complications associated with language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA.

Many SLPs (60.8%) indicated that a student's prior knowledge is why it is difficult to align language-therapy goals to grade-level CCSS for ELA. Bulgren et al. (2013) suggested that students may be experiencing problems accessing grade-level curricula due to a lack of necessary skills that are required to support higher level thinking. According to Bulgren et al., in earlier grades, students with learning disabilities may not have mastered low-level skills, which contributes to later problems in higher order processing. According to Roberts (2012), beginning in the primary grades, the standards set high expectations for students' interaction with informational text, many of which are significantly more linguistically demanding than the standards that they replace. Simply setting higher standards does not ensure that students with language-based learning disabilities, or other struggling learners, will meet them (Haager & Vaughn, 2013). Based on the evidence collected, many of the SLPs who participated in this study agreed that a student's lack of prior knowledge is a contributing factor that makes language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA complex.

Murza et al. (2014) discussed the need for professional development to focus on how SLPs can effectively develop specific and individualized therapy goals aligned to the CCSS. Many SLPs (46.4%) in this study indicated the need for more quality professional development to learn how to effectively align language goals to the CCSS for ELA for

students on their caseloads. Professional development aimed at helping SLPs learn how to effectively align their goals to the CCSS could help students achieve grade-level core standards and thrive academically while participating in a general education classroom.

SLP participants were able to generate their own reasons why they believe the process of aligning language-therapy goals to grade-level CCSS for ELA is complicated for the students they work with. Text analysis of self-generated answers regarding the challenges SLPs face when developing standards-based IEP language goals to address the CCSS for ELA revealed a common theme. SLPs identified that the underlying skill deficits of students should be addressed before goals aligned to the CCSS can be developed. SLPs reported that aligning language goals to the CCSS may not be appropriate due to the cognitive levels of some of their students. Some SLPs indicated that they cannot align language goals to the CCSS for the grade levels they work with because their students are functioning below grade level. Best and Cohen (2013) discussed how established grade-level core standards assume that the students are in possession of the lower grade level skill sets required to achieve higher level skills by the end of the academic year. Based on evidence collected in this survey, many SLPs would agree with Best and Cohen. According to the Response to Intervention Action Network (2013), because higher level goals can never be achieved unless the student acquires the basics first, there will be a disconnect between what is expected of students and what may be practical and achievable. Evidence collected in this study supports the belief that language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA is complex for SLPs working with students in elementary and middle school. A primary reason for this complexity is a reported disconnect between what the student is expected to do academically and what

the student is able to achieve academically.

Research Question 6

With the majority of SLPs indicating that they perceive the process of language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA as complex, further investigation regarding this perceived complexity was warranted. Research Question 6 was as follows: How complex is it for SLPs working with students across grades in K-8 to align language-therapy goals with the CCSS for ELA? It may become more difficult for SLPs to align language-intervention goals to the CCSS for ELA as students matriculate to middle school. Swanson and Deshler (2003) indicated that due to the higher order demands and the lack of necessary skills to support higher level thinking, it is often a struggle to prepare adolescents to respond to curriculum challenges at the middle school and high school levels. According to Bulgren et al. (2013), students may not have mastered low-level skills, contributing to later problems in higher order processing.

Alternate hypothesis. The researcher postulated a hypothesis that SLPs would view the process of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA as being easier for students in elementary school and more difficult for students in middle school. The researcher hypothesized that the difficulty associated with aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA for middle school students was due to a performance gap. According to Deshler et al. (2001), the performance gap is the gap between what students are expected to do and what they can do. Over time, this gap grows larger and larger, and it is especially exacerbated in the later grades when the academic growth of students with learning difficulties plateaus (Warner et al., 1980). According to Deshler et al., many educators struggle to prepare students with learning disabilities to successfully respond to

heavy curriculum demands at the middle and high school levels. The researcher hypothesized that the CCSS may be highlighting a performance gap that makes it difficult to align language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA for students in middle school grades.

Reported goal alignment complexity across grade level. Similar majorities of SLPs working with students in middle school (61.4%) and in elementary school (61%) indicated that they believe that the process of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA is somewhat complicated. Similar percentages of SLPs working in the middle school (13.8%) and in elementary school (13.0%) indicated that the process is very complicated. Based on the evidence, the majority of SLPs working across K-8 grade levels view the process of language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA as being at least somewhat complicated for the students they work with.

ANOVA. A one-way ANOVA was performed to determine if there were any significant differences between the means of SLPs working across grade levels in regards to their perceived complexity involving the process of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA. SLPs were divided into five groups according to the reported grade levels that they work with: (a) kindergarten and first grade, (b) second and third grades, (c) fourth and fifth grades, (d) sixth and seventh grades, and (e) eighth grade. The one-way ANOVA was specifically used to test the researcher's postulated hypothesis that SLPs would view the process of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA as being easier for students in elementary school and more difficult for students in middle school. The null hypothesis was that SLPs working across grade levels would find it difficult to align language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA.

The results of the ANOVA indicated no statistically significant differences between groups. The null hypothesis could not be rejected. The data did not support the researcher's postulated hypothesis that SLPs would view the process of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA as being easier for students in elementary school and more difficult for students in middle school.

Implications and Findings

Implementation of the CCSS is a curriculum priority for school districts across the United States. SLPs are exploring ways to incorporate the CCSS into their assessment and therapy practices. This study succeeded in achieving the previously mentioned three objectives: (a) to examine if SLPs working in public elementary and middle schools are embracing a standards-based approach to IEP development so that SLP language goals are aligned with the ELA grade-level CCSS, (b) to examine if SLPs working in the middle school setting find it more difficult to align therapy goals to grade-level ELA CCSS when compared to SLPs working in the elementary school setting, and (c) to examine the extent to which SLPs are developing standards-based IEPs that align language goals with the CCSS for ELA. The margin of error for this study was 8% with a confidence interval of 95%. The results of this study are considered to be reflective of the entire population of SLP members of the ASHA SIG 16. Based on the evidence collected in this study, the following findings can be confidently reported:

1. Information regarding the practice of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA has been effectively disseminated to the majority of SLPs working in public schools with K-8 students.
2. The majority of SLPs view the alignment of language-therapy goals to the

CCSS as a relative advantage that will improve a student's learning.

3. The majority of SLPs feel prepared to develop standards-based IEPs that align intervention goals with the CCSS for ELA.

4. The majority of SLPs are at the middle or advanced stage of language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA.

5. The majority of SLPs indicated that a student's prior knowledge, a lack of professional development, and a lack of professional collaboration are reasons aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA is complex.

6. Regardless of the specific grade levels that SLPs reported working with, the majority of SLPs working with K-8 students view the alignment of language goals to the CCSS for ELA as being at least somewhat complex.

The reported complexity regarding the alignment of language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA is currently impacting successful implementation and could affect future maintenance of this relatively new practice. SLPs have begun to implement the practice of language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA, with the majority of SLPs at the middle or advanced stage. As implementation of this new practice is reportedly underway, SLPs are now experiencing various levels of complexity associated with language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA. Complexity has been identified as an element of a new clinical behavior that can partly determine whether diffusion of a new practice will occur. If the practice of language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA is to be adopted by SLPs, then alleviating the perceived complexity associated with language goal alignment needs to occur. If the complexity associated with language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA is not addressed, then the successful implementation and future

maintenance of the practice could be in jeopardy.

Limitations of the Study

Though this study has basic methodological limitations (e.g., length of study, sample populations, self-reporting), the information gained from this study is believed to be representative of SLPs working in elementary and middle schools across the United States. Potential limitations to this study were assessed and, when possible, eliminated to ensure accurate data were recorded and analyzed. The potential limitations that could not be addressed are discussed in this section.

Survey questions were adapted and modified from the Common Core Feedback Tool for Educators. The survey was pilot tested and then made available to the NYSSLHA and the ASHA SIG 16 (School-Based Issues). The invitation to participate in this study was posted to the NYSSLHA members website and the ASHA SIG 16 Discussion Board. NYSSLHA has approximately 16,935 members. ASHA SIG 16 currently has 6,199 affiliates. Of the 16,935 members of NYSSLHA, only 6 SLP members responded to the invitation to participate in this study. Of the 6,199 affiliates of ASHA SIG 16, 175 members responded. This study was limited in its ability to effectively obtain a large number of respondents. The SLPs invited to participate in this study belong to organizations that do not allow members to be contacted directly. The ability to invite members directly through the use of their membership e-mail directory was not permitted. Posting an invitation to participate in this study to membership web pages required potential participants to view those pages and choose to participate in the study within the 3-week time span that the survey was made available. If e-mail membership directories were made available, and potential participants were able to be

directly contacted, then the participation rate for this study might have been larger. A larger participation rate would have reduced the current error margin index for this study (8%).

The majority of SLPs who participated in this study might have viewed the practice of language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA as favorable. When participants were asked if they agree if the act of aligning students' language intervention goals to the CCSS will lead to improved student learning, the majority (44.5%) agreed and 18.2% strongly agreed. The majority of SLPs might have decided to participate in this study because they viewed the CCSS as being a relative advantage. The high percentage of SLPs who viewed this language goal alignment to the CCSS could be indicative of a sample bias.

Potential response bias based on professional desirability was a limitation of this study. Participant responses might have been influenced by what the respondent thought the researcher wanted to hear, regardless of the participant's personal or professional beliefs. The reliability of survey data is dependent upon participants answering questions truthfully.

Participants might have interpreted survey questions differently, leading to unclear data. This survey was adapted, modified, and then pilot tested in an effort to reduce or eliminate question ambiguity. Due to the adaption and modification of the survey, potential limitations of this study could be syntactic or semantic survey question errors. Misinterpreting survey questions could lead to participants providing answers that did not truly reflect their professional opinions.

Recommendations for Future Research

The information gained from this study adds to the existing literature but also highlights the need for future research centered on language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA. Future research needs to focus on effective ways to alleviate the reported complexity surrounding language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA. Some SLPs who participated in this study did not believe that aligning students' SLP language-intervention goals to the CCSS will lead to improved student learning for the majority of students they serve. Future research should examine the specific reasons SLPs do not view language goal alignment to the CCSS as a relative advantage. SLPs who participated in this study indicated that a lack of professional development and a lack of professional collaboration are reasons the process of aligning language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA is complex. Possible future research could focus on evaluating the effects that increased professional development time has on reducing the perceived complexity regarding language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA. Possible future research could focus on evaluating the effects that increased professional collaboration among SLPs has on alleviating the perceived complexities regarding language goal alignment to the CCSS for ELA. Finally, qualitative and descriptive research should be conducted to provide more specific information regarding the complexities encountered by SLPs attempting to align language-therapy goals to the CCSS for ELA for students who are experiencing a performance gap.

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Appendix

Common Core Feedback Tool for SLPs

Common Core Feedback Tool for Speech-Language Pathologists

1. Background Information

Is your role/title Speech-Language Pathologist?

- Yes
 No

2. Do you have your Certificate of Clinical Competence?

- Yes
 No

3. Please indicate your professional affiliation?

- SIG 16 (Special Interest Group 16)
 NYSSLHA (New York State Speech Language Hearing Association)
 Both SIG 16 and NYSSLHA

4. Please select the grades in which you provide speech-language therapy support. (Check all that apply)

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Kindergarten | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grade 1 | <input type="checkbox"/> Grade 6 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grade 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> Grade 7 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grade 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> Grade 8 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grade 4 | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grade 5 | |

5. Please indicate years of experience working as an SLP in public schools:

_____ years of experience.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 – 5 years of experience | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 5 – 10 years of experience | <input type="checkbox"/> 30 – 35 years of experience |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 10 – 15 years of experience | <input type="checkbox"/> 35 – 40 years of experience |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 15 – 20 years of experience | <input type="checkbox"/> 40 – 45 years of experience |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 20 – 25 years of experience | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 25 – 30 years of experience | |

If you have more than 45 years of experience, please indicate the number of years you have worked as a speech-language pathologist in the public school system: _____

Objective 1: Instructional Practices –

6. How much do you know about the departments of education's transition to the Common Core State Standards?

- I have comprehensive knowledge about the transition to the Common Core.
 I have some knowledge about the transition to the Common Core.
 I have little knowledge about the transition to the Common Core.
 I have no knowledge about the transition to the Common Core.

7. Have you read the Common Core State Standards that relate to the grade levels

and subject area you work with? Y/N/

8. How much do you know about the Common Core State Standards and your responsibility to incorporate them into you speech-language therapy sessions?
- I have comprehensive knowledge.
 - I have some knowledge.
 - I have little knowledge.
 - I have no knowledge.
9. I believe that aligning student’s SLP language intervention goals to the Common Core State Standards will lead to improved student learning for the majority of students I serve.
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
 - I don’t know
10. If you answered “agree” or “strongly agree” for question #4 , please identify the reasons you believe that aligning SLP language goals to the Common Core State Standards will benefit the majority of the students you serve. (check all that apply)
- They will help educators focus on what’s most important.
 - They will help educators better prepare students for college
 - They will help educators better prepare students to compete in the workforce.
 - They will ensure that a high school diploma has meaning.
 - They will provide educators a manageable amount of curriculum to teach in a school year.
 - They will give students the opportunity to master key competencies, rather than just being superficially exposed to them.
 - They will help my school system ensure that our standards are vertically aligned from kindergarten through Grade 12.
 - They will provide students a clearer understanding of what they must know in order to succeed.
 - Other: _____
11. If you answered “disagree” or “strongly disagree” to #4, please identify the reasons you believe that aligning SLP language goals to the Common Core State Standards will not benefit the majority of students you serve. (check all that apply)
- Our current state standards are better than the Common Core.
 - The Common Core are too rigorous for many students I teach.

- The Common Core excludes important concepts that students should learn.
 - The Common Core embraces a “one size fits all” approach that will not help the students on my caseload.
 - The standards do not provide educators the flexibility needed to help students who are not on grade level.
 - Other:
-

12. Identify your level of agreement with the following statement: I believe that the act of aligning students’ language intervention goals to the Common Core State Standards and creating standards-based IEPs does not violate the requirements in the Individual Education Improvement Act to create individualized education plans for the majority of students I serve.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- I don’t know

13. How much do you know about the ELA core standards?

- I have comprehensive knowledge about the transition to the Common Core.
- I have some knowledge about the transition to the Common Core.
- I have little knowledge about the transition to the Common Core.
- I have no knowledge about the transition to the Common Core.

14. Have you read the ELA core standards for the grade levels you work with? Y/N/

15. Do you know how to align language goals to the ELA common-core state standards? Yes / No

16. I believe that linking students’ language intervention goals to the ELA core standards will lead to improved student learning for the majority of students I serve.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- I don’t know

17. What is the extent to which you are developing standards-based IEPs that align language intervention goals with CCSS for ELA?

- Beginning Stage-Familiarizing myself with how to align IEPs with CCSS

- Middle Stage-Still working through the challenges.
- Advanced Stage- Able to align IEP goals with CCSS for students on my caseload.

Objective 2: Feasibility–

18. Do you feel prepared to develop standards-based IEP that align intervention goals with common-core state standards for ELA?
- Yes, I feel completely prepared.
 - I feel somewhat prepared.
 - No, I do not feel prepared at all.
 - I do not know if I'm prepared.
19. [For those who answered “no” or “I don't know”] What would help you feel prepared to align therapy IEP goals to the Common Core State Standards for ELA ? (check all that apply)
- Access to curricular resources aligned to the Common Core
 - Access to assessments aligned to the Common Core
 - More information about how the standards change what is expected of my instructional practice
 - More information about how the standards change what is expected of students
 - Other: _____
20. Do you feel that the process of aligning language therapy goals to grade level CCSS for ELA is complicated for the grade levels you work with?
- Yes, I feel the process is very complicated.
 - I feel that it is somewhat complicated.
 - No, I do not feel the process is complicated at all.
 - I do not know if it is complicated, I have not yet tried.
21. [For those who answer “Yes” or “Somewhat Complicated”] Please identify the reasons you believe that the process of aligning language therapy goals to grade level CCSS for ELA is complicated for the students you work with. (check all that apply)
- Students' prior knowledge
 - Need more information about the standards
 - Need more therapy materials aligned with CCSS for ELA.
 - Need more time to help students really learn the standards
 - Need more quality professional development to learn how to align language goals to the CCSS for ELA
 - Need more time to collaborate with my colleagues
 - Other: _____