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Voices from the Field

Partnering to Create a Core Communication Board to Improve Theater Experiences

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines a partnership between a nonprofit theater in Connecticut and pre-service special education teachers at a local university. The goal of the collaboration was to increase the accessibility of the sensory-friendly performances and events designed for students in PK-12. The process of creating visual supports and a core communication board is shared, in addition to the designing of training and implementation phases. The project not only resulted in improved supports for the school-aged sensory-friendly events for the next season, but also in a demonstrable perspective shift on the importance of inclusivity and community communication supports among pre-service teachers and community members.

Keywords: accessibility, teacher education, community-based experiences, communication

INTRODUCTION

Participation in community experiences is essential for an individual's development. Many students with disabilities are missing out on socially meaningful community participation (King et al., 2003). Communication challenges may be one obstacle for students' inclusion in their community (Batorowicz et al., 2006; Shepherd & McDougall, 2008). The increased presence of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices in schools hasn't directly correlated to an increase in socially-interactive moments within the classroom (Alant, 2017) and beyond. To increase meaningful moments, AAC should be artfully integrated into an individual's environment (Alant, 2017), creating a fully inclusive space. Community spaces may have additional environmental factors—availability, supports, attitudes—impacting the meaningful moments for students to utilize AAC (Raghavendra et al., 2007). Although the research on communication supports in community spaces is growing (Derse, 2008; Naidoo & Singh, 2020; Shepherd & McDougall, 2008) there is a need to continue spreading communication supports into non-school-based environments.

Shepherd and McDougal (2008) reported on the implementation of the program Libraries for All which had the goal of increasing access to communication in Canadian libraries for everyone. This program included four different communication boards (two letter boards, a word board, and a symbol board), training for staff, and a promotion of the program. Although specific results and user testimonies weren't provided, the access to communication in a community environment was accomplished (Shepherd & McDougall, 2008). Unlike Libraries for All, the current project has a target population of PK-12 students attending sensory-friendly events at a theater with their families; however, the goals are similar.

A recent study by Naidoo and Singh (2020) outlined the integration of a low-tech, color-coded, symbol-supported visual communication board at a dental office. The research identified that visual supports increased client comfort and also highlighted the importance of continuous review of vocabulary and implementation (Naidoo & Singh, 2020). The current project describes a partnership between a private university and a nonprofit theater to add visual supports and a communication board with the goal of increasing universal communication access to school-age patrons and their families attending sensory-friendly events.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

One professor and three students from the university's special education program developed this community outreach project after identifying the need to increase community involvement and inclusivity. The special education program at the university is passionate around increasing access for individuals through universal design, AAC, and assistive technology. The professor is also a practicing assistive technology specialist with a background in theater and a family connection at the nonprofit theater. The family connection facilitated the partnership with the front-of-house staff and accessibility committee. The committee at the theater had already integrated consistent sign language supports for live events and was interested in continuing to expand accessibility. The three senior capstone students completed

student teaching and were in the final semester of their undergraduate program, eager to continue their involvement in the field. The university was dedicated to producing passionate special education teachers who advocate in their school and local community for inclusion, and this project aimed to demonstrate the importance of advocacy and community partnerships.

TARGET AUDIENCE AND RELEVANCE

School, community, and university members are the main audience for this project. Special education teachers can apply this example and partner with local theaters to increase the availability of field trips and supplemental experiences for all students. As noted within this project, once the personal connection was made with the organization, the theater staff was eager to improve its offerings and take initiatives to support inclusive practices. Fostering relationships and personal connections will help build these experiences and encourage accessibility awareness within the community.

Community members can utilize this article as an example of strategies and tools to improve universally accessible experiences. The work outlined demonstrates the steps and tools that can be implemented to support universal participation for a PK-12 audience. In the initial meetings with the theater, the staff was extremely eager to hear ways to improve access. Hopefully, this project report will provide options and spark new partnerships in communities to improve accessibility.

Finally, university members can appreciate the value of community partnerships and community clinical experiences for pre-service teachers. The emphasis on school clinical experiences is essential for pre-service teachers; however, dedicating coursework to community collaborations establishes invaluable perspectives to take into a future career. University professors can design similar experiences to bridge the school/community divide and to promote communication supports in and outside of the classroom.

PROJECT OUTLINE

Partnership

A local nonprofit theater in Connecticut dedicated itself to sensory-friendly experiences for patrons beginning in 2015, primarily targeting the 18-and-under population. They began the endeavor with a large holiday sensory-friendly performance and worked in collaboration with a committee of experts in the state to design the experience for patrons with sensory needs, specifically those with autism spectrum disorder. After the initial show, the theater staff continued the sensory-friendly experiences internally. They planned sensory-friendly performances, small workshops, and social events, including drumming circles, a paint night, yoga, and Lego projects. The organization wanted to improve the theater experience for patrons attending these events and began the collaboration with the special education department at the university in 2019 to continually enhance the sensory-friendly events.

The first year of the partnership with the university focused on pre-service teachers attending sensory-friendly offerings and surveying patrons regarding their experiences. Patrons expressed the continued

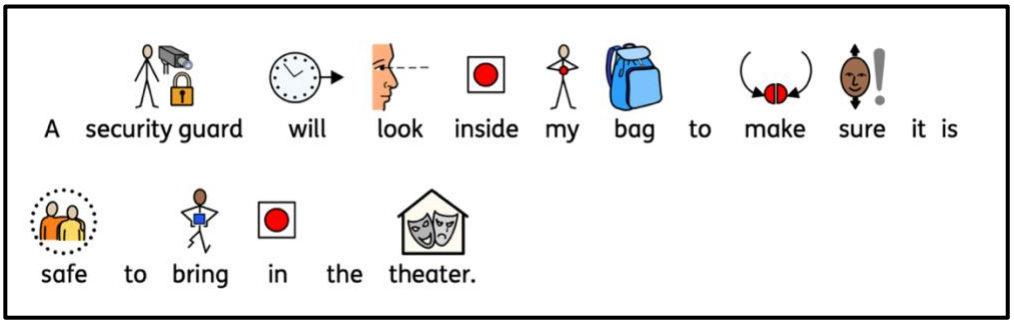
need for accessible community experiences. The theater staff and pre-service teachers met the next year to brainstorm ideas for increasing the accessible options. To guide this work, the pre-service teachers created an informal poll distributed via Facebook and parent networking groups throughout the state. With almost 50 responses from parents, caregivers, and special education teachers, respondents expressed that in addition to reduction in crowds, physical accessibility, and no loud noises, possible patrons would be interested in visual stories of the events, visual schedules, and low-tech communication boards to improve the theater experience.

For the 2020 season, the theater had a series of two workshops and one children's musical event. The supports were created to trial for the following sensory-friendly events in 2020: a Lego workshop for up to 20 students, a sensory-friendly performance of a kids' musical folk group (seating capacity up to 900), and a yoga session for up to 20 attendees. The team's goal was to meet after each event, process the success and feedback, and revise or adjust as needed for the next offering.

Visual Supports

The first step in the project was creating visual supports for potential patrons. Visual supports can be utilized across settings (Rao & Gagie, 2006) to improve the processing of information (Grandin, 1995) and to provide predictable environments (Fittipaldi-Wert & Mowling, 2009) and independence (Pierce et al., 2013). Types of visual supports include but are not limited to: visual schedules, visuals to structure the environment, visual scripts, rule reminder cards, and visual task analysis (Meadan et al., 2011). For the initial 2015 performance, the staff created a visual story on the live-theater experience. The story was reviewed by the pre-service teachers and updated to be generalized for any performance with symbol supports. The pre-service teachers also outlined additional scenarios such as: going to the bathroom, taking a break, getting a refreshment, and visiting the merchandise table. The pre-service teachers consulted family members of individuals with autism and other professionals to confirm the language use and appropriateness. Figure 1 displays an example from a symbol-supported visual story.

Figure 1: Sample Sentence from Main Visual Story



The website Widgit Online (https://widgitonline.com) was utilized to create symbol-supported text for the visual stories. This platform allows for symbol customization to ensure that the visuals reflect the diversity of the patron population. After the text was symbol-supported, the PDF versions were exported and sent to the theater for review. The theater media department approved the material and posted them on the public website for potential patrons to download and access. In addition to the text-based symbol

supports, the pre-service teachers planned and recorded a movie to demonstrate the experience of attending a live performance directly corresponding to the written story.

Core Communication Board

The next phase of the project involved designing and implementing a communication board for the lobby of the theater during sensory-friendly performances. In preparation of creating a low-tech communication board, the pre-service teachers conducted a background of AAC, core and fringe vocabulary, and implementation strategies. Core communication boards for community locations, specifically playgrounds, have increased in recent popularity in PK-12 environments, as made evident by a search of "playground communication board" on Google revealing 2,610 options. These results include Pinterest links to the best AAC/Core boards, GoFundMe pages for boards, and articles from local schools sharing their installments.

However, the research base on these community boards is not plentiful. Early on, Derse (2008) shared the process behind her project to install a playground communication board and emphasized the importance of planning and stakeholder buy-in. In a medical setting, Naidoo and Singh (2020) found that a low-tech symbol-based communication board increased comfort during a dental appointment experience. To identify the board vocabulary, the researchers gathered dental-specific terminology and received input from dental professionals. Since the purpose of the board was also to share oral care information, the majority of the words chosen were dental-specific. Naidoo and Singh provided training to the dental hygienists using an adaptation to the Language Acquisition through Motor Planning (LAMP) approach pairing the verbalization of the word and pointing to the symbol (2020). Based on the results of the small scale study, they also recommended more training and continued vocabulary review to improve the accuracy of the board (Naidoo & Singh, 2020). Looking at visual art experiences for students with communication needs, Coleman and Cramer (2015) suggested the use of a low-tech communication board for increased participation and control in the art space. This project took those recommendations from these previous studies, especially acknowledging the need to educate the theater staff and volunteers on the purpose and implementation of the communication board.

Vocabulary. After establishing the foundational understanding of AAC, the pre-service teachers then worked to design the board for the theater. A major component of this project was choosing the core and fringe vocabulary to include on the board for the target population. Core vocabulary refers to common language that is used most often across most environments, contexts, and conversations (Banajee et al., 2003). This language includes question words such as "what" and "where," personal identification words such as "me" and "his," general nouns, verbs, feelings, and smaller words, such as prepositions and articles. Fringe vocabulary refers to the context-specific vocabulary that changes with the environment or conversation (Banajee et al., 2003).

Integral to the vocabulary choices was the expected user population, PK-12 students and their families. The theater shared the workshops generally to attract children ages 3–15 and the musical event had a target age of under 12. Unlike Shepherd and McDougall (2008), there was no assumption that school-age children and their families would come with their own AAC devices for general communicative

functions. Choosing vocabulary was not taken lightly by the team. Input was provided from a school based AAC/AT Specialist and Speech and Language Pathologist to ensure the appropriateness of the vocabulary selection. The team decided on a majority of core vocabulary to increase the availability of general language for users across multiple opportunities. For example: “balcony” can be substituted for “up”; and to indicate that the patron has to wait for a break in the show, “close, stop” can be modeled. If a patron is looking for “refreshments,” “eat” and/or “drink” would indicate to the staff what the patron needs.

For the main board, focusing primarily on fringe vocabulary—balcony, soda, candy, merchandise—might limit the number of communication exchanges that could be initiated and communicated on the board. Although core vocabulary is rooted in conversation samples of typically-developing children, based on the article review by van Tilborg and Deckers, “core vocabulary is thus of high importance of all AAC users, regardless of physical or intellectual disabilities” (2016, p. 135). However, there remains a variety of viewpoints in research regarding vocabulary use and personally relevant AAC systems that are vital to consider when designing a communication board (Boenisch & Soto, 2015; Laubscher & Light, 2020). The team also discussed the option of creating fringe-specific word boards for additional areas of the theater during large events—for example, the concession stand, the merchandise table, and the bathroom—and utilizing photos of the items in the environment. However, the team decided to gather patron feedback from the initial implementation before adding additional layers of support.

The core communication board created for this project also includes interchangeable fringe vocabulary referencing the show or program that is being presented. If the performers were a musical band, the fringe vocabulary might include “guitar” and “drums” as well as titles of some of the songs and each of the band members’ names with actual pictures of the performance or activity. Photographs will be used to increase the personal connection to the vocabulary displayed on the board to promote communication attempts (McKelvey et al., 2010). These final two columns will be developed by the university team to ensure appropriateness of vocabulary for continued use. Updating vocabulary based on an individual’s needs is vital to continued success of the AAC use (Johnson et al., 2006); therefore, this continued revision is integrated into the implementation. The partnership agreed to review vocabulary after each event and will review and update as needed.

To assist in the development and ensure appropriateness, the pre-service teachers and professor consulted with a practicing speech and language pathologist and AAC/AT Specialist. She provided specific consultation on the language to include and made additional suggestions. For example, she emphasized the importance of including “Something else” for an individual to express that their message isn’t included on the board, which is vital when designing communication boards (Derse, 2008). Once the core communication board was finalized, the layout was sent to the theater administration for review and approval.

Targeting the initial population of school-aged students with communication needs attending performances was the basis for the majority of the core vocabulary. In contrast, when developing the boards for the general population, Shepherd and McDougall (2008) utilized library-specific vocabulary,

based on the assumption that patrons would bring their personal devices for general communication. Hopefully, this initial project with a target population will result in the development of a communication board for general admission events, which will require additional trainings and vocabulary revision.

Designing. Boardmaker Online® was utilized to design the core communication board. This platform was chosen based on the popularity of the Picture Communication Symbols (PCS) in schools. The pre-service teachers learned about the technical components of the website, explored the templates, and began the design process. The 63 word core board template was agreed upon to not overwhelm users, but also to provide enough access to core and fringe vocabulary. The board was organized into five different color-coded sections. The first blue column was broken down into question words (what, where, when, why, and how). The yellow column was dedicated to people, such as I, we, she, he, and you. The green columns had core words (help, more, feeling, bathroom). The orange columns had small words (yes, no, up, down, before, after). The final pink columns had the fringe/content-specific vocabulary that could be changed to match the particular event occurring at the theater.

Once the pre-service teachers identified the appropriate vocabulary for the core communication board, they then had to learn how to edit cells and symbols using Boardmaker®. They were required to delete existing visuals and vocabulary, input new vocabulary and visuals, and adjust the colors of the visuals chosen. The professor discussed the importance of ensuring that the visuals were culturally representative; editing the symbols allowed the team to do so.

The final board included 63 cells, 78% (49) core vocabulary with 22% (14) available for rotating fringe words. Individual fringe word symbols based on the individual performances would be created and Velcroed to the final two columns. With input from the expert, the final board was sent to the theater for another round of feedback. The front-of-house manager printed the communication board file and laminated it on a poster. The final core communication board image is pictured below with some starter fringe vocabulary included as Figure 2:

Figure 2: Core Communication Board Created for Sensory Friendly Events

Training. After developing the core board, the professor and pre-service teachers focused on training and implementation. The university team participated in significant research and practice when preparing to train the staff and volunteers at the theater to utilize the board. The expert advisor shared key strategies on building capacity, training, and implementation of AAC. She emphasized the importance of building an understanding of the purpose and function of AAC, in addition to effectively modeling language. Opportunities to utilize communication with a communication partner demonstrate value in the support and can contribute to its effective use (Johnson et al., 2006). The pre-service teachers collaborated and practiced the physical actions of modeling core language in combination with spoken language. After researching strategies, each pre-service teacher recorded a read-aloud while modeling communication on a low-tech communication board. The purpose of this activity was to increase their comfort with modeling before presenting to the theater staff and volunteers.

Research has shown that modeling the use of AAC systems not only increases the proficiency of use across multiple language domains, but also increases the complexity of language being expressed through these devices (Binger & Light, 2007; Sennott et al., 2016). When implementing a core communication board within a theater environment, modeling the board supports its functionality in the space and allows individuals who use AAC to see how communication supports can be integrated within the community. Modeling language on the core communication board at the theater will hopefully encourage other family and community members to participate in modeling.

A training session was scheduled for the front-of-house staff and approximately 200 usher volunteers. The professor and pre-service teachers designed a 15-minute mini-workshop providing a background on the core communication board and its purpose, as well as a demonstration of modeling. Unfortunately, three weeks before the training, the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the theater. To continue the project, the university team recorded the training to be delivered virtually to the volunteers.

NEXT STEPS

Once the theater reopens after the pandemic, the sensory-friendly programming will be rescheduled. The visual stories and video preview will be used in pre-show marketing and onsite support. The training video will be sent to the volunteers and the professor will conduct live language modeling sessions for the volunteers and staff. The professor will attend the sensory-friendly workshops and performances to model the use of the core communication board for patrons and volunteers. Observational data will be kept on patrons' interactions with the core communication board and informal feedback on its effectiveness. The theater front-of-house staff and professor will meet to review the implementation to revise the vocabulary or approach as needed based on feedback from patrons and use.

After the initial implementation during the sensory-friendly performances geared towards PK-12 students and their families, the collaboration will then discuss the creation of a communication board for general admission performances. The next phase of the project will have a targeted audience of all attendees; therefore, the vocabulary and presentation will need to be revised and updated to match. For example, when developing for an adult audience, more fringe vocabulary will be needed to reflect the unique

community experience of attending a theater. This fringe vocabulary and access will need to be developed with the consideration of a variety of users, similar to the work of Shepherd and McDougall (2008). Training, review, and revision will include the theater and university team as the collaboration has continued to grow over the first two years.

OUTCOMES AND BENEFITS

When presenting their experiences to the theater staff, department chair, and other community partners—including a universal participation theater consultant—the pre-service teachers emphasized the perspective shift in their roles and purpose as future special education teachers and members of their communities. They expressed that a key benefit of the core communication board is that it increases accessibility of the theater experience, not only for individuals with disabilities, but also all patrons. They expanded that although the current project focuses on families and students with disabilities during sensory-friendly performances, the theater was open to adding a communication board for other general events. Adding a communication support to a general-admission event has the potential to increase patron awareness to communicative differences. Other groups of audience members may also benefit from its availability, for example, patrons with physical disabilities, hearing loss, or limited English proficiency. The pre-service teachers also reflected on the interest and desire to learn from the theater staff. The staff wanted to create an inclusive experience but didn't have the knowledge background to identify what would be implemented. Providing more accommodations, increasing awareness, and establishing multiple means of access publicly in our community will provide opportunities for society to be accepting of diversity.

The pre-service teachers shared their feelings of responsibility to increase engagement with their home communities to support inclusive communication practices beyond this collaboration. One student explained that she is interested in contacting her local theater to initiate a similar program. Another reflected on her student teaching experiences and the frequent behavioral challenges on community field trips. She elaborated that in the future, if she were planning for a community outing with students, she would have a communication board ready for utilization in community settings. Although this project was one step in one community to increase communicative inclusivity, the perspective shift for all the team members was a huge benefit to the initiative and future projects.

Through the collaboration between the university and the theater, the importance of bringing the community into the classroom quickly emerged as a benefit throughout the process. Field experiences of teacher preparation programs almost always consist of being in the classroom and getting hands-on experience with real students and teachers. However, as important as this component is, that leaves little opportunity for pre-service teachers to engage with the community and make that connection between inside and out of the classroom. Especially in the field of special education, the community becomes a huge obstacle for individuals with disabilities when they reach the end of their school career. Although transition planning begins years in advance for individuals receiving special education, this often does not fully prepare them to integrate seamlessly into the community (Hoover, 2016). Through this current experience, the university team learned the importance of remembering that support and guidance does

not, and should not, end in the classroom. The community should be just as accessible and important of an environment for individuals, and therefore special educators should work early on to integrate as many aspects of the community into the classroom as possible.

When reflecting on their experiences during the partnership, pre-service teachers shared how their perspectives on universal design and communication support had shifted. They expressed the idea of including an AAC board in their future classrooms, implementing communication supports in lessons, and promoting a more communication-inclusive environment. Although these concepts are reviewed and taught in the higher education classroom, this partnership allowed pre-service teachers to experience the benefits and potential impact of community engagement. As Alant (2017) posits, teachers need to not only support students' functional interactions with AAC, they also need to support the experiential process of interaction during communication. The pre-service teachers expressed the increased value of meaningful communicative interactions that will hopefully result in positive outcomes for their future students.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Providing access to communication supports in the community is the first component in accessible community experiences for individuals with communication needs (Raghavendra et al., 2007). This article reflected the beginning stage of a collaboration between a nonprofit theater and a university with pre-service special education teachers. The goals of the partnership were twofold: increase accessibility at sensory-friendly offerings and expose pre-service special education teachers to developing supports for community settings. The project revealed two important areas for additional exploration: community acceptance of inclusive communication supports and pre-service teachers' engagement in authentic AAC and AT experiences.

Promoting an increased presence of communication supports—high tech or low tech —creates an environment where communicative differences are accepted. During some of the planning meetings with the theater, the team mentioned that the use of the core communication board might be increased to general performances beyond just sensory-friendly offerings targeted at school age audiences and families. The theater staff was excited for this prospect and agreed that other patrons could also benefit from the support. The theater staff shared that they hadn't previously considered the variety of patrons who could benefit from visual communication supports. They already offer sign language interpreters and sound amplification devices for patrons. Increasing their awareness of this support provided more opportunities to increase access at all of their events. Taking this next step toward accessibility would require a full redesign and vocabulary revision. However, this willingness demonstrates how awareness is a vital step in accessibility.

Finally, incorporating authentic experiences to apply and to implement AAC and AT for pre-service teachers is imperative to impact its use in future classrooms. The pre-service teachers within this project expressed that they had previously learned about universal design for learning, AAC, and AT, but it wasn't until this experience that they became true advocates. They shared future plans for class field trips and

new analysis of previous experiences. This perspective shift is crucial for future educators to consistently and meaningfully implement communication supports and design meaningful learning environments for students to succeed.

Demonstrating the importance of school and community partnerships allows for the sharing of strategies and information. Continually increasing the public presence of communication supports and involving pre-service teachers in these projects will hopefully result in community accessibility and inclusion.

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DECLARATIONS

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