Literacy Instruction for Students That Use AAC: Current Practice, Comfortability, and Professional Development Needs

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Background & Purpose

"No student is too anything to be able to read and write" (Yoder, 2000).

• Both the scientific community and disability laws (e.g., the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act, 2004; the No Child Left Behind Act, 2001; and the Race to the Top Act, 2010) stipulate that literacy instruction should be provided for students that require augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) modalities.
• The needs of these students regarding literacy instruction and those that teach them are still largely unknown.
• This study aimed to understand current practice, level of comfortability, and professional development needs of special education/professional language pathologists regarding literacy instruction for students that use AAC.
• The Four Block Model of literacy instruction was utilized as the framework for this study and includes the following areas: working with words, self-selected reading, guided reading, and writing (Cunningham, Hall, & Defee, 1989).

Demographics and AAC Background Information:
• What are the characteristics of speech language pathologists (SLPs) and special educators that work with children utilizing AAC (e.g. age, education, country of employment, experience, caseload/class size)?
• What are the characteristics of the students that utilize AAC (e.g. classroom/school type, type of AAC, AAC access method, etc.)?
• How comfortable do SLPs and special educators feel regarding modeling and integrating their students’ AAC into general instruction?

Literacy Background Information:
• What are the characteristics of literacy instruction for children that utilize AAC (e.g. type of curriculum, daily time/exposure)?

Literacy Comfortability:
• How comfortable do SLPs and special educators feel regarding modeling and integrating their students’ AAC into the Four Blocks of literacy instruction?

Professional Development Experience:
• Where did the SLPs and special educators gain the knowledge to teach literacy skills to students that utilize AAC?
• How much professional development have special educators and SLPs that work with students utilizing AAC received regarding literacy instruction?
• What is the perceived value of the professional development received and what domains/skill areas were addressed?
• What professional development is still needed for special educators and SLPs regarding literacy instruction for students that utilize AAC and how should content be delivered?

Survey Design

Participants: 122 individuals responded to the survey. Of those, 108 responses were complete and met inclusionary requirements: 1) self-identify as educators or SLPs, and 2) have experience working with at least 1 student that utilizes AAC.

Procedure: An anonymous 25-question survey was distributed through a secure University of Delaware College of Health Sciences Google Form. The survey was shared with the target population via Facebook group postings in several special education and speech pathology public groups. The survey was open for responses for approximately 6 weeks.

Analysis: Frequency distribution was generated for each question. Comfortability questions were then cross analyzed with participant role, number of professional development trainings attended, and daily time devoted to literacy instruction.

Results

Demographics and AAC Background Information:
• 57% of participants were SLPs, 43% were special educators
• The majority of participants were 25-34 years old, held a masters degree, worked in the United States, had 15+ years of experience in their field, and worked with 1-9 students that utilized AAC on a daily basis.
• The majority of their students were aged 6-12, served in self-contained classrooms, and utilized high-tech AAC systems via direct selection (touch).

Literacy Background Information:
• 47% of participants reported that their students received 31-60 minutes of literacy instruction daily via a separate curriculum or the standard school-wide curriculum with adaptations for content/pace.

Study Questions

Participants felt more comfortable providing aided language stimulation than designing, adapting, and implementing literacy instruction for this population.

• Comfortability ratings were comparable and unremarkable across the Four Blocks of literacy instruction, perhaps due to lack of familiarity with a particular model.
• Educators and SLPs showed similar comfortability ratings.
• Participants’ whose students spent more time receiving literacy instruction daily felt more comfortable teaching it.
• Participants that attended more professional development trainings felt more comfortable teaching literacy skills.
• Professional development is both needed and desired by special educators and SLPs working with this population of students.
• Participants indicated the most interest in the following topics: general early literacy development, how to collaborate with other professionals, how to modify the general education curriculum to meet student needs, how to adapt lessons and materials for alternative access (e.g. eye gaze, switch access, etc.).

Summary and Discussion

References


