All Change Please: Whole school AAC and literacy implementation Handout

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Adelaide West Special Education Centre is a school for students with physical disabilities in Adelaide, Australia. This presentation will detail our journey towards all students at our school having a comprehensive augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) system and all classrooms implementing daily balanced literacy instruction.

In 2012, the school began a whole school plan to implement increased use and support of AAC. Implementation commenced with whole school professional development during a full day workshop, explaining the importance of aided language stimulation (Goossens', Crain & Elder, 1992), vocabulary organization, and robust vocabulary instruction (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002). Following the training, each classroom was provided with a small set of aided language displays, including a generic aided language display with high frequency language that could be used across most activities. A speech language pathologist visited each classroom and demonstrated to the staff how to use the displays for modeling with their students.

Initially, most staff used the aided language displays but during the next 15 weeks, use of the displays dropped off as staff found they frequently didn't have the language they needed and also as they felt there was no change in the communication of the students. After 15 weeks, a second coaching visit from a speech language pathologist occurred and usage of aided language displays increased again, particularly in some classrooms. During this visit, staff were encouraged to become more familiar with individual student's existing AAC systems, both low technology and high technology, and to begin using these for aided language input. In addition, further conversation occurred around persisting with aided language stimulation for a longer period of time before expecting students to start using the systems for themselves.

After another 10 weeks, a further coaching visit established that most staff were now using aided language consistently in specific activities but that these were generally limited to one or two activities each day. The most common reason staff gave for not using aided language was lack of vocabulary. In addition, use of student's more comprehensive

AAC systems, which would have solved the vocabulary issues, was still very limited, with staff finding it difficult to move between the different systems in their classroom.

As a result, the school executive decided that in 2013 AAC implementation would focus on gaining expertise across the staff in one AAC system before moving onto others. The most common individualized systems in the school were low technology Pragmatically Organised Dynamic Displays (PODD) (Porter, 2007) and sessions from a PODD trainer, Janelle Sampson, were organized to provide professional development for all staff to help them gain understanding of the language organization and to improve practice in implementation. The initial training session was completed at the end of 2012 with further sessions held in 2013.

Also in 2013 the school began implementing a balanced approach to literacy development, based on Cunningham, Hall & Defee, 1992 and Hall & Williams, 2000, in all classrooms, providing comprehensive balanced literacy instruction for all students. Once again, implementation commenced with a full day workshop for all staff. In addition, the literacy skills of two students from each classroom were assessed at the beginning of the school year.

Throughout 2013 each teacher timetabled 2 or more hours per day focusing on literacy instruction. Following the principles of Implementation Research described by Fixsen, Blase, Naoom & Wallace (2009), staff received frequent coaching sessions with an expert in literacy implementation with students with diverse needs, with coaching sessions occurring once per month. In addition, short professional development sessions were held after school to address specific questions or implementation issues in the literacy area.

Staff were also coached in using AAC throughout the literacy block, to support the introduction of all literacy concepts. As staff saw the improvements in students' literacy skills, attention span and vocabulary they began to have increased reasons and motivation for using AAC. Staff began consistently using aided language and introducing vocabulary in the literacy block, and became much more competent at navigating around the classroom PODD books as they set different purposes for guided reading, activated background knowledge and discussed students' writing. These more complex AAC systems which initially were considered "too difficult" now were implemented with a view to long term language development and receptive language input.

Once staff became more confident and competent at using the AAC systems in the literacy block, and saw the corresponding increases in

language and vocabulary in a range of students, the use of the AAC systems improved throughout the school day. Staff now provide aided language input in all different areas of the school day. Staff consistently request updates and additions to individual students' AAC systems, often suggesting that a student needs a more complex system as they develop. Teachers and teacher assistants now have a great deal more ownership of the AAC system development, and have often volunteered to construct a new PODD book for a student in their own time once the files have been provided by a speech pathologist. In turn this has resulted in increased literacy and AAC development for all students, as will be shown in the videos and literacy samples shared in this presentation.

Overall, we now have a whole school community who support "the least dangerous assumption" (Donnellan, 1984). Each individual student is seen as a communicator and learner and every success is celebrated, resulting in more successes and a very positive and energized learning environment for all.

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