

“There’s still really a long way to go”: Mainstream teachers’ perspectives on culturally and linguistically inclusive communication in school settings.

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Short Abstract

The right to communicate and receive education is pivotal to everyone, and inclusive communication is essential in schools. However, many schools and teachers are not adequately prepared to support students and their families with communication support needs (CSN) from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds.

This study aimed to explore teachers’ perceptions of culturally and linguistically inclusive communication for students with CSN in mainstream schools. To the author’s knowledge, this was the first research in this area conducted in Australia. A qualitative descriptive approach, which aims to stay close to the data, was used to present authentic perspectives of classroom teachers. Participants (n=3), all mainstream teachers with over 10 years of experience, worked in South Australia at the time of the study. Three semi-structured interviews were conducted online to explore participant perspectives. Reflexive thematic analysis identified four overarching emerging themes: ‘broad perspectives on AAC and home language’, ‘inclusivity mindset’, ‘supporting teachers to be effective communication partners’, and ‘prominent roles in conversations and collaborations’. Findings highlighted that a monolingual mindset can be a communication barrier, while an inclusivity mindset facilitates effective interactions. There is an urgent need to prepare teachers to be responsive to the diverse needs of students and strive to build an inclusive school culture. Further exploration of how to create an inclusive learning community to support students with diverse learning profiles is recommended in future research.

Keywords: communication support needs; culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; culturally and linguistically inclusive communication

Long Abstract

Introduction

Everyone deserves inclusive communication and education. Schools and teachers have a crucial role in supporting students with communication support needs (CSN), especially those

from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds. However, many teachers feel unprepared to provide this support (Beukelman & Light, 2020; Kent-Walsh et al., 2015). Most communication tools are designed for English speakers, leaving bilingual students at a disadvantage (Ripat et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2023; Tönsing et al., 2019). Research on this topic is scarce, and there is a need to support bilingual learners with CSN (Cioè-Peña, 2022; Hall et al., 2021; Tönsing & Soto, 2020). Thus, it is crucial to understand how teachers perceive and support CLD students with CSN. By addressing the research questions below, we aimed to investigate how teachers respond to the diverse needs of students in schools, ultimately advancing inclusive education.

1. From the perspectives of mainstream teachers, how are they currently responsive to the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of students with CSN?
2. What are the mainstream teachers' perceptions of facilitators and barriers when supporting culturally and linguistically responsive teaching?
3. What do mainstream teachers report that can be done to support teachers with culturally and linguistically diverse practices for students with CSN?

Methodology

A qualitative descriptive approach, which aims to stay close to the data, was used to present authentic perspectives of classroom teachers. Participants (n=3) were three mainstream teachers, each with over a decade of experience working with students with disabilities and CLD backgrounds, working in South Australia at the time of the study. They discussed their inclusive approaches tailored to their students' diverse needs and shared their perspectives in semi-structured individual interviews (Punch, 2013; Thomas, 2017). The interview data were examined using thematic analysis, which uses a step-by-step, reflexive approach to describe and interpret the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Nowell et al., 2017). The presentation will detail the steps taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. This includes using direct quotes to support credibility and creating an audit trail to provide transparency.

Results

The study identified eight themes through thematic analysis. The research team noted overlapping themes across the research questions and consolidated them into four overarching themes: 'broad perspectives on AAC and home language', 'inclusivity mindset', 'supporting teachers to be effective communication partners', and 'prominent roles in conversations and collaborations'. The presentation will include participant quotes integrated with the presentation of these emerging themes.

Discussion

Broad Perspectives on AAC and Home Language

All participants exhibited diverse perspectives on using AAC and home languages. Their views on AAC varied depending on their experience and training (Leatherman & Wegner, 2022; Tönsing & Dada, 2016). Moreover, home language use was seen as both a facilitator and a barrier to student support. When home language was perceived to provide emotional support to bilingual students during high-stress (De Houwer, 2020; Ivaz et al., 2016; Sun, 2019), there

were concerns that home language might exacerbate communication barriers between English-speaking professionals and bilingual individuals and affect classroom participation (Halder et al., 2023; Hall et al., 2021).

Inclusivity Mindset

From the findings, a prevalent English-monolingual mindset emerged as a factor behind teachers' lack of responsiveness to the CSN of students whose home language is not English (Gramling, 2016; Hajek & Slaughter, 2014). Gramling (2016) defined monolingualism as the dominance of one language over others in a given historical or social context. One participant noted that the 'English-only mindset' was a barrier for teachers to effectively address linguistic and cultural diversity, thus marginalising vulnerable groups (Beatty et al., 2021; Cho, 2023). Transitioning to a responsive approach begins with a shift in mindset (Hollie & Allen, 2018). All participants expressed openness to cultural and linguistic diversity within schools. The study highlighted how a monolingual mindset contributes to these challenges and stressed the importance of adopting an inclusive mindset (Mowat, 2023; Pit-ten Cate et al., 2018).

Supporting Teachers to be Effective Communication Partners

Schools must adapt their curriculum and lessons extensively to meet students' diverse needs (Da Fonte & Boesch, 2018; Halder et al., 2023; Scheuermann et al., 2018); however, many teachers are unprepared to respond to them (Forlin et al., 2008; Jozwik et al., 2020; Stites et al., 2018). This challenge was apparent in our study, with all participants expressing their struggles when supporting culturally and linguistically inclusive communication. The results underscored the importance of collaboration between teachers and speech-language pathologists and the need for comprehensive teacher training. This aligned with previous studies highlighting the significant role of teachers as crucial communication partners and advocating for targeted teacher training (Biggs et al., 2018; Crowe et al., 2022; Pit-ten Cate et al., 2018).

Prominent Roles in Conversations and Collaborations

Effective conversations and collaborations play fundamental roles in driving successful education change. This study featured the necessity for conversations, with all participants agreeing on the importance of initiating open discussions involving various stakeholders. This echoed research emphasising that education changes should stem from conversations founded on respect, reciprocity, and shared values (Pleschová et al., 2021). Additionally, the study highlighted teamwork as a central concern for all participants, who believed collaborative efforts were essential in effectively supporting students with CSN and CLD backgrounds. These findings resonated with Fullan's work (2020), which stressed the significance of purposeful collaboration across different levels for initiating cultural change. He identified three essential elements for advocating such change: moral purpose, represented by the inclusivity mindset in this study; relationships, closely tied to conversations and communication; and purposeful collaboration, also emphasised as teamwork by the study participants (Fullan, 2020).

Conclusion

This study was the first research to explore educators' perspectives within school environments regarding students with CSN and CLD backgrounds. It emphasised fostering discussions with

frontline teachers and promoting conversations within this field. It highlighted the pivotal role of teachers as communication partners for students and how a monolingual mindset serves as a communication barrier. The results report the immediate need to equip teachers to foster culturally and linguistically inclusive communication and cultivate an inclusive school culture.