



Reflections on Training in Augmentative and Alternative Communication: The Views of Tennessee Special Education Teachers

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The need for special education teachers to be trained to effectively serve students with complex communication needs is underscored in the literature. Yet, special education teachers continue to be inadequately prepared to implement augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) practices (Andzik et al., 2019; Costigan & Light, 2010). The lack of preparedness is problematic, given the impact communication skills have on students' development and its potential influence on their overall outcomes (Andzik et al., 2019).

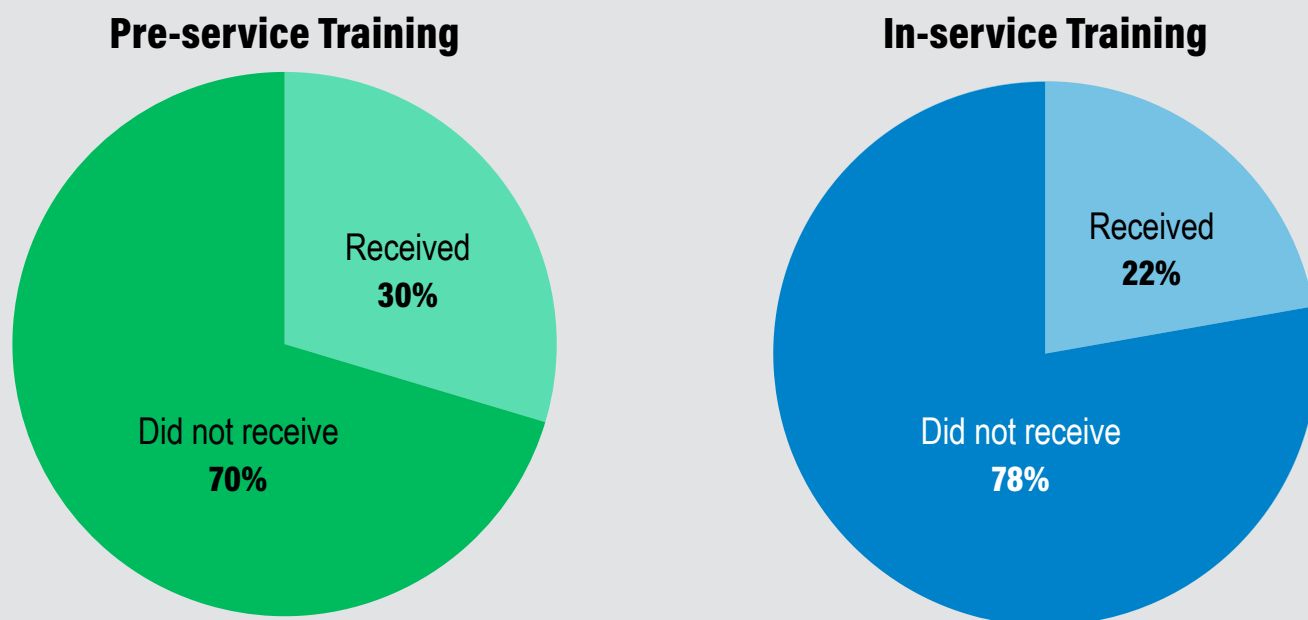
For special education teachers to support their students with complex communication needs, it is important to prioritize AAC training at the pre- and in-service levels. At the pre-service level, training will need to occur within a degree-granting teacher preparation program. As a result, training will focus on foundational understanding of such practices provided through coursework, assignments, and field experiences. The content and structure of pre-service training is usually grounded in preparation programs meeting the state's teacher licensure requirements. The goal of this level of training is to prime future professionals for further development upon entering the field.

In contrast, at the in-service level, training primarily occurs through professional development. In-service training occurs throughout a professional's career in the form of seminars, webinars, workshops, and conferences to enhance knowledge on current and updated practices. The decisions for in-service trainings are determined by the school districts' preferences and needs rather than meeting specific state or licensure requirements (Hill,



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Figure 1: Special Education Teachers Self-reported Training in AAC



The goal of this report is to summarize the views of Tennessee special education teachers on their self-reported pre- and in-service AAC training.

2009; Sindelar et al., 2010). Even with such differences, both pre- and in-service training serve a similar purpose, to equip professionals to serve students effectively.

Unfortunately, sometimes the training special education teachers receive is not sufficient to provide the knowledge and skills needed to support *all* their students. Special education teachers often find themselves relying on informal training through collaborative interactions with other professionals, such as speech-language pathologists, or through interactions with a student's family (De Bortoli et al., 2010). The goal of this report is to summarize the views of Tennessee special education teachers on their self-reported pre- and in-service AAC training.

Who Participated:

A total of 27 participants completed a survey on their training in AAC. The participants were the representation subgroup of Tennessee from a nationwide survey conducted by Da Fonte et al. All participants held special education teacher licensure, worked as special education teachers in Tennessee, and had experience serving students with complex communication needs. The majority of participants (66.67%) had listed a master's degree as their highest level of education, with the remaining 33.33% holding a bachelor's degree. Approximately 37.04% of the participants held Special Education K-12 Comprehensive Teacher licensure, while 62.96% held Special Education K-12 Modified Teacher licensure (currently Interventionist). On average, participants had 11 years of teaching experience and approximately six years of experience serving students with complex communication needs. All participants taught in public schools, with 51.85% teaching in rural areas and 48.15% in urban or suburban areas. The majority of the participants (59.26%) taught at the elementary level, followed by middle school (22.22%) and high school (18.52%), with most (62.96%) teaching in self-contained classrooms, followed by resource classrooms (37.04%).

Study Design and Analysis:

To examine special education teachers' self-reported training in AAC, a cross-sectional survey was conducted. The survey was evaluated for reliability, validity, and usability prior to dissemination. Only results from Sections 1 (demographic information; $n = 19$) and 9 (open-ended questions; $n = 2$) are included in this report. The Tennessee Department of Education website was used to compile an email list of 139 public school administrators. Through the recruitment email, school administrators were asked to disseminate the study information and survey link among their special education teachers. Thematic analysis was conducted on special education teachers' open-ended responses. All responses were coded independently, with two coders assigning them into themes, resulting in almost perfect agreement ($k = 0.889$).

Special Education Teachers Reflections on Pre-service Preparation:

A total of 70.35% of special education teachers in Tennessee who participated in this study indicated they joined the field with a *lack of AAC training* (see Figure 1). An example of such sentiment can be highlighted by one participant who stated that *"prior to receiving my teaching license, I received no formal training on AAC devices. However, I did take a class in college that was specific to adaptive AT."* Similarly, another indicated that *"there was only one class in the course of pursuing my undergraduate [degree] and then one course in my graduate degree that actually talked about AT. I feel like, as future teachers of students with the most severe disabilities, there needs to be way more courses that talk about how to use AT/AAC in everyday classroom activities."* Despite comments indicating a lack of training, a few participants expressed receiving some helpful training. One participant stated being *"... exposed to a lot of devices and methods in our AAC class, but then when I started teaching, none of my classrooms actually had any of the things we were exposed to, so I forgot how to implement and use [the communication systems]."*

Unfortunately, exposure to certain communication systems does not always lead to increased knowledge unless more intentional training is provided (Costigan & Light, 2010). One participant alluded to this assertion by indicating that

"it was beneficial to learn about the different types of AAC and interact with them. It would have been helpful to talk about actual cases, as every child is so unique." Likewise, there were a few teachers (11.11%) who highlighted their lack of exposure to content related to communication skills. One teacher shared, *"we never even hardly talked about communication issues with students. I hadn't even seen a PECS [sic] board until I started teaching CDC [comprehensive development classroom]."* Another stated, *"my experience was in my classroom, and actual experience seeing it [AAC] before would [have] help[ed] most of all."* These examples support the notion that AAC content is critical for special education teachers, and when provided, practical experiences are essential for special education teachers to fully immerse themselves with the content and practices (McCall et al., 2014).

A noteworthy finding was that participants with dual special education and general education licensure were significantly more likely to highlight the importance of acquiring AAC knowledge during pre-service training (22.22%). One survey participant stated that *"college students should be introduced to a variety of AAC and AT devices and know how these devices can help students."* In addition, the type of community where participants taught was significant in relation to their self-reported knowledge and skills (48.15%). Specifically, participants from rural communities noted that they had limited formal training opportunities in AAC at the pre-service level and expressed that *"what would have helped is training on how to assist a student who just started using a device."*

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Special Education Teachers Reflections on In-service Training:

Figure 1 illustrates that most of the special education teachers who participated in the survey indicated the *need for AAC training* at the in-service level (77.78%), and, more specifically, the need for training that focuses on *specific AAC content* (74.07%). The notion that professional development often is rather generic and is not tailored towards the needs of special education teachers or the students whom they serve has been documented in the literature (Woulfin & Jones, 2021). Such a notion highlights a need for training that is relevant so that these special education teachers can be sufficiently trained to serve students with complex communication needs. An example of the perspective is illustrated by a participant who indicated that *“it [training in AAC] is very limited but could be beneficial if it were more accessible.”* Similarly, another highlighted that *“I have gone to some training on my own to help the students I serve. I think training is out there, but one has to look for it.”*

A noteworthy finding was that some participants indicated the lack of training was due to administrators not understanding professional training needs of special education teachers (3.70%), insufficient resources (11.11%), and unavailable or limited funding to attend such training (11.11%). One participant indicated that *“we don’t have any [training]. Honestly, it feels like we have in-services or go to conferences where they’re trying to sell equipment as the next great thing, but it’s all too expensive for our system to afford, or even if we do get it, there’s very little if any training, and I don’t have the time (or sometimes the knowledge) to learn it and implement it on my own.”*

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Such comments mirror those suggested in the literature, where even when teachers receive specialized training, the lack of resources may impede the implementation of practices (Woulfin & Jones, 2021).

Although some participants suggested that *“if you have a student with AAC then you mainly depend on the SLP to provide your training”* and that *“the only training I have had was by the speech therapist,”* others, interestingly, indicated that *“my SLP happens to know very little about evidence based practice surrounding AAC, which makes teamwork almost impossible.”* The lack of training in AAC among special education teachers and their reliance on colleagues for such training is problematic, as service providers such as speech-language pathologists and occupational therapists also lack AAC training (Costigan & Light, 2010; McNaughton et al., 2008).

Call to Action:

Based on the findings from special education teachers in Tennessee coupled with previous research (Andzik et al., 2019; Costigan & Light, 2010), it is evident that these special education teachers are not well-prepared to support their students with complex communication needs. The lack of training at the pre- and in-service levels may create barriers for special education teachers, which in turn may impact the outcomes of students with complex communication needs. As such, a call to action goes out:

- ❑ For teacher preparation programs to continue to train pre-service special education teachers on the **specific disability characteristics** of the students they will serve. Knowledge on specific disability characteristics is crucial, as it allows teachers to “design effective instruction tailored to students’ individual learning goals” (Benedict et al., 2014, p. 148). This, in turn, will allow for special education teachers to be well-equipped and begin to feel more competent in providing educational supports that meet their students’ abilities;
- ❑ For teacher preparation programs to provide explicit training on **how to implement and support** students with complex communication needs by embedding courses and field experiences to expose pre-service special education teachers to foundational concepts and practices in AAC. By providing specific courses and field experiences, preparation programs will provide opportunities for pre-service teachers the

opportunity to link knowledge and skills acquired in coursework to authentic experiences with the students whom they will serve (McCall et al., 2014);

- ❑ For school districts to provide **professional development training** opportunities that focus on the characteristics the students being served. Offering special education teachers the opportunity to receive specific training that is pertinent to the students in their classroom (Woulfin & Jones, 2021) can further qualify them to serve students and implement the necessary practices;
- ❑ For school districts to continue to create **professional development training** opportunities that **focus on AAC practices** to help decrease gaps in knowledge and skills among in-service special education teachers.

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