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# Module 11: One County's Approach To Supporting AAC In Mainstream Schools

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This module is number 11 in the package "Supporting Communication through AAC" published by Scope.

## Introduction

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Somerset has been regularly including children with complex physical impairments in mainstream schools since 1996. This coincided with the closure of the Barnardo's school for children with physical disabilities (Princess Margaret's School) in Taunton. The support for the children who opted to go to their local mainstream school came from the team of teachers and therapists who had worked with the children in the special school. A year after, in 1997, the Education Authority took over the employment of those staff and they became the Physical Impairment and Medical Service. This is one of five advisory support teams that work for the SEN section of the LEA. The others cover the areas of general and specific learning difficulties, communication, sensory impairments and behaviour difficulties.

## The Physical Impairment and Medical Support Service

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The Physical Impairment and Medical Support Service (PIMSS) includes Advisory Teachers, a Speech and Language Therapist (SLT), two Support Assistant Advisors and two SLT assistants. We also have an Advisory Teacher who specialises in SEN Information Technology and a part time technician. The aims of the Service are to support the children, their schools and the families so that their placement in mainstream is successful. The team offers advice and 'hands on' support and training to schools to enable them to feel confident and to develop their expertise in including children with physical impairments.

## Funding arrangements

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In addition to the 'Special Educational Needs Devolved' (SEND) budget, Somerset has had a funding arrangement with mainstream schools called 'Send Plus' (this is now called School Action Plus to fit in with the new Code of Practice). This can be applied for by schools to help support identified children who have met the criteria laid down by the LEA. The schools need to provide evidence of the child's needs and show how they have been supporting the child up to the application date. The funding is divided into five sections one of which looks at the needs of children with physical impairment. This particular section is then divided into three levels of need. The criteria focus on the child's needs and the provision to be made rather than on the physical impairment itself and in doing so is working more with the social model of disability rather than the medical model.

The funding criteria look at both 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' provision. In the section with the highest level of funding (which includes children with AAC needs) there is an expectation that class teacher time is available for:

- Differentiation of the curriculum
  - Facilitation of alternative communication
  - Liaison with therapists and parents
- Support assistant time is expected to enable:
- Access and adaptation to the curriculum
  - Provision of personal support and management of the equipment needed.

Quantitative provision at this level is expected to be full time Support Assistant training for all staff and teaching time used to maximise curriculum access etc.

## Some of our aims

The PIMSS team aims to support schools in their provision of the above and to provide much of the training needed. For those children who have AAC needs the support focuses around the following:

- To develop an appropriate 'low tech' communication system for the child
- To train staff in the mainstream setting and develop collaborative working practices (parents are included where possible)
- To provide ongoing support to staff so they gain in skills and confidence
- To provide specialist support when needed
- To emphasise the important of AAC and to ensure that it is something that is used all the time and that it is valued.

**Training** for staff and parents is vital and in Somerset we use Somerset Total Communication (STC) training as our basis for training in AAC.

Somerset Total Communication has a strong inclusion philosophy and takes the idea that communication is a basic human right as its core concept. It is also considered very much a process rather than a package and the idea that 'everyone' in the child's environment needs to learn about the use of total communication (which includes symbols, signing, photos, Voice Output Communication Aids – VOCAs etc) is central. All the relevant managers at the Local Education Authority (LEA) level now support STC and there is a Strategic Committee including managers from Social Services, Health and Education, which oversees its development. Perhaps because of this strong management support schools see training in this area as a priority and this makes it easier to deliver the training and help support implementation and support those children with AAC needs.

Somerset Total Communication provides a very good basis on which to then build the training for the use of more complex aids as they are seen by parents and staff as yet another tool in the communication system the child has. As Sally Millar writes "In general a 'bottom up' approach, involving simple practical systems, requiring little specialist training for staff is more likely to be used in school classrooms" (Supporting Children Using AAC in Schools).

The training in STC is in three stages. The first 'Induction Level' is now expected to be undertaken as a whole school training event and many schools are now using symbols and signing across the school. The level of use is of course variable from school to school and often from teacher to teacher but for the children who use symbols and other alternative methods of communicating it is seen to be a valued and valid way of communicating. It also provides an opportunity for the "Development of a whole school culture which supports and enhances multi-modal communication" ("Developing AAC Policies in Schools" 2001).

In training there is a strong emphasis on STC being used to benefit all children, not only do they can communicate with their peers who use AAC, but also to aid their learning and communication. In the Education Action Zone (EAZ) on Bridgwater, Somerset the EAZ Speech and Language Therapists use STC as part of their training to schools and encourage the use of symbols in particular to raise standards and to enhance learning for all children.

The training moves on to a 'Second Level', which provides more information on communication and the use of symbols and signs and their use in developing communication and learning. The third stage is called 'Co-ordinator' training and this enables the participants to teach Induction level in their place of work so schools can keep their skills up to date.

## Collaborative working

Collaboration between outside professionals, school staff as well as parents and the child is seen as appropriate and the most effective way of working with children with complex needs and PIMSS encourages schools to set up structure to promote this way of working. In the schools in which we work, there are many different formats used, this is important as it has to be useful and meaningful to the school and fit in with those involved. Some of the different formats are as follows:

### Half-termly meetings to look at curriculum needs:

Staff at these meetings would include appropriate members of our team with the teacher, assistant(s) and the SENCO. The aim is to look at the curriculum for the following term and discuss how it can be differentiated and suggest ways to access it. The appropriate vocabulary is identified and ways to develop the child's communication skills will be discussed. Use of IT and how to record work may also be looked at.

### Termly 'Communication' meetings

This happens where a child has complex needs and a number of different carers. These meetings are for the parents and adults involved closely with the child and personal vocabulary and the use of the AAC system at home and school are discussed as well as issues that adults working with the child need to be aware of.

### Weekly Multi-disciplinary meetings:

Those invited include therapists, PIMSS staff, school staff and parents. Here all the team members discuss the aims and approaches for the child and the outcomes of the meeting may inform the development of the IEP, the child's communication system or physical access to the curriculum.

Where some or a number of these collaborative meetings happen regularly there is a sense of a team working together and school staff grow in confidence and skills. It no longer becomes the 'job' of the SLT to work on communication. As Hunt et al outline in their discussion (2002) "the (collaborative) and inclusion support personnel integrate efforts and share responsibility for student outcomes."

## How AAC is supported in the context of the curriculum

To move on to some practical examples of how AAC can be developed in the context of the National Curriculum, I will detail some ways of how we suggest this can be achieved within Literacy and Science.

### The Literacy Hour

The standard ability to read and write using traditional orthographic text may never be achieved with many of the children we work with. However, it is taken for granted in AAC 'circles' and is becoming more generally widely accepted that reading and writing using symbols to convey meaning is valid. "The capacity of symbols to bypass many of the problems normally associated with the written world has afforded access for many children with special educational needs to a broader range of learning opportunities than they had previously known." (Barry Carpenter 1998 in the forward to 'Literacy through Symbols' Detheridge T & Detheridge M.)

It is also worth reminding ourselves of the role of literature in developing literacy. It can:

- Develop empathy, imagination and insight, which will nourish the personal and social growth of individuals
- Provide shared experience of cultural heritage
- Develop and extend literacy skills (DES 1989)

Children using AAC can and should benefit from all the above.

The Literacy Hour provides a set structure, which those helping to differentiate the work and provide practical help and resources can use if the text is known. It also provides opportunities to work in small group with the teacher and communication with peers.

At the 'Text' level, Voice Output Communication Aids (VOCAs) can be used to involve the child in reading the text in shared or group reading times (more information can be obtained from the CALL Centre on Interactive Literacy). Children who can sign can 'read out loud' using signing or symbols which can be chosen from the communication book to help to "write a portrait of a character" (Year 3 Term 2 Text Level). Our team have developed a 'storymaking' kit that groups symbols in the layout of a narrative structure and this can be personalised for a child so photos of people or animals from home can be written about and places known to the child can be added. This was felt to be necessary where the vocabulary needed for literacy would be too great to put into their everyday communication book. Many of the children we work with often have a communication book or board and what is known as the curriculum book which is used in conjunction with their main book following the same format and layout but organised on a subject basis.

At the 'Sentence Level' for example, in Year 1 Term 3, The Literacy Strategy describes how pupils should be taught about word order by reordering sentences or predicting from the previous text. This is a good opportunity for the children who need it to work on their development of sentence structure using their low or high tech communication system.

'Word Level' work concentrated on spelling but also on word classes and this is an ideal time for work on topic pages to be developed. Many non-disabled children working with children who use AAC, benefit from access to symbols representing feelings or adjectives. We encourage teachers to make symbols available to all the children in the class.

Simple VOCAs such as Big Mack's can be used for a child to identify different spelling patterns. A symbols 'spelling' test can also be given instead of a standard spelling text and finding the symbol in their book or board can be a very useful activity.

### Science

Science is an area of the curriculum that provides many opportunities for developing a child's communication skills if it is planned for in advanced. It is vital that the key vocabulary is identified not only so symbols can be produced and key signs learnt but also programming of a VOCA is made possible.

Science provides opportunities for small group work with peers. Initially the learning support assistant can facilitate communication within the group. When the children become skilled in communicating with the child who uses AAC the support assistants are then encouraged to stand back. Science can provide opportunities for engineered situations or an "enlighten group format" to enhance communication (Carol Goossens presentation at CM conference 1999). It also provides many opportunities to develop sequencing skills and vocabulary.

## Children using AAC in secondary schools

So far I have focused on children in the mainstream primary school situation. Supporting AAC in the Curriculum within the secondary school can be challenging. The challenges include:

- More staff to liaise and plan with
- A wider curriculum
- Moving around the building
- Lessons are more complex and in depth and at a faster pace.

In order for children to access the curriculum successfully the following are essential:

- Planning is vital – with lessons including more specialist and in depth areas, this becomes imperative
- Special Needs Support Assistants need to support children in specific subjects – Use of AAC in lessons is more successful when Support Assistants cover the whole of a subject e.g. go to all the Humanities lessons with a child.
- Differentiation may become more necessary
- Accessing the social or hidden curriculum becomes more difficult. Here 'Circles of Friends Networks' can be invaluable.

## Where we have found VOCAs to work well

- VOCAs can be used to good effect particularly as dynamic screen aids for presentations in many lessons
- VOCAs can be used in Drama
- Engineered situations can become easier to organise as peers become more aware and more able to interact appropriately.
- Use of symbols and 'low tech' aids are still very important for children to be able to answer questions and express themselves.

## Recording children's work

In the fast pace of secondary school and to some extent to primary classrooms a way of recording children's work is vital when the child cannot record easily itself or does not always have access to IT. Scribing can lead to confusion as to what is a support assistant's work and what is the child's. This was brought home to us when our team first supported an able young man in a mainstream secondary school who used AAC and had lots to say but found the use of IT slow and laborious.

It was felt that a recording system to be useful needed to fulfil the following criteria:

- To inform 'others' how the child 'arrived' at this piece of work.
- The system needs to be consistent.
- It needs to show who did what.
- It must be quick to use and manageable.
- Enable the child to make and show mistakes.
- Easy to understand for child and others.
- Adaptable for different lessons.
- To chart progress in the child's communication.

## In conclusion

The challenges and benefits of including children with AAC needs in the mainstream classroom can be enormous. With management support for training, time for collaboration and liaison, as well as the development of skills in alternative ways of communication, everyone can benefit.

The National Curriculum can be used as a context within which to develop a child's communication. Being with one's peers and developing friendships and understanding among the children is as important if not more so than the academic side of school and will lead to greater understanding and acceptance of these who use AAC.

Kate Holloway, SLT  
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