

Neurodiversity-Affirming Practice – Exploring the Knowledge and Perspectives of Australian Speech Pathologists

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Short Abstract

A philosophical shift towards inclusive, neurodiversity-affirming practice in speech pathology and other allied health professions has been underway for several years. However, understanding how to plan and implement assessment and intervention that reflects the principles and values of the neurodiversity movement, while also meeting professional imperatives of evidence-based practice, currently presents a challenge for many professionals in Australia.

This presentation will discuss the results of a neurodivergent-led research project, which aimed to explore how evolving understandings of neurodiversity are shaping the work of Australian speech pathologists. Through a mixed methods approach, 137 professionals provided insights into how they currently conceptualise neurodiversity, their self-reported confidence to enact inclusive, neurodiversity-affirming approaches, where they are accessing practice guidance, and what they believe are the factors that currently enable or challenge a profession-wide shift towards neurodiversity-affirming principles and practices. Emerging and ongoing challenges and opportunities for the speech pathology profession highlighted by the results of this research will be discussed, as well as the broader implications for tertiary allied health education, continuing professional development, and workplaces aiming to support allied health professionals in the implementation of neurodiversity-affirming approaches.

Speech pathologists have an important role to play in promoting the inclusion and support of diverse communication amongst health professionals and within communities, including full-time and part-time speech alternatives. As such, it is critical that we start to explore the resources, guidance and knowledge that would continue to support them in this work.

Long Abstract

Background: The lived experience-centred neurodiversity movement has challenged and influenced the speech pathology profession, both in Australia and internationally, over the past decade. In particular, social media platforms have increased the social connectedness of both neurodivergent individuals and those who provide therapeutic supports. With the increased platform and access to the voices of those with lived experience, the movement towards highly reflective practice and reflection on past practices has grown. To date, however, there has been limited research in Australia about the challenges and

opportunities facing Australian speech pathologists who are seeking to work in a neurodiversity-affirming way.

There are few neurodiversity-affirming assessments or intervention practices that are supported by an empirical evidence base, and so there is little guidance from the research literature to support allied health professionals to implement neurodiversity-affirming approaches in their work. Similarly, many workplaces may not be equipped to support clinicians in this practice shift. For speech pathologists, much of the conversation and support for neurodiversity-affirming approaches is currently happening online, led by neurodivergent clinicians via social media and informal peer-support networks.

Method & Results: This research aimed to explore how evolving understandings of neurodiversity are shaping the work of Australian speech pathologists. Through a mixed methods survey and interview series, 137 professionals provided insights into how they currently conceptualise neurodiversity, their self-reported confidence to enact inclusive, neurodiversity-affirming approaches, where they are accessing practice guidance, and what they believe are the factors that currently enable or challenge a profession-wide shift towards neurodiversity-affirming principles and practices.

Conclusion: This project is the first opportunity that Australian speech pathologists have had to share their insights and experiences on the application of neurodiversity-affirming practice across service sectors in a research context, including how changes and shifts in the sector impact recipients of speech pathology services, personal and professional challenges in making practice shifts, and practitioners' visions for the future of our profession in supporting neurodivergent clients. This project is also neurodivergent led, which has allowed us to develop and analyse the questions from a position of authentic personal lived experience in addition to knowledge of the speech pathology profession. This research is, therefore, the first study of its kind in speech pathology and, to the researchers' knowledge, the first study to explore how the shift in understanding of neurodivergence from deficit to difference is affecting day-to-day decision-making and practice in an allied health field. With a focus on promoting authentic communication in interactions and relationships, shifting practice in speech pathology to be authentically and deeply neurodiversity-affirming, beyond the use of buzz words, is an important objective in the pursuit of a broad, societal shift towards inclusion of diverse communication modes and styles. Speech pathologists have an important role to play in promoting the inclusion and support of diverse communication amongst professionals and within communities, including full-time and part-time speech alternatives, and so it is critical that we start to explore the resources, guidance and knowledge that would continue to support them in this work.