

Transversal Competences and Normative Aspects: Formation of Speech Therapy Students in the Campania Region

Verlanti Girolamo^{1*}, Sivo Tiziana², Brancati Federica³, Gennaro Rosaria⁴, Zupi Maria Francesca⁵, De Luca Picione Simona⁶

1. UOC Otorinolaringoiatria, AORN S. Anna e S. Sebastiano di Caserta

2. Nucleo di Neuropsichiatria infantile Distretto 29 ASL NA 1 Centro

3. UOC SIPS, AORN dei Colli -Monaldi, Cotugno, CTO, Napoli

4. Gerovit s.r.l., Aversa

5. UOC Medicina Riabilitativa Intensiva, AORN San Pio di Benevento

6. Centro Anna Rita Buonincontro, Casalnuovo di Napoli

* Corresponding Author: girolamoverlanti@gmail.com

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Speech therapy, soft skills, university education, healthcare legislation, professional ethics, CME, professional order, healthcare governance.

ABSTRACT

The university education Speech Therapy students, in addition to technical knowledge, must integrate both soft skills and normative knowledge, in order to provide students with the appropriate tools to face the challenges of the healthcare sector. This study examines the way in which soft skills and normative aspects are addressed in the formation of third-year students of Degree Courses in Speech Therapy in the Campania Region. Through a questionnaire administered to 85 students, 11 training areas were assessed. The results show a positive perception of formation on soft skills and professional responsibility, while areas in which preparation is perceived as less solid emerge, including knowledge of the Professional Order, CME training and health advertising. The statistical analysis confirms significant differences between the different areas of learning, suggesting the appropriateness of enhanced training on normative and deontological topics. The study offers hints for the implementation of teaching strategies aimed at consolidating the students' preparation in these areas, fostering greater awareness and security in the exercise of the profession.

INTRODUCTION

The university education landscape is constantly evolving, with an increasing focus on the development of skills that go beyond just technical knowledge. In the Degree Course in Speech Therapy, the preparation of students cannot be limited to the acquisition of clinical and therapeutic skills alone. Transversal skills, together with a sound knowledge of professional regulation and health governance, are fundamental elements in the training of speech therapists who are ready to respond to the complex requirements of the professional world and contribute effectively to public health [1].

Soft skills include a range of abilities and aptitudes that enable individuals to interact effectively with others, manage their emotions and deal successfully with problematic situations. [2,3]. For speech-language pathologists, these competencies are essential not only for establishing a trusting therapeutic relationship with patients, but also for working in multidisciplinary teams, communicating effectively with colleagues and patients' families, and adapting quickly to changes and new challenges in the healthcare system. Among the most relevant soft skills

for speech therapists are interpersonal communication, the ability to work in a team, problem solving, time management and critical thinking [2].

The application of soft skills is further enhanced when combined with a thorough knowledge of health regulations, enabling speech therapists to contribute effectively to public health. Therefore, knowledge of the regulatory aspects closely related to the profession and the management of health programs is crucial to understanding the context in which one works and being able to navigate the legal aspects, guidelines and clinical practices that govern the profession. Health policies directly influence the work of speech-language pathologists, determining how services are accessed, criteria for delivery of care, and strategies for prevention and health promotion. A sound understanding of them allows, not only for the improvement of healthcare systems through the implementation of evidence-based practices, but also for the active support of patients' rights, guaranteeing them fair and appropriate access to care services. Furthermore, it allows speech-language pathologists to significantly contribute to the definition of strategies that are appropriate and adaptable to the



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continuous evolution of the healthcare system, thus responding to the emerging needs of the population and addressing future challenges in a proactive and effective manner.

This study aims to examine the level of training in soft skills and normative aspects among students of the Courses of Studies (CdS) in Speech Therapy in the Campania Region (Italy). The objective is to assess the integration of these skills into the academic curriculum and to measure the degree of satisfaction of students with the formation received in these areas, which are essential for their future profession [4].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

The study involved a sample of 85 students enrolled in the third year of the Bachelor of Science in Speech Therapy at the University of Naples 'Federico II' and the University of Campania 'L. Vanvitelli'. The study group included 81 females and 4 males.

Tools

In order to assess the transversal skills and regulatory aspects of the profession of the participants, a questionnaire was structured with 12 items, in which the students indicated the degree level of training they had acquired during their studies. An initial item was structured to indicate the university to which they belonged, the next 6 items, on the other hand, were structured to detect the degree of knowledge regarding the organisation and purpose of the professional association, health advertising, Continuing Medical Education (CME) training, professional responsibility, code of ethics and research methodology[5-8]. The last five items contain

ed questions relating specifically to soft skills. The response scale was a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Very Bad, 5 = Excellent).

Procedure

The study was conducted in two phases. In the Project 'The profession of Speech Therapist: a look at the past to understand the present and orientate the future' organised by the Board of Speech Therapists of TSRM PSTRP ORDER NA-AV-BN-CE in collaboration with both Boards of Studies in Speech Therapy of the Campania Universities, all third-year students were asked to fill a structured questionnaire before attending the seminar. The questionnaire was administered in June and July 2024 and was carried out with an online Google Forms and a paper form. The average time for completing the questionnaires was 15 minutes.

In the second phase, at a later stage, participants took part in a specific training session on the soft skills and normative aspects that were most critical in the questionnaire. The formation included group discussions and practical examples to facilitate the learning and application of the acquired skills in professional practice.

RESULTS

The items considered in this analysis concern the level of satisfaction with the training acquired with respect to 11 macro-categories referring to the specific training of students with respect to knowledge and skills acquired during the course of study (6 items) and soft skills (5 items). Table 1 shows the items investigated with the prevailing response found.

Descriptive statistics:

Table 1. Report, among the possible items, the most common value and its frequency.

Answer	Prevalent answer	% of total participants
Organisation and aims of the Professional Order	Poor	49,4
CME Training	Scarce	45,9
Health advertising	Scarce	45,9
Professional responsibility	Good	43,5
Code of ethics	Satisfactory	43,5
Research methodology	Good	40,0
Report writing and reporting	Good	40,0
Problem solving skills	Good	40,0
Communication skills	Good	51,8
Management of interpersonal relations	Good	40,0
Planning and scheduling of activities and projects	Good	40,0



The descriptive analysis of the data collected from the evaluated items shows the following key information (considering Likert scale values from 1 to 5, i.e. from very poor to excellent) regarding the distribution of the answers:

- The median for most categories is around 2 or 3, indicated a general trend towards a 'Poor' or 'Satisfactory' perception of the training received.
- 'Organisation and purpose of the professional association', 'CME training' and 'Health publicity' received a prevalence of 'Poor' responses.
- 'Professional Responsibility' and 'Communication Skills' have a median value of 4, suggesting greater satisfaction than other areas.

If we consider the average and variability of the results, we find that:

- The mean of the ratings varies between 2.40 (for 'Health Publicity') and 3.58 (for 'Professional Responsibility'), indicating that some areas are perceived as less satisfactory than others.
- The highest standard deviation is observed for 'Healthcare Advertising' (0.90), suggesting a greater dispersion of responses than the average.

The inferential analysis conducted on the data collected from the questionnaire submitted to the students of the Degree Courses in Speech Therapy in the Campania Region produced a highly significant result. Using a one-way ANOVA to compare the average satisfaction between the different areas of knowledge and competence, a value of $F=25$ with a $p\text{-value}<0.0001$ was obtained. This result indicates that there are statistically significant differences between the various categories assessed.

DISCUSSION

The results obtained from the analysis of the items referring to transversal competences and soft skills suggest that, while there are aspects of curricular formation evaluated positively by the students, at the same time there are critical areas that need to be attended to in order to guarantee a more complete and balanced formation.

In particular, as far as transversal skills are concerned, knowledge about the setting and purpose of the professional association, CME training and health advertising are particularly poor. However, for a student, it is of fundamental importance to know both the institutional bodies aimed at protecting the profession, the regulations concerning continuing medical education and the indications for correct advertising in the health sector. These notions are indispensable for all professionals qualified to carry out a healthcare profession, first and foremost in order to comply with the legal dictates concerning compulsory registration with the professional Order, CME training, and proper scientific disclosure and, consequently, to field a competent and expert

professional practice to protect the citizen's right to health [9].

The field 'Professional Responsibility' shows a prevalent percentage value of 'Good', therefore the students perceive to have a good education on the concept of professional responsibility probably understood in the legal field, however this data does not coincide with the one highlighted by the item that investigates the knowledge of the Code of Ethics, to which the concept of professional responsibility is linked. Further in-depth study of these issues might be necessary, by integrating specific moments of reflection and practical exercise on ethical dilemmas and professional responsibilities into the training course.

The soft skills items are, in total, considered to be skills that are well researched and acquired during the degree course. The students' good perceptions of communication, relationship management and organizational skills represent a strength of the surveyed degree courses, underlining the effectiveness of the training approaches adopted in these areas.

The study makes a significant contribution to the field of speech-language training, as it represents one of the few works that systematically compares students' perceptions of both transversal and normative skills. It also provides a useful empirical basis for designing targeted and evidence-based training interventions. The practical implications of the results are manifold: for example, the need to structure more solid and integrated training courses on regulatory and deontological issues emerges, with the aim of bridging the perceived gaps and guaranteeing future professionals greater awareness and preparation in today's healthcare context [9,10].

Finally, the inferential analysis shows an extremely low $p\text{-value}$, which highlights that the differences observed between the ratings of the different training areas are not due to chance. Some areas may have received significantly higher or lower scores than others, suggesting the need for targeted interventions to improve the quality of training in the less satisfactory areas.

This work is therefore configured as a concrete tool for guiding the improvement of training curricula of Speech Therapy degree courses, not only in the Campania Region, but also in broader contexts, paving the way for national comparisons and the construction of training standards that are more homogeneous and responsive to the current needs of the profession [11,12].

CONCLUSIONS

What emerges from the study conducted is that, although there are some areas of university education in Speech Therapy that are mostly satisfactory for students, such as Curricular Training, Soft Skills, Legal Professional Responsibility and Communication Skills, significant criticalities emerge in others, particularly with regard to knowledge of the regulatory



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aspects related to the profession.

Transversal Skills play an essential role in speech-language pathology rehabilitation, facilitating interaction with patients and work in multidisciplinary teams. It is therefore clear that, while there is a solid base of technical skills, university education should further enhance the focus on these regulatory issues and health governance, to ensure a complete and up-to-date preparation of students of the Speech Therapy degree courses in Campania.

The results of the analysis conducted provide only a starting point for implementing specific training

modules on healthcare legislation, continuing education and the deontological aspects of the profession, revising the curricular contents, and introducing practical experiences related to professional regulations. These reported could be effective strategies to enhance the preparation in these areas, which are fundamental to guarantee a conscious professional practice that complies with current regulations, so that future speech therapists can operate with greater safety, awareness and professionalism in today's complex healthcare system.

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