

The Future is Vocal: Media Project

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Transcript

Welcome back to the deep dive. Today we are focusing on something pretty remarkable actually. It's technology that's really changing education and inclusion. We're talking about augmentative and alternative communication or uh AAC devices. Yeah,

we've looked at a bunch of sources and they all point to the fact that AAC isn't just, you know, helpful. It genuinely opens doors for students with complex communication needs socially and academically.

It really is a seismic shift um in how we approach communication support. Maybe for listeners who aren't deep in this field, we should start with a basic definition.

Good idea.

Okay. So, when we talk about AAC, we mean basically every form of communication that isn't typical oral speech. It's used to express thoughts, needs, wants, ideas, all of it.

So, it's a massive spectrum then, not just one specific gadget or computer.

Absolutely not. No. It ranges from things that are very low tech, maybe simple picture boards, right?

All the way up to incredibly high-tech stuff like sophisticated tablets, iPads running apps like Prolquo or even systems that track eye movements.

Eye gaze. Yeah, I've heard of that.

Exactly. I gaze systems let a student create speech or text just by looking at different parts of the screen. But the core idea, you know, it's the same. Give a reliable way to communicate.

Make sure they can participate meaningfully

precisely in all parts of life.

So our mission today is to really unpack what makes AAC work well. Because just handing over an iPad, well, that's not enough, is it?

Not even close.

We're looking at three big pillars. The sources kept highlighting. How these devices enable real inclusion, how they foster genuine peer interaction, and uh the need for really deep collaboration between home and school.

Okay, let's start with that first one then. AAC as the engine for inclusive learning and getting access to the curriculum,

right? And when we say inclusion, it's more than just being physically in the room, isn't it? It's about the students right to access the same curriculum as their peers.

The sources pretty clear. AAC devices are seen as the main tool that makes this possible, but in a modified way that fits their communication needs. It's tailoring the entry point, not like dumbing things down.

And that idea, multiple entry points for learning, as the research calls it. That's key for differentiation. Lman and colleagues found this specifically helped differentiate instruction even in preschool.

Okay. Multiple entry points.

Can we make that less like jargon? What does it actually look like in a classroom?

Sure. It's actually pretty straightforward. Let's say the objective is identifying primary colors.

Okay.

A student who speaks verbally might just say red. An AAC user achieves the same goal, the same learning by using their device maybe to select a symbol for red and the device speaks the word.

Ah, I see. Same knowledge, different way of showing it.

Exactly. And using the device consistently. That's shown to improve both understanding and expressing communication over time for kids with intellectual and developmental disabilities. So, it's not just a substitute voice. It's an active tool for learning itself. The sources also mentioned that for young kids with autism, AAC instruction actually promotes functional communication and boosts participation in learning.

Yes, precisely. It's fundamental to engagement, not just some add-on activity, which brings in an ethical angle, too, doesn't it?

It really does. Kaylor and colleagues pointed out something crucial. Inclusion is both a right and a responsibility.

A responsibility. Okay.

So, when we think about providing access at Ethically, the focus has to be totally on equitable communication access,

not just sticking a child in a general ed classroom.

I hadn't thought about it in quite those terms. If it's a responsibility, what does that mean schools have to do beyond just buying the tech, which is expensive and staff time is always short,

uh, right? That's where the rubber meets the road.

Equitable access means the tech isn't just there. It's working. It's supported. It's integrated. That means staff time for training, technical support, updates, budgeting, ensuring the student always has their voice available.

It's systemic.

It has to be.

Yeah.

The Tai Center study backs this up. Inclusion supports must make sure students are always participants in peer networks, not just watching from the sidelines. That needs real investment.

Okay, participation. That leads perfectly into our second pillar, AAC as a social bridge. Because accessing a science lesson is one thing, but jumping into that fast, messy chat during a group project or at lunch, that's totally different.

Totally different. And AAC devices are vital for building those social connections precisely because they allow participation in those, you know, spontaneous moments. Without that tool, communication needs can lead straight to isolation.

That's the core challenge, right? If everyone's joking around quickly and it takes the AAC user 30 seconds to build a sentence that they've missed it.

Exactly.

So, how do schools get beyond just providing the device to making it work socially?

Well, the sources really point towards structured peer roles and instruction. It's not enough to just put kids together. You actually have to teach the non-disabled peers how to interact effectively.

Ah, teach the peers.

Yeah. Using strategies that create natural reasons to communicate. Modeling how to use the AEC device helps peers learn to engage naturally and it lowers the barrier for everyone involved.

But do these peer strategies actually work or is it just nice theory?

No, they have real measurable results. Research showed peer strategies significantly boosted social communication for young children with developmental disabilities. McCarti's work noted that when peers are trained and involved, those communication hurdles shrink. You get more real back and forth,

more genuine conversation.

Exactly. Less like a performance, more like just talking.

That must have a huge impact on how the student feels their sense of belonging.

Oh, absolutely. The emotional benefits are massive. Things like collaborative play, group learning, when AAC makes them possible, they really boost that sense of belonging. Using AAC in class increases social acceptance. It fights isolation.

It decreases the stigma.

Definitely. McCarti argues that having peer partners helps normalize AEC use.

If a friend is using it naturally or just waits patiently, it stops feeling like this special needs thing.

It just becomes another way people communicate.

Exactly. Which is the goal, right?

Yeah. Which brings us, I guess, to the final and maybe the trickiest part. Consistency. Making it work everywhere. The logistics.

Yeah. This is where it gets complex. Systemic success with AAC is a huge team effort. It needs uh buyin and support from all stakeholders.

Okay, so the devices are amazing. We agree on that. But let's talk friction. Teacher training and cost must be huge hurdles. You mentioned sources say devices often end up sitting on shelves.

Sadly, yes.

That's such a waste. Why does that happen?

It often comes down to time and confidence.

A systemic issue really. Sabanda and colleagues found many teachers, even special ed teachers, have big knowledge gaps about specific a tech,

they might feel overwhelmed.

Exactly. Intimidated, unsure how to weave it into, say, a math lesson, or they just don't have the prep time to customize it properly for each student.

So, it sounds like it's less about individual teacher failure and more about a lack of system support. You need to invest in the people using the tech, not just the tech itself.

Precisely. JMA's research really underlines this. Training boosts teacher confidence and their ability to integrate AAC daily. If teachers feel supported with ongoing training, they start seeing the device not as some separate thing but it's just part of the learning environment.

So train the team and make sure they talk to each other that leads straight to collaboration right absolutely non-negotiable you need collaboration between teachers the family and specialists especially SLPs speech language pathologist

MLPS right

joint planning say between the teacher and the SLP is crucial to make sure everyone's working towards the same goals that leads to better student progress and it helps teachers intentionally set up those good period interactions we talked about earlier.

And who needs to be right at the heart of all that collaboration?

The student. Always the student. Taylor's work emphasized this collaboration has to center on the AAC users themselves, their authentic voices. We can't have adults making all the decisions for the student without genuinely including them.

It has to be about what the student wants to say and how they want to say it.

Yes, their preferences matter.

Okay, so we've got the school team covered, but school isn't 24/7. What happens when that device goes home or even just out to the playground.

That's probably the critical factor for long-term success. The TAI center really stresses this. AAC support needs to be seamless. Recess, lunch, and definitely home life.

The family involvement

absolutely essential. Family involvement and training are necessary for consistency and they're actually the strongest predictor of whether a student will succeed with AAC long term.

I can imagine that's tough for parents though. They might be tired after work and suddenly they need to be an AAC expert. too. How do you support them?

It's about making it accessible and empowering them. Parents need to feel comfortable modeling AAC use, just doing normal daily stuff, making dinner, reading a story, going shopping, making it normal.

Exactly. When families feel supported by the school team and get involved, they use the device consistently. And that simple, consistent use normalizes AAC everywhere. It ensures the device is really their voice all the time, not just a school tool.

This has been incredibly insightful. We've covered a lot, but the main message message seems really clear. AEC devices, they support real inclusion.

They help break down social barriers and stigma. They boost communication overall.

And critically, success hinges on deep, consistent, student focused teamwork between school and home.

Right. And when systems truly commit to providing that training, that support.

Yeah.

These devices do so much more than just help with speech. They give students an authentic voice, a voice that deserves to be heard and respected everywhere they go. So thinking about all this, what does it mean for you listening, whether you're an educator, family member, or just someone interested?

Well, if we accept the consistent support and buy in from everyone, teachers, family, friends, is what makes this work long term.

Then we have to think beyond the classroom outside structured time, right?

So the question becomes, what action can you take maybe this week to ensure AAC use is supported outside of formal lessons? How can it become just a natural expected valued part of everyday life. Maybe think about how you model communication, how you show patience when interacting with someone using AC

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