Speech-Language Pathologists Serving Clients Who Engage in Challenging Behaviors: Experiences, Preparedness, and Strategies

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Purpose

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the current experiences, preparedness, and strategies of Minnesota speech-language pathologists serving individuals who engage in challenging behaviors.

Clinical Relevance

About 81% of individuals with behavioral disorders have underlying, unidentified language deficits which negatively impact their social and academic success (Chow & Wallace, 2021; Chow & Wehby, 2018; Hollo et al., 2014; Reid et al., 2004). Based on the fact that language deficits correlate with behavioral challenges, it is important that SLPs have training to manage challenging behaviors while serving clients. However, behavior management training courses are limited with about 93% undergraduate and 91% graduate programs not offering behavior management education (Chow & Wallace, 2021), resulting in SLPs reports of feeling as if they do not have the proper education, training, and research-based intervention strategies for behaviors that occur while serving clients (Chow & Wallace, 2021; Johnston et al., 2011; Ostergren & Aguilar, 2015; Scherschligt et al., 2023; State et al., 2019).

What Extant Evidence is Missing?

- Detailed questions with direct and specific definitions of challenging behaviors to obtain a clearer representation of data outcomes (Chow & Wallace, 2021)
- Continued research on the need for adequate behavior management training (Chow & Wallace, 2021)
- Information is limited and needs continued examination on how well SLPs manage challenging behaviors and how equipped SLPs are when working with them (Scherschligt et al., 2023)
- Further research with a higher number of participants to increase confidence in data on SLPs amount of behavioral education (Scherschligt et al., 2023).

Method

An anonymous electronic survey was distributed to 1,196 publicly available email addresses of organizations that commonly employ SLPs located from 251 Minnesota school districts' websites, 56 speech-language pathology private clinics, and Minnesota Speech-Language-Hearing Association (MNSHA). Bounceback emails received required locating a new email address if available.

Survey Distribution Procedure

Public Schools (1,132 email addresses)
1. Minnesota Department of Education District Map
2. Located publicly available email addresses using district websites
- Google Search Engine
- Located SLP and SLPAs
- If not found, located email address for most appropriate department (i.e., special education) or district itself

### Private Practice Clinics (54 email addresses)
1. Google Maps Search Engine
- MN Map "Minnesota speech language and pathology private practices"
- Located website and available email addresses
2. ASHA ProFind
- Specifying 'speech language pathology services' in 'Minnesota'
- Located website homepage provided with SLPs information
- Located publicly available email address
*Did not use duplicates
3. State of Minnesota Department of Health Rehabilitation Centers List
- Searched name of clinic in Google search engine and located website
- Located email addresses
*Did not use duplicates

MNSHA Members
1. MNSHA main page provided office email address
2. Research request reviewed and approved by MNSHA
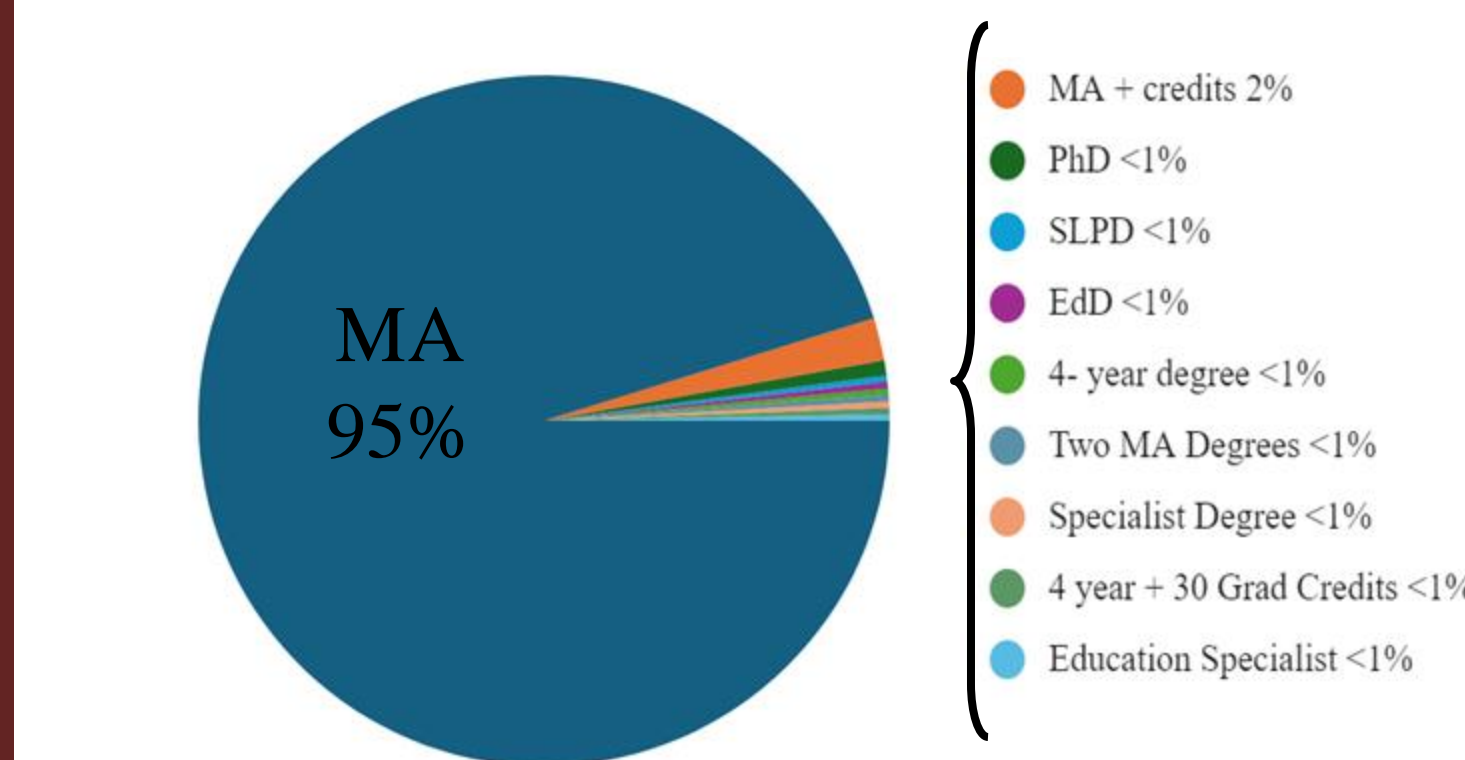3. MNSHA office distributed the survey to members via email

Results: Respondents
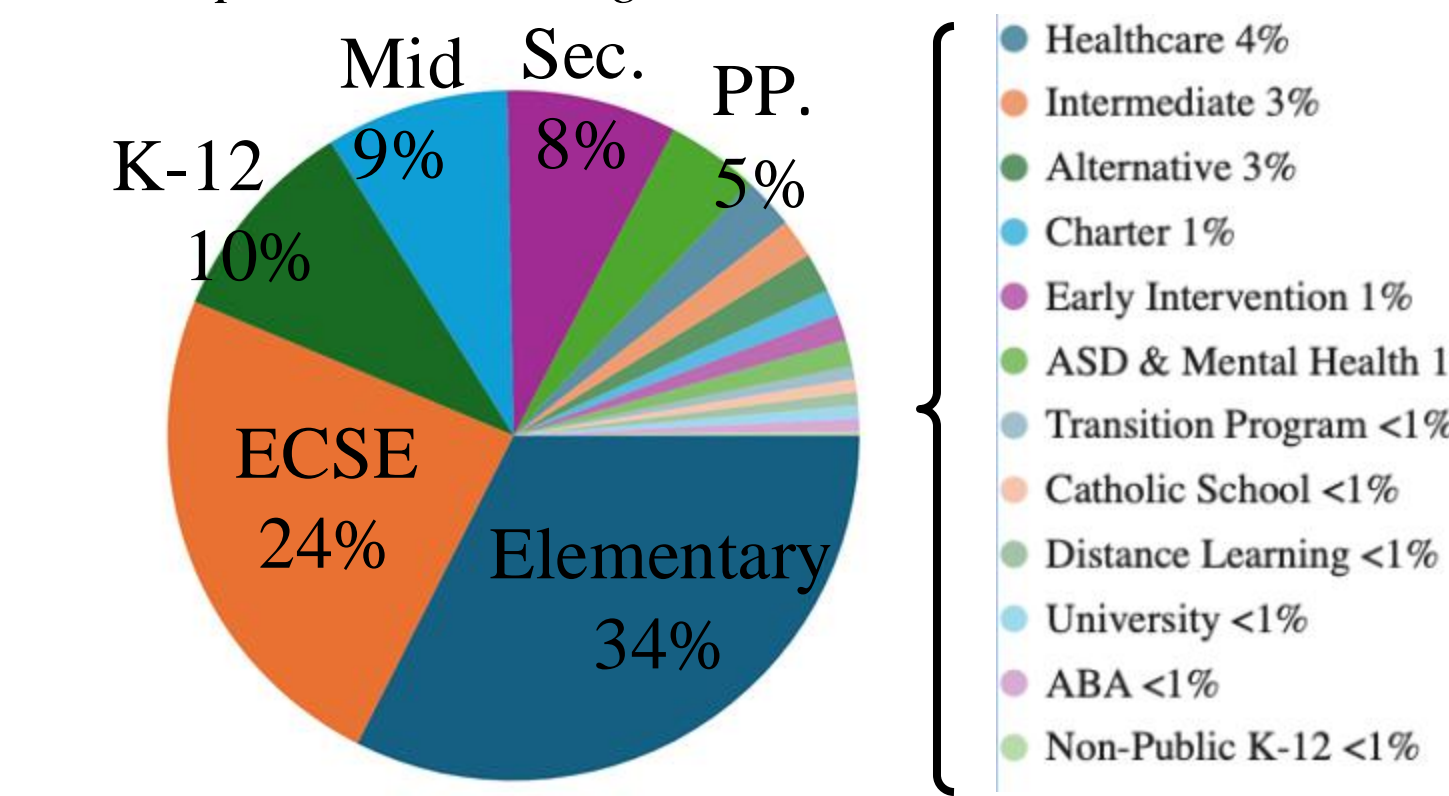

Figure 1.
Survey Completion Rate for 363 Participants
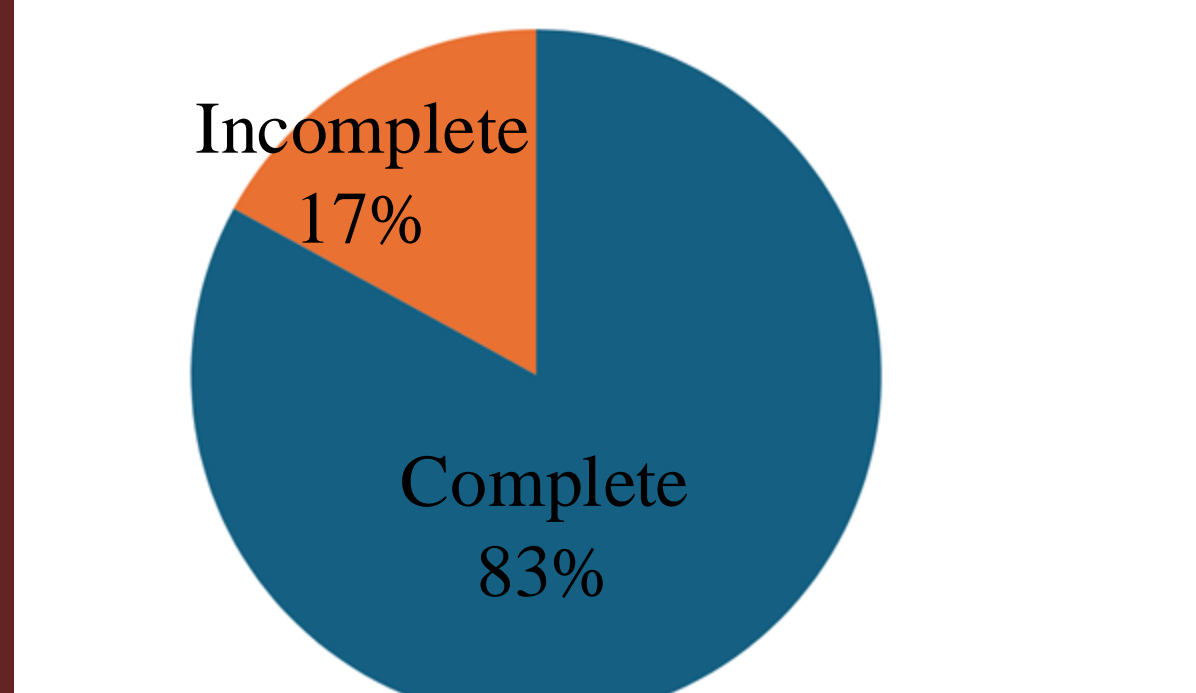
Note. 83% of participants completed the survey while 17% did not complete the survey to the full extent.

Figure 2.
Participant Work Setting

- Healthcare 4%
- Intermediate 3%
- Alternative 3%
- Charter 1%
- Early Intervention 1%
- ASD & Mental Health 1%
- Transition Program <1%
- Catholic School <1%
- Distance Learning <1%
- University <1%
- ABA <1%
- Non-Public K-12 <1%

Note. Schools written in the graph are all public (elementary, K-12, Middle, Secondary). Abbreviations: Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) and Private Practice (PP). Others are ranges from 4% to under 1%.

Figure 3.
Participant Education Level

- MA + credits 2%
- PhD <1%
- SLPD <1%
- EdD <1%
- 4- year degree <1%
- Two MA Degrees <1%
- Specialist Degree <1%
- 4 year + 30 Grad Credits <1%
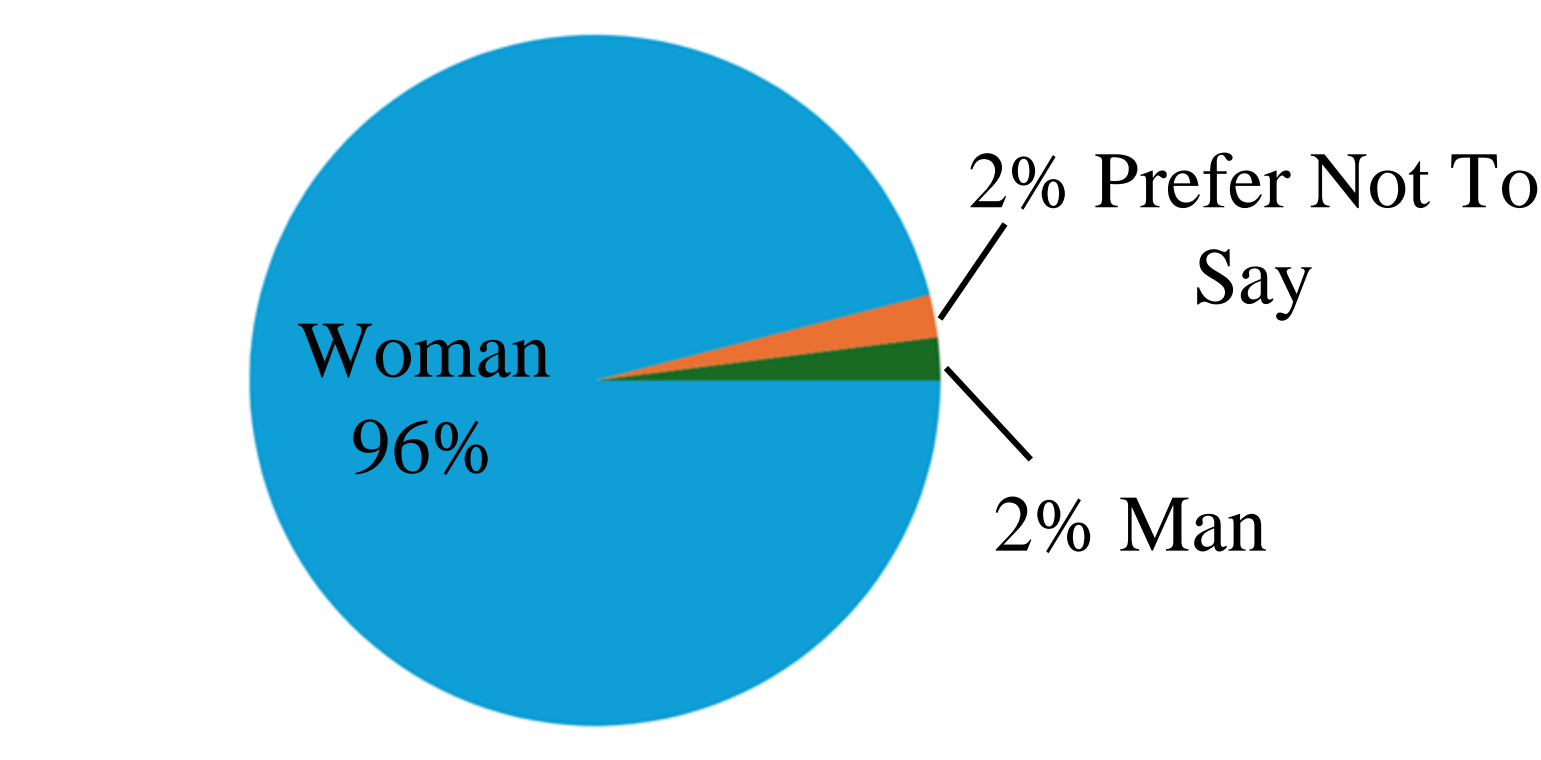- Education Specialist <1%

Note. 95% of participants received MA while 2% received their MA and obtained extra credits. In total about 3% of participants received other higher and lower levels of education.

Figure 4.
Participant Gender

Note. 96% of participants identified as woman while 2% selected man and 2% preferred not to say.

Results: Experiences

Figure 5.
Types of Challenging Behaviors SLPs Experience
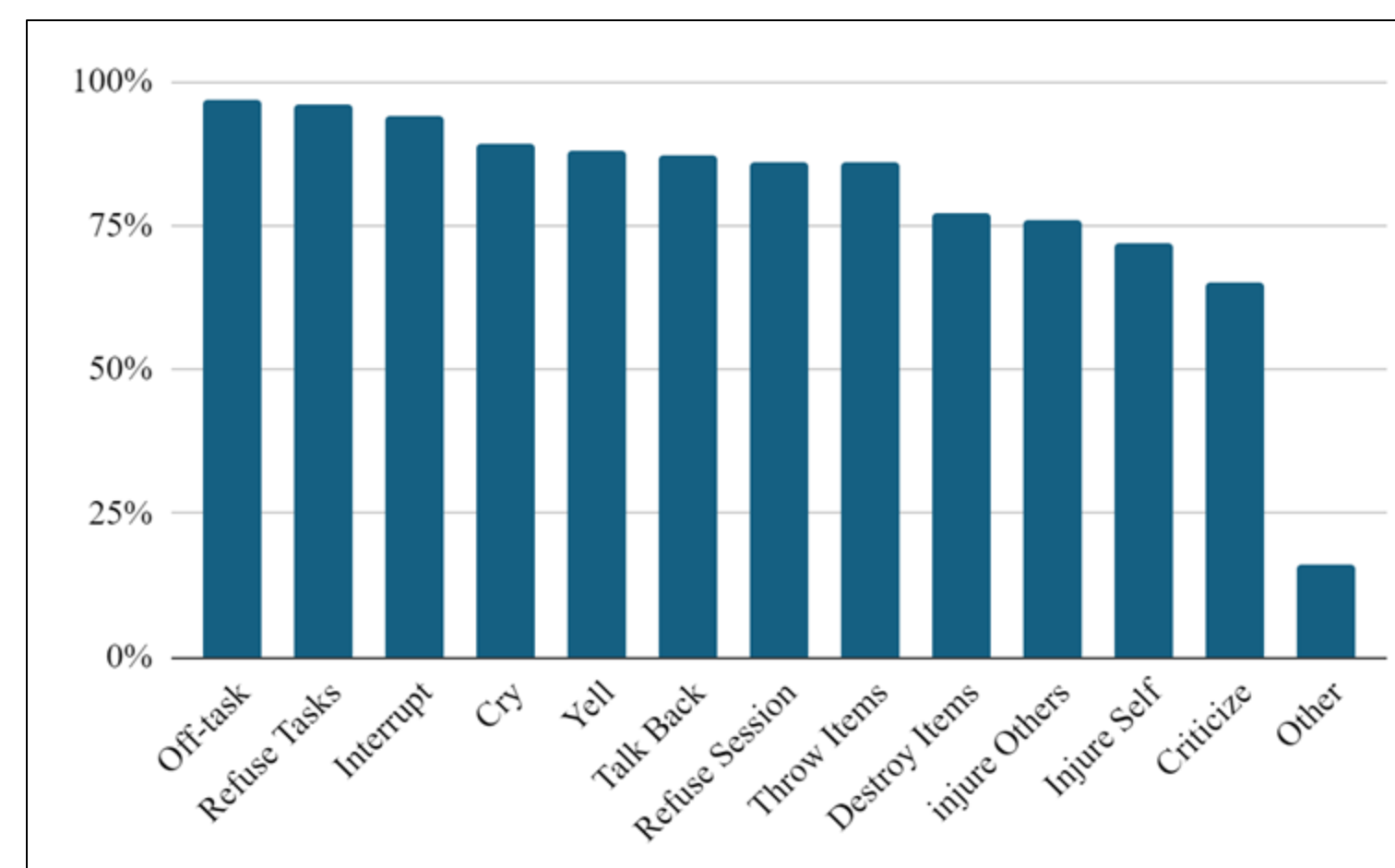
Note. 97% of SLPs experienced off-task and task refusal behaviors; more than half experienced the injury to self or others, destroying items, & session refusal. "Other" included eloping, swearing, removing clothing, and spitting. One respondent

Figure 6.
Frequency SLPs Experienced Challenging Behaviors
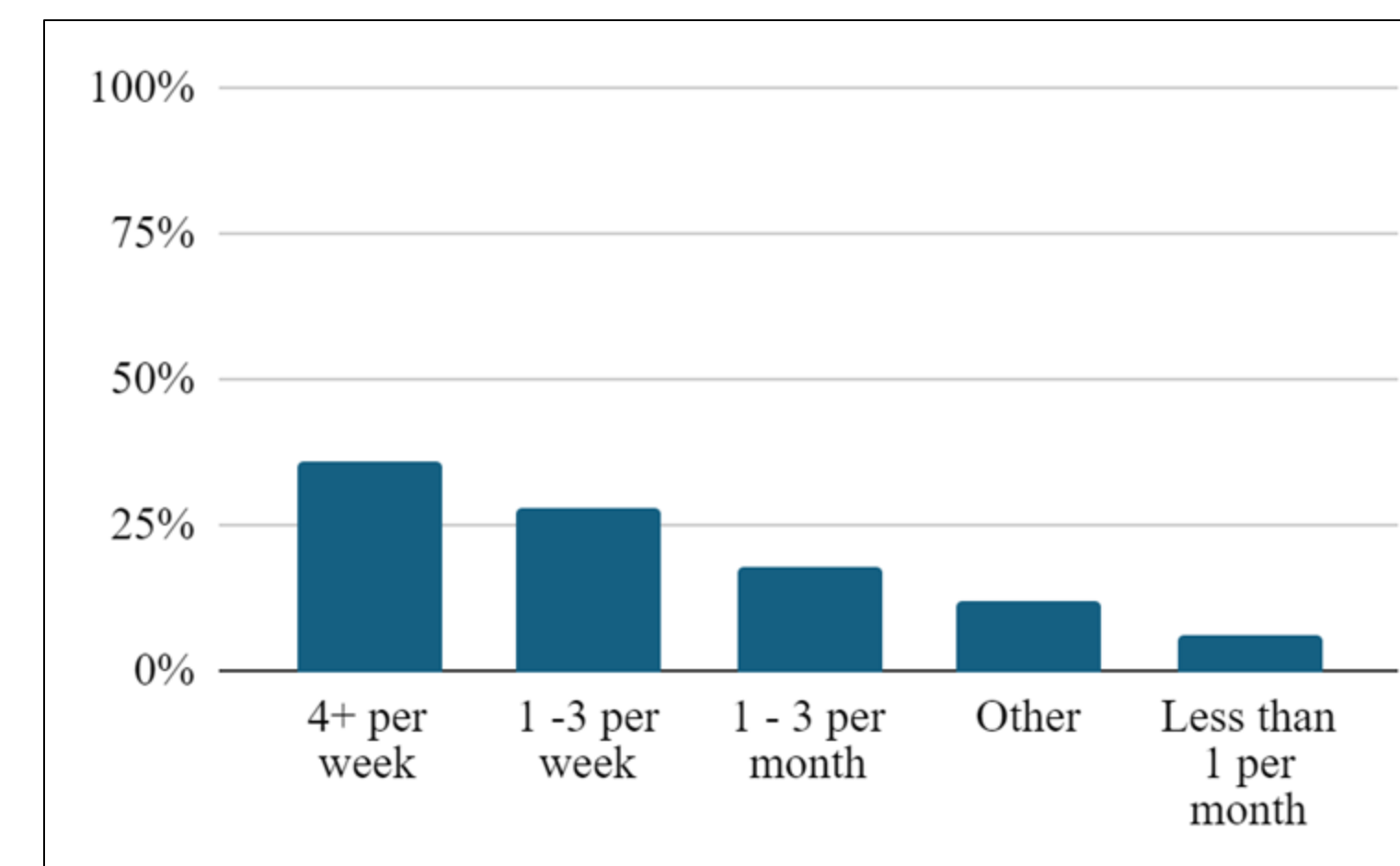
Note. Nearly 40% of SLPs experienced challenging behaviors more than 4 times each week. Only 6% experienced them less than once per month. Other consisted of stating multiple times per day up to 5-20, everyday, and a few that stated a range from 3-5 times per month.


Figure 7.
Perceived Motivations of Challenging Behaviors Experienced by SLPs
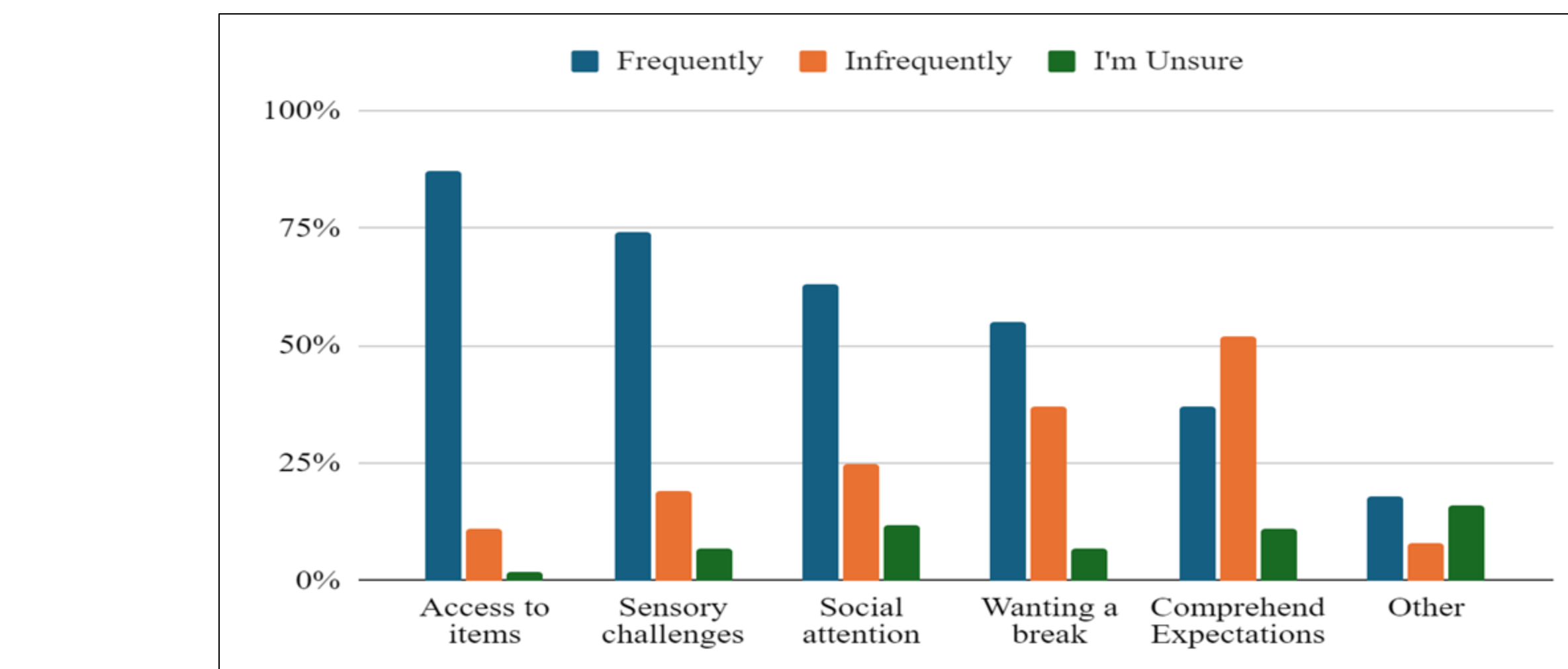
Note. Access to preferred items was the most frequent CB encountered at 87% then sensory, social attention, wanting a break, and comprehension of expectations. Comprehension of expectations was the highest infrequent motivator of CB's. "Other" indicates that SLPs are experiencing a variety of motivators leading to challenging behaviors.

Results: Preparedness

Figure 8.
Perspectives About Preparedness to Manage Challenging Behaviors
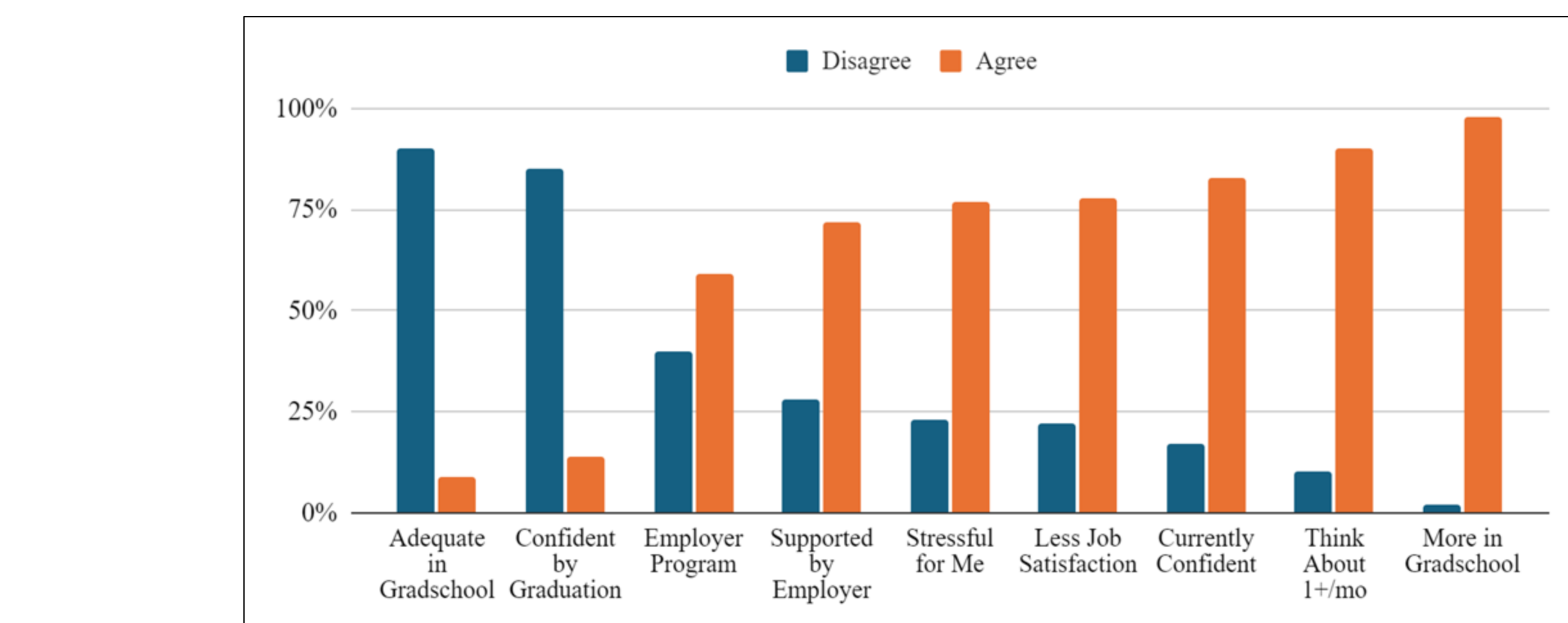
Note. About 98% SLPs agreed that education should provide more preparation in managing CB's. About 90% disagreed to being prepared to successfully manage CB's and 85% disagreed that they felt confident managing challenging behaviors by the time they graduated. About 75% of SLPs indicated a diminished job satisfaction with increased CB's


Figure 9.
Training/Education on Challenging Behaviors
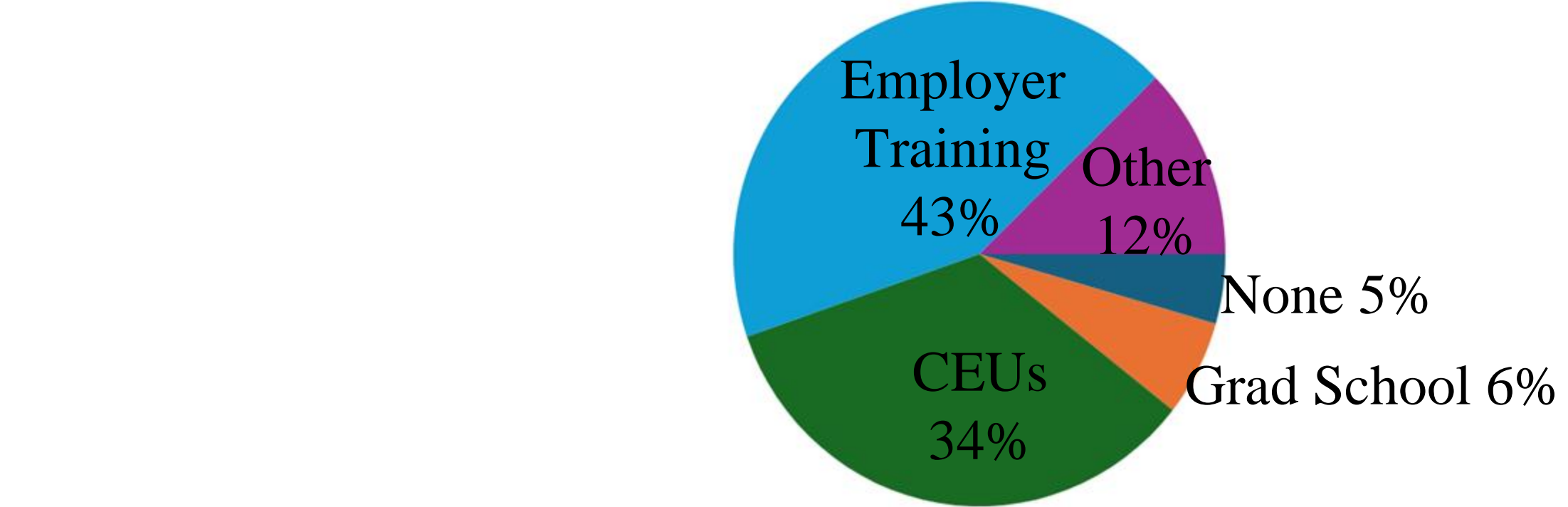
Note. About 6% of respondents received training/education during their SLP program. Other consisted of gaining training from coworkers, experience, ASD trainings, sought out training on own, a summer course during grad school, conscious discipline, and being a parent.

Results: Strategies

Figure 10.
Confidence Level with Skills to Manage Challenging Behaviors
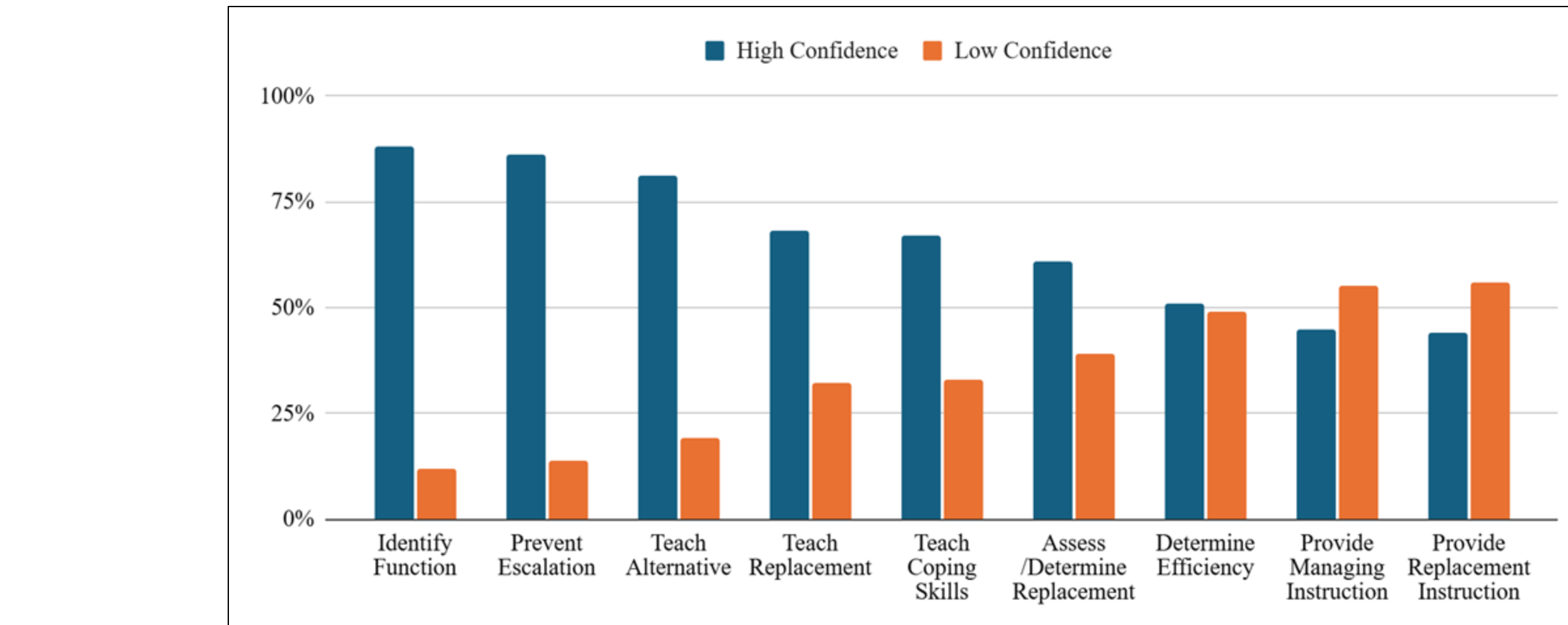
Note. 55% and 56% of SLPs answered low confidence to provide instruction to team members for replacement behaviors and managing CB's while a high level of identifying the function, preventing escalation, teaching alternative/replacement behaviors, and coping behaviors to the client. Determining the efficiency of the CB was about 50/50.

Discussion

- SLPs experience a variety of challenging behaviors with many motivations during their work day
- SLPs generally indicated inadequate training on managing challenging behavior during graduate school, which appears to be associated with reduced job satisfaction
- Half of respondents were unsure about determining efficiency of behavior, but most indicated high confidence in teaching replacement and alternative behaviors. This is potentially problematic because new behaviors need to be as or more efficient to be successful
- Limitations
  - Targeted Minnesota SLPs
  - Most SLPs in the educational setting
  - No defined technique in how SLPs manage challenging behaviors (see Figure 10). Future research should address this issue.
- Future Directions
  - Future research could also identify the specific training(s) that created greater confidence among SLPs in managing challenging behaviors.
    - If training/education leads to confidence, would it be valuable to obtain in graduate programs?
  - Easily accessible training materials relevant to SLPs should be made available.
  - Support should be provided to help SLPs be able to educate team members about the role of communication in reduction of challenging behaviors.

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