# Literacy Instruction for Children with Complex Communication Needs: Perspectives of SLPS

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INTRODUCTION

- **No single intervention will have as dramatic effects on a student's future as a solid foundation in literacy** (Heller, Fredrick, Tumlin, & Brineman, 2002).
- **Literacy skills are especially important for individuals with complex communication needs (CCN) who require AAC.** With literacy skills, individuals can use a range of communication options to augment or supplement their speech and independently share their own thoughts and idea (Fallon et al., 2004; Light & McNaughton, 2013).
- Currently, <u>90% of individuals with CCN enter adulthood without acquiring functional literacy skills</u> (Foley & Wolter, 2010). Access to adapted literacy instruction can potentially break the cycle of limited outcomes, expand communication options, and support fuller participation in an increasingly text-based society (Caron et al., 2016).
- SLPs have specialized knowledge that can be used to provide the help and adaptations for students with CCN in order to build vital language, communication and literacy skills and support the maximization of literacy and communication outcomes. In addition, within the scope of practice (ASHA, 2016), SLPs:
  - (a) should provide direct literacy and language instruction;
  - (b) have an obligation to provide effective literacy instruction to individuals with CCN that they serve; and,
  - (c) have the responsibility to advocate for best practice.
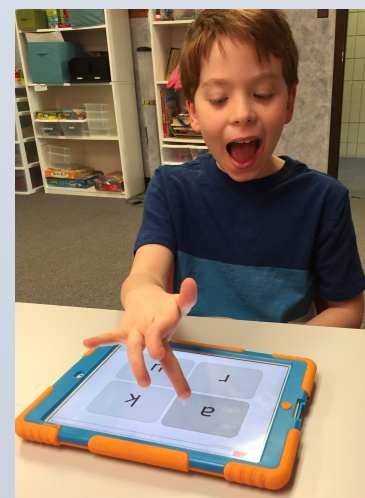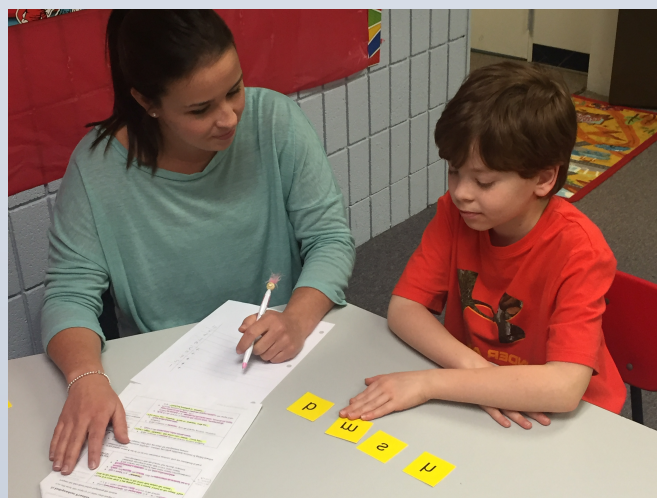
AIM

- To date, no research has investigated the translation of literacy instruction for individuals with CCN who require AAC by common service providers (e.g., speech-language pathologists or teachers).
- Effectively translating the current positive findings of adapted literacy instruction with researchers, to SLPs, could potentially increase quality literacy opportunities and access to adapted instruction, as well as change outcomes for individuals with CCN.

- <u>The project aimed to:</u>
- Use findings to develop future in-services and on-line training modules for common services providers (e.g., SLPs, teachers) and provide direction in how to best to translate the provision of adapted literacy instruction away from researchers.
- Explore the experiences of the provision of literacy instruction, by speech-language pathologists, who work with individuals with complex communication needs, including;
  - (a) current challenges;
  - (b) success stories;
  - (c) approaches that are used to adapt and modify the instruction; and;
  - (d) training received or want to receive in order to provide quality evidence-based instruction.

RESULTS

Theme 1: *Priorities for AAC Service Provision*
- Life skills
- Literacy
- Meaningful communication

Theme 2: *Approaches to Service Provision*
- Strategies
- Activities
- Beliefs
- Roles

Theme 3: *Preparedness to Service Provision*
- Preparedness from personal experience
- Preparedness from preservice & inservice
- Lack of preparedness from personal experience
- Lack of preparedness from preservice & inservice

Theme 4: *Barriers to Service Provision*
- Access to materials
- Environment
- Time management

Theme 5: *Recommendations to Support Optimal Service Provision*
- Preservice
- Inservice

Theme 6: *Demographic/Background Information*
- Caseload
- Success stories

"Literacy is a needed skill for the 21st century especially since technology will be involved in most aspects of life."

"Accessing mainstream technology (e.g., email and text messages) and social media (e.g., facebook) through their device or another mode is important in the 21st century."

"Literacy is the most "functional" life skill of all and it is of critical importance that we think outside the box to teach these individuals this skill."

"As SLPs, we can educate caregivers on the different literacy skills we are targeting in sessions, and train them in the different techniques we use with the individuals to improve these literacy skills."

"In order to function most effectively an AAC user requires literacy development. An AAC user requires understanding of word prediction, keyboarding skills, spelling skills, and development of written language skills."

"Poor outcomes for literacy for AAC users is a direct result of a misunderstanding by educators and SLP's."

"I feel fairly prepared to meet these roles/responsibilities because I have pursued a lot of professional development related to literacy, particularly for students with autism and/or CCN."

"I don't think my master's program really focused on the role of SLPs with regard to literacy especially with individuals with CCN even though I graduated having a vague sense that SLPs did have a role."

"In comparison to those without CCN, there are materials and programs that can be purchased and implemented to assist with literacy development. Nothing is readily available for these students with CCN."

"I think outcomes are low because of limited direct instruction and limited carryover of literacy skills."

"When students have complex communication needs, I feel like their level of ability is underestimated by the staff working with them."

"I think SLPs would benefit from a hands on type of training- maybe even a "make and take" type of training so the SLPs can go back to their setting with items they can use right away."

"Students in SLP programs need a lot more instruction on how to teach students with CCN in general and students also need a lot more instruction on teaching literacy to these students with CCN."

"I think these kids were successful because we presumed competence, ensured a balanced literacy experience, gave consistent instruction, and kept plugging along even when progress was moving really slowly but all the while thinking outside the box."

"Functional literacy is a goal for all of my AAC clients. Some of them are able to achieve this and go beyond my expectations."

METHOD

- Design: Semi-structured interviews, with 6 main questions, were conducted over email by the first author
- Participants: 22 SLPs that currently work with children with CCN were interviewed to document their experiences with provision of literacy instruction. Participant demographics include:
  - Mean years of work: 15
  - Work Setting:
    - Schools: 59.1%
    - Outpatient/Private AAC Clinic: 27.3%
    - Outpatient/Rehab/Hospital: 9.1%
    - Professor/Clinic Supervisor: 4.5%
- Analysis: Coding themes were developed post hoc based on a review of the participants' contributions and operational definitions will be created for the themes. Analysis procedures followed a five-step process including (1) Data unitizing; (2) Coding the data; (3) Negotiating agreement; (4) Calculating agreement and reliability; (5) Confirming the summary with the corresponding participant (McNaughton, Light, & Groszyk, 2001).
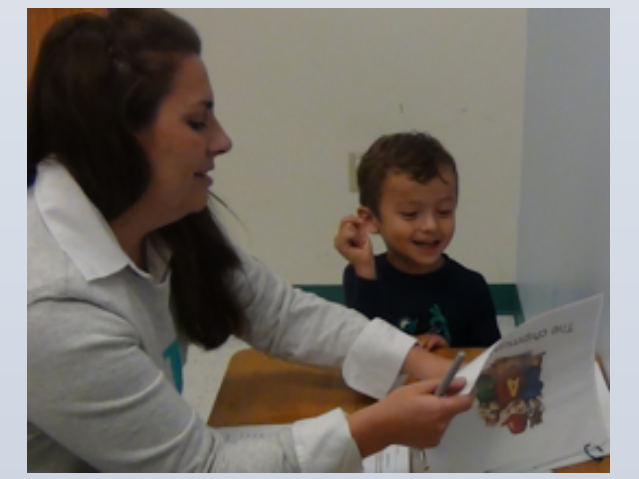
FUTURE RESEARCH

SLPs have specialized knowledge that can be used to provide the instruction and adaptations for students with CCN who require AAC in order to build vital communication and literacy skills (ASHA, 2016).
- Yet SLPs report the need for training at the pre-service and in-service levels in order to effectively translate the positive research outcomes and implement adapted literacy instruction
  - Future research should investigate the most effective modes (e.g., in person, online) of training, as well as training components (e.g., instructional methods, targets, and intensity).

OTHER RESOURCES

- http://aac.psu.edu
- http://aacliteracy.psu.edu/
- https://rerc-aac.psu.edu/isaac-2016/