

Visionary Leadership, Innovative Practices: A Three-Year Journey of Transforming Communication Accessibility at St. Patrick's Special School

Cathy Sires¹

Kelly Brook¹

¹ St. Patrick's Special School

Short Abstract

St. Patrick's Special School is a specialist education setting located in Adelaide, South Australia. The majority of the student cohort are unable to rely on speech alone to communicate and be understood.

In 2022 the Executive Leadership Team made a commitment to improve communication and literacy practice across the school. Leaders invested heavily and commenced several initiatives to achieve this.

With a willingness to utilise new and innovative technology, St. Patrick's Special School embarked on an exciting journey with AssistiveWare as a trial school for their new AAC app, Proloquo. Participation in the international trial with AssistiveWare not only contributes to global research on AAC but also informs best practices and innovation within the school.

Leadership also facilitated targeted professional development and opportunities for staff to become proficient coaches themselves, empowering them to mentor and guide fellow educators with both communication and literacy practice. This collaborative approach fosters a culture of continuous improvement and shared expertise, ensuring that the integration of AAC practice is both sustainable and impactful.

Through this comprehensive approach—characterised by supportive leadership, robust investment in professional development and resources, and active participation in research—St. Patrick's Special School exemplifies a forward-thinking model for enhancing communication and learning for students who use AAC.

This presentation will share insights from the three-year journey and future considerations.

Long Abstract

St. Patrick's Special School is a specialist education setting located in Adelaide, South Australia. The majority of the student cohort are unable to rely on speech alone to communicate and be understood (Communication First, 2023). In 2022 the Executive Leadership Team made a commitment to improve communication and literacy practice across the school. Leaders invested heavily and commenced several initiatives to achieve this, including:

- Participation in a school trial of AssistiveWare’s Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) application, Proloquo, accompanied by purchase of 1:1 iPads for all teachers, therapists and education support staff;
- Engagement with a literacy consultant, and implementation of a school-wide approach to literacy teaching and assessment;
- Whole school professional development, including teachers, therapists and education support staff, focused on communication autonomy, communication partner skills and practical skills with AAC;
- Whole school professional development focused on language based literacy tasks, with an initial focus on shared reading and writing;
- Well-resourced supports within the school including a Speech Pathologist and a Literacy Focus Teacher to coach educators in embedding new practices.

With a willingness to utilise new and innovative technology, St. Patrick's Special School embarked on an exciting journey with AssistiveWare as a trial school for their new AAC app, Proloquo. Previous work to improve the implementation of AAC in the school led to limited outcomes, but the implementation of the new system accompanied by expert coaching and support, has led to significant changes in communication skills of both staff and students. Additionally, participation in the international trial with AssistiveWare not only contributes to global research on AAC but also informs best practices and innovation within the school.

Beyond the acquisition and implementation of AAC systems to improve communication accessibility, leadership facilitated targeted professional development and opportunities for staff to become proficient coaches themselves, empowering them to mentor and guide fellow educators with both communication and literacy practice. This collaborative approach fosters a culture of continuous improvement and shared expertise, ensuring that the integration of AAC practice is both sustainable and impactful (Kretlow & Bartholomew, 2010).

Through this comprehensive approach—characterised by supportive leadership, robust investment in professional development and resources, and active participation in research—St. Patrick’s Special School exemplifies a forward-thinking model for enhancing communication and learning for students who use AAC. This presentation will share insights from the three-year journey and future considerations.

References

Communication First (2023, July 11). The Words We Use. Communication First. <https://communicationfirst.org/the-words-we-use/>

Kretlow, A. G., & Bartholomew, C. C. (2010). Using Coaching to Improve the Fidelity of Evidence-Based Practices: A Review of Studies. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 33(4), 279-299. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406410371643>