

“You can’t do it on your own”: Teachers’ experiences of the role of partnerships in enhancing communication access for students with multiple and severe disabilities



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November, 2009

Background to the project

- **Low frequencies of communicative interaction for students with MSD at school**
- **Staff development is not enough**
- **Limited insight, understanding of factors that may influence low frequencies**
- **AIM: to explore teachers' experiences of communicating and perceptions of supports and obstacles**

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Methodology

- 11 teachers of students with MSD
- In special schools and support units in mainstream schools; metropolitan and regional/ rural NSW
- Qualitative, narrative inquiry methodology; in-depth interviews. Interviews as a partnership; as a speech pathologist I had collaborated with 7 of the teachers
- Research questions:
 - experiences communicating with students
 - perceived supports and obstacles to communicating with students
 - professional learning

Some findings: teachers' experiences communicating

“Communication is the key to everything with these kids” -Polly

- Teachers experience communicating with students with MSD as “difficult” and “frustrating”

- difficult to interpret communication behaviours of students
- communication needs to happen on a one-to-one basis
- it takes a long time

- the school context presents major obstacles to creating opportunities for communication

Some findings: Building relationships with individual students

- One of the major ways for teachers to overcome this difficulty was to build relationships with individual students
 - patience, perseverance, sensitivity and responsiveness over long periods of time
 - attitude of respect
- But then a problem: meeting all the complex needs of students eg. eating and drinking, toileting, medications
 - not enough time for communicating one-to-one with individual students
 - expediency in meeting needs can result in not offering opportunities for communication
 - “objectification of students” - Barry

Some findings: Other people

- Other people needed to support teachers to create opportunities for students to communicate
 - eg. more staff to help in the classroom with toileting and feeding enables more communication in the classroom
- Contrast in presence and/or quality of partnerships and how well they worked
- Teachers in support units talked about “isolation”
- Teachers in special schools talked about “sense of community”

Some findings: “Isolation”

- **attitudes not conducive to offering opportunities for communication; inappropriate practices**
- **lack of specific times for teachers to meet to share information about individual students, decide on communication goals and strategies for individual students and problem solve**
- **mainstream context; lack of support, lack of knowledge, experience and interest, timetabling and different teachers working with students**
- **lack of availability or loss of collaboration with speech pathologists;**
 - **having someone there regularly, both working in the classroom and for informal problem solving**
 - **a need for certain expertise**
 - **most value seen in collaborative relationship, support from “outside” seemed to be more needed**

Some findings: “Sense of community”

- **Principal; finding funding for more people, raising awareness in broader community**
- **Supportive school cultures**
 - **whole school focus on communication with all students**
 - **support structures/ mechanisms within the school (both formal and informal = meetings**
 - = mentoring (high level of expertise among staff at school)**
- **Communication committee – co-ordinates development of communication systems and resources for whole school**
- **Ongoing support from other teachers within school – teachers help each other and share knowledge about resources, communication systems move with students so there’s continuity and sense of responsibility for communicating with all students**
- **Collaboration with speech pathologists**

In the end....

- Teachers found it rewarding when they were able to communicate with students BUT
- Those in “isolation”
 - lack of consistency and “continuity (across different staff within school and across different settings) needed to effectively encourage our students to communicate” – Sally
 - ambivalence, sadness, sense of failure – students are not achieving their full potential as communicators
- Where there is a “sense of community”
 - achieving repertoire of meaningful communication with individual students school wide
 - busy classrooms – situations and activities set up where students can make choices, request and initiate communication

In the end The irony

- Teachers in support units in mainstream school did not see sustained opportunities for communication for students in mainstream, broader community
- Teachers in special schools reported building continuity in communication for students with parents, residential facilities and respite and getting out into broader community
- However it is not as simple as segregated vs inclusive settings

Conclusion and implications

- Individual teachers do not and cannot enhance access to communication for students with MSD on their own. Partnerships are needed at a number of levels
- How can we create supportive cultures in schools – that serve to enhance access to communication for students with MSD?
- What about speech pathology service delivery?
- Next stage of the project: interviewing speech pathologists employed by Ageing, Disability and Home Care, NSW Department of Human Services
- Development of model with policy implications

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