

The AAC Mentor Program at Southern Support School

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Short Abstract

At Southern Support School in Tasmania, staff have worked over many years to improve their skills and knowledge in supporting students who use AAC. As a school we were interested in supporting students by providing exposure to ‘real’ AAC communicators and extending our own practice, by employing an AAC mentor.

Our speech pathologists already had a relationship with Joseph, an AAC communicator who presented at the 2022 AGOSCI conference and was also a volunteer AAC mentor at the Variety Motor Mouth Camp. Our school principal approached Joseph to see if he was interested in taking on the AAC mentor role at our school. Joseph agreed and was employed as a teacher assistant for 3 hours a week.

One of the key values driving this work was to respect the AAC Mentor role. We felt strongly that the role should be paid and viewed as a professional role within our school. We worked with our HR department and developed a Statement of Duties for AAC Mentor (a first in an Australian public service we believe) that truly reflected the work Joseph was doing in our school, respecting the role and its importance.

This presentation will discuss how the mentor role has changed and grown at our school, what strategies have worked and what have not. We will look at the benefits for our students, our staff and for Joseph. We will also discuss the future directions and opportunities for the AAC mentor program more broadly.

Long Abstract

Mentors are widely used in society to help individuals to develop both professionally and personally (Holmes, et. Al., 2024). Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) users can also benefit from having a mentor with lived experience of using AAC. In the limited research available, there is documented evidence to show that AAC mentor – mentee relationships are typically beneficial for both mentors and mentees in developing a range of strategies to support their communication and interpersonal skills (Cohen & Light, 2000; George & Warren, 2012; Ballin, Baladin & Stancliffe, 2012; Ballin, Baladin & Stancliffe, 2013).

Southern Support School is a specialist education setting in Southern Tasmania with 101 students. All students who attend the school have a communication disability and use an

AAC system. Staff have worked over many years with the School Speech Pathologists to improve their practice in supporting students who use AAC. As a school we were interested in engaging with an AAC mentor to provide students with an opportunity to see 'real' AAC users in their daily environments and to support to extend their skills and knowledge as well as building their expectations of what our students could achieve in the future.

As a beginning step, we reached out to other organisations around Australia to see how they were utilising AAC mentors. We found that some non-government organisations employed AAC communicators in roles such as facilitating group sessions for AAC communicators, advising on technology supports and presenting about and being assessors for communication accessibility. In Tasmania we were aware of AAC communicators who had done 'one-off' presentations to schools in a voluntary capacity, but could not find any information about schools actually employing an AAC mentor. We felt strongly that the role should be paid, viewed as a professional role within our school, and respected.

Our speech pathologists already had a relationship with Joseph, an AAC communicator who had presented at the 2022 AGOSCI conference and was also a volunteer AAC mentor at the Variety Motor Mouth Camp. Our Principal approached Joseph to see if he was interested in taking on the AAC mentor role at our school. Joseph agreed to take on the role and was employed at our school as a teacher assistant for 3 hours a week.

Since the implementation of the AAC Mentor role at SSS in 2023, the role has developed and changed. Initially, we believed having an AAC Mentor working in the school 'Mini Woollies' would be successful as Joseph had many positive interactions with campers while running the 'camp shop' at the Variety Motor Mouth Camp. We thought this would be an effective way to create a variety of communication opportunities for our students. However, Joseph did not find this strategy offered the same opportunities in the school setting. We found that an AAC Mentor was most effective when working in the classroom. In the classroom, Joseph had greater opportunity to use and demonstrate his communication skills to the students and staff during his interactions.

For the role to be effective, we learnt that it was important to have class teachers who worked collaboratively with Joseph and to have students who showed interest in engaging with another person. When a student was ready to engage in conversation, this allowed Joseph to expand their utterance length, demonstrate different communication functions and work on their specific communication goals. In the classroom environment, Joseph was able to teach and explain to students and staff important concepts such as:

- how to create personal space by not touching a person's wheelchair
- the importance of waiting for someone to finish what they want to say
- why we do not look over a person's shoulder when they are typing their message.
- Anecdotally, we have seen many benefits for our students who have worked with Joseph. He has developed close relationships with many students who get excited about his weekly visits. This has been observed in the way the students react to Joseph, as well as testimonials from parents.

One of the challenges was ensuring that Joseph's position description accurately reflected the work that he did. When Joseph started working with our school, the only option was to employ him as a teacher assistant (TA), however, Joseph did not perform all of the roles that are expected of a TA such as preparing resources for teachers and providing personal care for

students, and in fact was unable to do these tasks. We wanted a statement of duties that truly reflected the work. We felt it was important not to retrofit a Position Description, but rather respect the role and its importance with a dedicated position description. There was already a precedent with the department for roles such as 'Auslan Assistant'. We worked with our human resources team to develop an 'AAC mentor' statement of duties that reflected the work Joseph did in our school and that could be used more broadly across the department in Tasmania.

We continue to work to improve the AAC mentor program in our school. Joseph has also done presentations for our staff, as well as a group of school psychologists and more recently professional staff statewide to educate them on ways to support AAC communicators. We are looking to extend the time Joseph works at our school so that more staff and students can benefit from working with him. We plan to give Joseph access to our student learning plans so he has a clear idea of what students are working on and how he can tailor the supports accordingly. While Joseph often must be flexible when working in a busy classroom, we are looking to supporting Joseph to have clear session plans for the supports he provides. We hope there will be additional opportunities for AAC mentors in schools in the future.