Long term Implementation of Robust AAC in a Special Educational Setting

Brett Pearson[1]
Emma Pearson[1], Helen Tainsh[2] and Jane Farrall[3]
[1] Bullimbal School
[2] Helen Tainsh Speech Pathology
[3] Jane Farrall Consulting

Short Abstract

Bullimbal School is a New South Wales Department of Education School for Specific Purpose in Tamworth. Most students at the school cannot rely on speech alone to be heard and understood. Therefore, they need to use Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) as part of their communication system. Most students also have an intellectual disability and additional diagnoses.

In 2013, Bullimbal School began becoming a communication accessible school. This presentation will discuss the school's AAC journey from 2013 to now.

There have been many factors that have impacted the implementation of AAC in the school. We will discuss the impact of each, both positive and negative (or both).

These factors include:

- The strongly held belief of the school executive that the school needs to be communication accessible and that all students need a robust AAC system;
- The decision made by the school to provide robust non-electronic systems for students;
- The steadily growing school population;
- Parental aspirations for students;
- Cultural backgrounds, experiences and socioeconomic status of the students;
- The robust AAC systems introduced and supported;
- Staff experiences with AAC in previous settings;
- The recognition of the importance of comprehensive literacy instruction in supporting AAC implementation;
- Ongoing AAC training;
- Implementation of ROCC assessment;
- Staff turnover;
- Consultants around literacy, AAC, sensory processing and access;
- Resources required and implemented;
- The impact of the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

The presentation will also include the outcomes of the long-term implementation of AAC for the school students and school community.

Long Abstract

Bullimbal School is a New South Wales Department of Education School for Specific Purpose in Tamworth. The school is a regional special education setting, with a steadily increasing enrolment of students. In 2013 the school had 37 students, increasing to 70 students in 2024. Further increases are expected in 2025.

The majority of students at the school "cannot rely on speech alone to be heard and understood" (Communication First, 2023). Therefore, they need to use Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) as part of their communication system. Most of the students at the school also have an intellectual disability and additional diagnoses.

In 2013, Bullimbal School embarked on a journey to become a communication accessible school, providing expert support for students to learn and use robust AAC systems (Zangari, 2021). Communication Access means that "everyone can get their message across, no matter how they communicate." (SCOPE, Australia). This presentation will discuss the school's AAC journey from 2013 to now, the factors that have influenced it, and the outcomes of this journey.

There have been many factors that have impacted the implementation of AAC in the school over this period. Of these, there are several that have had a significant impact, either positive or negative, and sometimes both. We will discuss the impact of each and how we have been able to build on the positive effects and our strategies, where possible, for mitigating the negative ones.

These factors include:

- The strongly held belief of the school executive that all people have a right to communicate, and their understanding that therefore the school needs to be communication accessible (SCOPE, Vic). For this to happen, most of the students at the school need to have access to a robust AAC system;
- The decision made by the school to provide non-electronic systems for all students who need one, and how and why this practice has continued as the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) has been rolled out;
- The steadily growing school population;
- Parental aspirations for students which are strongly influenced by the parent's own life experiences and background;
- Cultural backgrounds, experiences and socioeconomic status of the students. At this time, over 50% of the school are of First Nations origin and the school has worked hard to create links and supports with local First Nations groups;
- The robust AAC systems introduced and supported. Initially the school had a focus on providing electronic AAC systems during school hours, but this rapidly shifted with the recognition that all students need a non-electronic system so that they have a voice at all times;
- Staff experiences with AAC in previous settings. These have varied from novice through to negative;

- The recognition of the importance of comprehensive literacy instruction in supporting AAC implementation, and the understanding that this is a two-way interaction (Erickson & Koppenhaver, 2020);
- Ongoing AAC training, including formal staff training and established staff supporting new staff;
- Implementation of ROCC assessment, supporting differentiation and goal setting;
- Teacher turnover, which has been high in recent years due to the implementation of curriculum, regional setting of the school and nationwide teacher shortage. Each of these have presented different and varied challenges;
- Regular visits from consultants to the school around literacy, AAC, sensory processing and access;
- Resources required and implemented as part of the ongoing support needed for robust AAC, including staffing and physical resources;
- The impact of NDIS, which was rolled out in the Tamworth region in 2017.

The presentation will also include the outcomes of the long-term implementation of AAC for the school students and school community.

These include:

- Increased student autonomy;
- Significant reduction in students communicating through behaviours of concern;
- Creation of a community of individuals who have become better communication partners, which has had a roll-on effect to the regional community;
- Positive outcomes in literacy, as student receptive and expressive language has improved, resulting in improvements in both reading with comprehension and writing. We are also aware that comprehensive literacy instruction has supported the use of AAC and recognise the reciprocal nature of this outcome;
- Despite recent high turnover of teachers, staff retention across the school has improved as many staff recognise the value of the training provided and the supportive environment;
- Bullimbal School staff's ability to support other schools in the region with students who need AAC;
- Recognition of the school's expertise at a regional level and student allocation to the school.

References

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

Erickson, K. A., & Koppenhaver, D. A. (2020). *Comprehensive literacy for all: Teaching students with significant disabilities to read and write.* Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Scope. (2024). *Communication Access*. https://www.scopeaust.org.au/business-solutions/communication-access

Zangari, C. (2021, December 13). What Does a Robust AAC System Look Like? *PrAACtical AAC*. https://praacticalaac.org/praactical/praactical-questions-what-does-a-robust-aac-system-look-like/