COMPLEX CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES ON THE COMMUNICATIVE INTERACTIONS OF STUDENTS WITH MULTIPLE AND SEVERE DISABILITIES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title Page</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of originality</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>xvi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>xviii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Publications</td>
<td>xix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Appendices</td>
<td>xx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequently Used Acronyms</td>
<td>xxii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>xxiii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

- **Introduction** 1
- **Best practices in communication intervention for students with MSD** 2
  - *Enhancing students’ communication skills* 3
  - *Functional communication in natural contexts* 3
- **The role of teachers in the classroom** 4
- **Frequencies of communicative interactions** 5
- **Limited implementation of best practices** 5
- **Influences on implementation of best practices** 6
  - *Teachers’ knowledge and skills* 6
  - *Communication education for teachers* 7
    - A traditional approach to professional development 7
    - An emergent model for professional development 9
  - **Other potential influences on implementation of best practices** 11
    - *Teachers’ attitudes, perceptions and beliefs* 11
    - *Broader contextual factors* 13
- **Summary** 20

### CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

- **Introduction** 21
- **Existing conceptual frameworks for the communicative interactions of students with MSD** 21
- **Social discourses about disability** 23
  - *Discourses about disability as socio-cultural constructions* 23
  - *The medical model of disability* 23
# vi

*Critiques of the medical model*  
Influences of the medical model  

**The social model of disability**  

*The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health-Child and Youth version: A biopsychosocial model*  
Communication  
Contextual factors  
Barriers and facilitators

Social policy and legislation  
General anti-discrimination legislation  
Legislation and policy pertaining to the education of students with severe disabilities  
Impact of legislation and policy on educational provision for student with severe disabilities

Findings from implementation science

Complexity theory: A Conceptual framework for this study  
Multiple contextual factors at multiple levels  
Student characteristics  
Teacher characteristics: Attitudes, perceptions and beliefs  
School context  
Government: organisations/departments, legislation and social policy  
Society

Nesting  
Inter-connections and interactions  
Collaboration  
Attitudes, perceptions and beliefs

Dynamic processes and particularities

Conclusion

Methodology

Summary and potential contribution of the study

Specific research questions

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Definitions of settings  
*Type of educational setting*  
*Geographical setting*

Rationale for participants included

Eligibility criteria

Recruitment  
*Stages 1 and 2*  
*Stages 3 and 4*
**Initial contact** 46

**Participants** 47

**Stage 1** 47

**Stage 2** 48

**Stage 3** 48

**Stage 4** 49

**Procedure for Data Collection** 49

*Interviews*

- Briefing 51
- Audio taping 52
- Interview technique 53
- Completion of interview 53
- The second interview 54
- Venues 55

*Research journal* 55

*Transcription* 56

**Analysis and Data Management** 56

- **Step 1: Initial analysis and preliminary list of categories** 57
- **Step 2: Coding the data** 58
- **Step 3: Assembling text segments into categories** 60
- **Step 4: Writing working definitions for categories** 60
- **Step 5: Applying coding definitions to all data collected** 61
- **Step 6: Summarising information about the categories** 61
- **Step 7: Interactions or relationships between categories** 62
- **Step 8: Themes** 62

**Subsequent analysis: Stages 2 to 4** 63

**Rigour and credibility** 65

- **Triangulation** 65
- **Verification** 65
- **Inter-coder reliability** 66

**Results** 67

**Summary** 68

---

**CHAPTER 4**

**STAGE 1 RESULTS: TEACHERS IN SPECIAL SETTINGS**

**Introduction** 69

**Part 1: Personal journeys** 69

**Characteristics of students** 71

- Complex medical conditions 72
- Complex personal care needs 72
- Complex communication needs 72
- Challenging behaviours 73

**Teacher characteristics** 74

- Lack of experience 74
The value of personal attributes and experience 74
Turning point experiences 75
Teachers' attitudes, perceptions and beliefs 76

Relationship with the student 77
Interpreting students' communicative behaviours 77
Knowing the students' preferred objects and activities 77
Enhancing students' communication skills 78
Resolving challenging behaviours 78
Time taken to build relationships with students 78

Part 2: Interactions with context variables 79
Class structure and the classroom context 79
Class structure: Students all with MSD 80
Time constraints 81
Communicative interactions 83
Different class structures 83
The classroom infrastructure and organisation of physical space 85

The school context: “isolation” versus “sense of community” 86
Contrasting school settings 86
School culture 88
Integration 90
The role of the principal 91
Funding and resources 92
Staffing 95
Collegiality: Working with other teachers in the school setting 97
Learning Support Officers (LSOs) 99
Inappropriate practices 100
Attitudes, perceptions and beliefs of other staff 101
Change: Teachers’ responses to the context 103
Gradual changes in a supportive school context 104

Part 3: Communication education for teachers 104
Pre-service training 106
Lack of availability of continuing education 106
The model of external courses 107
Inability to meet specific, identified training needs 108
Teachers' attitudes 109
The school culture 109
Mentoring for early career or inexperienced teachers 110
Working with others 110
Exchanges 111

Part 4: Other people outside the school context 111
Geographical region or area 112
Home context (including out of home care) 112
Networking with other special education teachers 113
Support from visiting specialist teachers 113
Collaboration with speech-language pathologists (SLPs) 114
Government departments 117
State education system 117
Other government departments and communication intervention 120
CHAPTER 5
STAGE 2 RESULTS: TEACHERS IN MAINSTREAM SETTINGS

Introduction

Part 1: Personal journeys

Student characteristics

Complex health conditions and multiple disabilities
Complex communication needs

Teacher characteristics

Knowledge and experience
Attitudes, perceptions and beliefs

Relationship with the student

Part 2: Communication education

Knowledge gaps
Lack of communication education
Practical experience
Mentoring
Visiting other schools
External courses
The role of support people
Internet

Part 3: Interactions with the context

The mainstream classroom setting

Peers without disabilities
Class structure
Curriculum and instructional practices

The school context

Staffing and learning support officers (LSOs)
The principal
Collegiality and communicative interactions
Attitudes of other staff
The physical environment/infrastructure of the school
Resources 153
Funding 153
School culture 153
Geographical location 156

Part 4: Other people outside the school context 157

Geographical region or area 157
Home context 158
Visiting specialist teachers 159
Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) and other therapists 161

Government departments 163
State education system 163
Other departments and agencies employing speech-language pathologists (SLPs) 165

Part 5: Societal factors 167
Social inclusion 167
Social discourses about disability 168

Part 6: Summary 168

CHAPTER 6
STAGE 3 RESULTS: SPEECH-LANGUAGE PATHOLOGISTS IN METROPOLITAN AREAS

Introduction 170

Part 1: Personal Journeys 172

Student characteristics 172
Idiosyncratic forms of communication 172
Engaging students in communication 173
Challenging behaviours 174

Speech-language pathologists’ characteristics 174
Experiences, knowledge and skills 174
Attitudes, perceptions and beliefs 175

Teachers’ characteristics 175
Enjoyment, interest and affinity 175
Experience, knowledge and skills 176
Attitudes, perceptions and beliefs 177

Part 2: Professional development 178

Professional development for speech-language pathologists 179
Pre-service training in speech-language pathology 180
Supports in the workplace 180
Ongoing communication education 180
The role of the education system 181

Communication education for teachers 181
Teachers’ education needs 181
The role of the education system 182
The role of speech-language pathologists (SLPs) 182
Part 3: Communication intervention/collaboration

Communication intervention

The paradigm

The role of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC)

Collaboration with teachers

Other benefits of collaboration

Speech-language pathologists’ (SLPs) experiences of collaborating with teachers

Recommendations for effective collaboration

Collaborating with families and working in the home context

The importance of collaborating with families

The importance of communication between school and home

The role of the speech-language pathologist (SLP)

Home context and family issues

Part 4: Teachers’ and speech pathologists’ workplaces; Contexts and practices

Speech-language pathologists’ (SLPs) offices

Other people in the office

Resources

The structure of speech-language pathologists’ (SLPs) time

The school context

Comparison of different educational settings

Class structure

Peers without disabilities

Learning support officers (LSOs)

Staffing

The structure of time in the school context

Resources

Funding

Collegiality

Culture and the role of the principal

Inappropriate practices

Part 5: Government departments

Government department employing speech-language pathologists (SLPs)

The service delivery model

Separate processes of each discipline

The prioritization system

The waiting list

Staff shortages and physical location

State education system

Changes in schools

Limited support for AAC

Other services

Recommendations for service delivery

Collaboration

Department employing speech-language pathologists (SLPs)

The state education system
CHARTER 7
STAGE 4 RESULTS: SPEECH-LANGUAGE PATHOLOGISTS IN REGIONAL AND RURAL AREAS

Introduction 219

Part 1: Personal journeys 219

Student characteristics 222

Students’ intellectual, physical and communicative characteristics 222
Responses of communication partners 222

Families’ characteristics 222

Teachers’ characteristics 223

Teachers’ knowledge and skills 223
Teachers’ attitudes, perceptions and beliefs 224

Speech-language pathologists’ (SLPs) characteristics 226

Speech-language pathologists’ (SLPs) personal characteristics 227
Speech-language pathologists’ (SLPs) experience, knowledge and skills 227
Speech-language pathologists’ (SLPs) attitudes, perceptions and beliefs 227

Part 2: Professional development 228

Speech-language pathologists’ (SLPs) professional development 228

Pre-service education 228
Access to continuing professional development 229
Supervision and mentoring 230
Networking with other speech-language pathologists (SLPs) in the region 230

Teachers’ professional development 230

Teachers’ pre-service education 231
Teachers’ access to continuing education 231
Speech-language pathologists’ (SLPs) role in providing professional development for teachers 232

Part 3: Communication intervention and collaboration 233

Communication intervention 233

The traditional withdrawal model 233
The paradigm shift 235

Collaboration with teachers and families 237

Benefits for students with MSD 237
Benefits for teachers, families and speech-language pathologists (SLPs) 238
Facilitating effective collaboration 238
Barriers to effective collaboration 240

Part 4: Interactions with contexts 241

Speech-language pathologists’ (SLPs) offices 242
Other people in the office 242
Resources 243
The school context 243
Educational settings: mainstream classes, support units and special schools 244
The school culture and the role of the principal 246
Funding, resources and technology 249
Staffing and collegiality 250
Time constraints 251
Classroom context 252
Learning support officers (LSOs) 253
Inappropriate practices 254
Change 255
Home context 255
Time constraints at home 255
Parental exhaustion 256
Cultural and economic factors 256
Part 5: The tyranny of distance: geographical location 256
Recruitment and retention of professionals 257
Access to professional development 258
Impacts on schools 259
Standards 259
Isolation 259
Impacts on families 259
Dissatisfaction with schooling 259
Cultural and economic factors in rural and remote communities 260
Lack of services 261
Outreach speech-language pathology (SLP) service 261
Inequity in service provision 261
Limited nature of the service 262
Working with local support people 263
Community attitudes 263
Attitudes towards people with disability 263
Attitudes towards services 264
The role of technology 264
Part 6: The role of government, social policy and legislation 264
The state education system 265
Organisational culture 265
Capacity building in schools 266
Government departments employing speech-language pathologists (SLPs) 267
Social policy and the evolution of the organisation 268
The service delivery model 268
Number of speech-language pathologists (SLPs) 270
Perceptions of the service 270
Co-operation between government departments 270
Knowledge sharing 270
Limited collaboration 271
Recommendations for service delivery 271
State education system
Collaboration
Department employing speech-language pathologists (SLPs)
The process of change

Summary

CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION

Introduction

Communicative interactions of students with MSD

The themes

Teachers’ and speech-language pathologists’ (SLPs)’ attitudes, perceptions and beliefs, and their relationship to communication practices

The school context

Communication intervention: Implementation of best practice

Professionals in capacity building in schools

Supports and obstacles to collaboration

Professionals’ identities and conflicting models

Impact of school context

Organisational issues

Families and the home context

Teamwork and family-centred practice

Families’ attitudes, perceptions and beliefs

Families’ capacity or resources and support needs

Geographical location

Access to professional development support

Impacts on schools

Impacts on speech-language pathologists (SLPs)

Impacts on outreach speech-language pathology (SLP) service

Community attitudes

The role of technology

Government departments: Organisational cultures and structure of services

The state education system

Department responsible for speech-language pathology (SLP) services

Limited collaboration between departments

Societal factors: discourse, inclusion and equality

Social discourses about disability

Social inclusion

Social change

In conclusion
A model for enhancing the communicative interactions of students with MSD

Principles of the model

Changing individuals’ attitudes and practices

The school context
  - The classroom context
  - School culture
  - School capacity

Communication intervention: Implementation of best practice
  - Capacity building in schools
  - Shared meanings
  - Support for collaboration

Geographical location
  - Professional development support for teachers
  - Support for schools
  - Support for speech-language pathologists (SLPs)
  - Outreach speech-language pathology (SLP) service
  - The role of technology in rural areas

Government departments: Organisational culture and structure of services
  - The state education system
  - Government department employing speech-language pathologists (SLPs)
  - Co-operation between government departments

Societal factors: discourse, inclusion and equality

Limitations of the study

Directions for future research

Students with MSD, their peers and peer interaction

School cultures

Communication intervention/collaboration

Families

Speech-language pathology (SLP) service delivery

Social discourses and inclusion

Community development and participatory action research

Summary and conclusions

REFERENCES

APPENDICES
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Characteristics of participants in Stage 1</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Characteristics of participants in Stage 2</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>Characteristics of participants in Stage 3</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Characteristics of participants in Stage 4</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>Preliminary list of categories for coding data</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Supports and obstacles at the level of individuals (Stage 1)</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Supports and obstacles in the classroom context (Stage 1)</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Supports and obstacles in the school context (Stage 1)</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Supports and obstacles associated with communication education</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Stage 1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Supports and obstacles located in the geographical region or area</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Stage 1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Supports and obstacles associated with government departments</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Stage 1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>Societal factors (Stage 1)</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Supports and obstacles at the level of individuals (Stage 2)</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Supports and obstacles associated with communication education</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Stage 2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Supports and obstacles in the mainstream classroom setting (Stage 2)</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>Supports and obstacles in the mainstream school context (Stage 2)</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Supports and obstacles located in the geographical region or area</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Stage 2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>Supports and obstacles associated with government departments</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Stage 2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>Societal factors (Stage 2)</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Supports and obstacles at the level of individuals (Stage 3)</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Professional development for speech-language pathologists (Stage 3)</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>Speech-language pathologists’ perceptions of communication education</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>Supports and obstacles associated with communication intervention</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Stage 3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.5 Supports and obstacles associated with collaboration  
6.6 Supports and obstacles in speech-language pathologists’ offices (Stage 3)  
6.7 Supports and obstacles in the school context (Stage 3)  
6.8 Supports and obstacles associated with the government departments (Stage 3)  
6.9 Recommendations for service delivery (Stage 3)  
6.10 Supports and obstacles at the societal level (Stage 3)  
7.1 Supports and obstacles at the level of individuals (Stage 4)  
7.2 Supports and obstacles associated with speech-language pathologists (SLPs) professional development (Stage 4)  
7.3 Supports and obstacles associated with teachers’ professional development (Stage 4)  
7.4 Obstacles and supports associated with communication intervention and collaboration (Stage 4)  
7.5 Supports and obstacles in speech-language pathologists’ (SLPs) offices (Stage 4)  
7.6 Supports and obstacles in the school context (Stage 4)  
7.7 Supports and obstacles in the home context (Stage 4)  
7.8 Supports and obstacles associated with geographical location (Stage 4)  
7.9 Supports and obstacles associated with government departments (Stage 4)  
7.10 Recommendations for service delivery (Stage 4)
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>Students with MSD and their teachers nested within complex systems</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Systemic factors identified by teachers in special settings</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Systemic factors identified by teachers in mainstream settings</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Systemic factors identified by speech-language pathologists in metropolitan areas</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Systemic factors identified by speech pathologists in regional and rural areas</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>Model for enhancing communication access of students with MSD</td>
<td>277</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

Where are teachers’ voices? A research agenda to enhance the communicative interactions of students with multiple and severe disabilities at school. *Disability and Rehabilitation, 32*(13), 1059-1072.


## LIST OF APPENDICES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B</td>
<td>Letter to principals</td>
<td>Page 349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C</td>
<td>Advertisement for schools</td>
<td>Page 353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D</td>
<td>Eligibility criteria for teachers</td>
<td>Page 355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E</td>
<td>Letter to DADHC managers</td>
<td>Page 357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F</td>
<td>Advertisement for speech-language pathologists</td>
<td>Page 359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix G</td>
<td>Participant information sheet for speech-language pathologists</td>
<td>Page 360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix H</td>
<td>Eligibility criteria for speech-language pathologists</td>
<td>Page 363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix I</td>
<td>Consent forms</td>
<td>Page 364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix J</td>
<td>Participant information sheet for teachers</td>
<td>Page 367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix K</td>
<td>Interview outlines for teachers and speech-language pathologists</td>
<td>Page 370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix L</td>
<td>Transcription rules</td>
<td>Page 373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix M</td>
<td>Excerpt from research journal: Notes about topics for development of coding categories in Stage 1</td>
<td>Page 374</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix N</td>
<td>Excerpt from research journal with examples of memos</td>
<td>Page 379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix O</td>
<td>Example of memos noting the emergence of new categories</td>
<td>Page 380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix P</td>
<td>Definitions of categories for analysing data</td>
<td>Page 381</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix Q</td>
<td>Copy of a printed out category folder from Stage 1</td>
<td>Page 388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix R</td>
<td>Example of the thematic analysis summary table</td>
<td>Page 391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix S</td>
<td>Calculating inter-coder reliability</td>
<td>Page 395</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FREQUENTLY USED ACRONYMS

MSD  Multiple and severe disabilities.
SLP  Speech-language pathologist or speech-language pathology.
AAC  Augmentative and Alternative Communication.
SSP  School for Special Purposes or special school.
SU   Support Unit in a mainstream school.
LSO  Learning Support Officer.

NB. This term has replaced the use of the term teachers’ aide.

TA   Teachers’ Aide
NSW  New South Wales, Australia
ICF-CY International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health-Child and Youth version.

KLAs  Key Learning Areas.
IEP  Individual Education Plan.
ABSTRACT

Although researchers have reported for more than two decades low frequencies of communicative interactions for students with multiple and severe disabilities (MSD), little is understood about reasons for the persistence of this situation. The purpose of this study was to explore reasons for the restricted communication access of these students, from the perspective of complexity theory which states that individuals, their activities and interactions are embedded within and influenced by complex systems. This thesis reports on research about the contextual factors influencing the communication opportunities of students with MSD. The study was conducted in four stages involving a total of 32 participants. Stage 1 involved interviews with 11 teachers working in segregated classrooms in metropolitan or regional areas, while in Stage 2 there were five teachers working in mainstream classrooms in rural schools. Stages 3 and 4 involved interviews with speech-language pathologists (SLPs) who visited students with MSD in different educational settings. Stage 3 involved eight SLPs based in metropolitan areas, whereas Stage 4 involved eight SLPs based in regional or rural areas. During two in-depth interviews, participants were each given the opportunity to talk about their perceptions and experiences of: (a) communicating with students with MSD, (b) supports and obstacles to communication opportunities for these students, and (c) professional development. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis and coded according to categories representing factors that acted as supports or obstacles to communication opportunities. Themes emerged from the relationships or interactions between the categories. Issues of rigour and credibility of the findings were addressed through triangulation of data from different groups of participants, verification through member checking, and inter-coder reliability measures. Participants identified a broad range of contextual factors, operating at a number of levels from individuals to society that influenced the communicative interactions of students with MSD. Results of the study suggested that the influences on students’ communication opportunities, and therefore reasons for restricted communication participation, are complex. These findings led to the development of a model for enhancing the communicative interactions of students with MSD that recommends changes at multiple, systemic levels. The findings also highlight several important areas for future research.