

Lowtown special school: Developing pupil independence and inclusion into the community through the use of AAC.

Introduction – creating and developing the role of Communication Manager to facilitate pupil communication, curriculum access, independence, and inclusion into the community.

Lowtown School is an all age special school for pupils with a wide range of complex sensory, neurological, physical and learning difficulties. The school is committed to using ICT to enhance the communication, curriculum access and community inclusion opportunities for all pupils and have developed systems for doing this effectively.

In the early 90s there was little in the way of technology available for children with speech or curriculum access difficulties, therefore children had few opportunities to work independently, interact and initiate conversation. Computer software available to schools was limited and not always age appropriate. This meant that staff expectation of children's attainment was low because they had simple, unsophisticated, methods of communication. In 1991 this school had 2 BBC machines, 2 Acorn and 1 Numbus. Only the 2 BBC machines could accommodate switches.

From 1994 onwards colleagues were able to obtain more AAC equipment which meant increased access to the curriculum for the children. AAC began to take a higher profile in school as people recognised the benefits to the children. However, it was recognised that good practice required consistency throughout the school and a different approach was required.



Mary working individually with Damien.

Meetings were held and it was decided that a designated person would be needed to promote the use of AAC / IT as this is a specialist field. The post of AAC / IT Co-ordinator was created and Mary was appointed. This post was later changed to Communication Manager.

In 1994 ORAC communication aids were used in school. This gave children better access to the then new national curriculum by using overlays and Mary was able to complete the programming for various subjects. A lot of time and training was invested in technology and eventually staff started making their own overlays. Initially much of the technology was used to enable pupils to access the curriculum, but later communication groups were set up and **for the first time children who had communication difficulties were taught to interact with each other using AAC.**

In 1995 Research Machine computers gave a range of software for all areas of the curriculum which were differentiated and age appropriate. Staff were trained on specific software such as Clicker and Boardmaker. Mary took on a different role - the training and support of staff.

2. The difference the Communication Aid Project has made to pupils.

When CAP was launched the school had 19 students who used AAC strategies and for the majority, the resources they had met the pupils needs adequately. **However, there were 8 students whose potential wasn't being fully realised. Vocabulary available to them was limited, they couldn't move between social and curricular vocabulary easily and what vocabulary they did have was what staff thought appropriate.**



Peter using Intellikeys.

In school today, almost every child has access to their own computer with appropriate programmes and settings. Communications aids have become more sophisticated and user friendly. **It must be said that obtaining dynamic aids has only been possible through CAP.**



Daniel using an ORAC

Colleagues at Lowtown School have said:

“Without appropriate AAC these children would not have been able to communicate with each other or included socially and educationally to the extent which they have been. When CAP funding ceases systems will need to be found to enable future children to continue to have appropriate AAC and ATL resources.”

“The advance and availability of special access technology and communication aids has raised our expectations of the children. We have given them the means to show us what they can achieve and we expect a high performance. It is usually the case that the children far exceed our expectations.”

3. Staff and Parent Training

As technology has advanced the role of the AAC / IT Co-ordinator has developed to include considerably more training and support. Mary's timetable is flexible so she can accommodate all teaching and non-teaching staff. Some people have less confidence in the use of technology and these people need more training and ongoing support. Mary tends to do staff training individually or in small groups. When people go on training courses they generally come back enthusiastic with lots of ideas but faced with the demands of the classroom, staff may not always have the chance to implement the skills gained from the training and the learning can be lost.

It was decided that a rolling programme of workshops should be set up to allow class staff time to make AAC/IT resources for the curriculum, trial new software, learn new skills or brush up on ones they hadn't used for a while. Every class gets 1½ hrs per week for one half-term. It is up to staff how they utilize this time; colleagues can work together, or with a child, in or out of the class. Staff work at their own pace, on their chosen activities, relevant to what is occurring in their class at that time. A supply teacher is brought in to release the class teacher. These workshops have helped change staff attitudes towards ICT and have boosted staff confidence in technology.



Mary working with a staff member and a pupil in her class.

Mary acknowledged,

“It is very rewarding when you look back and see the progress made by a member of staff who was particularly afraid of technology; this member of staff now makes all her own Clicker and Boardmaker grids and programmes vocabulary into the Dynavox with ease.”

Individual ICT training can be given to support staff. Mary shows them how to address problems when computers or printers go wrong. This helps them to address issues quickly, spreads expertise and leaves Mary more time to work with the children. Staff can approach Mary if they have difficulty sorting out a problem themselves. Mary allocates one afternoon per week to training Special Support Assistants on computer access, software, and communication equipment. She suggests ways in which they can give the children more opportunities to use their aids.

Whole staff training is carried out rarely as 1:1 and small group training appears to be more efficient in terms of lasting gains for staff.

Enabling staff to have confidence in using ICT and to make their own resources has meant that Mary has more time to help pupils programme their own computers and to develop social communication skills in school and the wider community.

School tries to ensure that pupils have access to the technology at home and many of the aids are portable and can be mounted on a wheelchair when necessary. Parents are invited into school or Mary will do home visits to train parents. Mary will train and support the parents in using software and special

access technology as well as teaching them to programme vocabulary into their child's communication aid. This empowers parents to support their child and to be more fully involved in their communication and education.

Mary went to the home of Carol and programmed her TV remote control from home into the Dynavox. Carol was really thrilled when she got home and found it worked. She spent most of the night switching channels and turning the volume up and down.



4. Pupils social, spontaneous language and control of their own environment thus promoting their independence and inclusion.

This work is done in a variety of ways to lead children and young people towards independence and inclusion:

- 'tutorials' to explore the vocabulary needed in different contexts and to practice it's programming;
- communication groups to role play using appropriate language in different contexts;
- taking responsibilities around school to explore using AAC within a more social context;
- going out into the community with support to use the skills practiced in school and to help people within the community learn how to communicate with people who use AAC;
- programming their own AAC so they can communicate their own thoughts.

A number of examples of have been used in this section to show the work of the children and young people, and the difference this has made to their lives.

4.1 Communication Groups in school

Many children who use communication aids have difficulty initiating spontaneous language. Mary and the Speech and Language Therapist run communication groups for children who use communication aids to try to promote their independence, to enable them to make decisions and ultimately take control of their own environment. The children learn to interact with one another, take their turn to talk and practice the social skills they are going to need to be fully included. They participate in various role playing scenarios and receive individual support.

Children greet each other and are encouraged to describe any news they might have. The rest of the group are prompted to ask relevant questions. Because spontaneous language is difficult for these pupils lots of activities are done to promote this.

- **Guess the celebrity – formulating and using questions.**

During the week a pupil puts together pictures of some celebrities they like. Here we see Daniel with his choices. During the group work Daniel chooses one but doesn't say which. The other pupils ask questions of Daniel using their AAC to try to guess which one he is thinking of and he responds appropriately.



- **Role play - developing early independence with AAC**

Going to the doctor's

The group had great fun with this activity, one pupil played an awkward receptionist, busy filing her nails, chatting on the phone to a friend whilst ignoring the patients, another played the doctor and the pupils took turns playing the patient.

At the end of the session Mary suggested to the group that there may be times when they would want to visit the doctor privately without mum being there. She ended by saying "So you see how important it is to practice using your communication aids when you see the doctor"

All of them with one exception said "No!" These were the older children, 13-14 years old. They didn't see the need to talk to the doctor because the doctor talked to their parents and their parents spoke for them. They had become used to this and accepted it. The exception was the youngest member of the group - a 6 year girl who strived to be as independent as she could.

This shows the importance of providing appropriate communication equipment and promoting independence at the earliest stage.

4.2 Inclusion into the Community Programme

This programme began a few years ago to encourage the pupils to use their communication aids in real situations. When it first started children who were confident in trying to communicate at school were very frightened when they went out of the school environment using their communication aids. The children and young people were encouraged to ask for help, directions or order a drink in the cafe

In the end **this programme has done more to advance interaction and inclusion within the community than anything else. It has turned out to be a two-way learning process.** The children and young people gain in confidence and social skills by using their AAC in real situations. People come up to them and ask the children about their device. It is breaking down barriers. People are learning to talk to children who use communication aids where once they might have walked on by. Frequently the aid is providing a focal point for conversation. The children also practice manoeuvring their powered wheelchairs in shops, supermarkets, car parks and gain an understanding of the safety issues involved.



**Daniel and Alecia
chatting to a passer by.**

Mary said,

“I’m amazed at how their confidence has grown. Now they demand the same level of independence when they go out with their parents or carers.”

4.2.1 Becoming independent

- **Tim becoming more independent and taking control – doing what I want to do.**

Recently, when out with a group the heel of Mary's shoe became unstuck. She asked Tim if he would go into the hardware store and get some Evostick for her. Tim programmed the words he needed and went into the shop independently. The shop owner enquired about the device and chatted to Tim.

As Tim has developed more independence he has taken more control over what happens when they go out. On route to the café Tim decided he wanted to go to the travel agents but would not tell anyone why. The adults went along with him; he went in and asked for brochures on different countries and information on travelling for disabled people. The brochures were mainly for his geography lesson but he also asked for information to enable him to ask his mum about going to Florida.

Tim in the café.



In W.H.Smiths Tim wanted a CD worth £10 but only had £2 with him. He asked a member of the support staff to go to the bank with him so he could draw out some money from his account. She refused and pointed out that his mum wouldn't be too happy. Tim said, "mum says whatever!" He sulked for a few minutes and then in the supermarket whilst they were standing at the checkout he asked one of the staff to get cash back. When they said no, he tried using flattery - "hiya gorgeous." Eventually he apologised for sulking and we went to the café where he ordered a drink. He was able to show independence and facets of his character people hadn't seen before.

- **Alecia becoming more independent and taking control using a knee switch to access Dynavox**

In the café it was agreed that Alecia was to build the sentence 'please can I have a chocolate milkshake?' When she got to the counter she constructed the sentence but added 'and a piece of chocolate cake'. At first people thought she had made a mistake and said no she could only have a drink but she insisted that she wanted chocolate cake as well. She pointed to the cake and repeated the message again and again.

There was no mistake!!

- **Peter taking control 'first time out' and showing his 'wicked sense of humour'.**



First time out with his Dynavox, in the café Tim selected the word Sam and pointed at something outside. He kept repeating this so Mary asked who Sam was and if he lived near by. Peter told her that Sam was his uncle and did work near by. Once Mary realised what he wanted to do she explained he should build the sentence 'I want to see Sam' Once constructed, Peter pressed the message repeatedly.

Peter directed the group to a butchers shop called Sam Cleggs. He was so excited. When they went inside he was so pleased with his independence and was rewarded with a big hug from his uncle.

Later, in the supermarket a man stopped to ask Peter about his device. He and Peter swapped questions.

Eventually the man said "I could talk to you all day Peter" Peter replied "get lost". Mary said she was mortified and quickly prompted him to say, "Oops I didn't mean that!" She hoped that he hadn't offended the man and said that Peter had a wicked sense of humour. When they saw the man a little later he was still smiling.

Again, colleagues saw a side to Peter that they had never seen before and he was able to share his thoughts independently.

4.2.2 Programming their own vocabulary

If pupils are really going to maximise their independence it is important the students receive intensive support for the first 2-3 weeks after they have received their communication aid. This allows time for customising the device and for the student to gain confidence in navigating their way around the software.

Where possible the pupils are taught to programme vocabulary, create and design pages/pop ups etc. by themselves. This gives them control over their device. It is frequently the case that they become more competent than classroom staff.

- **Daniel taking control – in a serious situation and for him to ‘flirt’.**

Daniel’s journey to school takes 1½ hours and he sits at the back of a large bus. Until he received his AAC he was not able to communicate with people when travelling. He fainted one night on the bus going home and the bus had to pull up. Later he programmed in “Sandra I’m not feeling well, I need your help” and Sandra was able to sort him out before he fainted again. Now Daniel uses his AAC to shout for help if the children sitting close to him feel unwell.

Daniel independently explored the features in the Dynavox settings and found a song bank which allowed him to compose songs. He wanted to sing a Valentine’s song to his girlfriend Chloe so he composed one and sang it to her on the bus coming to school. When he got to school he edited Chloe’s name, replaced it with Alecia and sang it to her. Then the same but with Hayley!



- **Independent ‘banter’ between Tim and Daniel.**

‘Evidence’ of the impact of this work with pupils was seen one day when Mary and Daniel’s teacher walked down the corridor and ‘eavesdropped’ on a conversation. Daniel was supposed to be ‘mentoring’ Tim.

Tim and Daniel were chatting in the corridor, both use Dynavox and this is the light hearted banter which took place

Tim: I have a problem, it’s DJ - he makes me sick
Daniel: Stop bugging me
Tim: Buzz off
Daniel: Talk to the hand ‘cos the face aint listening (Shaking his hand.)
Tim: Get lost
Daniel: You make me sick
Tim: Ha ha ha – both boys really laughed together.

This was the first time Mary and her colleagues had heard children using communication aids to enter into spontaneous conversation without adult input or guided structure. Mary said she,

“had waited years for this to happen and prior to CAP I didn’t think our children would achieve it.”

- **Mentoring and work experience.**

Daniel uses his communication aid in the mentoring scheme, he has a mentor who comes to school to see him but Daniel also mentors Tim. With his teacher he has designed a page to ask open and closed questions.

Following on from the ‘mentoring’ work Daniel was able to programme his computer and use his communication aid for his work experience placement at the Inland Revenue.



Daniel meeting ‘the boss’.

- **Anne can now send e-mails and go out into the supermarket and make herself understood using her communication book.**

Anne is 14 years old. She depends on the computer to write. She uses Clicker 4 with a Rollerball and a keyguard over the keyboard to rest her hand. Mary set up the same equipment at home and taught Anne how to create clicker grids and use them with e-mail. Anne made a number of grids linked together so she can construct e-mail quickly and with the correct spelling as this is a problem area for her.



Anne shopping in the Supermarket.

Anne also knows how to create a Boardmaker page for her A5 communication book. Anne uses her voice and doesn't feel the need for a communication aid but people who are not familiar with her speech struggle to understand all that she is trying to say so Mary helped her to develop an appropriate communication book with 4 symbols per page.

Anne made a page for the building society and opened an account. It is usually the case that the pictures are all the clue the person needs to understand what she is trying to say and a successful interaction can take place.