

## **Sustainable AAC supports in the education context: The AAC in classrooms project**

Harmony Turnbull  
Tracey Hanigan and Felicity Lovatt

### **Short Abstract**

We will describe the planning and implementation of a strategy for increasing classroom supports for school-aged children who use Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). Speech and language pathologists (SLPs) in the Tasmanian state education system provide valuable supports to school children and staff, however there are a limited resources to meet the need. The 'AAC in Classrooms' project was implemented in order to build the capacity of school staff to learn and utilise AAC in a sustainable way through online learning modules and a community of practice. A multidisciplinary working group involving SLPs and inclusion support staff was formed. The group implemented actions based on survey data gathered from school staff across the state regarding AAC skills, knowledge, and learning needs. The project is entering a monitoring and evaluation phase with early outcome data indicating that the project activities are meeting the ongoing AAC learning needs of school staff in Tasmanian state schools.

### **Long Abstract**

Speech and Language Pathologists (SLPs) working in the Department for Education, Children and Young People (DECYP) in Tasmania play a crucial role in supporting inclusive educational environments. Their work includes providing individualised assessments and supports for children with a communication disability (CD) who would benefit from using augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), and in supporting school staff to build skills and confidence in teaching children who use AAC. With a high demand for SLP services and ongoing staffing challenges for SLP teams, an opportunity arose for DECYP SLPs to work alongside other professional support staff on the 'AAC in Classrooms Project' to look at effective and time-efficient strategies for school staff to build their knowledge, skills, and confidence in working with school children who use AAC.

The key goals of the AAC in Classrooms project were:

1. Supporting and engaging teachers to learn and utilise AAC in an ongoing way.
2. Supporting and engaging students with a CD to communicate in an inclusive and diverse environments.
3. Establish a Community of Practice (CoP) which combines good AAC practice with good teaching practice and provides ongoing support for staff working with students who use AAC.
4. Foster a collaborative approach across DECYP to support and model best practice in AAC

To obtain baseline information and inform the actions of the project working group, an online survey of DECYP school staff was conducted. In relation to working with students who use AAC, 91 survey respondents (63%) indicated that they were currently working with a student who uses AAC at the time of completing the survey. It is possible that survey respondents had worked with a student who uses AAC in the past as this information was not gathered in this survey. Overall, survey results indicated that there was poor access to learning resources and reduced staff confidence, knowledge, and skills particularly in mainstream schools. The project working party determined a need for a platform where staff could access professional learning on demand and also connect with others who have more knowledge and experience (i.e., a CoP).

An online AAC course was developed. This included a mandatory 2-hour communication partner training module informed by the work of Jones-Wohleber, (2018) and Senner & Baud, (2017) to build common understandings about supportive practices and environments, and increase skills in goal setting for students who use AAC. AAC system specific modules become available after completing the communication partner training module. These were developed by or in consultation with certified trainers and suppliers and contain video content and resources. All course content was informed by principles of evidence-based practice as described by Hoffmann et al., (2017) to consider the practice context (i.e., educational environments) integrated with research evidence, perspectives and values of clients, and clinical expertise. AAC systems included in the course content were considered to align with critical characteristics of robust AAC systems such as core vocabulary, morphological variations, and potential for growth and expansion (Soto & Zangari, 2009, pp. 176–178). Principles of adult learning link prior experiences of participants in supporting students using specific AAC systems commonly to new information. Survey responses to the question “Throughout your career, what types of AAC have you helped students to use?” were used to inform the course content. The most frequently used AAC systems identified included Language Acquisition through Motor Planning, Pragmatic Organisation Dynamic Display, ProLoQuo2Go, TD Snap with PODD, and Key Word Sign communication systems. Overall, the AAC Canvas course contains 7 modules covering a wide range of topics that DECYP staff can access on demand to develop their skills in supporting students who use AAC.

A Microsoft Teams site was set up as a CoP platform to support ongoing collaboration and reflection, mutual support, and increased self-efficacy for course participants. The AAC in Classrooms CoP Teams site was designed to support the ongoing engagement and interests of course participants their ongoing learning and interaction through regular posts by the authors related to AAC promotion, resources, and content.

Outcomes are measured against the key goals of the AAC in Classrooms project. Currently, the AAC course has over 800 enrolments and over 4000 views on system-specific learning modules. Participants in the AAC Canvas course have the option to provide feedback through forms within the course. Positive comments were provided by some participants relating to the videos which were provided in “user-friendly snippets” of information; practical activities and resources included in the modules to break up the learning; general enthusiasm for accessing more videos throughout the modules; and appropriate strategies that could be implemented in practice. Constructive comments from participants who gave feedback within the modules included requests for more practical activities within modules, and videos of staff and students using AAC. In addition to these comments, several provided reflections on specific skills needed to improve their practices in supporting students who use AAC.

Terms of reference for the AAC in the Classroom CoP were established to encourage participation and engagement. The CoP has over 150 members and includes posts related to professional development opportunities, sharing of success stories, top tips for using AAC, and sharing of a wide variety of resources. To facilitate further interaction, live events have been held to practice and promote AAC skills such as Key Word Sign with good attendance and positive anecdotal responses.

While this project is in the mid-stages of implementation, it is felt that the initial benefits of the process are valuable to share in a way that might be implemented in other educational contexts. The progress of the project is published in the Journal of Clinical Practice in Speech and Language Pathology in March 2024. Assessment of the project outcomes against the goals is ongoing and formally evaluation will include a post-implementation survey. Specific evaluation strategies will be implemented to investigate impacts on children who use AAC including improvements in communication access, AAC competencies, and learning outcomes. The working group continues to implement additional strategies to achieve the project aims as well as supporting the CoP to grow.