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Interdisciplinary Collaboration of Pre-Service School Practitioners: Pilot Survey Results of Perceived Training and Practice for Special Education Services

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Abstract

Interdisciplinary collaboration plays a critical role in supporting student outcomes in school settings, yet limited research has explored how pre-service school practitioners are prepared for this work. This study aimed to examine the perceived training and practices related to interdisciplinary collaboration among pre-service school counselors, special education teachers, and general education teachers. We collected online survey data from students enrolled in school practitioner training programs at a large university in the Southeastern United States. A total of 46 participants completed the survey. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages to examine participants' perceptions of their training and agreement with interdisciplinary collaboration practices. Findings showed that participants completed an average of two courses focused on interdisciplinary collaboration. Most participants reported receiving a moderate amount of training in collaboration strategies and best practices, while fewer received training in theories or multi-tiered systems of support. Across three domains—teamwork (α = 0.75), assessment (α = 0.85), and instruction/instructional support (α = 0.87)—participants generally agreed with the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration practices. However, many also reported feeling underprepared and lacking confidence in applying these practices. These findings suggest a need to strengthen interdisciplinary collaboration training in school-based preparation programs to better equip pre-service practitioners for collaborative roles in schools.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary collaboration, inclusive education, school practitioners, pre-service

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1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction of the problem

Interdisciplinary collaboration (IC) is a process that utilizes the knowledge and skills of multiple stakeholders (e.g. teachers, school administration, parents, and students) to work collaboratively to solve a common goal through shared problem-solving and decision-making (Dillon et al., 2021). The process involves designing individual instructional programs to meet defined outcomes, collect data, and monitor progress (Hernandez, 2013; McLeskey et al., 2017). IC serves as one of the driving forces behind inclusive education providing the foundation needed to support students from all backgrounds through working collaboratively to design and implement tailored accommodations and comprehensive academic, college and career, and social-emotional support to students with exceptional learning needs (Dillon et al., 2021).

1.2. Literature review

Existing research demonstrates that the collaboration between school practitioners (e.g. general and special education teachers, school counselors, and school psychologists) is crucial in addressing the needs of students with exceptional learning needs - those who are gifted, have a disability, a learning difference, or are twice-exceptional (Barrow & Mamlin, 2016; Dillon et al., 2021; Hall, 2015). Students with exceptional learning needs exhibit diverse academic and social-emotional needs, and IC ensures that school practitioners address all aspects of the students' development through a holistic approach (Dillon et al., 2021). In addition, these students also require accommodations through individualized educational programming that are developed collaboratively to ensure comprehensive and cohesive support (Heward, 2013).

Dillon et al. (2021) noted that IC is effective in inclusive settings when there is a need for respect for different perspectives, effective communication, and shared governance. Dillon et al. (2021) noted that according to Bronstein's interdisciplinary collaboration model, effective collaboration among school practitioners entails interdependence, newly created professional activities that expand one's knowledge, flexibility involving blurred disciplinary boundaries, collective ownership of goals, and productive reflection. These components contribute to a positive collaborative relationship among school practitioners that positively impacts student success particularly those with exceptional learning needs (Dillon et al., 2021; Oehrtman, 2022).

The collaborative efforts among school practitioners creates an enriched, inclusive learning environment as they share knowledge and expertise from their respective roles to provide services to students with diverse needs (Hernandez, 2013). For instance, school

counselors are experts in academic, college/career, and social-emotional development, whereas general education teachers are experts in content-based instruction and curate the classroom environment, while special education teachers are responsible for guaranteeing that students with exceptional learning needs have access to the curriculum. However, Parikh Foxx and Anderson (2020) noted that school counselors and teachers are not often prepared to work collaboratively in inclusive settings and Beesley (2004) noted that in general there is limited research on inclusive education IC. Most of the research has been centered on special education teacher preparedness neglecting the collaboration with other school personnel (Da Fonte & Barton-Arwoos, 2017). The importance of IC in the implementation of inclusive education cannot be overemphasized given the unique needs of students and the expertise and responsibilities of various school personnel.

1.3. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to determine how pre-service school practitioners (i.e., school counselors, special education teachers, and teachers) perceive their training and practices in IC. IC research has focused on in-service school practitioners yet has limited focus on pre-service trainees. This study aims to address this gap by sharing insights into the perceived training of IC with pre-service school practitioners. This study addresses the following research questions: (a) To what extent do pre-service school practitioners perceive that their training program covered interdisciplinary collaboration? (b) To what extent do pre-service school practitioners agree or disagree with interdisciplinary collaboration practices?

2. Method

This study explores the extent to which pre-service school practitioners perceived training and practices in IC. We obtained an Institutional Review Board's approval before data collection began.

2.1. Participants

Participants consisted of three different types of school practitioner training programs: (a) 18 teacher education, (b) 14 special education, and (c) 14 school counselor (see Figure 1). Participants on average were enrolled in their second year of their training program.

Participants consisted of four different ethnic groups (see Table 1): (a) 18 Black or African American, (b) 15 Caucasian, (c) 10 Latinx, and (d) 1 American Indian or Alaskan Native. Two participants declined to respond. Participants consisted of two gender groups (see Table 1): 38 female and 8 male. Age ranged from 18-46 years old and 3 participants declined to respond.

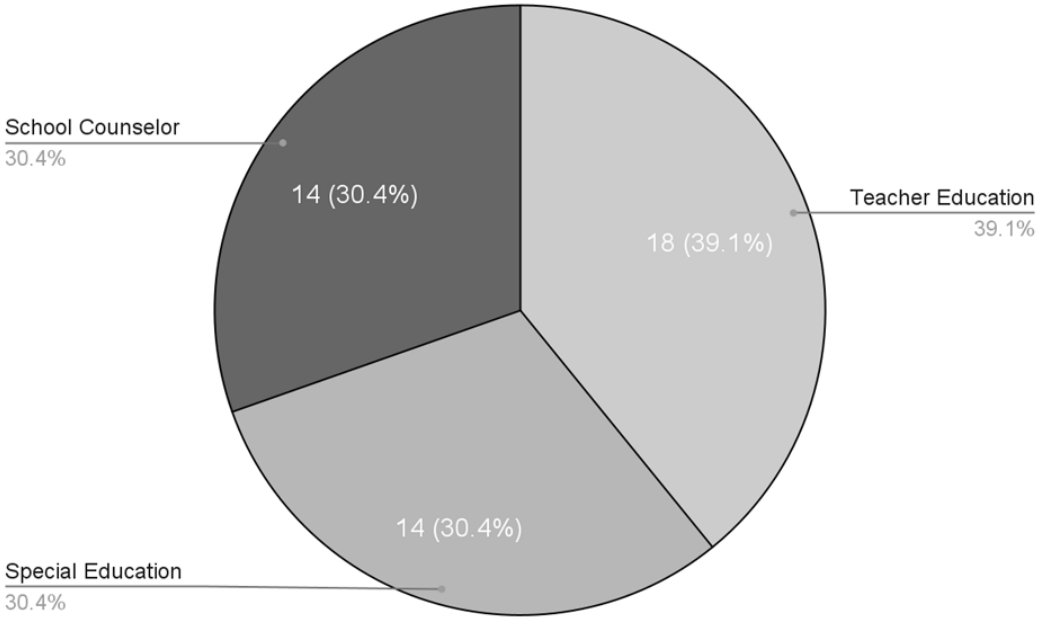

Figure 1. School Practitioner Trainee Programs

Table 1. Demographics of Partcipants

Ethnicity	Responses	Gender	Responses
Black or African American	18 (39%)	Female	38 (83%)
Caucasian	15 (33%)	Male	8 (17%)
Latinx	10 (22%)		
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1 (2%)		
Decline to respond	2 (4%)		

2.2. Instrumentation

A survey design was used to collect data on pre-service school practitioners' perceived training and practices in IC. The survey contained 32 questions broken into three sections: (a) demographic section with six questions, (b) interdisciplinary collaboration training with nine questions, and (c) interdisciplinary collaboration practices with 17

questions. The research team developed the interdisciplinary collaboration questions for this study, consisting of four faculty and two expert reviewers. Three faculty identified as counselor educators with experience teaching and consulting about IC. One faculty identified as a special educator with experience teaching and consulting IC. The survey was reviewed by two experts who have extensive backgrounds in inclusive education, teaching students with exceptional needs, and IC.

Questions were developed across six steps. The lead and second authors met to draft a total of 31 questions to determine interdisciplinary collaboration training and practices as part of the first step. The lead and second authors sent the questions to the third and fourth authors for independent review during the second step. After receiving the independent review feedback, the third step saw the research team meet to come to consensus on edits recommended by the third and fourth authors. The questions were then reviewed by two independent reviewers in the fourth step. The reviewers recommended removing five questions due to redundancy and rewording nine other questions to reflect training experiences more clearly. The lead and second authors met to review and edit questions based on the independent reviewer feedback during the fifth step. This resulted in the removal of five questions and editing of the wording of all questions to focus more on training experiences. The last step saw the research team reviewing the edits and coming to consensus.

2.3. Procedures

We collected online survey data from various school practitioner training programs (i.e., school counseling, special education, and teacher education) from a large university in the Southeastern United States. Four school practitioner preparation program directors and coordinators across the campus received an invitation to participate in the study via email with a request to share the invitation with their students. The director and coordinator sent the invitation to all students in their program. Participants were able to self-select for the study by reviewing the invitation email and reading and agreeing to the informed consent before they had access to the survey. Participants who completed the survey were able to choose a $5 Amazon or Starbucks e-gift card. The invitation email reminder was sent to all program directors and coordinators after two weeks with encouragement to resend the invitation to all students. The data collection process lasted for four weeks from March 4, 2024 until April 5, 2024.

2.4. Data analysis

All data were analyzed using SPSS 29.0.1.1. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to answer both research questions. Descriptive statistics helped to determine to what extent pre-service school practitioners perceived

that they received training in interdisciplinary collaboration and pre-service school practitioners' level of agreement or disagreement with interdisciplinary collaboration practices.

3. Results

This pilot study collected data from a large university in the Southeastern part of the United States using an online survey. We invited four school practitioner preparation program directors and coordinators at the university to share it with their currently enrolled students.

3.1. Response rate

School practitioner program directors and coordinators were requested to send an online survey to all currently enrolled students. There are an estimated 700 students enrolled in all school practitioner programs. There were a total of 75 responses, a 10.7% response rate, after four weeks. Data were cleaned and deleted responses with less than 75% complete. The final usable data consisted of 46 surveys (61% usable rate).

3.2. Data analysis

The results of this study aimed to share insights into the training of pre-service school practitioners in IC. The results aim to address the following research questions: (a) To what extent do pre-service school practitioners perceive that their training program covered interdisciplinary collaboration? and (b) To what extent do pre-service school practitioners agree or disagree with interdisciplinary collaboration practices?

3.3. Training

The survey used the following defined for IC at the top of the survey: “Interdisciplinary collaboration is the process where stakeholders (e.g., school-based practitioners, including school counselors and teachers) work together to learn from each other, exchange ideas, strategies, and solutions to achieve a common goal (Bird, 2022; Griffiths et al., 2021). Interdisciplinary collaboration can be implemented at the following levels: school, faculty and staff, and classroom.” The interdisciplinary training consisted of seven questions ($\alpha = 0.93$).

Participants indicated a range of 0-5 courses that covered interdisciplinary collaboration with the average being about 2 courses. Participants indicated that they learned about interdisciplinary collaboration in their training program as follows: 1 (2%) not at all, 18 (39%) a little, 18 (39%) a moderate amount, 5 (11%) a lot, and 4 (9%) a great deal. Participants indicated that they learned about interdisciplinary collaboration

theories as follows: 7 (15%) not at all, 16 (35%) a little, 16 (35%) a moderate amount, 5 (11%) a lot, and 2 (4%) a great deal. Participants indicated that they learned about interdisciplinary collaboration in multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) as follows: 7 (15%) not at all, 15 (33%) a little, 15 (33%) a moderate amount, 7 (15%) a lot, and 2 (4%) a great deal. Participants indicated that they learned about interdisciplinary collaboration strategies as follows: 6 (13%) not at all, 12 (26%) a little, 21 (46%) a moderate amount, 5 (11%) a lot, and 2 (4%) a great deal. Participants indicated that they learned about interdisciplinary collaboration best practices as follows: 6 (13%) not at all, 16 (35%) a little, 18 (39%) a moderate amount, 4 (9%) a lot, and 2 (4%) a great deal.

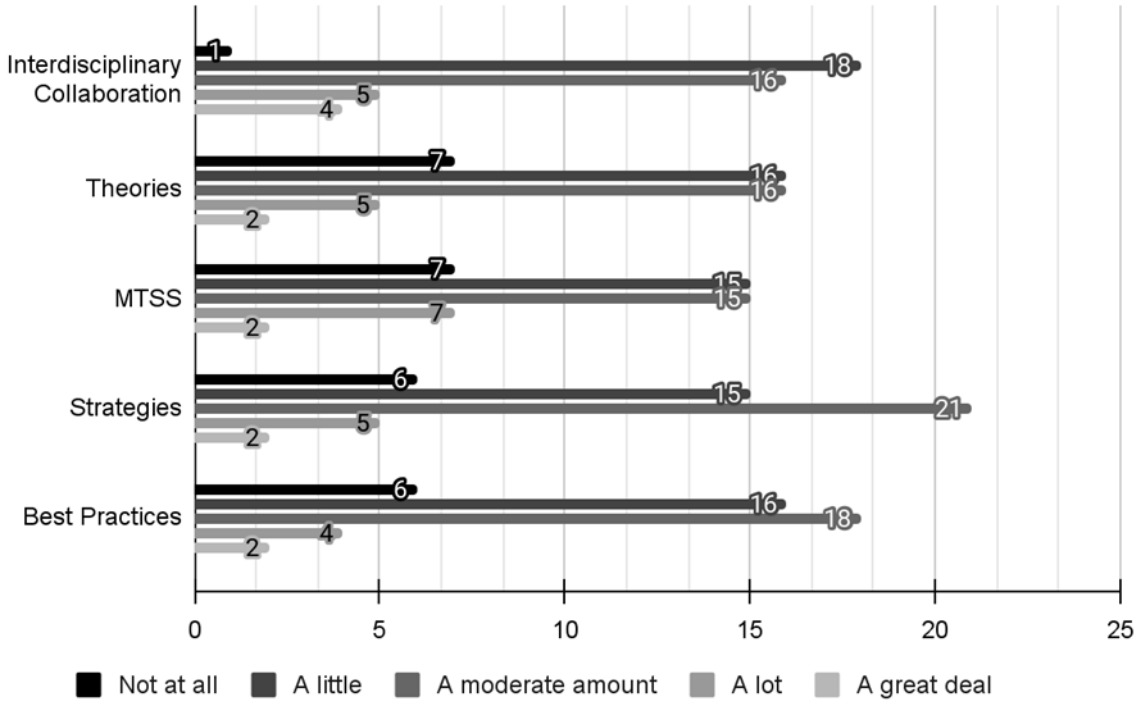

Figure 2. Training Program Content

Participants indicated that they feel prepared to use interdisciplinary collaboration in their role in schools as follows: 2 not at all, 21 a little, 15 a moderate amount, 6 a lot, and 2 a great deal. Participants indicated that they feel confident in their ability to use interdisciplinary collaboration in their role in schools as follows: 2 not at all, 24 a little, 11 a moderate amount, 6 a lot, and 3 a great deal.

Table 2. Preparation and Confidence

Prepared	Responses
Not at all	2 (4%)
A little	21 (46%)
A moderate amount	15 (33%)
A lot	6 (13%)
A great deal	2 (4%)
Confidence	**Responses**
Not at all	2 (4%)
A little	24 (52%)
A moderate amount	11 (24%)
A lot	6 (13%)
A great deal	3 (7%)

Participants indicated that the following people should be a part of IC as follows: 40 (87%) teacher, 37 (80%) special education teacher, 37 (80%) school counselor, 37 (80%) school psychologist, 32 (70%) paraprofessional, 29 (63%) school administrator, 28 (61%) school social worker, 2 (4%) parents, and 1 (2%) student.

3.4. Practices

Interdisciplinary collaboration practices were broken into three domains: (a) teamwork, (b) assessment, and (c) instruction/instructional support. The teamwork domain consisted of five items ($\alpha = 0.75$). The assessment domain consisted of five items ($\alpha = 0.85$). The instruction/instructional support domain consisted of six items ($\alpha = 0.87$).

Teamwork practices asked participants to identify the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the process of interdisciplinary collaboration (see Figure 3). Participants indicated teamwork in interdisciplinary collaboration using consensus building as follows: 0 (0%) strongly disagree, 3 (7%) somewhat disagree, 1 (2%) neither agree nor disagree, 17 (37%) somewhat agree, and 25 (54%) strongly agree. Participants indicated teamwork in interdisciplinary collaboration using goal setting as follows: 2 (4%) strongly disagree, 2 (4%) somewhat disagree, 3 (7%) neither agree nor disagree, 14 (30%)

somewhat agree, and 25 (54%) strongly agree. Participants indicated teamwork in interdisciplinary collaboration to plan curriculum as follows: 0 (0%) strongly disagree, 1 (2%) somewhat disagree, 8 (17%) neither agree nor disagree, 17 (37%) somewhat agree, and 20 (43%) strongly agree. Participants indicated teamwork in interdisciplinary collaboration to develop curriculum as follows: 0 (0%) strongly disagree, 1 (2%) somewhat disagree, 9 (20%) neither agree nor disagree, 13 (28%) somewhat agree, and 23 (50%) strongly agree. Participants indicated teamwork in interdisciplinary collaboration to co-implement the curriculum as follows:0 (0%) strongly disagree, 1 (2%) somewhat disagree, 4 (9%) neither agree nor disagree, 14 (30%) somewhat agree, and 27 (59%) strongly agree.

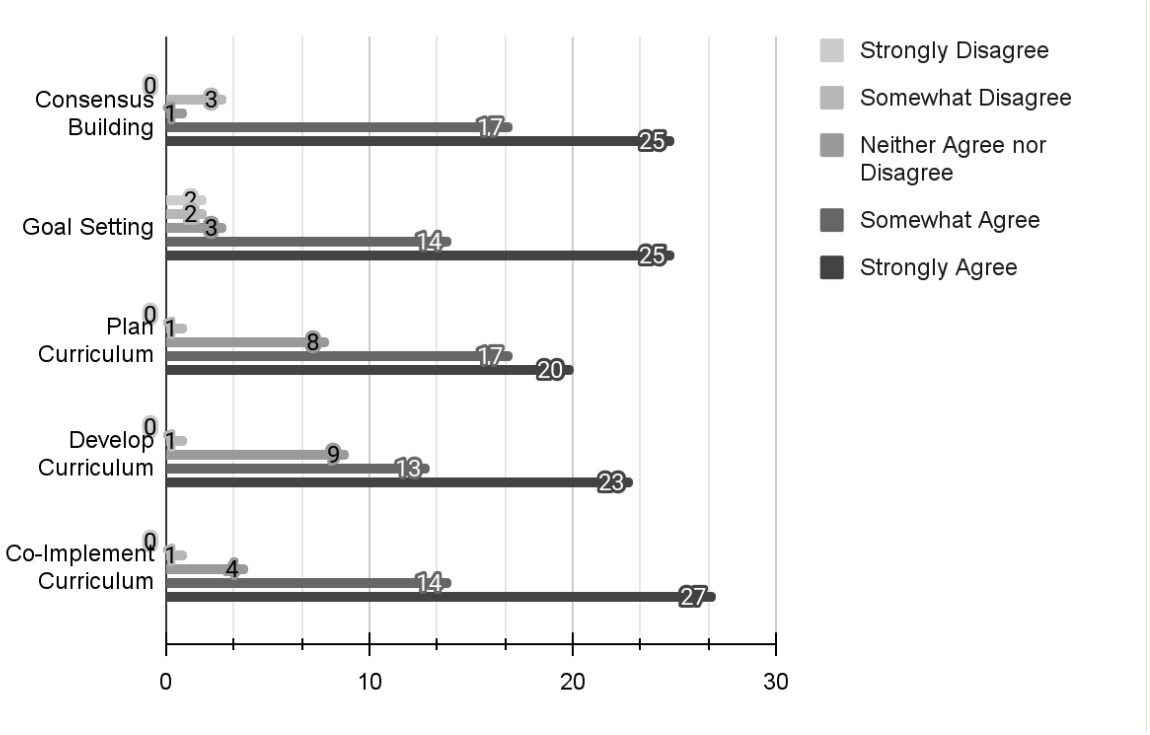

Figure 3. Teamwork Practices

Assessment practices asked participants to identify the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the process of interdisciplinary collaboration in using assessments (see Figure 4). Participants indicated interdisciplinary collaboration using assessments to identify needs as follows: 1 (2%) strongly disagree, 1 (2%) somewhat disagree, 2 (4%) neither agree nor disagree, 12 (26%) somewhat agree, and 30 (65%) strongly agree. Participants indicated interdisciplinary collaboration to modify assessments as follows: 1 (2%) strongly disagree, 3 (7%) somewhat disagree, 3 (7%) neither agree nor disagree, 8 (17%) somewhat agree, and 31 (67%) strongly agree. Participants indicated interdisciplinary collaboration to administer assessments as follows: 1 (2%) strongly disagree, 2 (4%) somewhat disagree, 7 (15%) neither agree nor disagree, 21 (46%) somewhat agree, and 15 (33%) strongly agree. Participants indicated interdisciplinary

collaboration in disseminating assessment results as follows: 3 (7%) strongly disagree, 1 (2%) somewhat disagree, 2 (4%) neither agree nor disagree, 8 (17%) somewhat agree, and 32 (70%) strongly agree. Participants indicated interdisciplinary collaboration in writing assessment reports as follows: 0 (0%) strongly disagree, 3 (7%) somewhat disagree, 0 (0%) neither agree nor disagree, 10 (22%) somewhat agree, and 33 (72%) strongly agree.

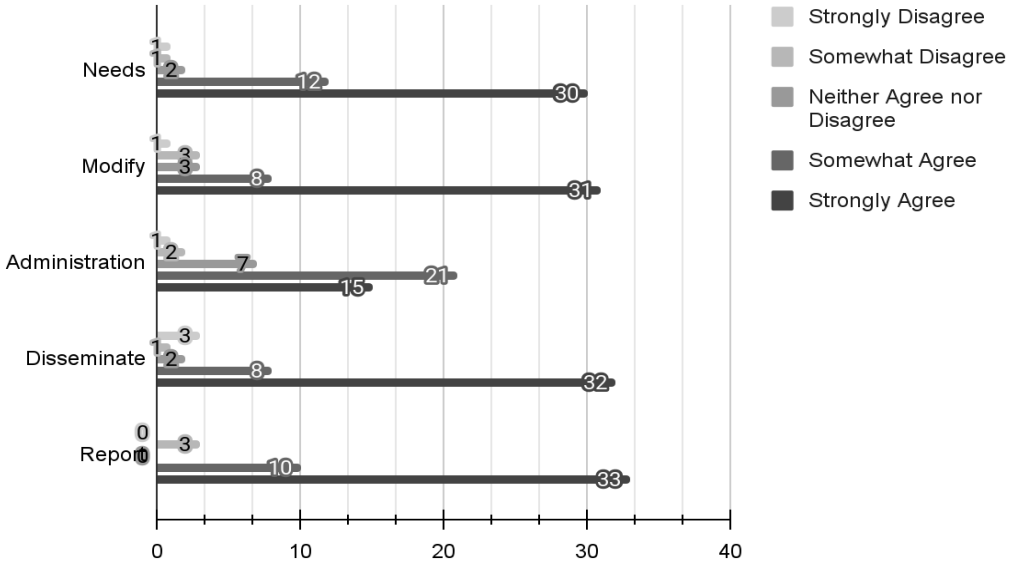

Figure 4. Assessment Practices

Instruction/instructional support practices asked participants to identify the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the process of interdisciplinary collaboration in instruction/instructional support (see Figure 5). Participants indicated interdisciplinary collaboration works together to collect instructional data as follows: 0 (0%) strongly disagree, 0 (0%) somewhat disagree, 2 (4%) neither agree nor disagree, 12 (26%) somewhat agree, and 32 (70%) strongly agree. Participants indicated interdisciplinary collaboration works together to analyze instructional data as follows: 0 (0%) strongly disagree, 0 (0%) somewhat disagree, 2 (4%) neither agree nor disagree, 9 (20%) somewhat agree, and 35 (76%) strongly agree. Participants indicated interdisciplinary collaboration work together to review instructional data as follows: 0 (0%) strongly disagree, 0 (0%) somewhat disagree, 2 (4%) neither agree nor disagree, 11 (24%) somewhat agree, and 33 (72%) strongly agree. Participants indicated interdisciplinary collaboration work together to modify instructional practices as follows: 0 (0%) strongly disagree, 1 (2%) somewhat disagree, 7 (15%) neither agree nor disagree, 14 (30%) somewhat agree, and 24 (52%) strongly agree. Participants indicated interdisciplinary collaboration work together to

implement instructional support as follows: 0 (0%) strongly disagree, 0 (0%) somewhat disagree, 5 (11%) neither agree nor disagree, 9 (20%) somewhat agree, and 32 (70%) strongly agree.

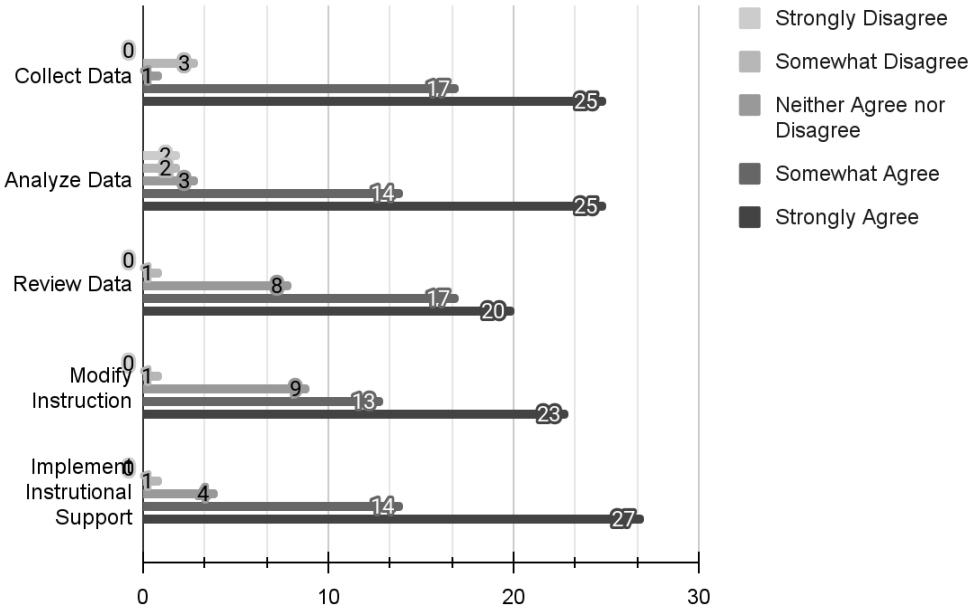

Figure 5. Instruction/Instructional Support Practices

4. Discussion

IC is an essential process that can benefit school practitioners by enhancing their attitudes, knowledge, and skills to benefit student development (McDaniel et al., 2022; Parikh Foxx & Anderson, 2020). IC provides school practitioners the opportunity to identify, develop, implement, and evaluate instructional, instructional support services, and accommodations designed to address academic, college/career, and/or social-emotional development (Dillon et al., 2021). School practitioners need to be adequately trained in IC theories, systemic supports, strategies, and best practices (Chitiyo & Alasa, 2023). Our study provides insight into how school practitioners are trained and perceptions of practices that could directly benefit school practitioner training programs.

4.1. Statement of principle findings

IC training requires school practitioners to have a deep understanding of various practices that can enrich the development of colleagues and students (Dillon et al., 2021; Goodman-Scott et al., 2018; McDaniel et al., 2022; Yada et al., 2022). Understanding how

school practitioners are trained and their perceptions of practices will provide insight into training approaches that can benefit collaboration and student development. Identifying perceptions of training and practices can transform school practitioner practices in supporting students with exceptional learning needs (Muñoz-Martínez et al., 2020), our study's results will provide school practitioner training programs with information that could benefit their training and development of IC for various school practitioners.

4.2. Training

Our study found that participants completed, on average, two courses that discussed IC; however, 41% of participants noted that they received not at all to a little training in IC. Participants indicated that their training experiences covered strategies (61%) and best practices (52%) a moderate amount to a great deal. Theories and MTSS being split between not at all to a little (50%) and a moderate amount to a great deal (50%). Pinkelman et al. (2025) noted that training is foundational to acquiring the necessary attitudes, knowledge, and skills to effectively utilize IC. We recommend that training on IC be integrated across the curriculum and cover more detailed information about how to use IC in MTSS and across the school system.

Our study found that participants were split between not at all to a little (50%) and a moderate amount to a great deal (50%) in their preparation to use IC; however, 56% of participants reported feeling not at all to a little confident and 44% reported feeling a moderate amount to a great deal of confidence in using IC. Developing preparedness and confidence in utilizing IC is essential to acquiring the necessary attitudes, knowledge, and skills to utilize IC (Berasategi et al., 2020; Hall, 2015). McDaniel et al. (2022) noted that IC is taught in isolation to school practitioners without providing opportunities for practical application across disciplines. Working collaboratively can help to improve one's confidence in addressing multiple concerns (Goodman-Scott et al., 2018; Yada et al., 2022). We recommend that school practitioner programs collaborate across disciplines to apply what is learned to help increase confidence.

4.3. Practices

Our study found that participants mostly strongly agreed with the process of IC in teamwork, assessment, and instruction/instructional support practices. Forty-six percent of participants somewhat agreed that IC should be used in administering assessments. IC could be meaningful when administering assessments to help address user bias and ensure standardization in the administration process. Working collaboratively across disciplines can enrich academic outcomes (McLeskey et al., 2017). Participant perceptions about IC practices do not translate to their process of using IC in those

practices. More research is needed to determine how perceptions of practices relate to using practices given that 56% of participants felt not at all to a little confident in using IC. Understanding how participants perceive practices can provide context for school practitioner training programs to provide trainees with the accurate attitudes, knowledge, and skills for practices associated with IC for students with exceptional learning needs (Davis et al., 2023).

4.4. Limitations

Our study is a pilot study, which limits the generalizability of the results. The study sampled from one university, which may not be representative of the training practices of school practitioner training programs across the United States. This study would benefit from sampling across the United States to gather more insights into training practices.

4.5. Future research

Findings from this study provide an opportunity for future research. Researchers could expand this study across the United States to determine the extent of training and practices in IC. Researchers could explore the extent of preparedness and confidence in relationship to IC practices. Lastly, researchers could determine the competence in utilizing IC practices.

5. Conclusions

IC is an essential part of working in schools. The process can improve teamwork, assessment, instructional practices, and instructional support (McLeskey et al., 2017). However, in addressing students with challenging behavioral and mental health concerns, Foxx and Anderson (2020) reveal the lack of robust training programs for special education teachers and counselors. The results indicate a need to equip both school counselors and teachers with the necessary skills for collaborative problem-solving (Graesser et al., 2018). The researchers also emphasize the importance of including evidence-based interventions and hands-on experiences in training curricula. Interdisciplinary collaboration between special education teachers and counselors has significant potential to build a truly inclusive educational system. This collaboration addresses the need for improvement in counselor's confidence, as well as, positive attitudes among teachers to work in inclusive settings (Yada et al., 2022; Goodman-Scott et al., 2018).

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