

“AAC is hot sh*t!”. Facilitating a positive narrative around AAC for speech language pathologists

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Short Abstract

Introduction

The attitudes of speech language pathologists (SLPs) towards AAC are integral to optimal outcomes for AAC users, however, there has been limited research into the attitudes of SLPs about AAC.

Aim

Therefore, this study aimed to explore SLPs’ attitudes, beliefs and values about AAC in addition to factors influencing SLP attitudes throughout their clinical journey.

Method

In total, 25 Australian SLPs participated in a semi-structured interview via Zoom investigating their attitudes towards AAC. Values coding was used to identify SLPs attitudes, values and beliefs surrounding AAC including any barriers or facilitators SLPs felt either supported them or deterred them from working in AAC.

Results

The most common words SLPs used to describe AAC or their feelings towards AAC were ‘overwhelming’, ‘hard’, ‘scary’, ‘daunting’ and ‘big’. However, attitudes varied between participants with one particularly passionate SLP referring to AAC as “hot shit”. Attitudes, beliefs and values about AAC varied between participants due to their bespoke clinical journeys. Subsequently, SLPs were exposed to different influencing factors, especially within their historical and social contexts. These factors included their university education, supervision experiences, workplace context and the attitudes of other key stakeholders.

Conclusion

Those SLPs working in the AAC space should consider ways they can positively impact attitudes towards AAC nationally by altering the narrative surrounding AAC. Those who choose to work in the AAC space for the majority of their caseload are often the minority, meaning their voices need to be the loudest.

Long Abstract

Introduction

Attitudes denote the way a person thinks or feels about something and are generally directed towards a person, or, as is the case with augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), an object, or an idea (Albarracin & Shavitt, 2018). A person's attitude can impact on how they act and/or the decisions they make. Therefore, when considering AAC, effective supports for people who cannot rely on speech alone to be heard and understood relies heavily on having a team with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to provide high quality assessment and intervention (McNaughton et al., 2019). While all AAC team members are integral, it could be argued that SLPs have the greatest impact on outcomes in comparison to other allied health services due to them fulfilling multiple roles including AAC intervention specialist, AAC facilitator, and AAC expert (Beukelman et al., 2008). Given that AAC is a recognised practice area for SLPs in most countries (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2020; Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, 2021; Speech Pathology Australia, 2020) and communication is a basic human right (Speech Pathology Australia, 2016), it could be assumed that SLPs would have a positive attitude towards AAC. However, this area has had little investigation with most research investigating the attitudes of communication partners such as peers (Beck et al., 2002, 2010; Dudek et al., 2006), family members (Townsend et al., 2012), and teachers (Radici et al., 2019; Soto, 1997; Tönsing & Dada, 2016).

Therefore, this study sought to comprehensively investigate the attitudes of SLPs towards AAC using a semi-structured interview design with the aim of developing a holistic picture through two research questions: 1) What are the attitudes of speech language pathologists towards augmentative and alternative communication?; and 2) What factors influence the attitudes of speech language pathologists towards augmentative and alternative communication?

Method

An exploratory qualitative approach was used to seek understanding of SLPs' attitudes towards AAC (O'Leary, 2021). An individual semi-structured interview format was selected to ensure participants felt comfortable discussing their attitudes and perceptions of AAC. All interviews were conducted online via Zoom to ensure participants from a wide geographical area could be included (O'Leary, 2021). In total, 25 SLPs were interviewed by the first author regarding their own attitudes towards AAC and the attitudes of SLPs they had encountered in the workforce. All interviews were audio and video recorded. Once transcribed verbatim by the first author, interview transcripts were uploaded to NVivo 12 (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2020) for analysis. Deductive thematic analysis was used applying a values coding approach as described by Saldana (2021). Structural coding was used to identify any factors which would influence an SLP's decision to work in AAC within a personal, social or historical context (Albarracin & Shavitt, 2018).

Results

SLPs expressed both positive and negative attitudes towards AAC. The most common words used to describe AAC were overwhelming, scary, hard, daunting, and big. Positive words were also used such as comfortable, amazing, and interesting; however, these positive attitudes were expressed by a minority. While SLPs expressed a range of values, three key themes were identified: 1) clients successfully communicating; 2) providing a high-quality service; and 3)

multimodal communication versus verbal speech. Finally, four key themes were identified pertaining to SLPs' beliefs surrounding AAC: 1) AAC is very time consuming; 2) AAC is for everyone versus AAC is only for certain populations; 3) AAC services should be individualised and holistic; and 4) Attitudes and knowledge are improving versus not improving. Participants highlighted that there is variation in the attitudes, beliefs, and values within the SLP community. This could be accounted for by the bespoke journey an SLP takes throughout their career where they are exposed to different influencing factors. During the interviews, participants identified a range of factors which they believe influence the attitudes of SLPs towards AAC within a personal (confidence, knowledge and personal preferences), social (social media, workplace, key stakeholders, clinical caseload, support networks and education) and historical context (changes in technology, funding, AAC research, generational differences and education).

Conclusion

Enacting attitudinal change is imperative when reducing barriers to service access for AAC users (McNaughton et al., 2019; Moorcroft et al., 2019). While substantial changes need to occur, three recommendations are made here. First, university education for SLPs needs to ensure communications and interactions around AAC are positive whereby AAC is perceived to be an exciting, interesting and viable area of practice. This should include comprehensive university education that is reflective of the contemporary AAC landscape. This would require frequent curriculum updates to reflect the constant advancements in technology and AAC research. Secondly, those in supervisory or management positions need to acknowledge the power of influence they have over early career SLPs. Those supervisors who feel AAC is overwhelming, daunting, or hard may need to reflect on why they feel that way and how they can ensure other SLPs do not inherit those negative feelings. Third, those SLPs with a positive attitude towards AAC need to understand that, no matter their role (e.g., early careers SLP or AAC specialist), they have power of influence, even if it is only in their immediate social context. Therefore, they should seek to share powerful, positive messages about AAC because change happens one person at a time.

References

References can be provided on request due to word count limitations in the submission file.