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Building an Effective Mentorship Program for Adolescents and Young Adults who use Augmentative & Alternative Communication in Alberta, Canada

Aim

Many people who use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) have neither seen nor met another person who “talks” like them. Even fewer have connected for the purposes of networking and mutual support. This is especially true in Alberta. Our relatively low population density presents geographical challenges for persons who require AAC to connect or get together regularly. Even those who reside in major city centers such as Calgary or Edmonton have limited or no access to others within their immediate communities.

Mentoring is the pairing of two individuals who share similar characteristics but differ in maturity and life experience (Cohen and Light, 2000). It is a practice that has long been used in many fields to provide less experienced individuals (“protégés”) encouragement and coaching from the authentic perspective of more experienced individuals (“mentors”). AAC users who have overcome challenges and been successful in attaining many of their educational, vocational, social and personal goals can be effective mentors and may be able to offer better supports than rehabilitation professionals (Light, McNaughton, et. al 2007). They are generally better aware of the needs of others with similar disabilities and better informed of the resources and strategies to solve problems. Further, AAC mentors can offer a very unique kinship because they have “been there,” and consequently, have an enhanced understanding of how protégés feel. Often they have personal insights and experiences to share that may be helpful in solving problems (“AAC Mentor Project,” n.d.).

To ensure adolescents and young adults have successful mentor-protégé relationships, mentors should receive specific skills training to become effective mentors (Cohen and Light, 2000). This training should include the learning of effective interpersonal communication skills; collaborative problem solving and goal setting skills; and strategies to find and access disability-related information and resources locally and/or provincially (“The AAC Mentor Project,” n.d.).

Presently, there are a couple of mentorship and/or leadership training programs available online such as the *AAC Mentor Project* through Penn State University that are designed to address the challenge of providing this distance instruction to potential AAC mentors. However they lack the support of an instructor who can ensure participants acquire targeted skills as they progress through the different lessons. Further, there are no participant opportunities to apply and/or

generalize their learning (e.g. using targeted skills in role play scenarios) or receive feedback on learning skills.

Methods

In light of these limitations, we are creating a regionally contextualized AAC Mentorship Training Program that is web-based, supported by trained instructors and provides opportunities for supervised practice of targeted skills. To do so, we will utilize the Penn State University website which offers free training materials available to anyone who is considering establishing a mentoring program for people with communication difficulties. The materials are the outcome of the *AAC Mentor Project* (Light, McNaughton, et. al 2007). Participants will be able to move through the lessons at their own individual pace using a distance learning format. Upon completion, mentors will be matched with a protégé or directed to other resources that will assist them in further building their leadership, socio-relational and/or problem solving skills.

A key element in the first phase of this project is that participating adult AAC users will be trained as mentors *as well as* instructors for successive AAC mentor candidates. Providing a structure for AAC mentors to train future AAC mentors will ensure our mentorship program becomes self-sustaining in our geographical region.

Results

This poster presentation documents our team's journey in conceiving, designing and implementing an Alberta-based AAC Mentorship Program that has involved:

- ✓ Developing valid pre-post training evaluation measures;
- ✓ Training the instructors;
- ✓ Recruiting qualified individuals to serve as mentors;
- ✓ Developing and piloting a reliable and secure website platform for mentorship training and mentors to connect with protégés and/or other mentors;
- ✓ Identifying protégés who would benefit from the program;
- ✓ Matching mentors with protégés and;
- ✓ Gathering information on provincial and local disability resources.

Conclusion

Resources are limited for providing ongoing supports to youth and young adults who use AAC, particularly in achieving their community 'transition' goals of developing relationships, maintaining access to needed services, and participating in meaningful activities including employment. If this mentorship training is appropriate for our Albertan population, we can begin offering it as a service to our clients, and a subsequent mentor-protégé matching program will have tremendous benefit.

Declaration of Interest

The authors disclose they have no financial or other interest in objects or entities mentioned in this paper.

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