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# Stepping Up and Taking the Lead: School-Based SLPs' Perceptions and Attitudes of Leadership

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## Abstract

This research explores the personal perspectives of school-based SLPs regarding their training in, perceptions of, and experiences regarding leadership. Survey research was conducted, and school-based SLPs acted as respondents. Results may inform education in leadership, both in student training and in continuing education. Leadership in the field of speech-language pathology is essential to not only advocate for better outcomes of clients and patients, but also to foster an environment for change and understanding for future generations of SLPs.

## Introduction

The field of SLP continues to expand, posing challenges to academic and clinical preparation of SLPs (Roth, 2015; Mason et al., 2020). According to Carozza (2019) this rapid growth has led to an increase in the roles and responsibilities for SLPs, including managerial and leadership roles. Leadership in healthcare professions is a developing field and has gained new importance with the global COVID-19 pandemic. ASHA has long since recognized the importance of leadership in the field of SLP. The association has developed various leadership programs, e.g. a yearlong Leadership Development Program (LDP) for members with leadership potential to encourage the development of leadership skills and giving back to the community through volunteering. The ASHA Leadership Academy was established to support leadership development (ASHA, n.d.).
According to ASHA's Professional Issues Statement on the roles and responsibilities of Speech-Language Pathologists in schools (ASHA Practice Policy, 2019), leadership is an important core role and responsibility. The leadership role is described as: "SLPs providing direction in defining their roles and responsibilities, and ensuring delivery of appropriate services to students." This leadership role is performed in advocacy, supervision and mentorship, professional development, parent training and research (ASHA, 2016). Collaboration is another key role of school-based SLPs and involves collaboration with other professionals, universities, communities and students. Current literature reveals an emphasis on leadership in both Interprofessional Education (IPE) and Interprofessional Practice (IPP). This development identifies the importance of exploring leadership in school-based SLPs. Secord (2007) stated that SLPs who are in a leadership capacity can profoundly influence school-based practice.
The purpose of this study is to explore leadership from the perspective of school-based SLPs through survey research.

## Disclosure & Acknowledgements

Researchers Millie Newport, B.A., Gabrielle Saliba, B.S., Mary Catherine Smith, B.A., and Brenda Louw, D. Phil., have no relevant financial or nonfinancial conflicts of interest to report for this study.

We gratefully acknowledge our respondents for their participation.

## Methods

Research Design:
An exploratory, descriptive, quantitative research design was selected to explore the personal perspectives of school-based SLPs regarding their training in, perceptions of, and experiences regarding leadership.
Materials:
An online survey was developed to answer the following research questions: (1) What leadership training have school-based SLPs been exposed to? (2) What leadership positions do school-based SLPs hold? (3) What leadership characteristics do school-based SLPs consider to be essential for leadership in schools? (4) Which specific needs do school-based SLPs have relating to their leadership roles and goals?
The survey consisted of 5 sections: Leadership Training Experience, Perceptions of Leadership, Leadership in Crisis, Personal Interest in Leadership, and Demographics. The survey was comprised of 41 questions with a response format contained Likert scales, multiple choice questions, yes or no questions, and one open-ended question. REDCap™, a secure online survey system, was utilized to administer the survey in order to collect data. A pilot study was conducted with school-based SLPs serving as respondents to improve the survey's reliability and validity
Procedure:
IRB approval consisted of an exempt determination in accordance with 45CFR 46.101(b)(2). The survey was distributed through the community page of the ASHA Special Interest Group (SIG) 16: School-Based Issues and SLP preceptors in the researchers' local area. After the initial request for participation, two reminder emails were sent to increase response rate.
Respondents:
A total of 112 practicing school-based clinicians acted as respondents. The majority of respondents obtained a master's degree, with 16 respondents holding a doctorate. Not all respondents answered each question, leading to different n throughout the results.
Data Analysis:
Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. Thematic analysis was done on the results obtained from the open-ended question.
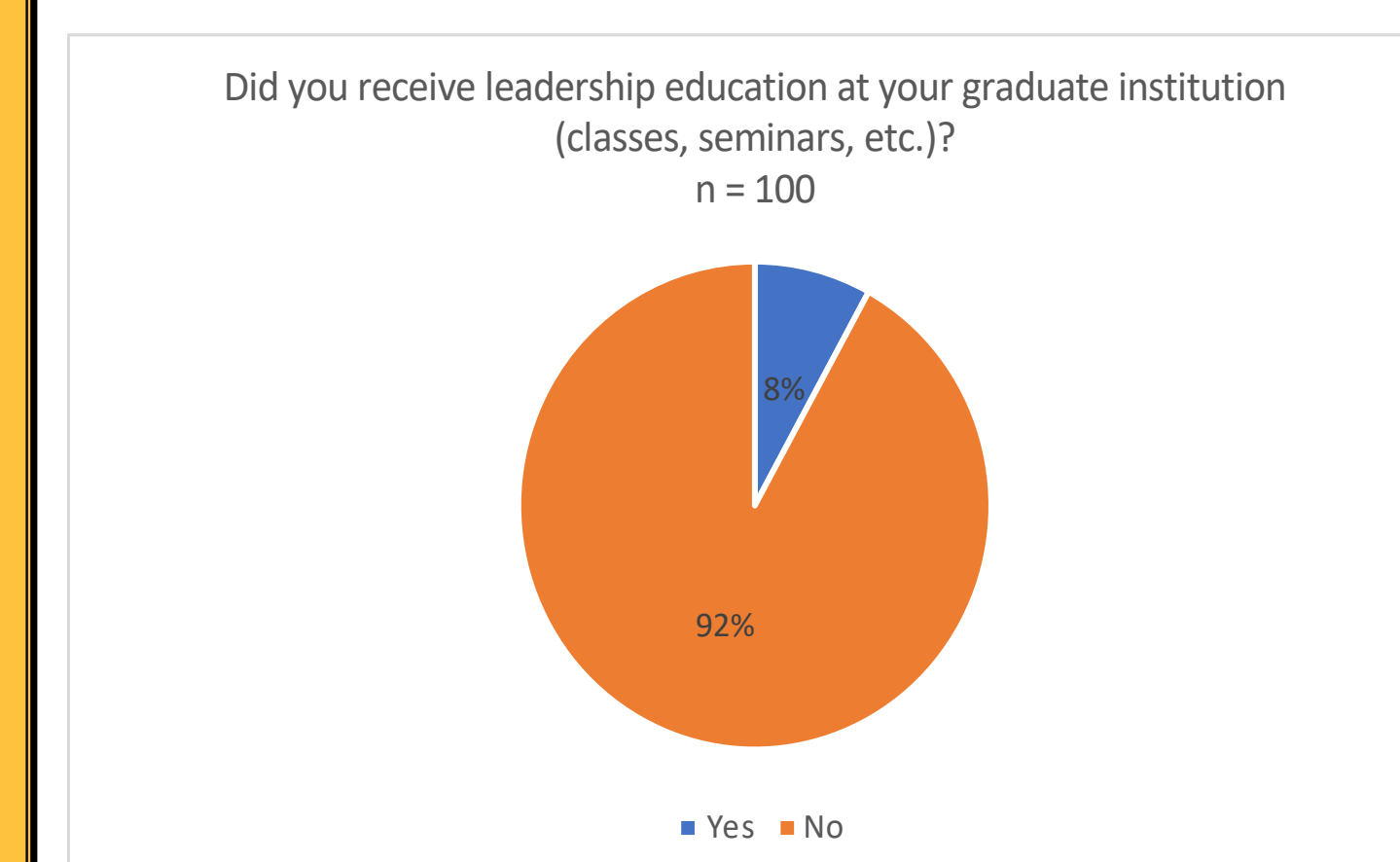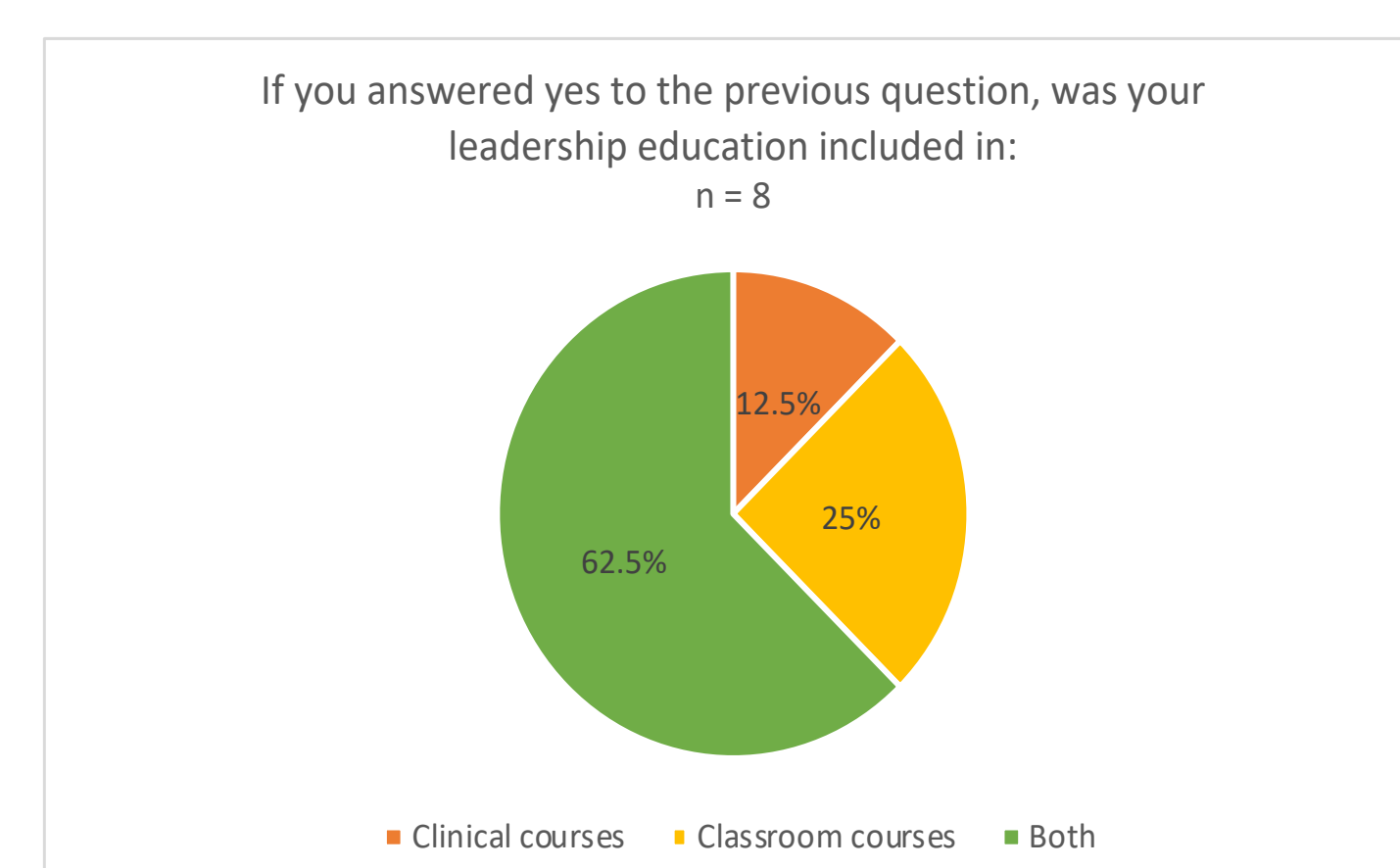
## Results



Figure 1 (n=100): Leadership exposure



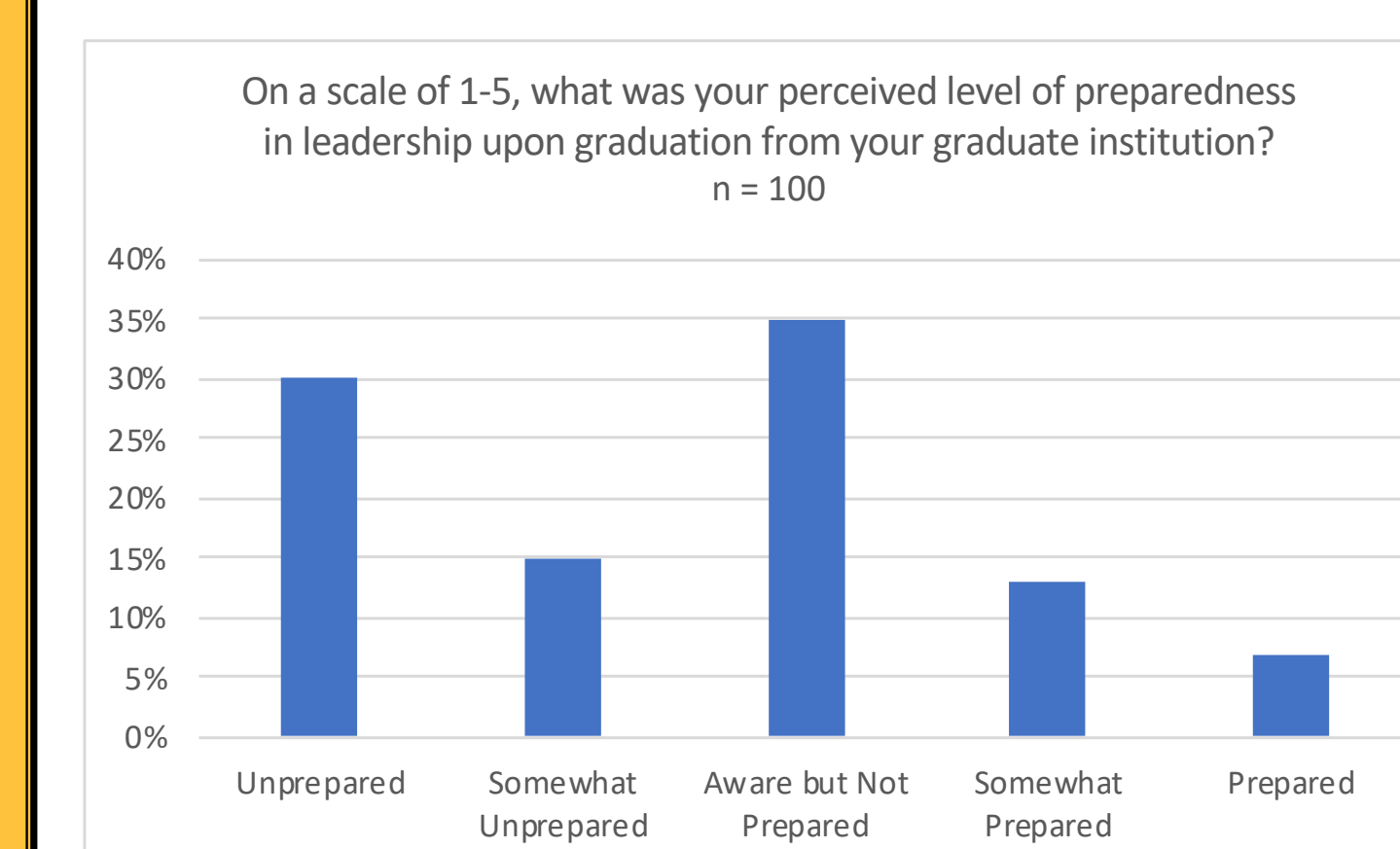Figure 2 (n=8): Leadership education
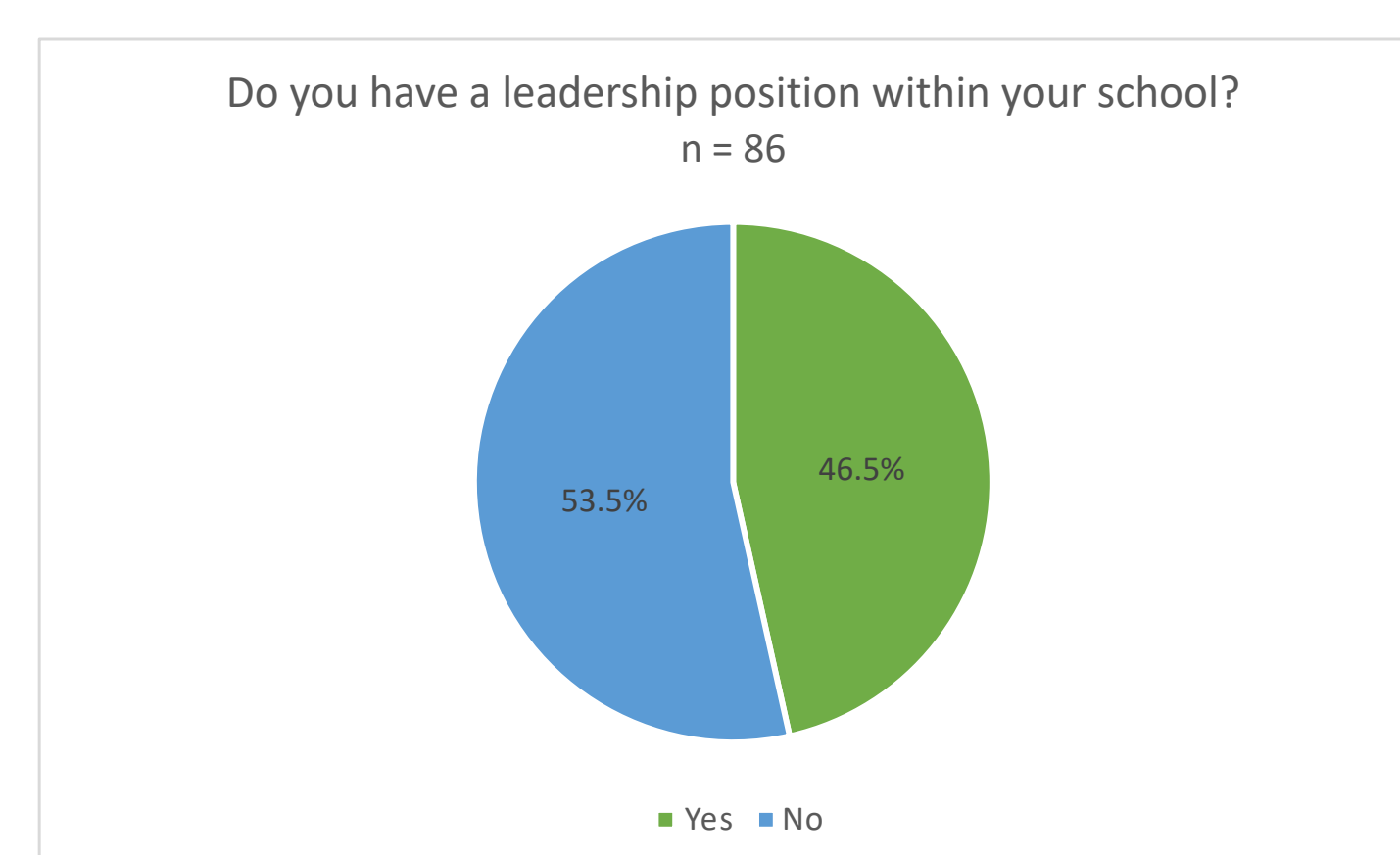


Figure 3: Leadership Preparedness
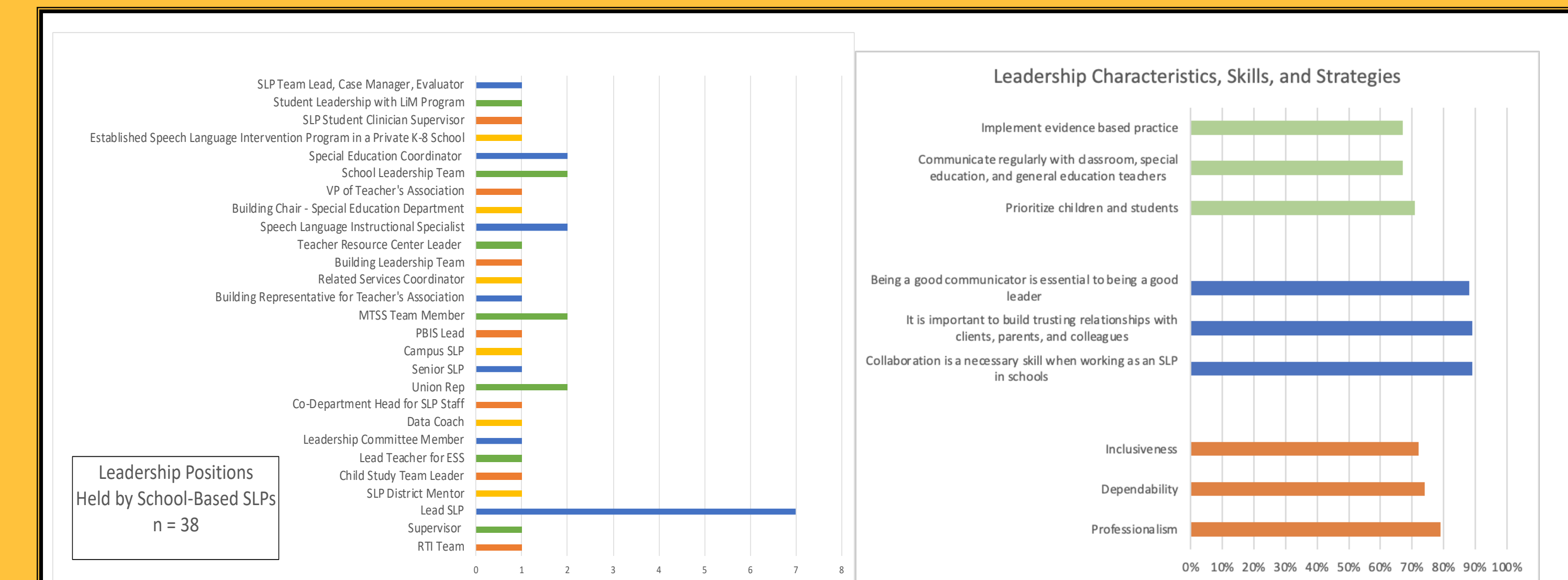


Figure 4: Leadership Positions



Figure 5 (n= 38): Leadership Positions Held by School-Based SLPs



Figure 6 (n= 92): Top 3 of Leadership Characteristics, Skills, and Strategies

Table 1 (n= 87): Top 3 and Bottom 3 characteristics of leadership in a crisis

| Top 3 characteristics | Bottom 3 characteristics |
|---|---|
| Communicate effectively and clearly (85%) | Perform regular check-ins regarding personal issues (37%) |
| Be flexible as the situation changes (83%) | Call for and shares perspectives (36%) |
| Provide clear directions to initiate and maintain action (63%) | Control performance to achieve goals (21.8%) |

## Discussion

Summary: 92% of the respondents reported that they did not receive any form of leadership education in their graduate program. Only 7% responded that they felt prepared for a leadership position upon graduation. 54% of school-based SLPs reported that they currently hold a leadership position within their school. Some of the leadership characteristics, skills, and strategies identified to be the most important include e.g. building trusting relationships; strong collaboration skills; being a good communicator; demonstrating inclusivity; prioritizing students; communicating regularly with teachers; and implementing evidence-based practice. Additionally, the important leadership characteristics to implement during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, were identified as effective and clear communication, flexibility, and the ability to provide clear directions to initiate and maintain action. 59% of the respondents indicated that they would be interested in receiving further information on developing leadership skills in the schools, the most popular preferences being continuing education courses, in-service training, and ASHA annual conventions.
Limitations: The small-scale respondent group (n=112) relative to the number of school-based SLPs, limits the generalization of the results.
Future Directions: The findings indicate an urgent need for increased leadership training in SLP graduate institutions, which may serve to increase both the numbers of school-based SLPs who hold a leadership position, as well as the quality of leadership that school-based SLPs provide within their positions.
Conclusion: This study highlights the importance of leadership for school-based SLPs, which is especially relevant in unprecedented times, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. Improved understanding of this topic may be used to inform training and CE to better equip and prepare school-based SLPs to grow their leadership skills and take on larger roles, to the benefit of the clients they serve.

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