Inclusive School Practices Toolkit

Augmentative and Alternative Communication in the Classroom

This tool has been developed as part of the *Inclusive School Communities Project*. The project is led by JFA Purple Orange.

Introduction

This tool provides a summary of ten key ideas for supporting students who use Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) within the classroom. The ideas are based on the author’s experience working with children and young people who use AAC alongside evidence-based practice informed by decades of research on inclusive education. It is designed to offer guidance to school leaders, teachers, and teacher aides on how to proactively include students who use AAC, academically and socially. It is important to have a foundational understanding of AAC for these strategies to be delivered effectively, therefore it is recommended that readers look at the ‘Introduction to Augmentative and Alternative Communication’ tool before reading this tool.

Ideas

The following ten ideas are useful in considering how to support students who use AAC within the classroom and address barriers to their access and participation in education. This is not an exhaustive list, and it is expected that teachers work collaboratively with the student, their family and therapy team to understand the student’s specific communication and learning requirements. According to the Disability Discrimination Act (1992) and the Disability Standards for Education (2005), students and their parents/families need to be consulted in designing and implementing reasonable adjustments to meet student’s requirements and preferences.

1. *Set up the environment for success*

Where communication tools are placed in the classroom will impact on how they are used. Students should always have access to their robust communication system (read ‘Introduction to Augmentative and Alternative Communication’ tool for a summary of the four key elements of a robust communication system). However, a multi-modal communication toolkit is important, and across the day, there are adjunct communication tools that may be added so that students can communicate specific messages efficiently and effectively. These tools need to be available for use, but also manageable within the classroom environment. Examples of adjunct communication tools commonly used in schools include single page communication boards (e.g., in the bathroom), visual schedules and quick chat symbols on a lanyard. Consider the following scenario:

*Jack is in Year 4 at his local primary school. Jack communicates using a speech generating device and completes his schoolwork on a laptop with an adapted keyboard. Jack also uses a visual schedule, which helps him to understand the sequence of his day. Jack’s teacher realises that when Jack’s laptop is packed away or when his visuals are placed in his tray, they are used much less. However, there is not enough space on a single desk to keep all these items out. Jack’s teacher consults with Jack, his family and teacher aides, and they come up with the following solution:*

* *Jack is allocated a double desk, within a group of desks with his peers*
* *This allows Jack’s assistive technology supports to remain always set up and easily accessible, and leaves space for a teacher aide to sit beside Jack when he needs assistance*
* *However, Jack is importantly still seated with his peers and therefore able to be included in the social elements of classroom activities*

1. ***Managing the juggle***

Students with complex communication needs (CCN) are often juggling so much more than their peers while trying to learn in the classroom. Students with CCN may have to juggle sensory processing challenges, maintaining their physical position (e.g., sitting upright) and knowing where to find words in their AAC system, while also trying to learn new curriculum content, new vocabulary and keep up with the pace of the lesson. It is this ‘juggle’ that can explain inconsistency of performance in students with CCN and can also explain disengagement, distraction, and the use of behaviours of concern. Thus, educators need to consider the impact of this juggle on engagement and performance. Consider the following scenario:

*Jana is in Year 2 at her local primary school. She has a physical disability and uses an eye communication device as her primary communication tool. Jana’s class is learning about measurement. Jana’s teacher wants to know what Jana understands about measurement, and whether she can order objects from shortest to longest and sets an assessment task for all the students. On this day, Jana is managing ‘the juggle.’ She is well-rested, and she has not had any seizures, meaning she can access her communication device well. She demonstrates that she understands the concepts of measurement, and correctly orders the four objects that she is presented with. One week later, the class is completing another measurement task. Jana is having a difficult day; she did not sleep well overnight and is very fatigued. She is having difficulty holding her body in an upright position, which impacts upon her ability to use her eye gaze device. When presented with the measurement task, Jana only gets one out of the six questions correct. How should Jana’s teacher interpret this result?*

The risk for students like Jana, who are always juggling cognitive, language, physical and sensory demands, is that inconsistency in performance is misinterpreted for a lack of understanding. Students with CCN need to be given credit for their performance on a good day and be shown understanding about how ‘the juggle’ may impact performance. Educators need to consider the demands on a student at any one time, including how much they are having to juggle and if there is any way to reduce demands to lessen the juggle for them. Other strategies may include breaking assessments tasks up over multiple lessons and presenting assessment tasks at times when students are well-rested to support participation. The use of multiple modes of data collection is also important and is discussed further below in point 7.

1. ***Participation supports engagement***

Inclusion is about more than just being in the room. When students are actively participating in their learning, they are more engaged. This is the same for students who use AAC. It is unlikely that an AAC user will remain engaged at school if they are presented with activities in which they cannot participate. Therefore, it is important to remove the barriers to ensure that AAC users can actively participate in classroom activities alongside their same-age peers. Sometimes this means shifting expectations about the work that is produced. Keep in mind that the barriers are external to the student, and it is not their fault or responsibility to fix them. Barriers that are commonly faced by students who use AAC in classrooms include the pace of the lesson being too fast, students not being given the time or opportunity to participate in discussions, and a lack of flexibility in how students who use AAC can complete their work. Consider the following scenario:

*In Jimmy’s Year 1 class, all the students have been asked to draw a self-portrait. Jimmy has cerebral palsy and does not have the fine motor control to draw a highly detailed self-portrait, but he is able to draw lines and loves to colour. Jimmy’s teacher and teacher aide discuss two ways in which Jimmy can complete this activity.*

1. *Jimmy’s teacher aide will draw a picture of Jimmy and colour in the picture; Jimmy will use his AAC system to tell his teacher aide what colours to use.*
2. *Jimmy will draw his self-portrait by himself. Once he is finished, he will use his AAC system to tell his teacher aide about what he has drawn (e.g., he points to a mark on the page and uses his AAC system to say “nose”). Jimmy’s teacher aide will annotate his drawing.*

Which self-portrait will be more engaging for Jimmy? And which self-portrait will Jimmy’s Mum want to stick up on her fridge? Remember, “when you cut it for me, write it for me, paste it for me or draw it for me, all I learn is that you do it better than me” (source unknown). Educators need to presume potential and have high expectations for every student; adjustments should build students’ independence and confidence to engage in learning.

1. ***Use a range of communication tools***

Depending on the context and tasks, different communication tools will be more or less effective. In thinking about how students with CCN can engage in activities, it is important to consider the goal of the task, and what the other students are required to do. Within a lesson, different activities will have different communication requirements. Consider the following scenario:

*Joshua is in Year 2 at his local primary school. Joshua’s class is learning about narratives and will be writing their own narrative, and then reading their narratives out in front of the class. Joshua has CNN. Some of the tools in Joshua’s toolkit include his communication device (Snap Core First on an iPad), a computer with an adapted keyboard, some single page communication boards, and a Little Step-by-Step Communicator (which allows a sequence of messages to be recorded and then shared by the AAC user). Joshua’s teacher thinks through the requirements of the task, and how Joshua can complete each component using his different communication tools. She also consults with Joshua’s speech pathologist for ideas on how to best adjust the task to meet Joshua’s strengths, learning and communication requirements and preferences. Her plan is that:*

* + *Joshua will use his communication device to select the key words that will form his narrative (his teacher will help expand his ideas into sentences with Joshua's agreement). This is called 'co-constructing'. (Read more about co-construction at: https://praacticalaac.org/strategy/helping-people-with-aac-needs-develop-personal-narratives/)*
  + *Joshua will type his story on his computer, with support for spelling*
  + *Joshua’s narrative will be recorded onto his Step-by-Step communication device, and he will use this to read out his narrative to the class*

In this scenario, it was the use of a range of communication tools that supported Joshua to be able to complete the task. By removing barriers and considering the communication priorities for each component of the lesson, students with AAC can participate in lessons and learn alongside their same-age peers.

1. ***Make the most of language learning opportunities***

There are lots of language learning opportunities at school. The classroom environment is rich with new vocabulary and new learning experiences. For students who use AAC, it is important for modelling of their communication systems to happen in those learning moments. Modelling means that you use the student’s communication system (by pointing to symbols) when you interact with the student (read ‘Introduction to Augmentative and Alternative Communication’ tool for a description of modelling). Modelling will support students to acquire this new vocabulary, and to talk about what they have learnt. New vocabulary may also need to be added to the student’s communication system (for example, by adding a word to a list in a student’s communication book). Modelling can be done in class by a teacher or teacher aide as well as by their peers. Consider the following scenario:

*Jessie’s Year 1 class is learning about living things. Jessie’s teacher organises an incursion, and a reptile keeper visits with some reptiles. Jessie (and her classmates) have never seen some of these reptiles up close before. While the reptile keeper is talking about the reptiles, Jessie’s teacher is modelling some of the key concepts in Jessie’s communication book. Jessie’s teacher models words so that Jessie can learn to talk about the reptiles, just like her peers; she models words like ‘scary’ and ‘slimy’ and ‘crawl.’ Jessie does not use these words to describe the reptiles (yet!), but every time her teacher models this language, she is supporting Jessie to make connections between her language and her learning.*

1. ***Student voice***

Students with disability may require assistance with personal care activities during the day. This is especially the case for students with a physical disability. It is important therefore that AAC users are taught to be active, self-determined communicators, so that they can direct assistants on how to manage personal care activities. Consulting with students about the adjustments that are put in place to support their learning also encourages them to advocate for their needs. It is also a requirement within the Disability Standards for Education (2005) that educators consult with students (or their associate) before making adjustments. There are tools available that can support students with CCN to express their preferences and to be involved in decision-making about their learning, such as Talking Mats*™*. A Talking Mat is a visual framework that enables individuals with CCN to express their preferences about a particular topic against a visual scale (e.g., ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘I don’t know’. Consider the following scenario:

*Jade is in Year 10 at her local high school and will be commencing modified SACE (South Australian Certificate of Education) the next year. Jade’s team want to understand the adjustments that will support Jade to access the curriculum – from Jade’s perspective. Jade has CNN and can communicate 1–2-word phrases using her communication device. To assist Jade to express her preferences about her learning, Jade’s educational team works with her speech pathologist to complete an activity called a ‘Talking Mat’™ with Jade. This process allows Jade to clearly communicate her opinion about strategies that support her learning, strategies that do not support her learning, and strategies she is unsure about. Jade’s preferences are shared with her new teachers, so that they can make meaningful and respectful adjustments for Jade.*

1. ***Documentation of learning***

As discussed in point 2), students with CCN are often juggling a range of competing demands. As a result, formal assessment tasks may provide only a snapshot of what students with CCN have learnt. Therefore, it is important to document evidence of learning throughout the day, as this information can be useful in gaining an accurate understanding of the student’s learning. Teachers and teacher aides can develop methods for documenting and sharing evidence of a student’s learning such as a communication book, Padlet, Google Doc, or another digital recording method. Consider the following scenario:

*Joseph is in Reception at his local primary school. Joseph is participating in Jolly Phonics lessons alongside his peers. As a result, Joseph is now noticing letters in the environment. One day, Joseph and his class are walking through the yard. Joseph gains his teacher’s attention and points out a ‘J’ on a sign on the playground, and then points to himself. Joseph has recognised the letter J and made the connection that this is the first letter in his name. Joseph’s teacher records this information in Joseph’s spelling book, as evidence of Joseph’s literacy learning. Later in the term, Joseph’s teacher can review her notes, as well as the results of a formal assessment task, to provide a detailed, accurate report of Joseph’s literacy progress over the term.*

1. ***Aim for quality, not quantity***

The reality for students who use AAC is that AAC is slower than verbal speech. For this reason, it is important to give students who use AAC more time to construct messages using their communication system and to participate in classroom discussions. Educators also need to proactively plan and consider how to prepare students who use AAC to participate in collaborative learning tasks such as pair and group work. It may be unrealistic for some students who use AAC to produce the same amount of work as their peers. This is especially the case for students who use alternative methods to access their communication systems (such as scan or switch access). Therefore, adjustments to the expected quantity of work may be made. Consider the following scenario:

*Josie is in Year 8 at her local high school. Josie has cerebral palsy and a cortical vision impairment. She uses a PODD communication book as her primary communication tool. Josie uses “partner assisted scanning” to access her PODD book, where a communication assistant will read out items in her communication book, and Josie will respond with a yes or no head movement to select the words she wants to say. This process takes time, but it allows Josie to communicate autonomously (say the words that are in her head). Josie’s English class are writing a persuasive essay about a topic of their choosing. Josie’s teacher works with Josie, her family and therapy team to adjust this task. There is careful consideration about making adjustments to the curriculum, and the recommended process for designing curriculum adjustments is followed (read more: https://inclusiveschoolcommunities.org.au/resources/toolkit/inclusive-curriculum-provision-ensuring-equitable-access-and-progress-age-equivalent-curriculum). It is determined that Josie will not be required to produce her response in essay style format, but she will be required to produce 4-6 persuasive arguments about the topic she selects. She will select key words from her PODD book to make her arguments, and her teacher aide will expand these into sentence format being careful to mark the difference between Josie’s words and the expansions she has added. In completing this task, Josie is still required to understand the purpose of persuasive writing and to construct an argument to defend a position. When Josie’s teacher marks Josie’s work, he will be assessing the quality of her work, not the quantity of work that she has produced.*

1. ***Support peer interaction***

It is important to support students who use AAC to build relationships with their peers. Much of this is done through incidental conversations that happen in the classroom, and by the modelling that adults provide. However, a formal peer training session can also be beneficial, to provide students with an opportunity to develop their skills in communicating with their classmate. Activities in a peer training session can include:

* Watching a video featuring a person who uses AAC
* Talking about all the different ways that people communicate
* The class learning to use a single page communication board to play a group game (e.g., Simon Says)
* Students learning how to communicate some messages within their classmate’s AAC system (e.g., some greeting words)
* Getting students to design a communication board that everyone can use in the classroom (e.g., a communication board for group time)
* Student with AAC supported by a chosen adult (e.g., parent, sibling, speech pathologist) delivering an information and training session to their class/whole school on their disability and communication requirements and preferences

Consider the following scenario.

*Jorja is a Reception student, attending her local primary school. Jorja, her family, speech pathologist and teacher collaborate to deliver a peer training session to all the students in Jorja’s class. Within the training session, the students are taught how to communicate some simple messages using Jorja’s communication device. Following the training session, Jorja’s teacher notices the following:*

* *All of the students in the classroom have an increased awareness of different modes of communication, and are able to explain to classroom visitors what a communication device is and how Jorja uses it*
* *Jorja’s peers are approaching her during free play lessons, and understand to give Jorja wait time when asking her if she wants to play*
* *Jorja is highly motivated to use her communication device to interact with her peers, and so now has additional opportunities across the day to practice using her device*
* *Other students in the playground are noticing that Jorja’s peers know how to use her communication device, and are now interested in learning how to use Jorja’s device too*

In this scenario, all the students are benefiting from Jorja’s inclusion in the classroom. Jorja is developing her communication skills and is developing friendships with her peers. Jorja’s peers, meanwhile, are learning about difference and diversity, and how to communicate with people with CCN.

1. ***It’s all about attitude!***

A consistent finding is that attitude is the single most important determinant of the success of inclusive education.[[1]](#footnote-1) Students who use AAC not only deserve to access an inclusive education; it is their right. Students who use AAC need educators who will be risk takers and change makers, and to approach their learning with an open mind and positive attitude. “Every child deserves a champion; an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection, and insists they become the best they can possibly be”.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The following statements describe the beliefs and attitudes that provide students with AAC the best opportunities for success at school:

* I have open expectations of students who use AAC and presume that they have the potential to learn to communicate.
* I proactively plan learning and assessment to remove barriers for students who use AAC.
* I adjust my communication style to meet the communication needs and preferences of students who use AAC.
* I believe every person has a right to communicate and value AAC as much as I value verbal communication.
* I provide opportunities for students who use AAC to communicate with and form friendships with their peers.

Action

Putting these ten ideas into action will assist students who use AAC to learn and communicate within an inclusive classroom. Schools can use this tool to engage in reflective practice and rate their current performance against each of the ten ideas listed, and then subsequently prioritise and plan for improvements. The following table can be used to reflect on current performances and plan for improvement.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Idea** | **Rate Current Performance** | **Plans for Improvement** |
| 1. Environment set up |  |  |
| 1. Managing the juggle |  |  |
| 1. Participation |  |  |
| 1. Range of communication tools |  |  |
| 1. Modelling |  |  |
| 1. Student voice |  |  |
| 1. Documentation of learning |  |  |
| 1. Quality output |  |  |
| 1. Peer interactions |  |  |
| 1. Attitude |  |  |

More Information

Consulting Students with Disability: A practice guide for educators and other professionals <https://research.qut.edu.au/c4ie/wp-content/uploads/sites/281/2020/08/Practice-Guide-Student-Consultation.pdf>

Free, downloadable communication boards for group games <https://twowaystreet.com.au/solutions/schools/>

Integrating Academic, Communication and Motor Programs for Students with Significant Disabilities <https://www.med.unc.edu/ahs/clds/wp-content/uploads/sites/859/2018/09/RedYellowGreenDirections.pdf>

Talking Mats <https://talkingmatsaustralia.com.au>

Acknowledgement

This tool was written by Amelia Edwards, Senior Speech Pathologist at Two Way Street with editing by JFA Purple Orange. Two Way Street creates communication solutions for children and adults with complex communication needs (little or no speech), their families, and the organisations in their community. Their team provides intervention services to individuals and groups, and workshops, training, and professional consultation to schools, providers, and businesses. [https://twowaystreet.com.au](https://twowaystreet.com.au/)



1. Jackson, R. (2003). *Why should schools include children with a disability?* Include. <https://include.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Whyinclude.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Pierson, R. (2013). *Every kid needs a champion*. TED. <https://www.ted.com/talks/rita_pierson_every_kid_needs_a_champion> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)