

The Training Experiences and Knowledge of Australian Supporting Workers in Assisting People with Communication Support Needs

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Short Abstract

Background

Since the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in 2013, support workers have become frontline providers of daily assistance for NDIS participants with communication support needs. However, there are no mandatory qualifications for support workers, and little is known about their training needs, experiences and knowledge.

Aim

Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the training and knowledge of support workers who assist NDIS participants with communication support needs.

Methods

This study followed a mixed methods convergent design. A total of 278 participant responses were analysed from an online survey which investigated the self-perceived knowledge, training experiences, and training needs of support workers. Participants were also asked to describe the strategies they use to support individuals with communication support needs and the barriers they face when accessing training.

Results

The majority of respondents (75.1%) reported receiving training they believed would assist them in working with people who have communication support needs; 86.0% were interested in further training. Barriers to accessing training included time and scheduling limitations, format and mode of training currently available and financial and geographical accessibility. On a 5-point Likert scale participants rated their self-perceived knowledge as moderate ($M = 3.92$). Ratings of knowledge were correlated with adequacy of training experiences. Support workers described using a range of strategies to assist NDIS participants.

Conclusion

These results suggest that while some support workers felt their training was adequate, the majority desired more training however barriers would need to be reduced.

Long Abstract

Background

In 2013, The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) was introduced in Australia with the intent to provide quality supports for individuals with disabilities in addition to increasing choice and control regarding service provision (Olney & Dickinson, 2019). Approximately 1.2 million Australians have some type of communication disability (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017) and therefore form a large proportion of participants who require NDIS services from support workers. Subsequently, since the roll-out of the NDIS, the demand for support workers has significantly increased (National Disability Services, 2018). However, there are no initial or ongoing mandatory training requirements for these support workers (Mellifont et al., 2023). While concerning, there are additional issues regarding the disability workforce in Australia, such as highly casualised employment, poorly trained staff, and high staff turnover rates (Baines et al. [2019](#)).

Although there is no recent evidence specifically regarding support workers and NDIS participants similar research in nursing and aged-care disciplines indicates that staff feel they lack knowledge and skills when supporting individuals with communication support needs, especially those who use augmentative and alternative communication (Simmons et al., 2019; Wittorf et al., 2023). Therefore, this research aimed to investigate the knowledge, training experiences and needs of support workers in assisting individuals with complex communication needs, including the strategies they use to support communication access.

Methods

A mixed method, online survey was used to investigate the knowledge, training experiences and needs of Australian support workers. The online survey was created using Qualtrics software and distributed through social media platforms including Facebook in addition to emails to professional networks and organisations who employ support workers. Closed ended questions were used to collect data on demographic information. Knowledge and training experiences were measured through a 5-point Likert scale. Open ended questions were used to collect data on strategies used by support workers and barriers to training. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Qualitative data was analysed using inductive thematic analysis.

Results

In total, 320 responses were received. After screening final number of participants ranged from 186 to 278 depending on the variable. In relation to qualifications, 54.3% of participants had a certificate or diploma and 31.3% had a Bachelor's degree or higher however only 59.4% reported their qualification was specific to support work. The majority of participants had less than 5 years' experience as a support worker (57.2%) which aligns with reports of high turn over within the workforce. Of those who had reported receiving training pertinent to assisting those with communication support needs (75.1%), face to face workshop was the most common format, followed by recorded online training. Through open text responses, participants also reported receiving training through participant's therapists, shadow shifts and training from participant's parents. Overall, on a 5-point scale, participants reported somewhat positively on the adequacy of their training ($M = 3.98$) however ratings specifically regarding the ongoing nature of their training was lower than other areas ($M = 3.55$). Unsurprisingly, the majority

(86%) indicated they would be interested in receiving more training on how to assist individuals with communication support needs. The preferred formats were online recorded webinars and face to face workshops. Unfortunately, support workers reported many barriers to accessing training including time and scheduling limitations, format and mode of training available and financial and geographical availability.

When asked to rate their self-perceived knowledge on a 5-point scale, ratings were somewhat positive ($M = 3.92$). When asked to explain two strategies they could use to support a client with communication support needs, four main themes were identified: 1) Use, model and provide access to augmentative and alternative communication systems, 2) Use of external resources to support communication 3) Following recommendations provided by therapists and 4) Use of specific support strategies to facilitate comprehension or expression.

Four factors were considered in relation to impact on support workers knowledge and training experiences. There was a positive correlation between ratings of training adequacy and self-perceived knowledge, [$r(172) = .527, p = <.001$]. A relationship was identified between self-perceived knowledge and highest level of education obtained [$F(2, 231) = 9.915, p = <.001$], with knowledge recorded as higher for participants with a bachelor's degree or higher in comparison to other groups (e.g., diploma or high school qualification). There was no significant relationship between knowledge and years spent working as a support worker [$F(4, 230) = 1.818, p = .126$] or between training experiences and employment status [$F(2, 183) = 2.565, p = .080$].

Conclusion

This study identified that the majority of support workers who assist NDIS participants with communication support needs have received training, but the adequacy of this training was variable resulting in survey participants reporting a desire to undergo further training opportunities. High quality supports can only be provided by those who have the training and knowledge to do so however this raises the question, who has the responsibility to ensure support workers are highly trained given the unregulated and casualised nature of the workforce? Key stakeholders including employers, therapists and the National Disability Insurance Agency need to consider innovate training opportunities for support workers that takes into consideration barriers, especially financial barriers for those in casual employment.

References

References can be provided upon request to the first author. Submission guidelines state the long abstract is 1000 words excluding references, however there is a 1000 word limit (in total) here.