

Case applications in a professional development program for communication partners: Reported changes in participant skills, knowledge and concerns

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Abstract

Communication partners of students with a severe intellectual disability participated in a three session inservicing program offered at two locations in each of the ten educational regions of NSW. The program introduced a process for assessment, programming and instruction predicated on the reciprocity of communication and the influence of ecological factors in the development of functional communication. Participants were encouraged to apply content and strategies between sessions to the needs of one student and evaluate the intervention process using this practical aspect of the program.

Using pre and post questionnaire data, analyses of variance indicated a number of significant reported changes within and across participant groups (teachers, therapists, aides). The program appeared to be successful in addressing participant concerns regarding information about and the impact of communication interventions. Data suggested an increase in the reported skills and knowledge of personnel in the areas of communication assessment, programming and instruction.

Potential applications of this case approach to staff development will be explored in the context of this project.

INTRODUCTION

The crucial role that partners play in the communication experiences of students with severe disability is steadily receiving more attention in the special education and professional development area. Whilst a number of writers have discussed the link between research and practice in communication intervention, highlighting the communicative context as a key variable (Arthur, 1994; Mirenda, Iacono, & Williams, 1990), others have attempted to define and support specific partner behaviours as a way of enhancing the quality of interaction in

classrooms and other educational settings (see, for example, two recent studies by Sigafoos, Kerr, Roberts, & Couzens, in press; Sigafoos, Roberts, Kerr, Couzens, & Baglioni, in press).

This paper describes some preliminary findings from a large-scale professional development program designed to support teachers and other communication partners working with students with severe disability in educational settings. The data was generated from the third phase of a four phase project, outlined below and described in more detail in Butterfield and Arthur (1994).

- * Statewide questionnaire to identify teacher needs and concerns

- * Development and piloting of responsive instructional manual

- * Development of an evaluation instrument for the manual and accompanying inservice program. Implementation of program.

- * Evaluation of data from phase 3.

The inservicing program took a case application approach in order to encourage participants to use the suggested intervention processes whilst recognising and incorporating individual differences in partner and student needs. Features of the case application approach are described in the next section.

METHOD

Subjects

Pre-intervention data was collected from 301 participants, with 179 again completing the post-instrument. The sample consisted of teachers, teachers aides and speech pathologists. A small number of parents and student teachers attended but were not included in the analysis due to the size of the cohorts.

Scale construction

A 39 item Likert scale, discussed elsewhere (Butterfield & Arthur, 1994; McKinnon, Arthur, & Butterfield, 1994), was developed to measure reported changes in participant skills, knowledge and concerns. A 5-point scale was used, moving through 0 = not relevant to me in my current role, to 4 = very true of me now. Participants were asked to complete the instrument prior to the first inservice session and again at the completion of the final meeting. Details of role and educational region were requested but no identifying code for individuals was used.

Procedure

The inservice program was offered in two locations in each of the ten

educational regions of NSW. Three sessions, separated by breaks of three weeks were conducted. Although further details on the program are provided elsewhere, the following case application themes were introduced into the planning and implementation of the program;

- * Sequential and cumulative sessions
- * Trial, practice and adaptation
- * Multi@disciplinary participation
- * Recognition of individual differences
- * Collective problem solving.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This paper provides an overview of reported whole group changes in skills and knowledge, following the provision of an inservicing program for communication partners. A major flaw in the design of this evaluation is the lack of point to point comparison of change. That is, although participants can be identified by region and role, the necessity for anonymity meant that individual pre@post comparison of reports is not possible.

In an attempt to explore the data, therefore, we conducted a series of analyses of variance (ANOVA) on the pre/post response means (Table 1), systematically dropping off groups in which there was a large drop in the number of respondents. This technique was designed to investigate the hypothesis that there would continue to be evidence of an intervention effect across the range of group responses. The size (and continuing significance) of the resultant F@ratio's, derived from the means presented in Table 1, although slowly dropping as the degrees of freedom shrink, suggests that the program was effective in increasing participants reported skills and knowledge. The analyses of variance consistently indicated a statistically significant pre/post change at a group level, at $p < 0.0005$ or better. This pattern suggests an intervention effect, despite an aggregated data base and the inability to make point to point comparisons.

PLEASE INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Further analyses are needed to explore within group changes, perhaps considering a range of demographic variables such as educational region, type of setting and participant role. Despite some of the constraints to analysis, these data do suggest that large@scale professional development programs, grounded in the identification of

participant needs and a realistic case-based approach to the application of new skills and knowledge acquired by participants, hold promise for bridging the gap between exemplary research and best practice. It may now be appropriate to pursue finely-grained studies of change in partner communication behaviour, incorporating a multiplicity of both controlled and open-ended, interpretive approaches to research.

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Table 1

Pre/Post Means: Participant reports about assessment, programming and instruction