

## **We need to fill the gap**

Siobhan Daley

### **Short Abstract**

As an AAC user, ambassador, and public speaker, I have firsthand experience with the significant gaps in education, employment, and disability services, especially for those who require both intellectual engagement and physical accommodations. At university, while intellectually stimulated, I struggled with the fast-paced nature of academic life, ultimately leaving due to the system's inability to accommodate my communication needs. My transition to Avenue, a disability support service, revealed a different issue: under-stimulation. The activities were overly simplified and didn't align with my intellectual capabilities. This disconnect left me feeling isolated, with my closest friends at Avenue being the workers rather than peers.

Despite these challenges, I continue to work as an AAC ambassador, advocating for systems that truly empower individuals like me to contribute meaningfully. My experience highlights the need for more personalised approaches that challenge the assumption that all people with disabilities need only basic support. We need environments that recognise the diverse abilities of AAC users, offering both physical accommodations and intellectual stimulation.

Through my work, I push for more tailored, person-centred approaches in education, disability services, and the workplace. These systems must provide AAC users with the necessary time to communicate, intellectually stimulating activities, and flexible work models that allow those with physical limitations to contribute. My goal is to create environments where AAC users are empowered to engage fully, develop socially, and achieve their full potential, bridging the gap between basic care and meaningful inclusion.

### **Long Abstract**

As an AAC user, ambassador, and public speaker, my journey has revealed significant gaps in the systems designed to support individuals with disabilities, particularly AAC users. My experiences navigating education, disability services, and employment have shown that these systems often fail to provide both the intellectual engagement and physical accommodations that people like me require to thrive. The reality is that many programs, while well-intentioned, are either too fast-paced or too under-stimulating, leaving those of us with complex communication needs struggling to fit into environments that don't fully understand or cater to our abilities.

During my time at university, I experienced the intellectual stimulation I craved. I was deeply engaged with the academic material, using my AAC device to contribute meaningfully to discussions and assignments. However, despite my intellectual capacity, I was ultimately forced to leave because I couldn't keep up with the relentless pace of lectures, deadlines, and group work. The institution's accommodations for my AAC needs were insufficient, as the focus remained on speed and efficiency. This experience demonstrated that even in environments that value intellectual ability, there is often little flexibility for individuals who require more time to communicate and process information.

After leaving university, I sought out disability services, hoping to find an environment that would better accommodate my physical limitations. I turned to Avenue, a program designed to provide support for individuals with disabilities. While Avenue provided the physical accommodations I needed, it quickly became apparent that it wasn't designed to meet my intellectual needs. The activities were routine, overly simplistic, and unchallenging, which left me feeling unstimulated and disconnected. What was particularly isolating was that my closest friends at Avenue became the workers rather than my peers, as the programming failed to foster meaningful social connections among participants like me.

This disconnect between physical accommodations and intellectual engagement is a systemic issue that pervades not only disability services but also education and employment. The one-size-fits-all model of support assumes that individuals with disabilities need only basic care and routine activities, without recognising the diversity within the disability community. Many of us, particularly AAC users, require environments that challenge us intellectually and allow us to engage meaningfully with others. These systems often overlook the fact that we have much more to offer than simply being passive recipients of care.

In addition to the challenges I've faced in education and disability services, my declining physical health has made it increasingly difficult to maintain traditional employment. Despite my intellectual capabilities and desire to contribute, many jobs are structured in ways that exclude people like me. Traditional employment models often prioritise physical productivity, leaving little room for flexibility when it comes to accommodating individuals who may need more time to communicate or work. This has limited my opportunities in the workforce, even though I continue to advocate for AAC users through my role as an ambassador and public speaker.

My experiences at Avenue and in other environments have made it clear that the systems designed to support people with disabilities need to evolve. These systems must move beyond basic physical accommodations and provide opportunities for intellectual growth and meaningful engagement. AAC users are not a monolithic group, and we require more than just routine tasks and physical care. We need environments that stimulate us mentally, allow us to build meaningful social connections, and empower us to contribute to society in a way that reflects our abilities.

As an AAC ambassador and public speaker, my advocacy focuses on promoting more person-centred approaches in education, disability services, and the workplace. In education, this means creating systems that allow AAC users the time and space to communicate fully, without the pressure to conform to traditional, fast-paced learning models. It means developing programs that challenge us intellectually and allow us to engage deeply with the material, while still accommodating our physical limitations.

In disability services, we need programs that go beyond basic care and offer intellectually stimulating activities that align with the diverse abilities of participants. My experience at Avenue highlights the need for more engaging and personalised programming that allows AAC users to develop socially, form meaningful relationships, and participate in activities that challenge them mentally.

In the workplace, there is a need for more flexible employment models that focus on the contributions and capabilities of individuals rather than on physical productivity. Many AAC users, myself included, have much to offer intellectually and creatively, but we are often excluded from traditional employment because the system prioritises speed and efficiency over meaningful engagement. We need workplaces that value our contributions and provide the necessary accommodations for us to participate fully.

Ultimately, my goal as an AAC ambassador is to raise awareness of these gaps and push for changes that will create more inclusive, empowering environments for AAC users and individuals with disabilities. By addressing the disconnect between physical accommodations and intellectual engagement, we can create systems that allow AAC users to thrive both socially and intellectually. My experiences at university, Avenue, and in the workplace have shown me that there is still much work to be done, but I believe that through advocacy and awareness, we can bridge the gap between basic care and meaningful inclusion.

In sharing my story, I hope to inspire others to think critically about the systems that are in place and how they can be improved to better serve AAC users. We need environments that don't just accommodate our physical limitations but also recognise our intellectual capabilities and provide opportunities for us to engage meaningfully with the world around us. By creating these environments, we can ensure that AAC users are empowered to achieve their full potential and contribute to society in a way that reflects their true abilities.