

Advantages and Disadvantages of a Transdisciplinary Team: Perception of Professionals

Ivana Arsenić, Zorica Veljković¹, Maja Ivanović, Mia Šešum

University of Belgrade, Faculty of Special Education and Rehabilitation

Abstract

A transdisciplinary team can consist of a large number of experts who should make decisions together and share responsibility thanks to overcoming traditional boundaries between disciplines. The aim of this research was to examine the perceptions of professionals in the field of special education and rehabilitation regarding the advantages and disadvantages of a transdisciplinary team, as well as their experiences working within such team. 48 respondents participated in the research, among whom 72.9% were speech and language therapists, 22.9% special education teachers and 4.2% psychologists. The results showed that they were most often engaged in multidisciplinary ($N = 24$, 50%), followed by transdisciplinary ($N = 13$, 27.1%), and the fewest in interdisciplinary team ($N = 9$, 18.8%). The experiences of experts working in a transdisciplinary team were moderately positive ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.41$). The type of team in which the respondents were engaged influenced their perception and experience of working in a transdisciplinary team ($F = 2.79$, $p < .05$). Data in the literature indicates numerous advantages of a transdisciplinary team. Therefore, understanding the personal experiences of professionals and how they perceive their role in a transdisciplinary team is important to develop appropriate support and education programs.

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¹ Corresponding author's email: zoricananicic@fasper.bg.ac.rs

Introduction

A team is a group of individuals working together to achieve a common goal (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). Teamwork can be viewed as a complex and dynamic activity, as it involves collaboration among experts from different disciplines, the sharing of knowledge and skills, and adaptation to a cooperative work environment (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006; Tarricone & Luca, 2002). However, the gap between disciplines can present a potential barrier to effective communication among professionals and may negatively affect team performance (Hong & Reynolds-Keefer, 2013). It is believed that, in addition to possessing various competencies, experience, and knowledge in their specialized fields, professionals should also demonstrate flexibility in their work. In doing so, they would have the opportunity to acquire skills in different areas with the aim of integrating them into their own activities (Udovychenko et al., 2022). In response to such needs, a transdisciplinary approach can offer a model for enhancing knowledge, mutual understanding, and communication in order to address all potential challenges of teamwork (Hong & Reynolds-Keefer, 2013).

The term transdisciplinarity was introduced by psychologist Jean Piaget in the 1970s (Sargent et al., 2022). Multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary teams (TTs) are terms that refer to collaboration among professionals from two or more disciplines and represent a continuum of cooperation characterized by increasing interaction and disciplinary integration (Lawless et al., 2025). Although there are similarities among these teams, they differ in the level and manner of collaboration. A TT goes beyond multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches by integrating different perspectives, and is therefore considered to offer the greatest potential for systematically addressing diverse problems in science and practice (Sargent et al., 2022).

A TT structure includes experts from various fields who transcend disciplinary boundaries and have equal rights and responsibilities (Arsenić, 2022). Overcoming boundaries between disciplines enables the formation of a complex, holistic, and systematic approach to problem-solving (Udovychenko et al., 2022). In this way, professionals continuously transfer their knowledge through collaboration, while simultaneously acquiring knowledge from other disciplines and strategies for solving different problems (Hong & Reynolds-Keefer, 2013). On an individual level, this means stepping outside one's area of specialization and continuously learning how to adapt one's work to other professionals (Zafeirakopoulos & van der Bijl-Brouwer, 2018). The success of a team depends on the ability of its members to plan and think together, which enables them to share expertise, knowledge, and responsibility. In addition, this approach involves respecting the principle of complementarity, which helps prevent potential conflicts among team members. Some authors argue that transdisciplinarity is the best way to enable cross-sector learning and to create a complex, integrative system of knowledge to address the various challenges faced by professionals in the 21st century (McGregor & Volckmann, 2013). The popularity of this approach is based on the assumption that each team member contributes equally with their unique knowledge, methodological approaches, conceptual frameworks, and theories, leading to the development of new scientific perspectives and innovations (Hall et al., 2012).

The transdisciplinary approach encourages mutual respect and trust, as well as appreciation of the knowledge, skills, and expertise of each member. This, in turn, allows for the establishment of consistent, continuous, and intensive communication, interaction, and collaboration (Gordon et al., 2014). Another important feature of this team approach is the concept of "role release". The process of role release involves the exchange of expertise,

appreciation of the perspectives, knowledge, and skills of professionals from other disciplines, and the establishment of mutual trust (King et al., 2009). In the role expansion phase, a shared vocabulary, theoretical knowledge, and the capacity to carry out integrated interventions are developed, which ultimately supports the achievement of the team's goals (Foley, 1990).

As mentioned, the goal of a TT is to expand existing knowledge as well as generate new knowledge, thus creating new solutions to improve science and practice (Bernstein, 2015). However, building an effective team is a continuous process rather than a series of linear steps. In the early stages of a team's development, professionals often come together as part of a research network, working group, or advisory panel. At this stage, group membership is fluid. Some members may join the group to explore potential collaboration opportunities, while others may participate for a limited time to contribute to solving a specific problem during the project (Hall et al., 2012). The development phase enables group members to begin fostering collaboration and group cohesion, which forms the basis for establishing a more "formal team."

In the initial phase, the exchange of information and the development of integrative knowledge among team members is encouraged. During discussions aimed at defining relationships between different disciplines and fields, it is crucial that professionals understand that all disciplines, including their own have specific methodological strengths and limitations. Such expansion and exchange of roles, built on relationships developed during discussions, include the possibility of safely expressing opinions, personal concerns, as well as potential professional weaknesses (Hong & Reynolds-Keefer, 2013). The development of critical awareness enables team members to focus on solving relevant problems by utilizing the diversity of available methods (Mansilla & Duraising, 2007).

Collaborative work and cooperation can positively influence the development of professional relationships, mutual respect among experts, and provide team members with an understanding of different perspectives and practices, including professional value systems (Hong & Reynolds-Keefer, 2013). However, during the development of transdisciplinary collaboration, various challenges may arise, such as potential conflicts over role overlap and information ownership (Gordon et al., 2014). Team members may experience a sense of competition or a lack of boundaries. A TT can consist of professionals from closely related or very different disciplines. As a result, members may feel that others do not understand, acknowledge, or appreciate their expertise (Zafeirakopoulos & van der Bijl-Brouwer, 2018). Additionally, when topics outside their area of specialization are discussed, team members may feel afraid of appearing uninformed or being misunderstood by their colleagues (Hall et al., 2012). For this reason, time, openness, and a willingness for continuous dialogue are necessary. Furthermore, successful teamwork requires developing an understanding of who knows what, who does what, how activities are carried out, and how interactions occur (Lim & Klein, 2006; Mesmer-Magnus & DeChurch, 2009).

The skills necessary for collaborative interprofessional teamwork include communication skills, active listening, negotiation, providing feedback, as well as conflict resolution and consensus-building skills (King et al., 2008). Team members should also be aware of their personal comfort zone when implementing interventions from other disciplines (King et al., 2009). Effective participation in a TT is believed to require awareness of contextual barriers, the ability to recognize how one's own expertise contributes to solving shared problems, and the confidence to apply this knowledge to address current challenges (Pineo et al., 2020).

Since working in a TT requires professionals to constantly adapt their practices, there is a need for them to become "effective transdisciplinary learners". This means embracing and keeping up with innovations, as well as adapting to evolving, often complex problems and the contexts in which they arise (Zafeirakopoulos & van der Bijl-Brouwer, 2018). For that reason, it is considered important to understand the experiences of professionals who are focused on applying transdisciplinary innovations in practice.

The aim of this research was to examine the perceptions of professionals in the field of special education and rehabilitation regarding the advantages and disadvantages of a TT, as well as their experiences working within such team.

Methods

Sample

A total of 48 participants took part in the study ($N = 48$, 95.8% female), among whom 72.9% were speech and language therapists, 22.9% special education teachers, and 4.2% psychologists. The average number of years of work experience was $M = 10.27$ ($SD = 8.24$). The shortest work experience was one year, while the longest was 30 years. The analysis of the results showed that an equal number of participants were employed in educational institutions and healthcare institutions ($N = 16$, 33.3%). A slightly smaller number worked in private practice ($N = 15$, 31.3%), while one participant was employed in the Serbian Armed Forces, categorized under "Other." An analysis of responses to the question "*Have you had the opportunity to collaborate with professionals from other disciplines as part of a team-based approach?*" showed that 97.9% of participants responded positively, while only one participant had no experience with team-based work.

Table 1 presents the distribution of participants by the type of team in which they were engaged, while Table 2 shows the distribution of participants by profession and type of team involvement.

Table 1. *Type of team participants were engaged in*

Type of team	N	%
Multidisciplinary Team	24	50
Interdisciplinary Team	9	18.7
Transdisciplinary Team	13	27.1
Other	1	2.1
No Experience	1	2.1

Note: N – number of participants, % – percentage

Table 2. *Distribution of participants by profession and type of team involvement*

Profession	Type of team					Total
	Multidisciplinary Team	Interdisciplinary Team	Transdisciplinary Team	Other	No Experience	
Speech and language therapists	16	7	10	1	1	35
Special education teachers	7	2	2	0	0	11
Psychologists	1	0	1	0	0	2
Total	24	9	13	1	1	48

Research Instrument

A questionnaire specifically designed for the purposes of this study was used. The first part of the questionnaire consists of six questions related to the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents (gender, profession, workplace, years of work experience), experience working with professionals from other disciplines within a team-based approach, as well as the type of team in which they were engaged. The second part of the questionnaire contains 18 statements covering the professionals' perceptions of their experience working in a TT, its main characteristics, advantages, and disadvantages. A five-point Likert scale was used. The research was conducted in December 2024.

Results

The average level of professionals' experience working in a TT ranged from 1 to 5. Based on this, the obtained results showed that professionals' experiences in a TT were moderately positive ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.41$). Table 3 presents the distribution of respondents according to their profession and experience working in a TT.

Table 3. *Distribution of respondents by profession and experience in working in a transdisciplinary team*

Profession	M	SD
Speech and language therapists	3.51	0.43
Special education teachers	3.50	0.34
Psychologists	3.58	0.51

Note: M – mean, SD – standard deviation

The results of a one-way analysis of variance showed that there was no statistically significant difference between respondents of different professions regarding their experience working in a TT ($F = 0.04$, $p > .05$). Since the results of the Shapiro-Wilk test indicated that the

empirical distribution of the variable "work experience" significantly deviated from the normal distribution model ($W = 0.90$, $p < .01$), appropriate non-parametric tests were applied in statistical analyses involving this variable. The analysis of results indicates that there is no significant correlation between the length of respondents' work experience and their experience working in a TT ($r = .00$, $p = .10$).

Table 4 shows the distribution of respondents according to the type of team in which they were engaged and their experience working in a TT. The results demonstrated that the type of team in which the respondents were engaged influenced their perception and experience working in a TT ($F = 2.79$, $p < .05$).

Table 4. *Distribution of respondents according to the type of team they were engaged in and their experience in working in a transdisciplinary team*

Type of team	M	SD
Multidisciplinary Team	3.42	0.41
Interdisciplinary Team	3.51	0.35
Transdisciplinary Team	3.58	0.32

Note: M – mean, SD – standard deviation

The analysis of the obtained results indicates that there is a statistically significant correlation between the average level of professionals' experience working in a TT and responses to the following statements: *I am familiar with the function and organization of a TT* ($r = .48$, $p < .01$), *My role in a TT is clear to me* ($r = .43$, $p < .01$), *I am satisfied with the collaboration with professionals from other disciplines in a TT* ($r = .55$, $p < .01$), *The speech and language therapist has the most important role in a TT working with individuals with speech-language pathology* ($r = .38$, $p < .01$), *I believe in the competence and knowledge of professionals from other disciplines* ($r = .30$, $p < .05$), *I handle conflicts easily when they arise while working with professionals from other disciplines* ($r = .57$, $p < .01$), *A TT allows me to gain knowledge from other disciplines and to understand the patient more comprehensively* ($r = .36$, $p < .05$), *The speech and language therapist must be the coordinator in a TT working with individuals with speech-language pathology* ($r = .36$, $p < .05$), *I consider the main risk of a TT to be loss of identity* ($r = .38$, $p < .01$), *I find it easier to make treatment decisions independently than as a member of a TT* ($r = .35$, $p < .05$), *There is an increased risk of conflict situations in a TT* ($r = .42$, $p < .01$), *A TT is difficult to form* ($r = .51$, $p < .01$), *A TT rarely exists in practice* ($r = .31$, $p < .05$), *A TT is more of a good idea than a successful practice* ($r = .42$, $p < .01$), *To be more effective, a TT should not have too many professionals from different disciplines* ($r = .34$, $p < .05$), *In practice, a TT always shows some hierarchy* ($r = .40$, $p < .01$).

Analysis of individual statements in the questionnaire showed that 47.9% of respondents fully agree with the statement that their role in a TT is clear to them. Regarding satisfaction with collaboration with professionals from other disciplines, 25% fully agree, while 35.4% mostly agree with this statement. Respondents fully agree in 66.7% of cases that they believe in the competence and knowledge of professionals from other disciplines. A similar percentage ($N = 33$, 68.8%) fully agree that a TT allows them to gain knowledge from other disciplines and to understand the patient more comprehensively.

Regarding potential disadvantages of a TT, results showed that 54.2% of respondents mostly agree with the statement that they handle conflicts easily when they arise during work in this team. Also, an equal number of respondents ($N = 13$, 27.1%) indicated that they either completely or mostly disagree, or neither agree nor disagree with the statement that the main risk

of a TT is loss of identity. In 47.9% of cases, respondents neither agree nor disagree that there is an increased risk of conflict situations in this team. Further analysis revealed a statistically significant association between respondents' profession and their answers to this statement ($\chi^2 = 22.56$, $p < .01$). No statistically significant associations were found between respondents' profession, type of team they were engaged in, and their answers to the other statements.

It is noteworthy that an equal number of respondents ($N = 15$, 31.3%) mostly agree with the statements that a TT rarely exists in practice, and that it is more a good idea than a successful practice. Additionally, 43.8% of respondents neither agree nor disagree with the statement that there are examples of good practice derived from a TT in our country.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the perception of specialists in the field of special education and rehabilitation regarding the advantages and disadvantages of a TT, as well as their experience working in such teams. The results show that 97.9% of respondents had the opportunity to collaborate with professionals from other disciplines within a team-based approach. They were most often engaged in multidisciplinary teams, followed by TTs, and least frequently in interdisciplinary teams. Analysis of the results indicated that specialists' experiences in working in a TT were moderately positive ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.41$). It was also found that the type of team in which respondents were engaged influenced their perception and experience of working in a TT ($F = 2.79$, $p < .05$).

The results showed no significant correlation between respondents' length of work experience and their experience in a TT ($r = .00$, $p = .10$). It is believed that specialists with shorter work experience, i.e., less practical team experience, may feel overwhelmed by the expectation to work in such a specific manner (King et al., 2009). Teamwork skills and crossing disciplinary boundaries, which develop over time, have proven to be equally important for the success of a TT as the competence of its members (Norris et al., 2016). A key feature of transdisciplinarity is continuous learning, meaning specialists are expected to be flexible and versatile both in practice and in acquiring new knowledge (Zafeirakopoulos et al., 2018). This can be especially challenging for beginners in the team who often feel most comfortable developing competencies within traditional disciplinary boundaries (King et al., 2009). Working with a large number of specialists in new contexts can pose a challenge for those with less work experience. It is considered that insufficient experience of team members in crossing disciplinary boundaries can be a significant challenge in the team formation process (Norris et al., 2016).

Analysis of individual questionnaire statements showed that 47.9% of respondents fully agreed with the statement that their role in the TT is clear. This result aligns with findings from other studies (Byrne & Pettigrew, 2010; Cumming & Wong, 2012; Thompson et al., 2017). In a study on professionals' experiences in a TT within early intervention (Cumming & Wong, 2012), respondents understood what a TT entails and noted the advantage of this approach as the opportunity for professionals to learn from each other. For a team to be effective, establishing a shared understanding of each member's expertise and how they contribute to the common goal is very important (Hall et al., 2012). However, despite this, it was shown that professionals had greater difficulty applying this knowledge in practice. Similarly, our study results indicated that 31.3% of respondents mostly agree with the statements that a TT rarely exists in practice and is more of a good idea than a successful practice.

More than half of the respondents in our study believe they easily handle potential conflicts during work in a TT. They mostly disagree with statements that the main risk of a TT is loss of identity and that there is an increased risk of conflict situations within the team. Disagreements or potential conflicts are common in a TT since its members come from different backgrounds and may have varying value systems, ways of resolving problems, and

interpersonal conflicts (Sixsmith et al., 2020). The basic principles of working in a TT imply that the opinions of all team members are equally considered, that all perspectives are treated as equally important, and that all facts and knowledge are available to all participants. However, individual perceptions and opinions of professionals, as well as their interests, can sometimes contradict these general principles and be driven by various forms of discrimination. For example, some professionals may believe that opinions of members of certain racial, gender, cultural, religious, or other groups should not be considered (Lawrence et al., 2022). The study by Cumming and Wong (2012) showed that there were obvious tensions among team members, although data indicated mutual respect. These tensions arose due to differences between individual, discipline-specific identities and interprofessional, team identities.

Professionals' desire to maintain their professional credibility and status may hinder full realization of this approach. Professionals may perceive the problem, its causes, and consequences differently. This diversity of perspectives must be taken into account when identifying problems, analyzing them, and developing and testing solutions (Pohl & Hadorn, 2008). Conflicting views on methodological or other standards may arise among team members, as besides scientific credibility, some members may also value other criteria, such as clarity and perceived legitimacy (Lawrence et al., 2022). Moreover, the process of learning shared terminology, creating a common vision, gaining comfort in teamwork, and developing relevant questions can cause feelings of failure, discouragement, and frustration among team members (Mather et al., 2023).

Significant data shows that about one-third of respondents ($N = 15$, 31.3%) mostly agree with statements that a TT rarely exists in practice and is more of a good idea than a successful practice. Additionally, respondents are uncertain whether examples of good practice arising from the transdisciplinary approach exist in our country. Possible reasons relate to the fact that a TT aims to solve problems fundamentally differently from traditional approaches that dominated in the past. Accordingly, transdisciplinary research and projects require considerable time, effort, and dedication from researchers (Thompson et al., 2017).

Conclusion

The results of the conducted research showed that 47 participants had experience working in different types of teams. They were most frequently engaged in multidisciplinary teams, followed by TT, and least often in interdisciplinary teams. The experiences of professionals working in a TT were moderately positive. When transitioning from multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approaches to transdisciplinary ones, professionals should consider the advantages and disadvantages of this type of team.

The advantages of a TT include fostering mutual respect and trust, which enables consistent and continuous interaction and collaboration. This allows for the implementation of a complex, holistic, and systematic approach to problem-solving. Potential disadvantages relate to the possibility of conflicts over overlapping roles, as well as the emergence of feelings of competition or lack of boundaries.

It is of utmost importance that all team members have a clear understanding of a TT and how it functions best in different environments. Literature data indicate that professionals are often unsure how to form an effective TT to achieve positive outcomes. For this reason, it is important to provide them with opportunities for training on how to implement, expand, and improve disciplinary collaboration.

Conflict of interest

None.

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