CAS or Can't? Building a Communication Accessible School.

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Short Abstract

Addressing communication accessibility for people with complex communication needs (CCN) continues to be an ongoing important inclusion initiative by Speech Pathologists and wider community teams. At the 2016 AGOSCI Conference, Porter & Parfett addressed communication accessibility within a school setting. Subsequent discussion identified a range of opportunity barriers, as described by Beukelman and Mirenda, 2013. The participants also described the ideal features of a communication accessible environment in a school, (Porter and Parfett ISAAC, Toronto 2016).

This presentation seeks to explore a range of assistive strategies that were used to identify and build solutions to address opportunity and access barriers for students with CCN at the Northern School for Autism (NSA). In recent years, NSA faced some unique challenges to communication accessibility, including the large staff cohort and rapid increase in student numbers. Additionally, NSA's teaching and learning protocols are based on structured teaching principles, which are believed to impact autonomous communication opportunities due to its links to Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA), (Paul, 2008). In 2019, NSA formed the Communication Accessible Schools (CAS) committee. This committee has highlighted some key strategies and successful initiatives with the aim of building NSA into a CAS. These include, but are not limited to, facilitating a shared understanding, supporting meaningful interaction with students who use AAC, building staff competency as communication partners, adjusting therapy service delivery models, and embedding communication access goals into school protocols and the Annual Implementation Plan (AIP). Attendees will leave with realistic and practical strategies when implementing communication accessibility changes.

Long Abstract

This presentation will explore one school's journey so far of working towards *true* communication accessibility. Using the Northern School for Autism (NSA) as a case study, the presentation will highlight successful strategies, ongoing challenges and barriers to communication opportunity and access (Beukelman & Mirenda, 2013), as well as plans for the future. Building meaningful solutions in a school setting depends largely on harnessing the power of the school community. Traditionally, schools have focused on the 'access' barriers described by Beukelman & Mirenda, (2013), utilising Speech Pathologists' knowledge and expertise to assess and implement suitable AAC based on the student's current communication profile. In this approach, addressing barriers to 'opportunity' have been secondary, often leading to a lack of shared responsibility between Speech Pathologists, classroom staff and the student themselves. Additionally, at a school there are many goals, priorities and curriculum plans that classroom staff are implementing at the one time, which can impact upon the direct focus on communication accessibility.

Communication access for those who access augmentative and alternative communication systems (AAC) has been an ongoing inclusion initiative and point of support for Speech Pathologists. SCOPE (2011) describes communication access as "communicating with people who do not use speech or have speech that is difficult to understand. It makes everyone in the community aware that they can play a role in removing communication barriers." But what does this mean for a school setting and more specifically a specialist school setting that has a vast range of communicators that differ in style, preference, language level, sensory profiles, motor skills, cognition, social motivation and past experience? At the 2018 ISAAC Conference, Haylee Parfett, an Australian-based Speech Pathologist, discussed how schools have *more* responsibility than the community or business-based communication access. She quoted, "Australian schools do more than just educate students. They prepare them for life − developing communication skills, self-discipline and respect for themselves, their peers and their world."

Haylee proceeded to extend the definition of communication accessible schools to 'people who understand the alternative form, autonomy who can scaffold it in the acquisition period, and who are able and willing to communicate in a manner that gives the individual maximal communicative autonomy,' (von Tetzchner & Grove, 2003, p. 27).

Generally speaking, due to differences in student population, staff or communication partners working in a specialist school setting will have more knowledge, skills and understanding when supporting students with CCN when compared to their mainstream counterparts. It is known, however, that shared beliefs and values, policy, leadership support and practical communication strategies implemented in the classroom still vary from school to school, even within the specialist setting.

The select unique aspects of NSA that had a great impact on practical solutions included, the large staff size (275 staff), speedily growing student numbers (3-6 classrooms per year for the last 5 years), subsequent growing leadership staff with varying levels of experience and teaching and learning protocols based on structured teaching principles (believed to impact child lead and autonomous communication opportunities).

Building a communication community and CAS committee is ongoing, however, a few key strategies and initiatives have demonstrated success. These strategies include but are not limited to; building shared understanding or beliefs between staff, meaningful interactions with students who use AAC to gain their perspectives, building staff competencies as communication partners (Von Tetzchner & Grove, 2003, p. 27), harnessing the power of staff from classrooms, therapy and leadership, adjusting therapy service delivery models, embedding communication access goals into teaching and learning protocols and the Annual Implementation Plan (AIP).

Attendees will leave with realistic and practical strategies when implementing communication accessibility changes. In addition, be encouraged to make a commitment to ongoing innovation in this space.

References

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