



Teacher to Teacher: Recommendations on AAC Practices

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Tennessee faces a shortage of special education teachers, with school districts continuing to report this content area being one of the most challenging to staff (Collins & Schaaf, 2020). In Tennessee, there are an estimated 8,320 special education teachers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020), many serving students under the overarching category of low incidence disability. Many students with low incidence disabilities often have a comorbidity of complex communication needs (Page & Quattlebaum, 2012). Students with such needs can benefit from the use and implementation of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), as these systems and practices can help enhance communication opportunities.

Unfortunately, the limited number of professionals entering the field coupled with minimal levels of training and competencies in AAC (Costigan & Light, 2010) is troublesome. The lack of knowledge and skills in AAC stems from insufficient coursework and experiences during pre-service training (Costigan & Light, 2010) and limited professional development opportunities (Andzik et al., 2019;



Da Fonte et al., 2022). As a result, it is not uncommon that novice professionals look to more experienced colleagues for exposure and awareness in an attempt to decrease the gaps in their own knowledge and skills.

In schools, efforts have been made to increase supports and provide peer mentoring for special education teachers entering the field. These methods are most commonly used to support novice teachers, as they provide the opportunity to help with the transition from pre-service teacher to in-service teacher (Brownell & Leko, 2018; Lofthouse, 2018; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003). A question that remains unanswered is, what knowledge related to AAC practices, if any, do veteran special education teachers share with their mentees during these ongoing mentoring opportunities.

The aim of this report is to outline what Tennessee special education teachers recommend to more junior-level educators to best support students with complex communication needs and the implementation of AAC practices. By recognizing the current practices of special education teachers related to AAC, novice special education teachers can be prepared to support all their students, specifically those with complex communication needs.

Who Participated:

To be included, participants were required to:

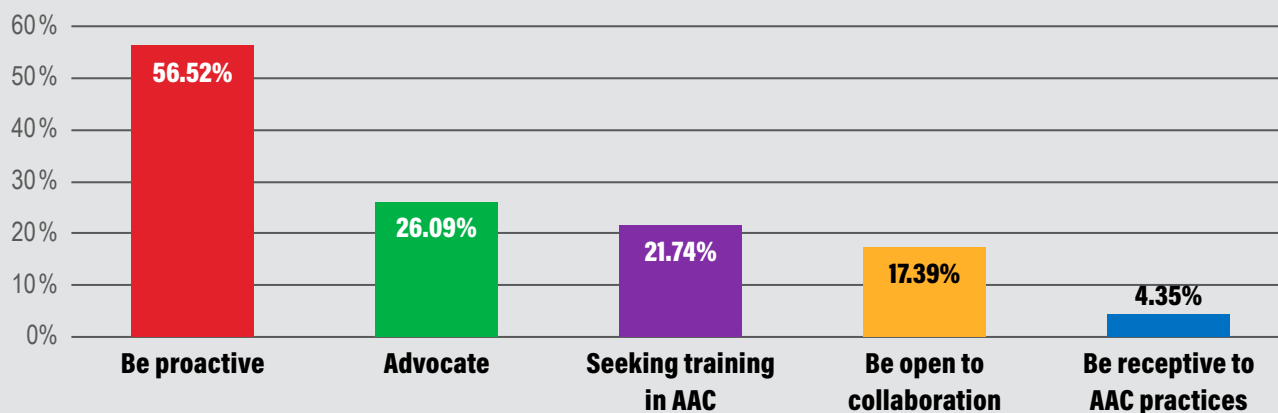
- a. currently be working as a special education teacher in Tennessee;
- b. hold special education teaching licensure; and
- c. have experience serving students with complex communication needs.

A total of 23 Tennessee special education teachers (a subgroup from a nationwide survey conducted by Da Fonte et al.) shared their recommendations on supporting students with complex communication needs to novice special education teachers. On average, participants had 11 years of teaching experience, and seven years of experience serving students with complex communication needs. The majority of the participants (56.52%) held Special Education Modified Teaching licensure (currently Interventionist), with the remaining (43.48%) holding Special Education K-12 Comprehensive Teaching licensure. Most of the participants (69.57%) claimed a master's degree as their highest level of education, with the remainder (30.43%) claiming a bachelor's degree. All participants taught in public schools across the state, with 56.52% working in rural areas and 43.48% in urban or suburban areas. Half of the participants (52.17%) taught primary grades in elementary schools, and the other half taught secondary grades in middle (26.09%) and high schools (21.74%).

Study Design and Analysis:

A cross-sectional survey was conducted. The survey was evaluated for reliability, validity, and usability prior to dissemination. For this report, only information on participants' demographics (Section 1; $n = 19$ questions) and one open-ended question related to recommendations for novice special education teachers on AAC are reported. To recruit participants, 139 superintendents, principals, and special education directors were contacted and asked to disseminate the study information and survey link to their special education teachers. Emails were obtained by searching the Tennessee Department of Education website. Thematic analysis was conducted by two raters with almost perfect agreement ($k = 0.985$).

Figure 1: Five Recommendations from Tennessee Special Education Teachers



Recommendations on AAC Practices:

Five overarching recommendations to special education teachers training novice special education teachers on AAC practices were collected from Tennessee’s special education teachers. Anonymous quotes from survey participants are italicized:

- Be proactive** (56.52%) by *“try[ing] to spend time in a classroom where AAC is used regularly and effectively;”*
- Advocate** (26.09%) by asking questions and asking for help, as the use of a communication system becomes their students’ voice: *“Do whatever it takes to learn as much as you can about how to effectively use AAC to increase student participation within all settings and particularly the general education setting so that lack of a means of communicating doesn’t result in one of your students being isolated and left behind;”*
- Seek training in AAC** (21.74%) by *“attend[ing] all trainings offered;”*
- Be open to collaboration** (17.39%) by *“take[ing] advantage of your SLT/PT/OT team because they are a great resource for training and knowledge of AT/AAC;”* and
- Be receptive to implementing AAC practices in your classroom** (4.35%) by being willing to *“learn as much as you can and know the field is ever changing with what is available.”*

Results indicated that participants' level of education and years of teaching experience were an influencing factor in recommending being proactive. An example of such recommendation can be illustrated by the suggestion that novice special education teachers “*visit a classroom that uses AAC*” and “*think of all your students' needs and ask questions about how and when to implement teaching it to your student.*” The recommendation of being proactive can be further described by one comment indicating that novice special education teachers should “*do whatever it takes to learn as much as you can about how to effectively use AAC to increase student participation within all settings and particularly the general education setting so that lack of a means of communicating doesn't result in one of your students being isolated and left behind.*”

Participants' level of education was also an influencing factor on their recommendation to advocate. Tennessee special education teachers' recommendations support previous research where the importance of advocating was highlighted as an essential means to seek training opportunities, which in turn can have an impact on the outcomes of students with complex communication needs (Andzik et al., 2019). Although the recommendation of seeking training in AAC is closely linked to the recommendation to advocate, the need for additional training can be best described by not “*underestimate[ing] how much you'll need AAC/AT training and how much you'll use it in the classroom.*” Similarly, another participant indicated that novice special education teachers should strive to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills needed to be well-equipped to effectively serve all their students by “*learn[ing] as much as you can and know the field is ever changing with that is available.*”

Based on previous research, it is not surprising that special education teachers in Tennessee recommended that novice special education teachers be open to collaboration. The notion and importance of collaborative practices to effectively support the outcomes of students with complex communication needs has been well-documented in the literature (Aldabas, 2021; Binger et al., 2012; Chung & Stoner, 2016). Examples that illustrate such recommendation include suggestions to “*collaborate with the speech teacher and therapists,*” and “*take advantage of your SLT/PT/OT team because they are a great resource for training and knowledge of AT/AAC.*” Although this recommendation was intended for novice special education

teachers as they are the ones that will have access to such colleagues, it is worth noting that this recommendation may help set the stage for special education teachers in training. Therefore, special education teachers who are entering the field should have an open mindset and be receptive to implementing AAC practices. Only by recognizing the gaps in the training and being willing to implement student-centered practices can special education teachers implement effective and individualized services that allow students to thrive (Lund & Light, 2007).

Final Thoughts:

With the increasing prevalence of students with complex communication needs, it is vital that special education teachers have the skills needed to successfully support these students. The recommendations outlined by Tennessee special education teachers support previous findings by underscoring the importance of AAC training for special education teachers (Andzik et al., 2019; Costigan & Light, 2010). The notion of implementing ongoing mentoring and coaching may be effective forms of informal training that could help increase the opportunities to gain experiences with AAC and decrease the gaps in special education teachers' knowledge and skills. Yet the challenge in these practices is that research suggests that special education teachers and related service providers do not feel well-equipped to support students with complex communication needs (Andzik et al., 2019; Costigan & Light, 2010). When school professionals are not prepared to support students' communication needs, students will face barriers that will have a direct impact on their opportunities, interactions, and the possibility to actively participate in classroom activities. Only by working collaboratively towards increasing the implementation of evidence-based practices may special education teachers be well-equipped to provide effective services to students with complex communication needs (Aldabas, 2021; Binger et al., 2012).

Special education teachers who are entering the field should have an open mindset and be receptive to implementing AAC practices.

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