HOW TEACHERS AND THEIR STUDENTS WHO HAVE AN INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY ARE TRAINED IN AND USE AN AUGMENTATIVE AND ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION DEVICE TO COMMUNICATE AND PARTICIPATE IN THE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to describe the implementation process of an Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) device in a classroom at a school for adults with intellectual disabilities, and how the use of the device relates to communication and participation in the classroom.

Efforts between the researcher, the teachers, and the Speech and Language Pathologist (SLP) allowed for a collaborative research design. The researcher described participant perspectives regarding student communication and engagement before, during, and after the AAC device training. Additional training took place as a result of the findings.

Both communication and engagement were effected by the implementation of the AAC device. On-the-job coaching was recommended for future iterations using the ACC device.

BACKGROUND

Studies have found that the use of assistive technology can help students who have a disability be successful in their learning (Maor, 2011; Watson et al., 2010). Little is known about the implementation process of integrating assistive technology, specifically AAC devices, into instructional settings for students who have an intellectual disability (Cheslock et al., 2008; Torrison et al., 2007; Snell et al., 2006).

PURPOSE

To describe the implementation process of an AAC device and how two students who have an intellectual disability use the device to communicate and participate in classroom activities, and to describe how their teachers experience this process.

METHOD

Participants: Two students were selected by the H’art staff and invited to join the study based on their challenges producing speech. All three teachers at the school participated in the study. One of the teachers recruited a SLP based on her experience with and knowledge of speech-generating devices.

Data Collection and Analysis: A qualitative methodology and emergent design were used in this study:

- a three-month data collection period
- 20 hours of in-class observations
- weekly journaling by teacher participants
- post-intervention interviews with all participants (approximately one-hour each)
- two additional training sessions (based on recommendations from staff obtained during interviews)

FINDINGS

Student communication and participation before the AAC device was implemented were limited. Students primarily used body language, sign language, and simple (one or two word) sentences.

Student communication and participation before the AAC device was implemented were limited. Students primarily used body language, sign language, and simple (one or two word) sentences. Students appeared to engage in classroom activities, but many of the activities were language-based, consequently, participation was a minimal. Students relied on others to ask questions that could be answered with a “yes” or “no”. One staff member recalled that “students were in a passive role. You couldn’t really ask an open-ended question...and initiation came from the teachers.”

Student communication and participation changed throughout the integration of the AAC device. Students were able to make requests and initiate conversations using their AAC device more frequently than without it. Non-verbal communication also continued, and students were encouraged to use their device simultaneously. Students were able to ask and answer questions during class discussions. They used more specific language than without it, as demonstrated during an interview when asked how she feels using the device: “excited; proud; tired.”

Teachers faced many challenges in their efforts to support the implementation of the AAC device:

- programming the device, and
- planning classroom activities to provide opportunities for communication.

There were logistical challenges to conducting the in-class teacher training. The three teachers were all giving instruction while they were being trained, which made them preoccupied and unable to participate in the in-class coaching. As a result, a follow-up session was conducted. The SLP and her assistant provided an additional session where they modeled a lesson so teachers could focus on learning process.

DISCUSSION

Three primary themes emerged:

1. In-class training was necessary for successful implementation.
2. The AAC device improved communication and participation in class for the student participants.
3. Teachers needed time to learn and incorporate the device into their classrooms to support student communication.

REFERENCES


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS