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“Makes Their World a Bit Bigger”:

Opportunities and Experiences of a Poetry Group for Students With Multiple Disabilities Who Use AAC and the Staff Who Support Them.

A thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Speech and Language Therapy at Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand.

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In-Confidence

Abstract

Students who have multiple disabilities may use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) to meet their communication needs (Beukelman & Light, 2020). People communicate for many different reasons, and it is important to extend beyond sharing basic wants and needs (Beukelman & Light, 2020). It is also vital that communication partners who engage with AAC users receive training and support. Students with multiple disabilities require varied and interesting learning opportunities to expand their knowledge and skills.

This research used a case study approach to examine the opportunities and experiences of a poetry group for five students with multiple disabilities who use AAC and the seven staff (including the Speech and Language Therapist Researcher) that support them. Poetry as a creative learning context has some promising literature, as described in the literature review. This literature is limited, however, especially around potential benefits in the disability sphere.

Data were collected through several sources, including a focus group with staff, individual student interviews following the poetry group, and through the researcher's reflexive journal. Reflexive and inductive thematic analysis was used to analyse focus group data and the reflexive journal. Quantitative analysis was used to analyse student interview data which were then integrated with the developed themes from the qualitative analysis.

Data analysis resulted in the development of five themes. These were: Theme One: Practical Considerations Relating to Consistent Routine, Space, Staff Support and Time Facilitated the Success of Poetry Group, Theme Two: Poetry Group Facilitated Whakawhanaungatanga; The Development, Maintenance and Consolidation of Interpersonal Relationships, Theme Three: The Value of Poetry Group in Facilitating Students' Self-expression and Self-advocacy, Theme Four: The Benefit of Poetry Group on Strengthening

and Developing AAC skills, Independence, AAC exploration, and Self-confidence for Students and Staff and Theme Five: Poetry Group Fostered Enjoyment of Students and Staff.

Across these themes, positive outcomes for learning, connections and personal enjoyment were indicated for both staff and students. Future directions and clinical implications are discussed.

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Declaration of Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Any generative AI tools that have been used in developing this thesis were used following the Massey University Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence in Assessment Policy (Massey University, 2025). Gemini (Google, 2026) and Co-Pilot (Microsoft, 2026) were used on occasion to assist with locating relevant research, which was then verified and summarised by the researcher. Audio from the focus group and one individual staff interview were transcribed using Zoom AI software (Zoom Video Communications, 2025), which was later checked for accuracy and corrected by the researcher. Gemini (Google, 2026) was used to check APA formatting of references was accurate.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Communication is the process of sharing ideas or information with another person. This process involves expressing and understanding a message, and communication can take many forms; including (but not limited to) spoken, written or visual communication (Beukelman & Mirenda, 2013). Communication gives access to education, culture, employment, social connection, better health outcomes and many other benefits (McLeod, 2018). Additionally, "communication is a basic human right" (Mulcair et al., 2018, p. 34). It is important to note that the Universal Declaration of Communication Rights expands this right to "recognise that everyone has the potential to communicate" (McLeod, 2018, p. 5). Fulfilling this potential necessitates access to communication through less traditional means. Jim Prentice, a person who uses augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) describes this as providing "the ability to have and develop strong and rewarding relationships with others. Deny a person the ability [to communicate] ... that person is sentenced to live in social, intellectual and emotional isolation" (Prentice, 2000, p. 213).

Children who use AAC

A range of health conditions or disabilities can impact a person's ability to communicate. These may impact spoken and written communication (Beukelman & Light, 2020). Many children with disabilities do not develop speech, language or literacy skills as expected due to communication, motor, sensory or intellectual disabilities (Light & McNaughton, 2012). These children may instead rely on other methods of communication.

AAC

AAC encompasses all the different ways people communicate other than talking and is necessary when people are unable to meet their communication needs through spoken language alone. AAC can be used to augment spoken language when needed or as a complete alternative (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, n.d.). A variety of people use

AAC, from different age groups, racial backgrounds and disabilities. Beukelman and Light (2020) estimated that as many as 97 million people worldwide could benefit from AAC.

With such a wide range of people using AAC, the different systems available vary greatly as well. AAC systems can be unaided or aided (Beukelman & Light, 2020). Examples of unaided AAC systems include signs, gestures, and vocalisations. Aided AAC requires an external system of some kind. These may include light tech systems such as visuals, communication boards, or communication books. These are also referred to as low tech, although this terminology is being moved away from due to the 'low' terminology leading to the false perception of these systems as being lesser (Hartmann, 2025). High tech systems include computer-based speech-generating devices (Beukelman & Light, 2020) such as an app on an iPad or a dedicated communication device.

AAC systems can vary in methods of access, such as direct access (e.g. pointing), eye gaze or partner assisted scanning (Beukelman & Light, 2020). Partner assisted scanning will be discussed in more depth in the method section of this thesis.

Terminology

AssistiveWare, an AAC and assistive technology development company, ran an online survey to explore the terminology that people who use AAC prefer when referring to themselves and their communication (Zisk et al., 2023). This survey included responses from 556 people, 18% of whom do not use any spoken language. Their most preferred terms were "AAC user" and "people who use AAC" with 77% and 62% liking or using these terms respectively. Based off this survey, these terms have been used throughout this thesis.

This aligns with the American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines on using bias-free language when discussing disability (American Psychological Association, 2020). Using person-first or identity first language is acceptable unless the group has a known

preferred term. Disability terminology is continually evolving, so importance is placed on using language that maintains people's dignity (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Students with Multiple Disabilities who use AAC

The students included in this study have different causations of disability but have complex communication needs as well as physical, cognitive, and sensory needs. They attend a specialist school in New Zealand which requires students to have *high* or *very high* Ongoing Resource Scheme (ORS) funding based on their perceived level of need (Ministry of Education, 2023). Only 1.4% of students in New Zealand receive ORS funding, and of this percentage only 24% receive very high ORS funding (Education Counts, 2025). These students need support from specialists and therapists to access the curriculum and learning environments (Ministry of Education, 2024).

Students with multiple disabilities face additional complexities to accessing AAC (Brittlebank et al., 2024). For example, physical disabilities may impact a child's ability to physically access an AAC system, and they may instead rely on partner assisted scanning, where a partner visually or auditorily highlights selections to aid the communicator (Burkhart & Porter, 2006). Due to these additional barriers and complexities, many students with multiple disabilities are emergent communicators (Brittlebank et al., 2024). Emergent communicators do not yet have a reliable symbolic method of communication and therefore rely on emerging communication behaviours such as facial expressions, vocalising, crying and laughing. The term 'emergent communicator' comes from Dowden's Communicator Profiles (Dowden, 1999) which will be discussed in more depth in the literature review. The Expanded New Zealand Curriculum identifies that "all students are communicators" (Ministry of Education, 2026, communication section).

Rationale for Study

The rationale for this study will now be described with relation to relevant current literature. Existing gaps in the literature will also be highlighted.

Communication Partners

For AAC users, communication may look different than a traditional conversation. One unique factor is that communication partners are "uniquely engaged" (Blackstone et al., 2007, p. 192) during AAC interactions, as establishing meaning is a joint effort between communication partner and communicator, and involves a wide range of communication methods, such as aided AAC, signs and facial expressions. The AAC user is impacted by the communication partner, and in turn, the communication partner is impacted by the AAC user. Therefore, AAC intervention must include communication partners, as well as the AAC user (Beukelman & Light, 2020). Factors that make a good communication partner and the co-construction process are discussed in more detail in the literature review.

Purpose of Communication

Beukelman and Light (2020) classified five purposes for communication interaction which are: communicating wants and needs, social closeness, information transfer, social etiquette and internal dialogue. Each of these functions is necessary for AAC users to develop and may require varied AAC systems.

Beukelman and Light (2020) highlight the risk of overemphasising the communication of wants and needs as the only skill that is necessary for an AAC user to have. The need for AAC users to be able to communicate wants and needs clearly and quickly so that they can get what they require has been offered as a possible explanation for why AAC systems and AAC therapy have a tendency to focus on this skill (Beukelman & Light, 2020). However, an overemphasis can be problematic as it is vital that AAC users can communicate for other purposes. Jamie Preece, an adult AAC user shared his experience when beginning to use AAC: "Everyone wanted me to start with wants and needs... I wanted to talk about more

interesting stuff with AAC. I was boring. I couldn't say the things I wanted to say" (Holyfield et al., 2025, p. 272).

Baker (2005) spoke about the motivation formula for AAC users. This idea was that anything an AAC user has to say must be motivating enough for them to override the physical and cognitive effort and time that it will take from them to say what it is they want to say. Baker goes on to highlight the importance of giving AAC users time and space to communicate, and that "they want the communication acts they are allowed to make [to] be meaningful" (Baker, 2005, p. 50). What is considered meaningful will differ depending on the person and situation. Each AAC user needs to develop skills to communicate for a range of purposes, and to find what is most motivating for them.

Creative Contexts and Poetry

The New Zealand Curriculum places value on learning through arts and culture, emphasising both the cognitive skills of creative thinking and connecting ideas, as well as the personal benefits to wellbeing and confidence (Ministry of Education, 2015). There are promising signs of children with disabilities feeling empowered, included, and engaged in these activities, but research is limited (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2025a). Literacy arts have little research, and this has been identified as an area in need of investigation (UNICEF, 2025a). An example of a literacy art is poetry. Poetry provides a variety of learning opportunities, such as exposure to interesting vocabulary and other literacy skills, as well as benefits for personal expression and wellbeing (Simecek & Rumbold, 2016). The multiple learning opportunities provided by poetry, especially with a focus on the disability sector is discussed in more depth in the literature review.

Group-based In-class Sessions

Participating in group-based therapy can have numerous benefits. Reichow et al. (2012) conducted a systematic review of social skills group therapy for children with autism,

and found benefits from group therapy, such as helping students make friends, decrease loneliness and make gains in learning. Carrying out speech and language therapy in the classroom helps to generalise skills across environments, and to build a more collaborative effort from the team working with the child (Milewski, 2023). Setting up a classroom for group-based activities can help someone with communication needs to build their confidence, practice their communication skills and become a valued member of a group. Having a shared social context aids a child in feeling part of a team and being able to share their learning and achievements with one another (Ministry of Education, 2015).

Cognitive Load Theory

Cognitive Load Theory posits that everybody has a capacity for taking in information and learning through different methods (visual, auditory etc.) and transferring that into their long-term memory. Learning cannot occur unless information is being moved from working memory into long-term memory. Everybody has a different limit however, and when that limit is reached, learning cannot occur (Kennedy & Romig, 2024). Pressures can also impact learning, for example, pressures on intrinsic load, such as presenting too much new information at once, or using jargon or unfamiliar vocabulary, or pressures on extrinsic load such as, presenting multiple sources of information at once, or distractions in the environment. Students with disabilities often have more demands on their intrinsic and extrinsic loads and may find it difficult to create new pathways between their working memory and long-term memory (Kennedy & Romig, 2024). Additionally, students who have struggled with learning in the past may have negative beliefs about their capacity to learn, and this can also impact on their cognitive load (Kennedy & Romig, 2024).

In regard to students developing AAC skills, this has been framed as the Red Yellow Green framework (Erikson & Koppenhaver, 2020). Learning new skills or topics requires more cognitive functioning than doing something that is familiar or highly engaging. The Red

Yellow Green framework uses a traffic light analogy to support a student using assistive technology. The framework outlines that when a student is engaging in something highly motivating and familiar that this is a good time for learning new skills, such as more complex AAC systems. A yellow light may indicate that a task is less familiar, the environment is more distracting, or the student is feeling tired, and this is where learning demands should decrease. A red light is when cognitive demands are high and motivation is low, and this is when expectations and demands need to be minimal. Balancing motivation, cognitive load and accessibility needs are difficult but necessary for students with disabilities to achieve and learn (Erikson & Koppenhaver, 2020).

One aspect that can help manage cognitive load in the classroom is having routines. Familiar routines can help students feel more comfortable in the classroom, as they understand what is expected. Having a familiar routine helps to reduce cognitive load, create connections in long-term memory, and this has a positive impact on a child's ability to learn (Da Silva, 2023).

Children with Multiple Disabilities in Research

Children with multiple disabilities are currently under-represented in research. This may be due to the impact disability can have on participation in research, and/or a lack of adaptation or accommodations made in research tasks (Njelesani et al., 2022).

Bayldon (2018) noted the multiple factors that influenced her research with children with multiple disabilities who use AAC. These factors included health factors such as seizures, medications, and health appointments that impacted the amount of time spent at school. In addition, physical and communication needs impacted the time that was spent carrying out research tasks. By making adaptations for these factors, the children were able to engage in tasks and make progress in their communication skills.

Snart and Hillyard (1984) found that for children with multiple disabilities, allocated time (the time given to engage in learning) and instructional time (time actually spent learning), varied greatly. This was due to the large amount of time necessary for staff to complete daily caretaking tasks such as toileting, positioning, dressing, medications and many other such tasks. In one example, having one extra staff member increased instructional time by 2.75 hours. Optimising instructional time is incredibly important for these students.

Efforts must continue to be made by researchers to include children with multiple disabilities (Njelesani et al., 2022). Limited research in the disability sector delays progress in inclusive education and disability-inclusive programmes (UNICEF, 2025b). The Global Research Agenda for Children with Disabilities (UNICEF, 2025b) identified priority areas for research with children with disabilities. One such area is identifying strategies that foster inclusion, learning, and development for these children. Research is necessary to determine the next steps and opportunities for these children.

There is very limited research examining how creative contexts can support learning with children who have multiple disabilities who use AAC. A broader range of communication contexts and learning tasks provide "exciting opportunities" for AAC users (Blackstone et al., 2007, p. 192). While there is some literature around poetry and people with disabilities (as will be examined in the literature review), very little involves people who use AAC and there is no research around students with multiple disabilities who use AAC participating in poetry groups. There are some mentions in the clinical practice literature (Wagner & Musselwhite, 2020) with suggestions that this is a promising area in need of research.

This study therefore seeks to explore the opportunities and experiences of a poetry group for students with multiple disabilities who use AAC and the staff that support them. Ultimately, this work has the potential to expand current understandings of poetry groups as a

communication environment for supporting the communication and language development of children with multiple disabilities who use AAC.

Researcher Perspective

I have been a speech-language therapist (SLT) in a New Zealand specialist school for six years. My first experience in a specialist school was during a university placement. While there, I met a student with multiple disabilities who used a Pragmatically Organised Dynamic Display (PODD) book and switches to communicate. Every conversation I had with this student was so amazing, his dedication and perseverance to get his message across, the insight that his use of AAC gave me into his personality and view of the world. I felt honoured to become a trusted communication partner, and that I had found what I was meant to be doing. Over the years, I have had the privilege to work with more students with multiple disabilities, people that experience complexities and barriers to communication. That feeling of amazement and privilege with every interaction has never faded. It has strengthened my belief that everyone can communicate, learn, and achieve. It is because of these students, their families, and the people that work with them that I have developed a passion for and understanding of AAC.

My interest in poetry as a potential communicative environment came from attending a presentation by Caroline Musselwhite at the 2021 International Society for AAC (ISAAC) conference (Musselwhite et al., 2021). I have always enjoyed and found benefits from more literacy-based communication interventions, such as sensory stories or the students writing stories. Hearing about using poetry as a tool to let the students explore language even more creatively felt like a great next step. Following the conference, we decided to run a poetry group at school to see what the students thought. It felt like it went well, as I observed students smiling and laughing, exploring their communication systems more and seeming confident and proud of their work. This made me curious to find out what the benefits were to

this type of learning, whether it was something we could or should be repeating, and to have more concrete data on what the experiences were for everyone involved. I love finding creative ways to help the students that I work with, and I like to be able to share my knowledge where I can. In the context of this study, I had a dual role as SLT and researcher. I will refer to myself as the Speech and Language Therapist Researcher (SLTR) throughout the thesis.

Thesis Structure

The thesis begins with an overview of the current relevant literature. The next chapter will then describe the methodology of the study and the participants. The following chapter will present the results. The next chapter will discuss the results in relation to relevant literature. The final chapter will conclude the thesis with discussion of trustworthiness, limitations, future directions and clinical implications.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review begins with a broad overview of the importance of access to communication. Next, it introduces Light's AAC competencies (Light, 1989; Light & McNaughton, 2014) and Dowden's Communicator Profiles (Dowden, 1999) as important frameworks for describing AAC users and their communication. The importance of AAC users having effective and supportive communication partners who employ strategies such as providing wait time, encouraging autonomy and using co-construction techniques is then discussed. Following this, literature related to the importance of making communication motivating and engaging is examined. Finally, poetry is explored as a learning and engagement tool, and the literature around poetry in the disability sphere is presented. The purpose of the literature review is to examine the current literature base and to provide rationale for this study, which explores the opportunities and experiences of a poetry group for students with multiple disabilities who use AAC and the adults who support them in.

Importance of Access to Communication

Communication is both a human right, and something which every person has the potential to do (McLeod, 2018; Mulcair et al., 2018). McLeod (2018) reviewed various articles which examined communication as a human right from four perspectives. McLeod highlighted that the right to "freedom of opinion and expression" (p. 5) is expressly mentioned in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and Article 21 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (United Nations, 1948, 1989, 2006). This review was within a special addition of the International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology, published for the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (McLeod, 2018). The four perspectives were communication rights for 1) all people, 2) people with communication disabilities, 3) children and 4) language. The

perspectives often overlapped with one another. Overall, McLeod (2018) considered that empowering people and their right to communicate requires communication partners to acknowledge the person, adjust their style of communication and take time to listen.

McCormack et al. (2018) examined submissions made to the Australian Government following an inquiry into the prevalence of communication and swallowing disorders, especially within particular demographic groups, and the allocation of speech therapy services and the perceived social and economic cost of not providing these services. McCormack et al. specifically focused on first-hand personal accounts which made up 17 of the submissions. Four themes were defined after coding these accounts which were: 1) I am a person; I have a communication disorder, 2) My communication disorder impacts how I interact with others, and how they interact with me, 3) Help can change me, change communication disorders, and change lives, and 4) My life would be different if I didn't have a communication disorder. Overall, these themes highlighted the ongoing need for wider societal support for people with communication disorders to have people who respect their human rights and give them space to share their thoughts.

Lundy (2007) suggested that Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (United Nations, 1989) needed further description and shaping to support effective implementation. Article 12 is:

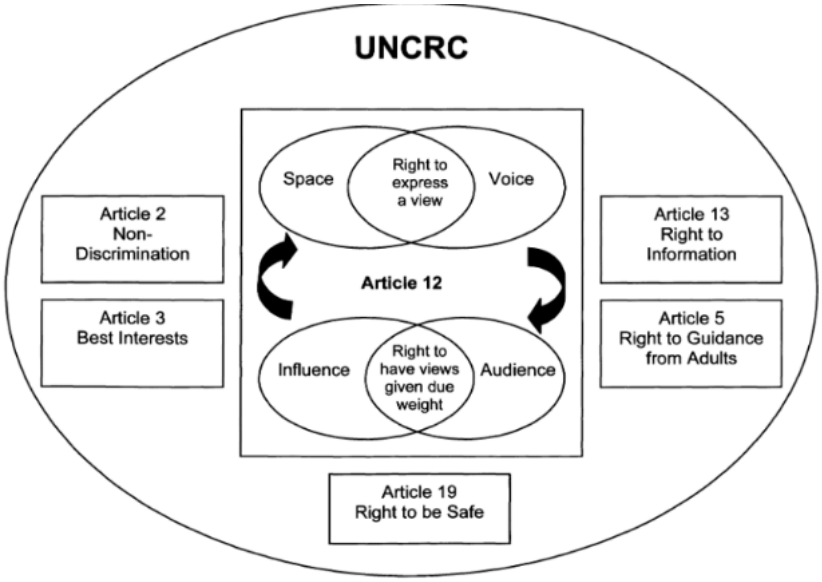
> *1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.*
>
> *2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either*

> *directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.* (United Nations, 1989).

In order for Article 12 to be implemented practically, Lundy suggested a need to highlight and define how this is communicated, by highlighting aspects of Article 12, see Figure 1.

Figure 1

Conceptualising Article 12



Note. From "'Voice' is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child," by L. Lundy, 2007, *British Educational Research Journal*, *33*(6), p. 932 (https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033). Copyright 2007 by John Wiley & Sons. Reprinted with permission. See Appendix A for permission documentation.

The four main facets of Article 12 that Lundy wished to draw attention to were space (the opportunity to give opinions), voice (support to express opinions), audience (that these opinions will be listened to), and influence (that opinions will be acted upon as appropriate). The inclusion of other Articles of UNCRC within this model, such as Article two, the right to non-discrimination on the basis of race, sex, disability or other factors, highlights the importance of making spaces inclusive and supportive for all to truly foster communication.

AAC Competence

In 1989, Light put forward the AAC Competency Model. This model provides a framework to examine the different strands of competency involved in being a competent user of AAC. This model does not focus on a particular AAC system but rather on the skills

necessary to be able to use AAC successfully. Being a competent user means being able to express a variety of messages across multiple settings to different listeners (Light & McNaughton, 2014). This is similar to the definition of an autonomous communicator by Porter and Burkhart (2012), which is discussed in more detail below.

More recently, Light and McNaughton (2014) added other factors to the competency model to better reflect the complexity of being a competent user. This includes a focus on the factors that surround an individual and what supports or barriers are offered by their community. Light and McNaughton (2014) emphasise the importance of a supportive environment, as without this an AAC user is unlikely to be able to achieve complete competency in all areas. This also shifts the onus from the AAC user to all of those in their environment; those who are supporting them to make progress and become competent. The competency factors will be discussed below.

Linguistic Competence

Linguistic competence focuses on the actual language skills needed to express oneself. This is usually split into receptive language, the language a person understands, and expressive language, the language a person outputs (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, n.d.). There is an added level of complexity for AAC users, in that they are typically exposed to a lot more spoken language than they are to their AAC being modelled to them. Korsten (as cited in Farrall, 2014) stated that:

The typically developing child will have been exposed to oral language for approximately 4,380 waking hours by the time he begins speaking at about 18 months of age. If someone is using a different symbol set and only has exposure to it two times a week, for 20 – 30 minutes each, it will take the alternate symbol user 84 years to have the same experience with his symbols that the typically developing child has with the spoken word in 18 months.

AAC users are expected to understand language expressed via spoken language and to then be able to translate that into the language of their AAC system and express their own ideas. Blasko (2025), a full time AAC user, highlighted the mental strain of translating his thoughts into the limited vocabulary offered on an AAC system to output what it is he wants to say, stating "with my increased stress and cognitive load... it often felt like I was working twice as hard, to say half as much" (Blasko, 2025, p. 216-217).

Binger and Light (2008) conducted a systematic review of 31 articles that investigated the syntax and morphological development of AAC users with severe speech and motor impairments. The studies examined expressive and receptive grammar, morphology and syntax, and found that despite the wide range of populations included in the studies, most AAC users had difficulty with both syntax and morphology. Another consistent finding was that most individuals tended to use short, grammatically incorrect phrases to communicate, although Binger and Light (2008) explained that this may not be due to not understanding grammar, but instead from necessity to get a message across quickly and efficiently. The review highlighted the need for further research and the development of assessment tools and intervention approaches in this area.

Binger and Light (2007) examined the impact of more consistent multi-symbolic modelling of AAC for preschool aged children with communication needs. Most of the children progressed to using more than one symbol while sharing a message, with some showing progress within one session of modelling. This suggests that with more aided modelling, children using AAC can progress to generating longer messages. This is necessary to be a competent AAC user, to have both the receptive and expressive language skills to understand and express different thoughts, feelings and opinions.

Operational Competence

AAC users need to be able to operate their AAC system to be a competent communicator. This includes skills such as being able to turn pages in a communication book or being able to access buttons and navigate pages on a screen (Light & McNaughton, 2015). An AAC user may need support to find a reliable and functional access method. Once again, the onus may be on the user, unless all efforts have been made to find a communication system that is able to be operated independently. There may also be operational demands for the communication partner, either until the user is able to learn to do these tasks themself, or as a support for the user. Tasks such as charging the device, editing vocabulary or carrying the device are examples of tasks which may require support.

Murphy et al. (1996) found in a study of 93 participants who used AAC, only 51 could access their AAC system independently. This included low- and high- tech users. Supports needed varied, from users who were unable to retrieve their AAC systems from bags or other places (such as shelves) to those who needed assistance to power on, support the device, or turn the pages. This highlights again the importance of a supportive communication partner.

Strategic Competence

Strategic competence encompasses the compensatory strategies an AAC user may need to employ to participate in a range of communicative settings (Light & McNaughton, 2014). Despite all efforts, communicating with an AAC system is different from communicating verbally. Two major areas of difference are communication rate, and vocabulary availability.

The rate of AAC use to speech varies from person to person, but the gap is wide. Hartmann and Sheldon (2025) found that someone who uses AAC can produce around 15 words per minute. This is compared to the average speaking person who will speak 150-170 words per minute.

Trnka et al. (2008) examined the effect of word prediction on AAC rate. They found that the type of word prediction made an impact. They compared a basic word predictor, which based the next suggested word on an alphabetical dictionary, and a more sophisticated word predictor, which used statistics to offer the most likely words based off the two preceding words. The 28 adult participants were asked to type different conversations across three sessions. These authors found that the average time for the task using the advanced predictor was 21 minutes and 36 seconds. People using the basic predictor took an average of 29 minutes and 47 seconds. With no word prediction the task took, on average, 32 minutes and 59 seconds. Participants also reported they had less fatigue and more ease of use with the advanced word predictor.

A consistent motor plan within an AAC system also impacts the rate of AAC use. Thistle et al. (2018) examined the effect of consistency in a display of AAC symbols for preschoolers who did not have a disability. These preschoolers were split into two groups and asked to find symbols on a display board across five sessions. One group had a consistent layout while the other changed each week. Both groups had an average response time of 6 seconds in the first session. By the fifth session, the group with a varied display still averaged 6 seconds while the children in the consistent motor display group averaged 3.3 seconds.

Using predictable pre-stored phrases or key words may also help AAC users to reduce the rate and physical load required to share a message (Clendon & Anderson, 2016). Messages generated using key words usually include the content words (i.e., words that carry the semantic meaning) and exclude grammatical words or pronouns (Binger & Light, 2008).

Communication partners giving more time to AAC users is another factor that can impact communication success. This is discussed further in the section on the factors impacting communication access.

Not having access to every vocabulary word is an unavoidable barrier that AAC users face. This may lead to situations where an AAC user finds themselves unable to say exactly what it is they want to say. Being able to employ compensatory strategies to manage to get their message across is an important part of being seen as a competent AAC user (Light, 1989). The number of strategies used may fluctuate in different settings, with different communication partners, or as the AAC user expands their competency in other areas (Light, 1989). This may also include the user using other forms of communication to supplement their message, such as gestures or facial expressions. This may particularly be the case for conversations with unfamiliar listeners.

An example of a compensatory strategy is within the PODD system the user can select 'The word is not in my device. I'll give you a hint.' The user may select this when they do not have access to the specific vocabulary required for the conversation (Porter & Sensory Software International Ltd., 2012). However, as an AAC user's linguistic and literacy skills grow, they may no longer need to use this compensatory strategy as often.

Social Competence

Social competence covers both the ability to use the AAC system in a social setting, and knowledge of pragmatic and social skills. Not only is communication a human right, but communication is what makes us human. Communication and connection with other people benefit us both mentally and socially. Communication encompasses many functions for connection, such as greeting, requesting, joking, and refusal. "Humans are inherently social" (McEwin & Santow, 2018, p. 1).

Logan et al. (2017) conducted a systematic review to examine interventions focused on increasing the use of social communication functions by autistic children who use AAC. There were 85 articles that met their inclusion criteria; however, 55 articles were then excluded for focusing solely on the communication of requests. Of the 30 articles that

remained, two thirds of these still had a strong focus on the communication of requests. Despite this, Logan et al. (2017) found emerging evidence that AAC interventions can support different communication functions, but more research is needed that focuses on developing a variety of communication functions, particularly social.

McNaughton et al. (2019) identified the need for AAC research to shift from evaluating new systems to improving social outcomes for AAC users. They identified that as well as AAC users connecting with the right services, it is important that the people in their communities can learn about AAC and how to support AAC users. McNaughton et al. (2019) quoted Chris Klein, an AAC user with cerebral palsy, as he discussed the importance AAC had on his life and his social wellbeing, stating "AAC is my bridge to the world, and a window for the world to see the real me. It supported me in moving from frustration to communication, and from isolation to relationships with others" (p. 56).

Hrastelji (2021) carried out a project with primary school aged children who use AAC and the adults who regularly support them in class. Their project, called AACtion heroes, involved the students sharing opinions about their classrooms using their AAC systems and other visual supports such as photographs and Talking Mats (Murphy, 1998). The students involved in this study were all AAC users, but had a range of experiences, and multiple forms of communication. The adult participants reflected on the value of giving these students an opportunity to share their opinions. One student was reported to have responded with a surprised "Can I say no?" (p. 81) when asked if they liked something. Hrastelji (2021) highlighted that the adults reflected on their intent to include time for asking the children's opinion and being more child led in other activities in the classroom.

Therrien et al. (2016) conducted a systematic review on whether interventions were successful in promoting peer relationships with AAC users. Nineteen studies met the inclusion criteria with the studies predominantly including school aged children. Interventions

varied, such as peer mediation or environmental adjustments, but the studies all indicated an improvement in peer relationships and interactions. The authors highlighted areas for future research, noting that there are very few studies that have explored peer relationships between children with disabilities, and no studies that have investigated peer relationships between AAC users. In a specialist school setting, this is the peer population that children with disabilities are most likely to interact with, so research focussed on developing these social skills between peers would be beneficial.

Psychosocial

Psychosocial factors expand on aspects of social competence. They include factors such as the person who uses AAC's ability to be resilient when communication breakdowns occur. It also includes confidence and having a positive attitude and motivation to use AAC to communicate (Light & McNaughton, 2014).

Hurd (2005), a parent of two AAC users, spoke about factors that a child who uses AAC needs to develop to become a self-sufficient adult AAC user. Along with factors such as independence and the ability to have and share opinions, Hurd suggested persistence and having a good sense of humour are also vital skills. By highlighting these character traits as skills that should be taught and encouraged, Hurd is emphasising the importance of an AAC user having strong psychosocial skills to support them into adulthood.

Environment

The environment of a person who uses AAC is particularly important but may be difficult for the AAC user to impact. This includes the attitudes and knowledge of those in their community. This will be expanded on below in the section discussing factors impacting access to communication.

There are several factors, both internal and external, that an AAC user is required to show competency in to be considered a competent user. Another model to be considered is

Dowden's (1999) Communicator Profiles model, that uses communicator profiles to portray the different stages of becoming a competent AAC communicator.

Dowden's Communicator Profiles

Dowden (1999) identified three groups of AAC users. These are outlined below. It is important to note that these stages are based on consideration of AAC users' expressive (not receptive) language skills.

Emergent Communicators

Emergent communicators are individuals who do not yet have a reliable symbolic method of communication. These individuals communicate using emerging communication behaviours such as facial expressions or vocalisations. These communicators require a familiar communication partner to interpret the meaning of their emerging communication behaviours.

With emergent communicators, the role of the communication facilitator (e.g., a SLT or teacher) is to support the individual and their communication partner by modelling both an AAC system and a wide variety of other multimodal methods of communication to support the individual to be able to communicate a message. Communication goals for this group will often involve establishing more reliable, symbolic, and intentional methods of communication, increasing interaction opportunities, and supporting the individual and their communication partners to use these methods of communication effectively.

Context-Dependent Communicators

Context-Dependent communicators (The Bridge School, 2024) (or dependent communicators, as initially named in Dowden, 1999) can use both symbolic and non-symbolic methods of communication. This means they can communicate a wider range of communication functions. However, these users may still be dependent on context, or on familiar topics or communication partners to interpret their communication.

With these individuals, the communication facilitator's role is to offer support if any communication breakdowns occur, to provide training to communication partners, and to make sure the AAC user has access to the vocabulary they need. Literacy skills are particularly important for individuals in this phase (as they are, of course, important to all AAC users), as these skills can help to broaden the vocabulary that is available. Communication goals for this group of individuals include increasing access to vocabulary, literacy skills, and diversity of topics. They will also be working on decreasing dependence on others. This may include expanding the individual's network of familiar communication partners.

Independent Communicators

Independent communicators can interact with familiar and unfamiliar communication partners about any topic. These users may still require support but with less frequency. These individuals will often be working on pragmatic skills and increasing their speed in relaying a message. Facilitators may still be called upon by these individuals for some interpretation or device management but overall, this is far less.

As highlighted by both Light and McNaughton (2014) and Dowden (1999), there are many factors, both internal and external, that impact whether an AAC user is seen as competent or independent. Both models provide some flexibility for AAC users to have varying competency depending on factors such as health, communication partners, or environment. However, we must also consider the many AAC users who may still be learning to use AAC or, for many different reasons, may never be considered a 'competent user' by the criteria set out above. For example, an AAC user who requires someone to charge their device, or set up a switch, may not fall into the category of being operationally competent, or an independent communicator. This does not negate the necessity for these individuals to be

given opportunities to communicate and to learn. This will be discussed further in the section on autonomous communication.

It is highlighted that independent communicators under Dowden's model (1999) may participate more in shaping or choosing their goals or focus for communication. This suggestion does leave many communicators who have not yet reached this stage as being unable to be involved in decisions or even discussions about their goals or aspirations. Watson (2016) highlights the importance of informed and supported decision making for people with profound cognitive disabilities. This process can be complex and relies on supportive people and environments, but Watson links back to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (United Nations, 1989) to highlight the necessity and obligation for this population to be included in decision making.

The students included in this study are a mix of emergent and context-dependent communicators using Dowden's (1999) descriptors. As mentioned above, they may move between these groups depending on their communication partner or environment.

Factors Influencing Communication Access and the Importance of Communication Partners

There are multiple external factors that can impact an AAC user's ability to communicate freely. Often these factors are impacted or controlled by communication partners. Communication partner training usually involves working on various facets at once, so isolating what is the most impactful can be difficult (Holyfield et al., 2025). Communication is an interaction. Therefore, two (or more) people must be involved in order to communicate a message. This is true for anyone but is possibly one of the most important factors in communicating with a person who uses AAC. As well as the AAC user needing a certain level of competency with their communication tool, the person they are communicating with also needs to have certain skills to carry out a conversation. Therefore,

this section will include an overview on the importance of communication partners, providing adequate wait time, supporting autonomy in AAC users and co-construction techniques.

Communication Partners

Hanley et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review to examine the factors that influence communication partners' use of AAC with people with severe/profound intellectual disability. Hanley et al. (2024) expressed that communication partners can have a variety of factors that influence their own readiness to engage in AAC, such as knowledge, attitude, and expectations of the AAC user. There were 15 studies that underwent thematic analysis, and two main themes were found. First, achieving meaningful communication. This included being able to identify individual needs of the AAC user and providing encouragement and support to the AAC user. The second was communication partners' preparedness. This included training, tackling preconceived ideas about AAC, building belief in and knowledge of AAC, and having a supportive team dynamic. This systematic review highlighted the importance of the communication partner understanding and believing in the benefits of AAC. Support and training helped to build this belief. It also highlighted the importance of responding to the individual needs of each AAC user.

Some studies have explored the communication partner skills and strategies that are considered most effective according to AAC users. Midtlin et al. (2015) interviewed eight children who use AAC to find out what they considered were the most important tools for a communication partner to have. The children ranged from 10 to 19 years old, most had cerebral palsy, and they all used AAC as their primary method of communication. Using Talking Mats (Murphy, 1998), the children identified that the most important factors for a communication partner were for them to take the time to understand what they were saying and to take initiative in repairing communication breakdowns when they occurred. The researchers reflected that these may be important factors for children who use AAC as their

AAC systems may not have the vocabulary needed to begin to repair communication breakdowns, or (and possibly more likely) the energy and time expended by the communication partner to communicate is lesser, and therefore the onus should be on them.

Other studies have focused on upskilling communication partners. Shire and Jones (2015) conducted a systematic review of studies that targeted training of communication partners of children with complex communication needs. Thirteen studies were found to meet the inclusion criteria, and these studies included the communication partners of children with a wide range of different diagnoses. Various activities were used such as book reading and play. The systematic review overall found positive preliminary findings on the uptake of communication skills by the communication partners, although highlighted a need for higher quality research to be undertaken.

Kent-Walsh et al. (2010), for example, focused on upskilling communication partners so they could more easily connect with the AAC users in their lives. In this study, caregivers of 10 children who use AAC were included in a group to learn skills for more effective communication. Sessions were provided three times a week, for three hours a day across two weeks. The sessions covered different strategies the adults could use to encourage AAC use, such as clear modelling and expectant pauses. There was a dramatic increase in the use of multi-symbolic messages from the children, despite the fact the children were not included in most of the upskilling sessions and did not receive any direct instructional sessions during this two-week period. Most of the parents felt strongly or very strongly that the sessions had met their needs in supporting them to communicate more effectively with their child.

Pennington et al. (2004) conducted a systematic review of studies that had conducted research on communication partner training for partners communicating with children with cerebral palsy. Four studies were identified that met the inclusion criteria and these studies identified targeting physical positioning, creating communication opportunities and

responding to communication attempts as potential facilitators of communication. These training opportunities resulted in changes in behaviour in the communication partners. However, Pennington et al. (2004) identified methodological inadequacies, such as poor description of participants, which highlighted a need for more robust research to be conducted in this field.

Time

As Midtlin et al. (2015) identified, time is one of the most important factors for AAC users. Howery (2018, p. 48) stated "Make time, take time, and perhaps even to try and shape time so that every child may be given the gift of time to be heard."

Howery (2018) examined this important factor in her study exploring how time impacts several AAC users. Howery (2018) discussed how even for users who were very adept at using their device, entering the flow of conversation was extremely difficult. Having to factor in the extra time of producing an idea, formulating it into words found on the device and then programming in the words often meant that the topic of conversation had moved on or changed completely by the time they were ready to join in. Often AAC users seen in more mainstream media, being interviewed, or presenting, have been able to pre-plan and store messages, thus avoiding the issue of time. However, in most aspects of life this is not possible. Howery (2018) discusses one user who had their teacher plan what question they would ask the user so they could prepare an answer in advance. This often took the user over an hour in the evening. So, although the time was not taken in the classroom and they were able to enter the flow of a classroom discussion, the time still had to be taken.

Mathis et al. (2011) examined the impact of giving time to AAC users. The study found that participants who use AAC responded more and with a longer mean length of utterance when given an expectant pause of around 45 seconds than when a shorter wait time was given. Giving wait time is a common suggestion in AAC blogs and support forums.

Zangari (2014, para. 4) refers to it as the "perfect pause," so much is its power in giving AAC users time to join the conversation.

Hartmann and Sheldon (2025) interviewed AAC users to find out what makes an effective communication partner. There was extensive variety found within the answers given but the authors collated the most common themes to help create guidelines for communication partners. AAC users mentioned the importance of being given time to speak, because as mentioned in the strategic competence section, rate differs greatly between AAC rate and speech rate. It was also highlighted, however, the importance of taking the time to get to know the AAC user and their preferences.

Autonomy

Porter and Burkhart (2012, p. 1) define autonomous communication as "being able to say whatever I want to say, to whoever I want to say it to, whenever I want to say it." There are several complex factors involved in being able to be an autonomous communicator. This is also discussed below as having conversational agency.

As raised by Valencia et al. (2020, p. 1) "[conversational] agency is not a fixed property." We all experience moments where we have more or less freedom to pursue conversational agency. This may take the form of choosing what we speak about with certain conversation partners based on relevance or appropriateness. For AAC users however, this may rely less on the context and more on other factors. One factor Valencia et al. (2020) discussed is the AAC user may weigh the effort of using their communication method with the importance of what they want to say and decide it is not worth it. This may impact their agency especially if the listener is not likely to support or infer meaning from the AAC users' message. Other factors influencing conversational agency may include environmental factors (e.g. busy or noisy environment, time pressures), the AAC user's competency, or support from the communication partner to listen and get their message across.

Valencia et al. (2020) specifically examined how the communication partner can impact conversational agency through an interview and information sharing tasks. Factors such as how long a communicator took to construct a message and if the interviewer addressed the user directly impacted whether the communication partner was more likely to take a turn. However, the communication partner sometimes did use a conversation turn to clarify something for the AAC user or to support an answer they had made. Assuming the communication partner knew the user well, this was most likely helpful. We can see a potential conflict here between co-constructing a message versus interpreting the message for an AAC user which may be seen as decreasing their agency to share exactly what it is they meant. Communication partners who were aware they had interrupted or were interpreting for the user may ask for permission but did not necessarily wait for it to be granted. Valencia et al. (2020) discussed that communication partners may be impacted by social expectations, such as reducing pauses in conversation and answering questions.

Porter and Burkhart (2012, p. 1) identified the difference between autonomy and independence: “Autonomous communication is not necessarily independent.” For several reasons, a person who uses AAC may have difficulty being able to access their method of communication independently. Independently means that the AAC user can select words to communicate and operate their system without outside support. Autonomously means that the user may require a communication partner to support their access to a communication method, such as turning pages or visually or auditory scanning options, but the user is still in control of the message. This is an important distinction to consider especially in relation to co-construction and competence as an AAC user may only be able to autonomously access their AAC with the right support from a communication partner.

Co-construction

Co-construction is another key feature of an AAC user being able to get their message across. “Co-construction is a collaborative process where two or more parties work together to build or create something” (Zangari, 2022, para. 3). Co-construction is a feature that is common across many areas of language development and speech and language therapy. For young children who are learning to talk, it is common to hear parents expanding and modelling a possible longer sentence. The child then can accept or reject the suggested addition to their message. For example, a child may point at a ball and say “Ball.” The adult may then say, “Oh, it’s a red ball.” The child may then accept this as an addition to their message as they were sharing a comment. The child may need to add a word such as “me” or point to themselves to clarify that they are requesting the ball, following which the adult may choose to model a full sentence. AAC users may often communicate in shorter messages due to the demands of time, energy, or competency to express their message more clearly. They may then be relying on their communication partner to support the clarity or expansion of their message. However, it is important to find the line between independence and co-construction. It is important that the AAC user can get their message across as they intended. As highlighted by Zangari (2022, para. 12), “Independence isn’t always the goal in supporting the communication of people with AAC needs. Autonomy, on the other hand, always plays a significant role in the provision of meaningful, respectful, and effective AAC support.” As has been discussed, the importance of an effective communication partner for an AAC user cannot be overstated. A familiar communication partner may help even more with the ability to co-construct a message as they may have more knowledge of what is important and relevant to the AAC user or may have more knowledge of what has been happening during the AAC user’s day.

Carragher et al. (2024) carried out a scoping review of assessment tools used to measure communicative interactions, with a focus on co-construction for people with

acquired communication disability. They examined 37 studies which described different tasks that had been used to assess communicative success. This is the first systemic review of assessments of this kind. Assessments often focus solely on the communication skills of the individual, rather than seeing communication as a group activity. Most commonly, these studies used referential tasks, for example one person must describe a hidden object to their communication partner. Many of these studies included family or friends as communication partners. While this is not often the focus of these studies, the skills of these communication partners could have an impact on the success of the participant. Interestingly, the study also highlighted that having shared visual stimuli often led to better communication outcomes. This review also highlighted the need for more research in this area, particularly to increase reliability in assessment outcomes. Hrastelji (2021) echoes that further work needs to be done on co-construction as being a key aspect of interacting with AAC and seeing this as a holistic part of a conversation.

Poetry to Support Early Language Learning and Literacy

While poetry is often viewed as being an exclusive and complex form of literature, it is important to remember all that poetry can encompass. Poetry ranges from Shakespeare to nursery rhymes and everything in between.

As Maynard et al. (2005, p. 35) discovered while interviewing nine specialised children's librarians, "due to its brevity and memorability, poetry is regarded … as the most accessible literary form for poor or reluctant readers, despite its wider image as a neglected and 'difficult' genre for children and young people." They found that children were naturally drawn to poetry. Children were attracted to the sense of rhythm and humour so often found in poetry. Maynard et al. (2005) found that it was often children who were less capable and enthusiastic readers who benefitted from poetry the most. Rhythm, rhyme, and repetition helped students to engage in both reading and writing poetry. Additionally, poems are usually

shorter than stories and take less sustained focus. Maynard et al. (2005) suggests that listening to poetry and stories is a critical stage in developing literacy skills, and thus children should not be restricted in the level of literature they are exposed to. Librarians were also able to find poems that addressed difficult and emotional topics that children could connect with. Hart-Hewins and Wells (1990) discussed that engaging in literature can also help children connect to words or concepts that are outside of their personal experience.

Poetry can serve as an outlet of expression for children to explore difficult experiences or feelings. Malekoff (2002) implemented a poetry group for 5- to 7-year-old children with mental health needs. His aim was to give children a space to tap into a new form of self-expression and creativity, as well as to build spirit and find a lifelong outlet of poetry. Malekoff (2002) described these students as having "heavy hearts," (p. 30) and explained how poetry gave them space to explore some difficult feelings around their own experiences such as their relationship with themselves and others. Students began to write poems in their own time, bringing them back to be shared and appreciated by the group. A major part of the group was the comradery that was built between students cheering each other on. Children put their own experiences into writing, and by adding description created poetry (Pramling, 2009).

Poetry is also not restricted to the written form. The form that poetry takes lends itself to being explored through action, performance, and music. "Poetry is not a static form to be studied on a page but is connected with song, dance, drama, games and action" (Maynard et al., 2005, p. 36).

Rocha et al. (2021) studied 115 infants to examine their sense of rhythm. They found that infants as young as five months old had an innate sense of rhythm, and that this differed from the rhythm that older infants showed. This aligns with what Koch (1970) put forth that children have a natural talent and interest in learning and writing poetry, and that teaching poetry to children mostly requires giving children a space to express themselves naturally.

Poetry and People with Disabilities

The use of poetry as a method for people with disabilities to explore and express themselves is not unheard of but is an area that has minimal research. Wagner and Musselwhite (2020) developed a guide for ideas on how to incorporate poetry into learning for people who use AAC. They encourage the use of poetry for three main reasons:

Poetry for Life

Wagner and Musselwhite (2020) suggest that poetry can be motivational, fun and engaging. Poetry can help people to share and connect with others.

Fenge et al. (2016) discuss the *Seen but Seldom Heard* project run by Bournemouth University. This project empowered young people with disabilities to share their experiences through poetry and performance. The individuals were 14- to 20-years old and had physical and/or complex medical conditions. They were from a local school and were invited to a series of poetry workshops. These workshops taught the students different elements of writing poetry. There was also a strong emphasis on performing poetry. Participants reflected afterwards that the workshops had helped them express themselves and share with others how they experienced the world. Audience members from their various performances also had a positive experience and it helped them to understand and empathise with the poets.

Knupp (2004) hypothesised that poetry writing instruction would impact both the writing skills and the confidence of sixth grade students. Ninety-four students consented to the study and completed pre- and post-intervention surveys. Results indicated that the students' confidence had increased over the course of the poetry sessions, as well as less experienced writers increasing their writing ability over the course of the intervention. These results suggest that poetry not only benefitted the students' literacy skills, but it also increased their confidence in their ability to be writers.

Poetry for Language

Poetry can be useful for supporting language development in AAC users. It gives a reason to explore vocabulary and work on morphology and syntax. Poetry composition or performance can be a suitable time for students to practice using their AAC systems (Wagner & Musselwhite, 2020).

Keylin (2024) examines the work of Dave Young, aka 'The Shouting Mute' who has cerebral palsy and performs his poems using his AAC device. Keylin reflects that poetry is often read aloud by the poet, and this is seen as part of the performance. He argues that Young challenges these assumptions and the ableism that authenticity is linked to the spoken word. Additionally, he suggests that Young is more authentic as his communication device is unable to impart inflection, emotion, or imperfections. This leaves listeners only able to focus on what Young has to say.

Poetry for Literacy

As discussed above, poetry is a useful tool for students to be exposed to literacy features such as rhyme (Maynard et al., 2005). The studies in this section go across the continuum from emergent literacy skills to more advanced, as poetry can be beneficial to different learners. Beaumont (2022) introduced poetry to her group of four six-year-old children who were learning English as a second language. Poetry was used as a tool as it supported phonological awareness, and introduction to other literacy and language features through a playful lens. Additionally, Beaumont (2022) stated that the freedom that poetry offers from various language rules, such as grammatical expectations, provided a space free from fear of "linguistic imperfections" (Beaumont, 2022, p.10). Poetry helped to both build understanding and gave the students a safe way to make mistakes and learn.

Erickson and Koppenhaver (2020) discussed important features of emergent literacy for students with significant disabilities. First, the literacy skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening and understanding can develop on different levels and timelines to each other. These

authors emphasised that “no one area of skill or knowledge must precede any others, or is more important than any of the others” (Erickson & Koppenhaver, 2020, p. 6). This allows for students with multiple disabilities to learn on their own timelines and not be prevented from learning by not having certain verbal skills, for example. Secondly, that language awareness can develop from birth, and that there are therefore no prerequisites to emergent literacy. Thirdly, both form and function are of importance to emergent literacy learners. It is necessary for students with multiple disabilities to be provided with exposure to literacy through real world contexts, such as signs, lists and high-quality texts of interest (such as poems), and to see others in their environment using these literacy skills too. This includes expanding the student’s world, and providing new environments to interact and engage in. Explicit literacy instruction around shared and independent reading and writing, alphabet and phonological awareness is also of great importance.

Lee and Hughes (2012) examined poetry comprehension with a group of 16 fifth and sixth grade students with learning disabilities compared with 16 of their age matched peers. Lee and Hughes (2012) noted there was limited research surrounding reading comprehension of poetry, particularly with this population. Students were initially asked questions about what they liked to read and questions about poetry. A similar percentage of students with a learning disability said they like poetry as their age matched peers, which was more than half of the participants. Students were introduced to two poems which were played aloud while students followed along with the written text. They were asked to make a prediction based on the title, identify different literary features, interpret meaning from the poem and make personal connections. Overall, the students with learning disabilities used multiple interpretive strategies and performed as well as their age matched peers in making sense of the two poems. However, the students exhibited difficulty related to their depth of understanding and interpretation of the emotional intent of the poem. Lee and Hughes (2012) suggested all the

students should be explicitly taught poetic conventions and technical terms as both groups struggled to name these and this would aid with their comprehension of all texts. Additionally, students asked many questions about the poets themselves which indicated to the researchers that teaching poetry writing and allowing students to explore reading and writing conventions through their own work and connections to their own lives could have benefits.

Summary

The literature supports communication and expression as a human right (Mulcair et al., 2018). Both Dowden (1999) and Light (1989, Light & McNaughton, 2014) emphasise aspects that AAC learners need to acquire to be able to use their AAC with greater competence. Both models also emphasise the importance of people in their environment, or communication partners, supporting communication. This is further supported in the literature by the focus on what makes an effective communication partner and what are important aspects to focus on when communicating with an AAC user. This literature relates to my research question by focusing on both the students using AAC and the adults in their environment.

The literature review moved into highlighting the different functions of communication and why it is important to focus on functions other than requesting. There is less literature in this area, as identified by Logan et al. (2017). The review then examined literature surrounding poetry as a learning context to support literacy and language learning. When examining Wagner and Musselwhite's guide, it is apparent poetry can target literacy, language, and life – that is to say, wider aspects of the self. There is limited literature that includes students with disabilities or that focuses on the multiple learning opportunities of poetry. The SLTR was unable to find any research that included students with multiple disabilities who use AAC engaging in a poetry group. This highlights a need for more

research to be conducted in the disability sector, especially for children and students who use AAC and have multiple disabilities.

Overall, there is a strong literature base for students who have multiple disabilities and use AAC being given opportunities to learn more and communicate more effectively. There is also literature focused on poetry supporting language and literacy development. This study will investigate the opportunities and experiences of students with multiple disabilities who use AAC and the classroom staff as they engage in a poetry writing group.

In-Confidence

Chapter 3: Method

This section will outline the method employed for the study. The section will begin with an overview of the research design and the rationale behind choosing a case study approach. The context of the study will be clearly outlined. Ethical considerations will be addressed early on within the chapter and then woven in throughout the chapter to emphasise the importance at each research stage. Following this, a detailed description of the participants will be provided including demographic information for the students. This will be followed by a description of the research phases, included data sources, and data analysis procedures. The section will conclude with an overview of the complexities of research involving students with multiple disabilities.

Research Design (Case Study)

A case study design was employed for this study to highlight the participants in their "real-world context" (Yin, 2018, p.15). Case study design allows for a deeper description of the case and to have the social realities of the case maintained (Flick et al., 2004). Maintaining the context of a case study adds validity by not isolating findings that could be misinterpreted out of context. A case study approach provides an opportunity for the inclusion and ongoing description of context details, complexities of the case and the likely effects of an intervention or programme within the context (Paparini et al., 2020).

It is important to define the nature and time period of the case (Crowe et al., 2011). It is also vital to highlight why a particular case was chosen and why the case study design was selected (Flick et al., 2004). This will shape what is and is not included in the study and the types of data collection necessary (Yin, 2018).

There are important considerations to strengthen the scientific rigour of case studies (Crowe et al., 2011). Following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness criteria, there are

four key areas that must be addressed to ensure scientific rigor within qualitative research. These are credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability.

The first, credibility, can be addressed by prolonged observation and participation, peer debriefing and triangulation of data sources (Mills, 2014). This aims to strengthen credibility by ensuring data collected are varied, collected from multiple time periods and bias has been minimised (Mills, 2014). The amount of data and data sources that can be included in a case study adds to the complexity and depth of the research (Yin, 2018). Data sources may include documentation, interviews, observation, artifacts and records (Yin, 2018). Ongoing data collection throughout the study means problems during the intervention can be identified early and adaptions made, and more information can be gathered from collecting data across multiple time periods (Yin, 2018). Triangulation of data also strengthens the dependability and confirmability of the study by painting a more detailed picture (Mills, 2014).

Secondly, transferability, particularly within a case study is important. Case studies need to have detailed descriptions of the context, participants and intervention so that the reader can take relevant findings that are fitting to their own context (Mills, 2014). By using a selection method of purposeful sampling to clearly select the case, documentation and artifacts, this allows focus on the individuals and the uniqueness of the specific situation, rather than a generic sampling where the focus is on representing the general population (Schoch, 2020).

Dependability relies on triangulation, as well as having robust methods of data collection. Also included is data analysis, which can be strengthened, for example, by use of codebooks, checking and interpreting codes, and who has been consulted during this process. (Mills, 2014).

Confirmability emphasises the importance of neutrality and objectivity within intervention, data collection and data analysis. Triangulation of data, and reflexivity practices through peer discussion or self-reflection are important (Mills, 2014).

Context (Specialist School)

The context for this study was a classroom at a specialist school in New Zealand. Students attending specialist schools in New Zealand have high and complex learning needs. These students are required to meet the criteria for *high* or *very high* Ongoing Resourcing Scheme (ORS) funding (Ministry of Education, 2023). At the school involved in this study, the classroom usually consists of a teacher, three or four teacher aides (TA) and five to eight students who are grouped together based on their individual learning and health needs. Students are also seen by a variety of therapists and specialists in school, including SLTs, such as the SLTR. A high percentage of the students at this school are non-speaking or have minimal spoken communication. These students have access to augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) which may include a variety of tools such as visuals, communication books or speech generating devices. These will vary based on the individual needs of the student.

Ethical Considerations

The Massey University Code of Ethical Conduct (2017) was closely followed in this study. This study was approved by the Massey University Ethics committee (Appendix B). The SLTR and supervisor met with the Ethics committee to discuss the study in more depth. Information was given to the school principal to distribute on behalf of the SLTR, to minimise any perceived pressure on staff and parents to participate. Information was presented clearly, to clarify the purpose of the study, what was involved and their rights, so they could give informed consent. All participants were given a later check in where they could withdraw from the study before data analysis began. Participants were always given the option to opt

out of any sessions, or to opt out from answering any questions during the interview stage. Due to the complexity of the communication needs of the students, any signs of discomfort or distress were also followed up on or interpreted as opting out.

The SLTR also met with the school's kaiārahi to ensure Te Ara Tika Guidelines (Hudson et al., 2010) were followed. One of the key considerations was manaakitanga (cultural and social responsibility) to ensure the dignity of all the participants was upheld. This was vital due to the vulnerable nature of the students involved. The kaiārahi was able to guide the SLTR to run the study in a culturally appropriate manner. For example, meetings with students and staff were opened and closed with a karakia. Staff meetings included kai as the sharing of food is an important part of manaakitanga (Tūtira Mai New Zealand, n.d.). Students were not provided with food as many of the students in this group were enterally fed and unable to eat food orally.

Other key ethical considerations related to consent; student assent and special relationships have been woven into the chapter. This is to highlight their importance at the relevant step in the research process.

Recruitment and Consent

The SLTR met with the principal and discussed the purpose of the research, how the poetry group would run, and the benefits for the students and school (Appendix C, Appendix H). The principal then provided consent for the school, before six staff were contacted through provision of an information sheet (Appendix D). These were distributed as physical copies by the principal. All contacted staff consented to their inclusion in the study (Appendix I). However, one TA was on extended sick leave and thus did not participate in any phase of the study. Once the teacher of the classroom returned her signed consent form, seven whānau were then contacted through an information sheet (Appendix E). This was sent as a physical copy in the students' home/school communication diary. Staff and family were given

opportunities to ask questions before they consented to the study. Five families consented by returning a signed consent form for their child's participation in the study (Appendix J). Once families consented, the SLTR met with the five students and talked them through an information sheet in the form of a PowerPoint presentation which used clear concise language and high contrast visuals to aid the students' comprehension (Appendix F). Students were then asked to give assent to being included in the study through giving a yes response. The students' yes and no responses are described in more detail below. Both family consent and student assent were required for participation. All five of the students assented.

One SLT student (SLT-S) was recruited midway through the second phase of the study. This was due to their natural inclusion in the poetry group as part of their student placement.

Participants

There were three participant groups: staff, students and the SLTR. The staff included four TAs, the classroom teacher, an SLT-S and the SLTR. The students self-selected pseudonyms, and the staff were given role codes. These are used throughout the thesis to protect the participants' identities. Despite this, due to the nature of the setting, students and staff may be identifiable to those familiar with the school. This was highlighted as a potential risk to staff, whānau and students, during the recruitment process.

Staff

The staff participants have a variety of experiences and backgrounds. The demographic information is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Staff Participants Demographic Table

Code	Role	Years at school	Background
Teacher	Teacher	1.5	Specialist teacher – 20 years
SLTR	SLT/researcher	6	SLT
TA1	Teacher aide	14.5	Teacher aide Parent to disabled daughter Enrolled nurse
TA2	Teacher aide	8	Teacher aide
TA3	Teacher aide	1 month	Residential Advisor
TA4	Teacher aide	3 months	Not listed
SLT-S	Student	5-week placement + 4 poetry group sessions	Specialist teacher

Note. SLT is speech-language therapist.

Students

The students all had very high ORS funding, which meant they require adaptation of the school curriculum and have significant educational needs relating to learning, hearing, vision, physical, or communication (Ministry of Education, 2024). Demographic information for the student participants is provided in Table 2. Students ranged in age from 6 to 16 years old, and have a range of diagnoses, such as cerebral palsy or genetic conditions. Some of the students also have Cortical Visual Impairment (CVI) which will be discussed in more depth below, along with some of the key methods of communication used by these students, as these varied from student to student and are of importance to the intervention provided as part of the research.

Students chose their own pseudonyms. This activity was completed after the students had completed the poetry group. Students were reminded of the need for privacy and anonymising their data. Students were able to choose a name from a variety of sources, such as books, tv shows or other poets.

Table 2

Student Participants Demographic Information

Name	Age	Sex	Diagnosis	Communication	Mobility	Ethnicity	Interests
Sally	6	F	Genetic disorder	• 12 expanded functions PODD • Partner assisted scan • Yes/no cards, head shake • Can occasionally verbalise single words and phrases	Uses a pacer	Māori and NZ European	Music, mirror/dress ups
The Banker Pig	16	M	Brain damage CVI	• Smartbox with PODD 15 • Auditory scan with jellybean switch	Wheelchair	Asian	Silly stories and music
Emily Dickinson	6	F	Cerebral Palsy	• Dedicated device with CoreScanner (trialling during study)	Wheelchair	NZ European	Music and stories

				• Partner assisted scan • Jellybean switch			
Supergirl	9	F	Genetic disease	• 16 expanded functions PODD • Yes/no cards, taps tray for yes • Partner assisted scan	Wheelchair, pacer	Māori and NZ European	Being on the move and anything noisy
Maya Angelou	16	F	Cerebral Palsy CVI	• Smartbox with PODD 15 • Auditory scan • BIGmack switch	Wheelchair	Māori	Music and floating in the pool

Note. PODD is Pragmatically Organised Dynamic Display. CVI is Cortical Visual Impairment.

Pragmatically Organised Dynamic Display. All the students have used Pragmatically Organised Dynamic Display or PODD. PODD is a communication system that was developed by Gayle Porter at the Cerebral Palsy Education Centre in Victoria, Australia (Cerebral Palsy Education Centre, 2024). PODD can be paper based or accessed on an iPad or speech generating device depending on what is available and appropriate for the individual. The organisation of PODD is based on the pragmatics of language aiming to support the social flow of a conversation. PODD can be used to express a range of communication functions and can aid in social functions, as PODD users may not have access to natural social supports, such as intonation or gesture (Bayldon, 2018). PODD also includes core and fringe vocabulary (Cerebral Palsy Education Centre, 2024). Core vocabulary refers to common, high frequency words (i.e. I, more, go), whereas fringe vocabulary is specific, often high interest words (i.e. truck, purple, swing). Binger et al. (2024) examined transcripts from typically developing toddlers and found that including core and fringe vocabulary increased the children's mean length of utterance and influenced the grammatical and semantic structure of their utterances. This suggests the importance of including both core and fringe vocabulary for AAC users.

PODD can be accessed using a variety of methods. An AAC user may use direct access (reach out and point or touch the symbol they want) or indirect access such as scanning. Other access methods rely on a partner called partner assisted scanning (or a high-tech AAC system) to scan through possible responses. This may include visual scanning, involving the communication partner pointing to or highlighting a column (and then each item within the selected column) for the user to select from. Auditory scanning is similar, but the communication partner reads the items aloud. The user may also combine auditory and visual scanning (Burkhart & Porter, 2006). Partner assisted scanning requires co-construction between the communication partner and communicator, but the communicator needs to have

autonomy over the message they ultimately share (Bayldon et al, 2023). The consistent motor placement used in the design of PODD assists with language learning (Cerebral Palsy Education Centre, 2024). Thistle and Wilkinson (2015) surveyed 112 SLTs with an AAC background to discuss factors influencing design of AAC systems. One third of those surveyed indicated keeping a consistent design to aid motor planning was important. Most of the student participants use partner assisted scanning. Two used a high-tech speech generating device with auditory scanning with the PODD language system. One trialled a high-tech speech generating device with auditory scanning with a different system during the course of the study, and thus only used PODD as a paper-based alternative for some activities.

Yes and No. As the students involved in this study were non-speaking and used AAC, they need a method to indicate 'yes' and 'no'. Two key methods that will be mentioned in this study are yes/no cards and switches.

Yes/no cards are two visuals on a lanyard. The visuals are double sided, with the visual on a black background designed for students with Cortical Visual Impairment (CVI). The 'yes' visual is a yellow cloud on a black background, or a green square with the word YES in white. The 'yes' is always presented on the students' left side. The 'no' visual is a red cross on a black background, or a red square with the word NO in white. The student can reach out and touch or look at the symbol they want depending on their mobility and vision (Thompson & Behnami, 2018).

Switches are buttons that can vary in size and functionality. A switch can be connected to something such as a speech generating device, a radio or a toy. Switches can also include a microphone and speaker so sounds can be recorded and play a message. The switch is activated by being pressed, and this will make something happen. Over time, the user learns cause and effect through hitting their switch. The switch is positioned in a consistent place where the user can access it by pressing it with a body part. This may include hands, head,

arms or legs. Many of the students in this study have a switch that they either use to access their speech generating device or to say "yes." Some students will have a way to indicate 'no', such as a second switch or shaking their head. For other students, no response is interpreted as a 'no' (Burkhart, 2018).

Cortical Visual Impairment. Several of the students in this study have Cortical Visual Impairment (CVI). CVI is a condition that affects vision due to damage to the brain. Usually, the eye itself is still healthy, but the brain has difficulty understanding what it is seeing. The way vision is impacted varies between individuals (Blind and Low Vision Education Network New Zealand, 2025). Naturally, the impact on vision also influences how an individual can access AAC and learning in the classroom. Adaptions such as reducing visual clutter, taking breaks from visual stimuli and spacing of visual information can have positive impacts on these individuals (Perkins School for the Blind, 2025). There still needs to be more research focused on how best to support people who have CVI and use AAC (Luo et al., 2022). The students in this study who had CVI had adapted AAC systems to support their needs. This included more focus on auditory scanning, and use of high contrast visuals.

Having described the context and participants of the poetry group, the research phases will now be outlined. Included are the methods of data collection that were employed.

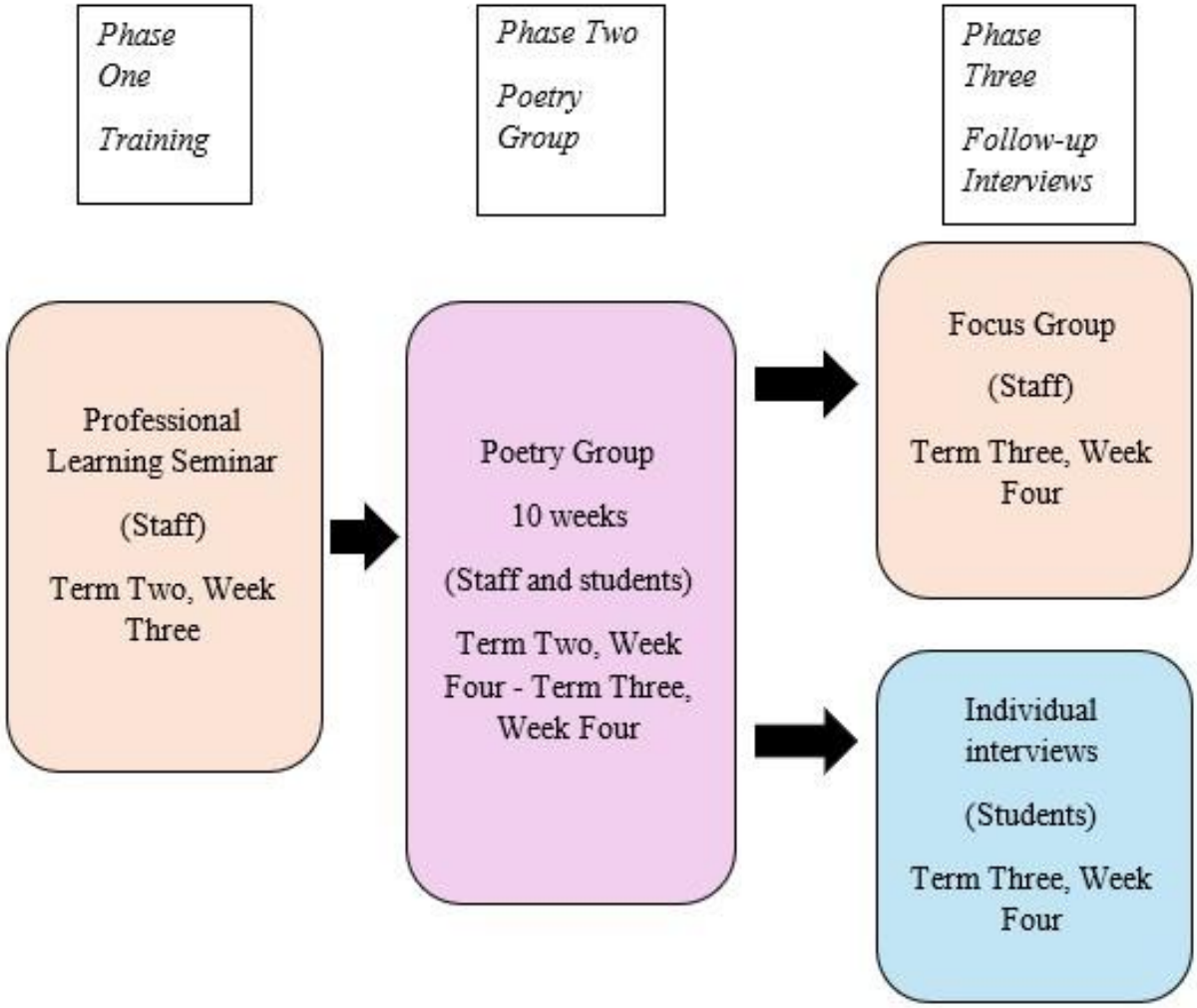
Research Phases

The study was split into the three phases as shown in Figure 2. The phases will be described in more detail below.

In-Confidence

Figure 2

Study Phases



Phase One: Training with Staff

Phase One consisted of a 45-minute professional learning seminar with the teacher and TAs. The purpose of this seminar was to discuss how the poetry group would be run and upskill the adults on how to support the students in the group. All had worked with the students previously, so there was less need to focus on the individual communication methods of each student. One TA and the SLT-S were unable to attend the seminar. The SLT-S received the same information at a later date. Due to absence and constraints relating to the school timetable, this was not possible with the TA.

The seminar opened and closed with a karakia to build a sense of connection and wellbeing (Motu et al., 2023). The SLTR then presented an overview of the research aims, rationale and methods surrounding the poetry group, which staff had previously been provided through the Information Sheet.

During this meeting/information session, roles and responsibilities of adults and students in the poetry group were clearly defined. For example, staff were introduced to the session log (Appendix K) that they were asked to fill in at the end of each session. An overview of the poetry group intervention was provided, including example activities that students would participate in.

The main focus of the seminar was to introduce staff to key strategies for co-construction. These strategies were compiled from various sources, such as those discussed in the literature review. Strategies highlighted for staff were as follows: wait time, letting the child lead, asking open-ended questions to expand, attributing meaning, offering suggestions or best guess and having a good social connection. Key discussion points came from the AAC Acknowledgment checklist from AAC Innovations (Hayes, 2023), the PrAACtical AAC website (Zangari, 2013, 2022) and Stepping into AAC's video on co-construction (2023).

Staff were then reminded of students' Communication Profiles which were already available within the classroom. These provide information about each student's AAC, how they indicate 'yes' and 'no,' and any other key communication tips. Staff were shown where these were and reminded that they could refer to them or ask questions at any time.

Phase Two: Poetry Group with Students (Staff Supporting)

The poetry group ran for 10 weeks over the course of two school terms (Term 2, Week 4 - Term 3, Week 4 2025). Poetry sessions were once a week for 50 minutes and took place in the classroom to maintain the regular social environment (Crowe et al., 2011). Each poetry session began and ended in the same way to create a sense of routine. Routines help students

feel safe and reset to being ready to learn (Brunzell, 2021). The session focus changed every two to three weeks to introduce the students to different poetic functions. An overview of the structure and focus of the poetry group across the 10 weeks is provided in Table 3.

Table 3

Poetry Group Overview

<table>
<tr><td colspan="4">Session opener (10 minutes)
First, students were placed in a comfortable space (usually wheelchair or standing frame) in a semicircle. Staff checked that the students had their AAC readily available. The SLTR began by reading a poem, which changed each week. Students were then asked to use their AAC to answer the following questions.
1. Did you like the poem? (Yes/no)
2. What is your favourite line of the poem? (Staff went through line by line so the student could indicate yes or no).
3. How did the poem make you feel? (Feelings page in PODD)
During weeks four to six, question three was replaced with; what do you think is being described?
10 minutes was dedicated to the session opener, and after 10 minutes the session would progress regardless.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Weeks One to Three
Students were asked to rewrite a popular story: Hairy Maclary from Donalson's Dairy, by Lynley Dodd</td><td>Weeks Four to Six
Students explored "What Am I?" poems. These poems described an object or an animal. The students were asked to guess</td><td>Weeks Seven and Eight
The focus of these sessions was similes. Students went on a "simile walk." Students went on a walk for five to ten minutes</td><td>Weeks Nine to Ten
The final two weeks students were encouraged to explore free form poems. Students could</td></tr>
</table>

(1983). The book has examples of rhyme, repetition, simile and other common poetic functions used to engage the reader (Kilby, 2013). Students listened to the whole story and were then given a copy to fill in the blanks. The spaces that were being filled in matched with categories in their PODD books. For example, “Hercules Morse, as big as a horse,” students were asked to replace horse with a different word from the	what was being described in the poem. Students were then asked to choose their own object or animal to describe. Students could use similes or add describing words however they saw fit.	outside to look for things that interested them. They could either take a picture or bring back an item. Students were then encouraged to write similes about the items that they had found. Students were verbally encouraged to explore all their senses while writing similes.	choose any topic to write about. Poems did not have to follow a set structure. Students were, however, encouraged to incorporate what they had learnt from previous weeks.

animal section of their PODD books.			
Session close (5-10 minutes) Students were asked if they would like to share their poems or works in progress with the class. Students were encouraged to listen to each other's work and be supportive. While the SLTR read out the poems, staff were given time to fill out their session log.			

Note. AAC is augmentative and alternative communication. PODD is Pragmatically Organised Dynamic Display. SLTR is speech-language therapist researcher.

Phase Two: Data Sources

Various forms of data were collected throughout Phase Two in relation to the poetry group intervention. The data sources included: 1) Reflexive journal; 2) Informal and formal written (e.g., emails) and oral (e.g., conversations) communication with staff involved in the poetry group; 3) Session logs and 4) Poetry samples.

Reflexive Journal. It is important to leave space for reflection to mitigate the risk of interpreting experiences or data from a skewed viewpoint (Deggs & Hernandez, 2018). The SLTR's dual position meant they had familiarity with the context, the participants and their methods of communication. Being sensitive to the impact of positionality is important (Yin, 2018). The SLTR kept reflective notes to reflect on the sessions as they unfolded. This helped to document the observations, reflections and reasoning behind decision making (Charmaz, 2006). This also gave space to reflect on making changes or adaptations as the group continued. Pillow (2003) puts forward that reflexivity is a necessary tool to do engaged qualitative research.

Communications. The SLTR also collected any formal or informal communication from staff as the sessions unfolded. These included texts, emails, notes from verbal conversations or school notes.

Session Logs. Staff were also asked to fill in session logs (see Appendix K) at the end of each poetry session reflecting on how the student they had working with had seemed during the session and the co-construction techniques that had been used. This aided in observation of different students.

Poetry Samples. Poetry samples were also collected from the students at the end of each session. This aided in keeping track of the work that was being produced week by week. It also gave artifacts to reference.

Phase Three: Follow-up Interviews

Once the poetry group concluded, interviews (students) and a focus group (staff) were conducted to gather participants' perspectives of their experience in the poetry group and the opportunities it had offered them.

The interview and focus group guides were developed with consultation from the SLTR's supervisors, as well as consultation with the school's kaiārahi. An emphasis was put on the importance of whanaungatanga or relationships. Being able to facilitate a focus group or to interview children relies on being able to aid people to feel comfortable to discuss their thoughts and having a basis of trust will help (Davis et al., 2010; Leung & Savithiri, 2009).

Student Interviews. All five students who participated in the poetry group were interviewed individually. Interviews were conducted by the SLTR in a quiet room at school. No students declined to be interviewed. Individual interviews explore an individual's experience more in depth (Gaskell, 2000). The students were interviewed individually to focus on what they had learnt and experienced for themselves and not be influenced by their peers.

Interviews have multiple benefits as a data source. They allow the perspective and experiences of the participants to be highlighted and centred by prioritising what is shared (Hecker & Kalpokas, 2025). This was of particular importance for this study as the perspectives of the participants is one of the key areas of focus. Face to face interviews have an additional benefit of the researcher being able to observe the interviewee for any cues that add to their answer, such as body language and facial expressions (Opdenakker, 2006). This was very important to be aware of while interviewing the students. The interviews were carried out by the SLTR as they were a familiar communication partner to all the students and thus were able to be aware of any non-verbal cues the students showed which may have indicated they needed a break, or to end the interview. There is a potential for bias, as the students were aware the SLTR had run the poetry group. Efforts were made to mitigate this,

by the SLTR reassuring students that their answers were valued and respected no matter what they said, and a positive environment throughout the interviews was fostered.

An adapted version of the Speech Participation and Activity Assessment of Children (SPAA-C) (McLeod, 2004) was used during student interviews (Appendix N). While the SPAA-C was developed for use with children with speech sound disorders, the developers permit adaptations of the tool for wider application to other areas of communication. The SPAA-C was developed to understand how a communication difficulty affects a child's activity and participation (McLeod, 2004), according to the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (World Health Organization, 2001). The SPAA-C has questions for other people in the child's life but within the scope of this study, only the child form was used.

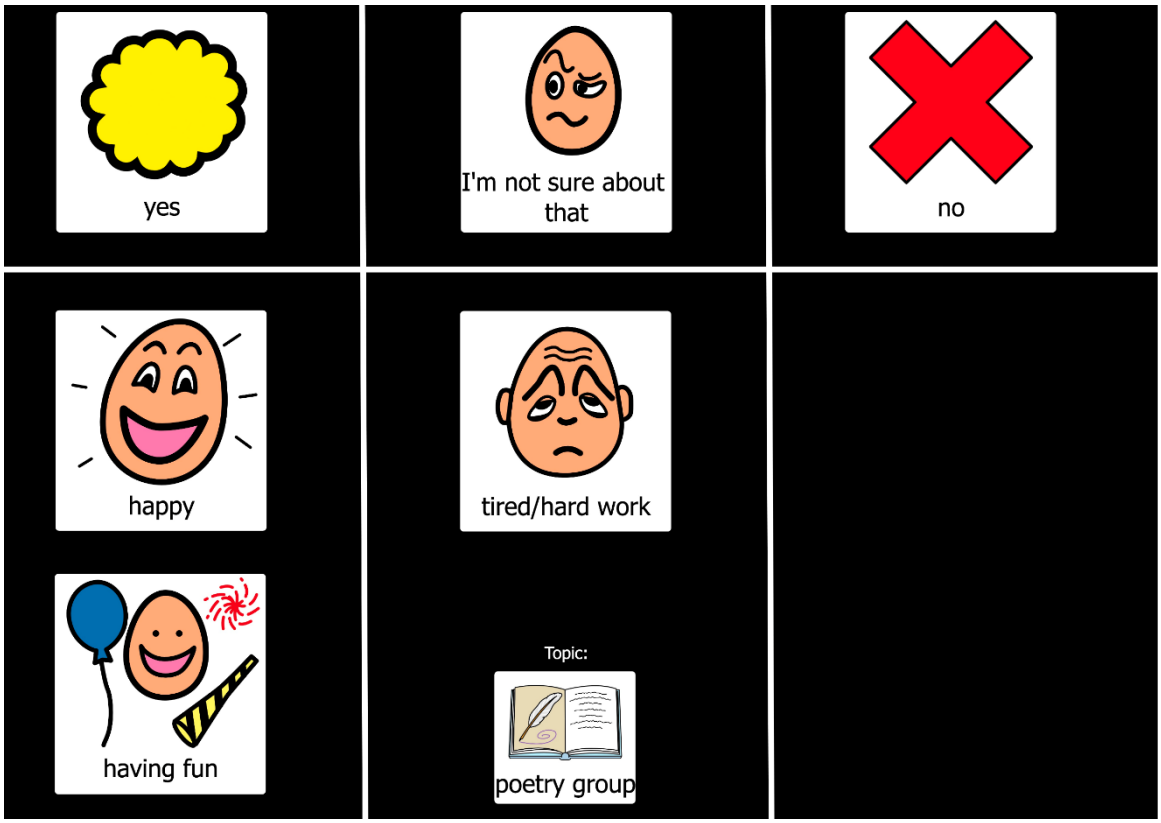
The first part of the interview involved students answering a selection of relevant questions from the SPAA-C (McLeod, 2004). These questions were included to provide an overview of how the students feel about their communication in a general sense such as when communicating with family, to the class or with friends. The selected relevant questions and student responses are included in Appendix N. Students were then asked questions more specific to their involvement in the poetry group, such as how they felt about specific elements or what they had worked on (see Appendix M for interview guide and Appendix N for responses). Students were also asked to choose a favourite poem they had written and given an opportunity to add any other thoughts (Appendix M and N). The interview questions were developed in consultation with the SLTR's supervisors and the school's kaiārahi.

In order to support the students' participation in the interview, Talking Mats (Murphy, 1998) were used. Talking Mats is an AAC tool which helps to visualise conversations and choice making. Talking Mats can be used with a variety of people with communication needs to aid receptive and expressive language (Stans et al., 2019). A visual representing the topic

of conversation is placed at the bottom of the mat (in this case, poetry group). The top scale can vary. For this interview, the options for each question were *yes*, *I'm not sure about that*, or *no*. Students were then asked a question about an aspect of poetry group and asked to answer using the top scale. A visual for each question was shown to the student and placed under the option the student chose. For example, for the question 'how do you feel in poetry group?' The students were given possible responses of 'happy, tired, having fun.' A visual corresponding to the response was shown to the student. The student then responded, 'yes, no' or 'I'm not sure about that' and the visual was placed on the Talking Mat in that column. Students were given the opportunity to add a different response or to change their answers after each question. An image example is provided in Figure 3, where a student has replied 'yes' to feeling happy and having fun in poetry group, and 'not sure' to feeling tired in poetry group.

Figure 3

Talking Mat Example



Note. Created using Boardmaker software. PCS® is a registered trademark of Tobii Dynavox®. All rights reserved. Used with permission. See Appendix O for permission.

Student responses during the interviews were transcribed by the SLTR, as overall the interview questions resulted in visual responses. Photographs were taken of the Talking Mats, but no audio or video footage was used for transcription. The student interviews lasted between 17-43 minutes (mean: 31 minutes).

Focus Group Interview. Five staff were involved in an in-person focus group interview. One staff member was unable to attend and was instead interviewed separately at an earlier date. Advantages of a focus group are that participants can feed off other participants' ideas and may form a consensus or discuss and highlight differences in opinion (Gaskell, 2000). There is additionally more space to allow participants to express their thoughts than in other similar forms of data collection, such as a survey (Hecker & Kalpokas,

2025). By allowing the staff to compare their perspectives and discuss what they had experienced working with the students, a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation can be achieved, in this case, the poetry group.

A semi-structured approach was taken with the focus group to ensure the discussion stayed on topic but that there was space for the SLTR to follow the group's lead and allow for spontaneity in the questions that were asked. Questions for the focus group topic guide (Appendix L) were developed by the SLTR based on the student interview questions and expected possible outcomes of the study. The topic guide was then reviewed and discussed by the SLTR's supervisors and the kaiārahi before being used as a data collection tool.

Staff were asked broad questions around their personal experiences in the poetry group and their perceptions of the experiences of the students they worked with, based on their observations and familiarity with these students. Questions started more broadly to give staff the opportunity to follow each other's thought processes and any topics that naturally emerged (Hecker & Kalpokas, 2025). More specific prompts were given if required.

The SLTR acted as the facilitator for the focus group. Facilitation of a focus group is critical (Leung & Savithiri, 2009). Good facilitation ensures contributions from all participants are heard and considered. It is important to be able to listen, ask follow up questions and facilitate participation. With facilitation, the information that is gathered will be more relevant and useful to the study (Leung & Savithiri, 2009). As the SLTR was the facilitator of the group, there were potential benefits and potential for bias. The SLTR was familiar with the group, had attended all sessions and was therefore familiar with the people and settings involved in any anecdotes shared. This allowed the SLTR to have a greater understanding of what was raised in the focus group and be able to follow threads of discussion. The staff were familiar with the SLTR which may have aided staff to feel comfortable sharing, although there was also the potential for bias, as staff were aware they

were providing feedback on the SLTR's poetry group. Efforts were made to mitigate this by beginning the focus group by drawing attention to the importance of having an accurate depiction of the poetry group.

The staff focus group was conducted for 33 minutes, in the classroom after the students had left for the day. The session was video recorded with Zoom audio transcription software running (Zoom Video Communications, 2025). The transcription was checked and updated by the SLTR using the recording at a later date. Staff were reminded the interview was being transcribed, but no identifying information would be included, and role codes would be used.

Data Analysis

The data that were collected from phases two and three were then analysed. This analysis is described between the two phases.

Phase Two

Throughout the poetry group, poetry samples in the form of the student's poems were collected. Additionally, at the end of each session, staff completed a session log form regarding the student they had worked with that day (Appendix K). These data sources were kept so the SLTR could be responsive in making any necessary changes to the poetry group from session to session. Additionally, it was sometimes necessary to refer back to these sources when discussing the sessions with staff or the supervisors. These data sources were collated and used to support the SLTR's responsiveness but did not undergo thematic data analysis as they were not found to provide a detailed overview of the poetry group. A reflexive journal was kept by the SLTR throughout the running of the poetry group. The reflexive journal was analysed alongside the staff focus group data.

Phase Three

Reflexive inductive thematic analysis was carried out on the reflexive journal and focus group, following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) six phases. The first phase included having increased familiarity with the data. The SLTR confirmed and updated the transcription of the transcription using the audio recording, which allowed the SLTR to become more familiar with the data. The second phase required generating initial codes. Initial codes were developed within the NVivo software (Version 14; Lumivero). These initial codes were then combined where possible. Codebooks were created for both these data sources (see Appendix G). Next, the third phase, the SLTR searched for and identified potential themes. This involved using mind maps, returning to the data, comparing between codebooks, and discussion with supervisors. The fourth phase involved reviewing the themes through more discussion, combining and refining of themes until they highlighted important patterns across the dataset. The fifth phase included defining and naming the themes. The naming of the themes followed the definition to make sure they clearly defined each theme. The student interviews were quantitatively analysed, and the student responses were then mapped into the themes that were established during the qualitative analysis. The sixth phase was the write up of the themes, including selection of illustrative data extracts, which is contained in the results chapter.

Once the themes had been named and defined through this process, the student interview data were examined. Due to the nature of the interviews, the student interview data were quantitative and not thematically analysed. Instead, the student interview data were collated, as seen in Appendix N, and then the quantitative data were integrated to the existing themes. This integration of the quantitative student interview data and the qualitative focus group and reflexive journal data is provided in Table 4, which is included at the beginning of the results chapter.

Complexity of Research Involving Students with Multiple Disabilities

There were several complexities over the course of this study related to carrying out research with students with multiple disabilities. These are outlined below.

Adaptation of Resources

Data collection tools and poetry group resources needed to be adapted for these students to support their understanding and participation throughout. It was important to use clear, concise language to support their understanding and minimise cognitive load (Australian Education Research Organisation, 2023). Visuals were used to aid their understanding, and these were also adapted to be high contrast where possible for students who have CVI (Blind and Low Vision Education Network New Zealand, 2025). Talking Mats (Murphy, 1998) were used in the interviews to support receptive understanding of each question and to support students to communicate their answers. Lewis and Porter (2004) emphasise the strength of having an established relationship when interviewing students with disabilities. The adaptation of learning materials to enable access to the curriculum is a requirement of specialist schools in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2023).

Health Needs

The students have a range of diagnoses that can impact on their health in different ways. This impacted both their attendance at school and their ability to engage depending on the day. Bayldon (2018) found that health factors impacted the responsiveness and the availability for learning (around medications or medical episodes such as seizures) of two students with multiple disabilities in her research. The Education Review Office (2022) found that students having physical health issues and chronic illness impacts attendance, and that this is more so for students with disabilities.

Several of these students have seizures, which can impact the student both during and after the seizure. The postictal period can last 24 hours or longer and can include symptoms such as fatigue, forgetfulness and headaches (Subota et al., 2019).

Pain and fatigue can also play a role for anyone with a long-term chronic disability, and it can be difficult to explain this to others (Yorkston et al., 2010). Some days, students may have had capacity to deal with a level of discomfort that on other days made it difficult to engage in a task. This could be impacted by a variety of personal or environmental factors.

Diversity Amongst Participants

The range of ages, ethnicity and diagnoses of the students meant this was a heterogeneous group. Having diversity within a group can have both benefits and add complexity in research. One example of a limitation is that there will be more varied individual factors that impact each individual and this makes it more difficult to draw conclusions about one group (Kernan et al., 1999). However, inclusion of diverse participants within studies is important, as communities are diverse. There is a clear move in some fields for this diversity to be reflected in the participants who are involved in research. For example, the National Health Service Health Research Authority (2022) have clearly highlighted their commitment to including participants that reflect wider diversity in their research.

It would also be difficult to find participants with the same diagnoses. It is estimated that 300,000 New Zealanders may be living with a rare disorder, with approximately half being children, although this figure is based on overseas data (Ministry of Health, 2022). There are approximately 7,000 rare disorders that have been identified, so there may only be one person in the country, or there may be more, but with no guarantee they are in the same region or age demographic (Ministry of Health, 2022). Even when people have the same diagnosis, there is no guarantee that they will have the same presentation, experiences, upbringing or culture.

Overall, these students were chosen as they are all in one classroom at a specialist school. They all have communication and learning needs, and all have used a PODD language system. Their individual strengths were as important as their similarities.

It is important to highlight that many of these complexities are part of these students' everyday lives. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) highlights the importance that all students deserve an education that encourages not only their mental skills, but also the development of their "personality, talents and creativity" (p. 16).

In-Confidence

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to examine the opportunities and experiences of a 10-week poetry group for students with communication and learning needs. This chapter examines the results collected in the forms of a reflexive journal kept by the SLTR, a focus group (and one individual interview) conducted with the staff, and individual interviews with the students. Due to the qualitative nature of the data, reflexive and inductive thematic analysis was carried out on the reflexive journal and focus group. Quantitative analysis was used for the student interviews.

The following five themes were identified through the analysis: Theme One: Practical Considerations Relating to Consistent Routine, Space, Staff Support and Time Facilitated the Success of Poetry Group; Theme Two: Poetry Group Facilitated Whakawhanaungatanga - The Development, Maintenance and Consolidation of Interpersonal Relationships; Theme Three: The Value of Poetry Group in Facilitating Students' Self-expression and Self-advocacy; Theme Four: The Benefit of Poetry Group on Strengthening and Developing AAC skills, Independence, AAC exploration, and Self-confidence for Students and Staff; and Theme Five: Poetry Group Fostered Enjoyment of Students and Staff. A summary of these themes is provided in Table 4, along with how the data sources were integrated to build each of these themes. Themes have been elaborated on further below.

Table 4

Theme Descriptions

Theme Name	Theme Description	Student Interviews	Staff Focus Group (and One Individual Interview)	Reflexive Journal
Practical Considerations Relating to Consistent Routine, Space, Staff Support and Time Facilitated the Success of Poetry Group	The impact that practical considerations had on facilitating the success of poetry group. This includes aspects such as routine, the space or environment, staff support or facilitation and time.		✓	✓
Poetry Group Facilitated Whakawhanaungatanga - The Development, Maintenance and Consolidation of Interpersonal Relationships	How poetry group facilitated both building and maintaining strong interpersonal relationships between students and staff.	✓	✓	✓

The Value of Poetry Group in Facilitating Students' Self-expression and Self-advocacy	Poetry group facilitated how students were able to express themselves and to advocate for their needs.	✓	✓	✓
The Benefit of Poetry Group on Strengthening and Developing AAC skills, Independence, AAC exploration, and Self-confidence for Students and Staff	How poetry benefited both students and staff to develop their AAC skills, independence and self-confidence. It also provided an opportunity for exploration of their AAC systems.	✓	✓	✓
Poetry Group Fostered Enjoyment of Students and Staff	That poetry group fostered an environment where students and staff were able to enjoy themselves.	✓	✓	✓

Note. AAC is augmentative and alternative communication.

Theme One: Practical Considerations Relating to Consistent Routine, Space, Staff Support and Time Facilitated the Success of Poetry Group

Consistent routine and sufficient space, time and staff support facilitated success in poetry group. The routine of the sessions and being sufficiently prepared and organised facilitated the smooth running of the poetry group. This was reflected in both the focus group and the reflexive journal. The teacher commented on the benefit of *"being prepared and knowing what was going to happen".* This comment was made in reference to the pre-learning seminar which all involved staff attended. The SLTR also commented on multiple occasions within the reflexive journal that organisation and preparation benefited their ability to run things smoothly and *"being organised with the folders and writing seemed to help everyone have a clear idea of what we were doing".* Preparation also impacted how the SLTR was able to facilitate others. In the reflexive journal following the second session, the SLTR referred to *"having a really clear plan of how I wanted everything to go meant I was able to push through and stay focused on this".*

Occasionally, the routine of the group could not be fulfilled. This is reflected well in the below statement from the reflexive journal:

> *Often for this group, I have felt it was helpful when I am prepared. And this makes it easier to facilitate other people when I am prepared. But there are some things it is really hard to be prepared for* (SLTR).

On this occasion the SLTR was referencing the weather as being the factor they had not been able to prepare for, which meant that one session was unable to be run outside as planned. On other occasions, unexpected visitors, school timetabling, technological issues or health of staff or students also impacted the consistent routine of poetry group sessions.

More than one staff member shared how having a familiar routine in the poetry group sessions also benefited the students. For example, one staff member commented on the

students sharing their work (a usual part of their routine) saying that *"having the same format meant they knew you would probably share ... and because it's repeated it was like, oh that's right, it's sharing time, I'll [referring to student] do that"* (SLT-S). Having a similar overall routine to the session, with only the learning content changing, seemed to benefit students and staff as they knew what was expected from them.

The classroom environment was also mentioned in the focus group and reflexive journal. Poetry group was predominantly held in the classroom, aside from some exceptions. One exception mentioned in the reflexive journal noted a conversation between the SLTR and TA2 following the third session, where TA2 commented that they had found *"a really good routine"* which included a movement break between the session opener and starting the main writing task, which consisted of a *"walk first and then working in the library [for a while], which helped Supergirl settle".*

One week the session took place outside of the classroom for a simile walk exercise, where the students were asked to find something from nature that inspired them to write about. The rationale for this activity was expressed in the reflexive journal with the SLTR noting *"I wanted to achieve with this simile walk exercise, that poetry is not just about being in the classroom, it's about life, it's about being out in the world".* Teacher comments from the focus group and noted observations of students indicated that this activity was well received. In the focus group, the teacher reflected that it was *"really good when we went into the courtyard".* Student reactions were also noted in the SLTR's reflexive journal as positive and that they *"really enjoyed"* the experience. Banker Pig was noted by the SLTR as *"enjoying it so much. He didn't hit his switch at all until SLT-S suggested he could [continue to] do his work outside and he hit his switch straight away. Seems like they had a really nice time out there".* When reflecting on the rationale of poetry *"being out in the world"* for the

session, the SLTR's reflective journal noted that Banker Pig seemed to be *"really appreciating that"*.

In the focus group, when asked what could be done differently if poetry group were to be run again, multiple members of staff mentioned changes to the physical environment. The teacher reflected that she felt the classroom could have been *"more quiet"* to *"give them the opportunity to think".* She expanded on this to explain this included staff minimising *"background noises".* This seems to reflect a discussion noted in the reflexive journal that was held between the SLTR and the teacher, noting that they had *"both reflected that today things were not working, and it was just too busy".* The TAs' comments focused on taking advantage of the wider school environment to find a quieter space. TA2 recommended "*spreading out a bit or going to different rooms"* which TA4 agreed with by mentioning another potential space that could have been utilised.

Support and facilitation from the SLTR was also commented on throughout the focus group. Having access to an SLT during poetry group seemed to be beneficial to the implementation of AAC by the other members of staff. One TA commented to the SLTR during the focus group that *"you're always willing to help with if we're stuck with our communication devices, you always come up with good suggestions"* (TA1). Being able to do this during the poetry group, was perceived as more helpful, as suggestions could be offered and implemented in the moment, which helped the group to keep running smoothly.

Staff were also positively impacted by the enthusiasm of the SLTR, as was mentioned within the focus group on multiple occasions. Staff mentioned feeling that the SLTR's enthusiasm *"feeds our enthusiasm"* (TA1) and that *"it made me feel really enthusiastic about it, and I felt really great to be a part of it, so it was quite inspiring"* (TA2).

This was something the SLTR was aware of, and felt a responsibility for as well, as reflected within this quote from the reflexive journal: *"I know that me keeping a good attitude and looking positive helps the rest of the class feel positive too".*

Time was discussed multiple times throughout the focus group and reflexive journal. Time was reported to be an important resource for making poetry group run effectively. Reflexive journal notes highlighted the impact of the time required to prepare students for their participation in poetry group. One example of the tasks involved was detailed following the first session, where the SLTR wrote that *"there's a bit of time needed for students getting into standing frames, students needing the bathroom when they arrive".* Some weeks this was noted to have made a big impact on starting the group on time. The second week, the SLTR noted that *"after half an hour most students still did not have their communication devices or switches set up".*

Staffing changes, and the impact of these changes on time, were also often mentioned in the reflexive journal. Some weeks this appeared to have a positive impact, such as in the third session where the staff to student ratio was described by the SLTR as "*1:1 plus 1*" and the group was described as *"less rushed and busy than last week".* Another week, however, the SLTR described *"being short-staffed, and this meant we were really late starting".*

Another aspect of time, outside of time for the logistical considerations of the poetry group, related to the benefit of giving time for students who use AAC to communicate. This was reflected in the focus group discussion, with staff mentioning students having the *"time for her to reinforce what she wanted"* (TA1) and how important it was to *"give them time to share their ideas without putting your ideas forward"* (TA1). Staff were able to see the benefits of allowing students to have time to construct their poetry, and that this helped students more with their self-expression.

Similarly, the benefit of time was also recognised in relation to the allocated time for poetry group itself. The focus group participants valued the *"concentrated period of time"* (TA4) for them and the students to focus on AAC. This will be further discussed in Theme Four in terms of benefits this had on staff confidence using AAC. SLT-S saw this concentrated time as a great benefit for the students, stating: *"from the students' perspective, they're getting a communication partner who's really listening. And is really focused on that time communicating"* (SLT-S).

However, for all the benefits that the concentrated time poetry group gave, one TA expressed that having set time for poetry group only made them wish for more time. *"I just wanted more time, and more resources… You know what I mean? It's like, oh, I wish we could do more with these guys".* (TA2)

Theme Two: Poetry Group Facilitated Whakawhanaungatanga - The Development, Maintenance and Consolidation of Interpersonal Relationships

Throughout both the reflexive journal and the focus group, poetry group was seen as being a good place for students and staff to either build or maintain positive relationships. One staff member (SLT-S) was new to the students in the poetry group and reflected on how the sessions helped them build an understanding of the students, saying:

> *I think as well through poetry, or through those sessions. I'm sure everyone feels this way, I felt like I got to know the students so much more than just coming in and observing them... building up a relationship* (SLT-S).

This statement highlights how this staff member felt they got to know the students and how the poetry group facilitated this. Another staff member reflected on how they felt that working with one student gave them *"insight into how he thinks"* (TA4) and how he saw the world, through helping them write their poetry. This TA noticed Banker Pig was consistently

using shapes and colours to *"describe people close to him"* which she found *"fascinating"* and *"touching"* (TA4).

Throughout the focus group, staff reflected on how poetry group aided in building their understanding of the way these students communicate, which helped strengthen their relationships. One staff member (SLT-S) compared their understanding and relationships with the students when they first worked in this classroom compared to the end of poetry group, saying:

> *I really got to know and understand what a yes looked like for somebody. I couldn't really tell when I first came in, or how to work with someone that I hadn't really worked with before. And over the course of that time, I built a relationship with the students ... Whereas, when you first come in and some of these students with really complex communication needs. You know, it's quite hard to understand what it is that they're trying to tell you* (SLT-S).

The SLT-S was able to see the benefit of spending a concentrated time with the students to understand them and their communication styles more.

Collectively, staff involved in the poetry group saw the strength that existing relationships had on the work that students were producing. Throughout the reflexive journal, the SLTR tracked one student who seemed to rely on their strong existing and exclusive relationship with a staff member during early poetry group sessions. This student (Maya Angelou) initially refused to work with any staff member that they were unfamiliar with. The SLTR, having paired this student with an unfamiliar member of staff in the first session, reflected on this pairing and decided to *"make sure to pair Maya Angelou with someone she is comfortable with so she can just focus on her writing and feel comfortable"*. The following week, the SLTR again referred to this student in her reflexive journal, this time working with a different TA (one that the student had a strong relationship

with), and observed *"they were a great pair as they know each other really well and it really shows how much that relationship is important for this work".* The relationship between this TA and the student aided this student to work well and focus on their poetry. When the SLTR brought up this strength in relationship and co-construction to TA1, they reflected that she *"know[s] her really well"* and mentioned some of her communication methods that they know to look out for.

However, as the group continued, the SLTR continued to note how Maya Angelou worked with other staff members. Near the end of the study, Maya Angelou was once again paired with a less familiar member of staff. The SLTR *"thought about how Maya Angelou has previously not worked so well with new people,"* but decided to observe how this went. The SLTR later reported that that *"they did heaps of work together and Maya Angelou was really engaged. It was good to see she has become more open to working with new people as the group has gone on".* This suggested that this pairing was successful. Having an initial strong relationship seemed to help Maya Angelou build her confidence and understanding of what was expected with her and then was able to engage in working with unfamiliar people.

One moment with another student showed how poetry group helped him build a relationship with a member of staff. As was described in the reflexive journal:

> *Banker Pig used his device to say, "I want you stay with me" ... This was so amazing to see how working on poetry helped give the SLT student and him a foundation to aid them in building a relationship so quickly.*

This was the first time this student and staff member worked together and was memorable to SLT-S who reflected on this moment in the focus group, saying she *"loved it".*

Three students when asked what aspects of poetry group they had enjoyed, agreed they had enjoyed being in a group. Students were asked in their interviews about how they felt

when communicating with different people. Most students (*n*=3) said they were happy when communicating with their friends and their teacher. However, more students (*n*=4) were happy when communicating with their family. This indicates the students had a preference for familiar communication partners.

Theme Three: The Value of Poetry Group in Facilitating Students' Self-expression and Self-advocacy

Students sharing, expressing and advocating for themselves was a big focus of the poetry group, and this is reflected in the data. Three of the students (Supergirl, Banker Pig, Maya Angelou) when asked the interview question, "Did you enjoy sharing your poems?" indicated yes, that they had enjoyed sharing their poems with the group. This was of particular interest as only Banker Pig and Supergirl said they felt happy when they spoke to the whole class. Throughout the group, students were observed showing signs of enjoying presenting their work. These observations were reflected in the SLTR's reflexive journal with words such as *"excited," "happy"* and *"joyful"* being used to describe students when they presented. TA2 commented in the focus group on seeing the students' enjoyment in sharing their work grow, stating *"as the weeks went on, I noticed that they were getting more and more satisfaction out of having their poems shared".* In one session, it was observed and noted in the reflexive journal that all the students wanted to share, and all wanted to share their work more than once:

> *Some students hit their switch or said yes to indicate they wanted another turn, but Emily Dickinson said, 'me' to ask for another turn. Maya Angelou said to me "you let's-go". Banker Pig initially said no and then after I read Emily Dickinson's he said "my" on his device, so we read his. After he heard, he said, "it me". He then said "me I-want you" to indicate he wanted it read out again. And then said "Yeah!-That's-it!" After we had finished ... Banker Pig said, "Thank-you".*

This excitement for sharing on this occasion resulted in a lot of clear requests from the students to share and re-share their work. One week, it was noted in the reflexive journal that Sally *"looked really happy to be there but did not engage in any work".* However, when it was time for sharing, Sally was *"really keen to share and I had to tell her she couldn't because she hadn't done anything".* The following week, the SLTR noted she had given a *"gentle reminder"* to Sally to complete some work because they both *"really want to share her work".* This reminder resulted in Sally completing her line and getting to share her work.

The students also seemed to enjoy listening to each other's poems, as is reflected in this quote from the reflexive journal. *"The students were smiling/laughing and so respectful listening to their friends' work. Very quiet but engaged as they listened".* Being able to engage in not only the creation of poems but also the sharing and appreciation of other's work seemed to be an added benefit of poetry group.

The students were also able to use poetry group as a time to express themselves and their feelings. Most (*n*=4) students answered in their interview that poetry group helped them to share their feelings. TA1 reflected on how expressing yourself is not something that comes naturally to the students, stating:

> *It's a skill, isn't it? I think for our students if you don't give them that opportunity, they won't know how to express their ideas, and so this gives them an opportunity to give their ideas and share them with others* (TA1).

Another TA reflected that, although the students are given time every day to share how they are feeling during their morning hui (meeting), that it is good to *"go deeper"* (TA4) and for the students to have *"time to expand on that"* (TA4). She finished with saying that it was a *"really good thing that they get heard"* (TA4). This appears to indicate that not only did poetry group give students an avenue to express themselves, but that the staff they were working with were receptive to listening to what they were saying.

Often when students' poems were shared with whānau, the context of what students had chosen to write about became clearer, and this was noted in the reflexive journal. One example was:

> *Sally's mum said that it was really cool that Sally wrote about spicy food because she loves spicy food...I told her [Sally's mum] about her writing about a birthday party, and it turns out that it was Sally's dad's birthday the day before. It was amazing that she was reflecting on that in her poetry. And another time that I love getting to hear more context for our students' work.*

This example highlighted students using poetry as an avenue for recounting or sharing important moments in their lives. Topics for poetry were often around whānau (Sally, Banker Pig) or familiar places, such as when Supergirl wrote *"flax the same as church".* All of the students wrote at least one poem which mentioned either themselves or a member of their whānau. Another example of a student using poetry to reflect on their life was when Maya Angelou wrote a 'What Am I?' poem. The structure of these poems was for students to use different senses to describe something which is only revealed at the end of the poem. The poem is included below:

> *<u>What Am I?</u>*
>
> *I feel wet*
>
> *I smell yucky*
>
> *I don't hear*
>
> *What Am I?*
>
> *A Doctor.*

The construction of Maya Angelou's poem was discussed in the reflexive journal. The SLTR noted her chosen topic was *"quite emotional"* and noticed that Maya Angelou

> *had chosen words like wet, yucky and then ended with "not hear." I asked if she meant when a doctor doesn't listen to you and she nodded yes. It is such a rubbish feeling when that happens and I'm sure it has happened to her many times unfortunately. What an amazing poem!* (SLTR)

This was a clear example of Maya Angelou processing her life through her poetry. Another one of Maya Angelou's poems was discussed in depth in the reflexive journal. Maya Angelou had her freeform poem she wrote in week nine recorded on her switch so she could press it and share her poem. She seemed *"so happy"* and was *"smiling as she was presenting"*. The staff ended up sending *"the switch home with Maya Angelou's poem still recorded".* The next day the teacher and parent had a conversation which was passed onto the SLTR, and a voice note from the teacher was transcribed in the reflexive journal as follows:

> *Maya Angelou is so clever. And Maya Angelou's mum was so happy this morning ... [her poem] was similar to the conversations that Maya Angelou's mum, and the key words that Maya Angelou's mum uses. Oh, isn't that so so cool?*

The teacher reflected on this further during the focus group, saying *"it's pretty amazing to see how they can verbalise what's going on in their lives".* TA2 took this further by saying through poetry group *"we can see how much understanding they have. You know we would always assume competence but it's just a reminder to do that assuming competence. We need to have quite high expectations of them".*

Students also had time in poetry group to use their AAC systems to advocate, reject and communicate their thoughts. One exchange between two staff members in the focus group reflected that

> *[SLT-S] They got to say no, and they got to reject things a lot, and a lot of these students, I think, don't get that opportunity very often. And I really liked the way that, in that one session where Banker Pig wanted to finish and make his music choice. He*

kept saying, 'pack up. When are we doing it? It's my turn. Me, me, me, me, me.' And he got to protest. ... So, I think for students to be able to voice some of the more negative feelings, or some of the things that they want to say no about. And really be insistent. If they didn't have that opportunity, if they didn't have the communication systems, if they didn't have that chance to say that, where else in their lives do they get a chance to sort of protest, and -

[TA 2] Yeah, and advocate for themselves, for whatever it is that they want, their opinion to be absolutely fine.

This suggests that the skills students learnt or had time to work on in poetry group helped the adults in their environment give the students more space for expressing themselves, and their needs. During the interview, Banker Pig reflected on the moment described by SLT-S. Banker Pig mentioned *"pack up"* while discussing what he enjoyed, and clarifying questions established this was the session he was referring to. The dynamic of self-advocacy and self-expression was further supported by another TA talking about how poetry group impacted the classroom culture outside of the group. She said that during other classroom activities she felt that the students knew *"I can share, somebody's going to listen to me"* (TA1).

Theme Four: The Benefit of Poetry Group on Strengthening and Developing AAC skills, Independence, AAC exploration, and Self-confidence for Students and Staff

Poetry group gave a space for students and staff to develop their AAC usage. This also aided independence, time to explore their AAC and encouraged self-confidence in the students. During their interviews, most of the students (n=3) agreed that poetry group helped them with using their AAC system. The two students who did not agree, Maya Angelou and Banker Pig, have had their AAC systems for several years. When the interviewer suggested that Banker Pig's years of experience with his AAC system might explain why poetry group did not help him with using his AAC system, Banker Pig agreed. Banker

Pig's perception that poetry group did not help him in using his AAC system contrasted with one observation that was made during the focus group by TA4 that Banker Pig had more time in poetry group *"concentrating on using his switch. He's had that change of position... but it's really intentional now than from Term One".* She felt that there had been a *"huge difference"* in his switch use following the *"concentrated period of time"* of poetry group.

Staff during the focus group reflected on how poetry group had positively impacted their own confidence using AAC with these students. TA3 mentioned getting to work with different students meant *"getting to know"* different communication methods she *"didn't know how to do"* before poetry group and that it was *"kind of cool...learning more about that".* Another exchange in the focus group reflected on how the focus of poetry group aided the staff's confidence using AAC systems, particularly the PODD and being able to navigate through this:

[TA 2] Yeah, because it was very intentional and deliberate, and we were focusing.

[TA 4] It actually helped me, really learning how to use the PODD consistently.

[SLT-S] Navigate through hey?

[TA 4] Yeah. I feel more confident using the PODD after that. So that's good.

TA2 later expanded that she *"felt like that too. It was quite good to have concentrated time to go over the PODD and hearing everyone around the room while you were doing it, helping with your communicating".* The reflexive journal entries also indicated that staff were growing in confidence using AAC. This included examples such as noting when staff were *"approaching [SLTR] with some good questions"* and *"referring to co-construction techniques,"* such as when TA2, while working with Supergirl, followed a model from the SLTR and, *"self-reflected that she may have been scanning too fast".*

Independence was an important skill that was both fostered and advocated for in poetry group. As was noted in the reflexive journal, TA2 told one student that she *"wanted to make sure [student not in study] was writing the poem [they] wanted to write... referring to co-construction strategies"*. Emily Dickinson was noted one week to use her communication device unprompted to instruct adults on how she wanted her poem to be read out and *"Emily Dickinson loved it when I read her poem out 'fast' as requested. And she made SLT-S 'act' out her poem when some visitors came into the room."* On one occasion, Banker Pig was noted in the reflexive journal to have said *"do it myself"*. Following this request, he was not taken to a page as was suggested in the activity but was told he would be given *"time to do it himself...and he chose an adjective! His first simile was 'grass as loud as me.' This was all by himself, I did not take him to any pages all session"*. Another time, Banker Pig was able to relate one of the warmup poems written by a 10-year-old to his 10-year-old sister by calling out her name.

Giving the students space to explore and make mistakes was discussed in the reflexive journal and focus group. TA1 reflected on the importance of letting the students know that *"it had to be their work, and it didn't have to be perfect"*. The teacher echoed this sentiment during the focus group that something she observed the students enjoying was that *"nothing's wrong, there's no right or wrong, but whatever they say is acceptable"*. She felt that *"different kinds of poems"* used in the warm-up activity helped the students to know that *"anything can be a poem"*. This was reflected in this excerpt of the reflexive journal from the final group session:

Since we read 'On the Ning Nang Nong' [by Spike Milligan], I think it has really given Emily Dickinson permission to see poems as being something silly...She likes to be very clear and purposeful in her communication...she is worried about making mistakes... When we did the 'On the Ning Nang Nong' poem, she thought it was really funny and since then

she has been more open to writing whatever she feels like because she has seen poems can be anything... Now she is attempting to do that herself. This indicated a shift for Emily Dickinson to be more comfortable exploring and giving it a go.

The teacher also discussed the effect she had seen on the students' confidence, reflecting that *"They got so confident... they can just write anything, and it is what they are feeling. And whatever they are writing is beautiful. And it gives them the confidence to be able to write more".* Three students agreed in their interviews that poetry group helped them with their self-confidence (Banker Pig, Maya Angelou and Sally). Students were also noted as showing pride in their work in the reflexive journal, for example, in week six the SLTR observed *"how proud the students were of themselves and their work"* when they were sharing their poems at the end of the Group.

Theme Five: Poetry Group Fostered Enjoyment of Students and Staff

All of the data sources showed signs of enjoyment of both students and staff. In the student interviews, the students were asked, 'how did you feel in poetry group?' All the students agreed that they felt happy in poetry group. Four students also agreed that they felt they had fun. Maya Angelou added that she felt *"excited"* in poetry group, while Banker Pig said he felt *"love".* Four students indicated that poetry group was hard work. When asked 'what did you enjoy about poetry group? All five students indicated yes to 'enjoyed using their AAC'.

Both the focus group and reflexive journal made note of observations of student enjoyment. TA2 described the start of poetry group sessions as having a *"ripple"* through the classroom from the students which had *"been really good".* Several participants in the focus group described multiple students as having *"had fun"* (TA1, TA2, Teacher) and *"a lot of joy"* (Teacher) across the course of poetry group. TA2 noticed the students getting *"more and more satisfaction out of sharing as the weeks went on".* TA1 also felt that *"to present their*

work to class, that gives them joy as well". TA2 stated that the students *"definitely enjoyed poetry time".*

The reflexive journal often described times the students' showed signs of enjoyment, such as laughter and smiles. For example, the SLTR noted in week five there was *"a lot of very happy, smiling and laughing kids today,"* and described at one point *"sitting between Banker Pig and Emily Dickinson, and they were both laughing so much. I felt so happy that they were both so engaged in their poetry writing and that it was bringing them so much joy!"* In week nine, Emily Dickinson was described as *"her face lit up with smiles"* (SLTR) as she was writing her poem. In the same week, Maya Angelou presented her poem recorded on her switch and the SLTR noted *"her smile when she is presenting is so amazing".* In the last session as Emily Dickinson completed her poem *"everyone was looking over as she was laughing so hard"* (SLTR).

In their interviews, students were also asked questions about what poem they were most proud of, but there was no clear consensus. Each poem was chosen by at least one student as being the one they were most proud of, except for the simile walk poem, which one student (Supergirl) stated was the most fun. Students were slightly more in favour of the 'What am I? Poems' (n=2). One student (Emily Dickinson) did not choose a poem they were most proud of until the interviewer offered the answer 'all of them' which was not previously offered to the other students.

Three of the students agreed they would like to do poetry group again in their interviews. Interestingly, the other two students did not provide a response to this question.

Often the students' enjoyment in poetry group positively influenced the staff's level of engagement in the focus group and reflexive journal. TA2 mentioned seeing Maya Angelou's *"joy when she's making her poems...She loves it, you know? Gives me chills".* TA4 also mentioned that Banker Pig's work *"gave her chills, made her tear up"* as

was noted in the reflexive journal. The SLTR reflected on her strong reaction to Banker Pig's work saying:

> *It's the staff now being able to say look how cool this poem is. I can witness this as someone who knows this student and cares about this student, and knows how they communicate much better now. I loved that she [TA4] reflected so much about how Banker Pig sees the world and that is something she has learnt about him through his poetry.*

SLT-S reflected on the engagement they had seen throughout poetry group, and how this had been impacted by everyone's involvement:

> *The last thing I wanted to say was how well the staff have embraced the poetry sessions, so why it's worked so well from my perspective is looking around the room and seeing everybody involved. So, there's not students waiting for their turns. And having everybody on board. You did a really good job of pulling everyone in. And making sure that the students had that time and that opportunity with a staff member, and that's a massive team effort that you don't see in every classroom, and you don't see all the time, so I think that's a really big credit to your team, and to SLTR as well.*

Staff also appeared to enjoy the group, with the teacher in the focus group saying she was "*going to miss it,*" and that she had gotten *"a lot of joy"* out of the group. The reflexive journal also made note of staff enjoyment. One instance that was noted in the reflexive journal was when the warmup poem was *On the Ning, Nang, Nong* by *Spike Milligan*, and staff *"were saying they remembered this poem and hyping it up".* TA1 described how her own view of poetry had changed from *"a little thing that rhymes"* to *"poetry is expressing ideas and fun things, and it's not always in a little box".* TA1 also expanded on

how they felt that poetry had impacted the students and that it *"makes their world a bit bigger"*.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This research examined the opportunities and experiences within a poetry group for students with multiple disabilities who use AAC and the staff who supported them. In this chapter, the themes outlined in the results section will be discussed.

Theme One: Practical Considerations Relating to Consistent Routine, Space, Staff Support and Time Facilitated Success

Having a consistent routine helped both students and staff understand expectations and facilitated participation in poetry group. Consistent routines help students to feel empowered, raise expectations and are more likely to engage students in learning (Brunzell, 2021). Having familiar learning routines can help reduce cognitive load by creating familiar patterns in working memory and long-term memory (Da Silva, 2023). Cognitive load theory is of particular importance for students with disabilities, as they have additional demands (Kennedy & Romig, 2024). Supergirl provides a good example of how the routine of poetry group helped her participate. Having the consistent routine and expectation for each stage of poetry group allowed her to understand her role and participate fully. This is reflected in both the reflexive journal and focus group data. Having a consistent routine and motivating activity follows the Red Yellow Green framework that familiar and motivating activities provide the best opportunities for extending learning (Erikson & Koppenhaver, 2020).

Within the focus group, the physical environment was mentioned frequently as both a barrier and facilitator to student engagement. The physical environment can impact aspects of AAC communication such as conversational agency (Valencia et al., 2020). Conversational agency refers to a person being able to express exactly what they want to say. A busy environment may have a negative impact (Kennedy & Romig, 2024; Valencia et al., 2020), which was a concern raised in the focus group. Suggestions were made for possible future sessions for staff to attempt to be quieter, or to move to different spaces.

On the other hand, positive impacts of seeing and hearing others using AAC were also noted in the focus group. The session that took place partially out of doors also had a positive impact on the students, as noted in the focus group and reflexive journal. This session gave the students more space and a quieter environment to write in, so this may reflect what was suggested in the focus group, that the classroom environment was too busy and/or noisy.

Environment is a feature of Light and McNaughton's (2014) communication competencies. This was added to Light's (1989) competencies as the impact of environment can have such a significant impact on an AAC user and their ability to communicate. This includes personal factors of environment which is discussed in more depth in theme three. Kennedy and Romig (2024) discuss the impact that aspects of the physical environment, such as temperature or noise, can have on a child's extraneous load, in regard to cognitive load theory. Mitigating the impact of these environmental concerns can help to minimise load. It is positive to note that staff were reflecting on what could be done to minimise this for students in poetry group, and this may have a positive future impact in the classroom.

One aspect of personal environment was that the SLTR was in the room, running each poetry session. This was commented on positively in the focus group, as staff noted having someone proficient with AAC being able to give feedback in real time was useful. Dowden's (1999) communication profiles identified roles for the communication facilitator as AAC users and their communication partners work through the stages. For emergent communicators, the main role identified for facilitators was modelling AAC, while context-dependent communicators require facilitators to train more communication partners. Having an SLT accessible prior and during poetry group to fulfil these communication facilitator expectations appeared to support the other staff.

This reflects the findings from both Kent-Walsh et al. (2010) and Hanley et al. (2024) that communication partner training can have a positive impact on the AAC user. Kent-Walsh et al. (2010) found that children communicated longer utterances using their AAC, despite the children receiving no direct therapy, indicating the importance of communication partner training. The combination of the initial communication partner training at the start of poetry group, seeing the students engage and succeed, and the ongoing speech and language therapy support appeared to have had a positive impact on the environment throughout poetry group. Hanley et al. (2024) also discussed the impact of a communication partner having positive and high expectations for AAC users. This appears to reflect the impact that having the SLTR in the sessions had on the other staff members which was noted in both the reflexive journal and focus group.

Time was another aspect that was mentioned throughout the focus group and reflexive journal. Staff began to notice the benefits of giving the students more time to share their own ideas and compose their poems using their AAC. Time is repeatedly identified in both the research and clinical practice literature as one of the most powerful factors for AAC users (Hartmann & Sheldon, 2025; Howery, 2018; Mathis et al., 2011; Midtlin et al., 2015; Zangari, 2014). This includes wait time, expectant pauses, providing processing time and taking time to understand the message. One example of the factor of time was noted in the reflexive journal, when TA2 reflected that she may have been scanning too fast. After implementing a longer wait time, Supergirl engaged in her writing. Zangari (2014) specifically reflects on the power of the expectant pause to encourage AAC users' participation.

More than one member of staff commented in the focus group on the benefit of poetry group providing a focused period of time to work with AAC. Having a dedicated time each week where the students and staff were all focused on implementing AAC and getting to

practice co-construction skills was a benefit of poetry group. Co-construction relies on having the time for the AAC user to persevere in getting their message across (Zangari, 2022). In the context of this poetry group, co-construction techniques such as wait time, asking open ended questions and letting the child take the lead were discussed in the professional learning seminar and revisited throughout the group.

Another TA reflected, however, that having focused time in poetry group made them wish they had even more time and resources to give these students. Giving enough time to get everything done is difficult, as these students have plenty of needs, activities, learning and fun that they need to fit into their day. Seeing the benefit of poetry group on the students' communication appears to have made this TA wish for more dedicated times like these. The more time these students were given with their learning, the more staff were able to reflect on the self-expression and communication that was given.

There were repeated mentions in the reflexive journal about the time that was taken for the students to be ready for the day, including position changes, toileting and communication systems being set up. The amount of time that these activities of daily living take impacts the time that these students can spend on learning tasks, unless it is acknowledged and action is taken to supplement this time (Bayldon, 2018). Interestingly, this particular aspect of time, regarding personal cares, was not specifically mentioned in the focus group. This may be because the teacher and TAs are in this class every day and so every classroom lesson begins in the same way and thus does not stand out as being unusual to them. Snart and Hillyard (1984) examined the impact that staff ratios have in classrooms for students with multiple disabilities, finding that higher staff ratios tended to result in more instructional time being spent with the students. This appears to echo what was reported in the reflexive journal, where days with higher staff ratios were referred to more positively in regard to how much work the students were able to achieve.

Theme Two: Poetry Group Facilitated Whakawhanaungatanga - The Development, Maintenance and Consolidation of Interpersonal Relationships

Poetry group appeared to inspire students and staff to both build new relationships and maintain existing ones. Others have identified that poetry can provide a way for people to connect with others (Wagner & Musselwhite, 2020). Fenge et al. (2016) specifically examined young people with disabilities sharing their experiences through poetry, and the impact this had on both them and their audience. Audience members said they felt they understood the young people more after hearing their performances, and the young people felt they had been able to express themselves well. This seems to reflect the findings of the current research, with members of staff reflecting in the focus group that they felt they understood more about their students, with one TA mentioning she felt she understood more about how Banker Pig's mind worked and made connections. Poetry group also gave SLT-S, who was new to working with the students, a foundation to learn more about how the students' communicated. McNaughton et al. (2019) identified the importance that AAC plays in the role of an AAC user being able to build relationships and experience more social connections. McNaughton et al. (2019) identified that by expanding the AAC users' communication and building the understanding of the community around the AAC user, this resulted in better social outcomes for the AAC user. Understanding AAC theoretically and being able to respond to the individual needs of the AAC user are two different things, and it is important to be able to do the second (Hanley et al., 2024).

Using co-construction techniques requires the communicator and communication partner to work as a team to get the intended message across (Zangari, 2022). As part of a scoping review of how co-constructed communication has been assessed in adults with acquired communication disability, Carragher et al. (2024) commented that friends and family are common co-construction partners, and the familiarity of the relationships likely has an

impact on the effectiveness of the communication and/or the co-construction. For poetry group, some students were more selective about who they wanted on their 'team' while writing their poems. Maya Angelou was able to advocate to have familiar members of staff working with her until she felt comfortable with the expectations of poetry group. Maya Angelou's development in working with others was noted in the reflexive journal. In the focus group, one TA who had an existing strong relationship with Maya Angelou was able to reflect on what made them a good team when working together and mentioned aspects of her communication methods that she knew to look out for. Understanding an AAC user's communication methods is important for communication partners (Hanley et al., 2024). Dowden (1999) mentions in her communicator profile descriptors that a familiar communication partner is often needed while developing early communication skills. Even though Maya Angelou is further along in her communication journey, she still finds reassurance in working with familiar people who understand her. However, as Maya Angelou built her confidence, found comfort in the familiar routine, and understood her role in poetry group, she became more confident working with new people. Maya Angelou agreed during her interview that poetry group had helped her with her confidence. Knupp (2004) identified that poetry writing instruction for sixth graders built both writing skills and confidence. Having existing strong relationships helped Maya Angelou to build her confidence, and then poetry group allowed her to build new relationships. As mentioned earlier, Fenge et al. (2016) found that in their poetry group for young people with disabilities, that the poets felt that writing and performing poetry had helped them share their view of the world, and the audience felt they had a better understanding of the poets and their lives. This reflects what was mentioned in the focus group in this research, where multiple staff members mentioned feeling they understood the students better after working with them on their poems.

Poetry group provided students with the opportunity to describe and maintain their relationships with their whānau. Whānau was a common topic for students to write poems about or to mention in their poems. Almost every student wrote at least one poem which mentioned a member of their whānau. Banker Pig also related one of the warmup poems to his sister by saying her name while the group was discussing the poem. The relevance of this was only better understood once mentioned to his whānau, who clarified his sister was 10, the same age as the poet. Discussions with different whānau members were noted in the reflexive journal, and extra context or understanding was often given to the student's poetry. This is another example of a familiar communication partner being able to interpret communication more successfully, especially for students still developing their communication skills (Dowden, 1999). Another common topic for all of the students to include in their poems was themselves. The students appeared to enjoy exploring their personal relationships and their relationships with themselves through their poems. The *Seen but Seldom Heard* poetry project for young people with physical disabilities also found that their poems often explored their personal relationships (Fenge et al., 2016). However, there was less of a focus on family. This may be due to differences in communication levels or perhaps in life experiences.

During the interviews, most students agreed that they enjoyed the group aspect of the poetry group. Poetry group gave the students opportunities to hear poems being read, as well as writing and performing or hearing their own poems heard aloud too. Malekoff (2002) reported that in the poetry group he formed for those with mental health needs, students developed connections with each other and congratulated each other on their poems. In this poetry group, staff modelled to the students how to be good audience members when others were sharing their poems, and every student who shared was clapped and cheered, no matter the length of their work. In this way, poetry group provided an avenue to teach and encourage positive interactions and model social conventions of being a supportive friend and audience

member. Therrien et al. (2016) identified in their systematic review that intervention can improve peer interactions with students who use AAC, although this highlighted a need for more research to be done around peer relationships between students with disabilities who use AAC. As noted in the reflexive journal, students were usually quiet and engaged during their peers' poetry presentations, as they were busy listening as their way to support each other. Peer to peer relationships can be difficult for these students, as their wheelchairs or other adaptive equipment often create a physical barrier between each other, and their communication is still developing. Peer relationships between AAC users is an area in need of future research (Therrien et al., 2016). It was documented that students were smiling or laughing as one way to show enjoyment of being with each other and each other's work.

Theme Three: The Value of Poetry Group in Facilitating Students' Self-expression and Self-advocacy

Poetry group facilitated opportunities for students' self-expression and self-advocacy. Being given the space and voice to be able to communicate is of vital importance, as established in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and further defined by Lundy (2007). Poetry group provided space (the opportunity to give opinions), voice (the support to express opinions), audience (awareness that their opinions would be listened to), and influence (an understanding that their opinions would be acted upon as appropriate). These will be discussed below as a framework for how self-expression and self-advocacy were facilitated within poetry group.

Students were given the opportunity to present their poems, or works in progress, at the end of each session. It was noted in the reflexive journal that both students and staff were attentive during these presentations and helped to foster a supportive audience. Malekoff (2002) discussed an important finding from the poetry group for children with mental health needs was the camaraderie built amongst the group by the students supporting each other and

sharing encouragement. Keylin (2024) examined the work of Dave Young, a poet who uses and presents with an AAC device and the impact this had on the audience. Keylin discussed that in poetry, the audience is expecting authenticity, and that for Dave Young, his authentic voice is his AAC device voice, even if it lacks emotion or emphasis. For poetry group, the students often chose to write about their own families, experiences and familiar places. Whether they chose to present their work recorded on a switch, or to have a staff member read it for them, their authentic work was at the forefront. In the reflexive journal, focus group and student interviews, students were reported to have showed a clear interest and excitement for having the opportunity to share and present their work. Providing opportunities for presenting work is important in the New Zealand Curriculum, and it is important to offer alternative and unique opportunities for people with communication needs to present their work (Ministry of Education, 2015).

Poetry group also gave the students support to use their voice and express their opinions. This was evident both through their poems and discussions that happened during poetry. One TA reflected that although the students are asked each day how they are feeling, poetry group seemed to provide them with more time to go deeper into this and unpack more of their feelings. This aligns with what Midtlin et al. (2015) found when interviewing young people with cerebral palsy. They found that one of the most important attributes of a good communication partner is that they take the time to understand what someone is saying. While the students are asked each day during their morning hui about their feelings, it is rare that the students get to have more time to dive into why they have chosen an answer and to discuss it in any detail. Poetry group seemed to provide a space for students to investigate their feelings more, and for the communication partners to have more time to support this exploration.

Poetry being used as a vehicle for self-expression is commonly discussed in the literature (Fenge et al., 2016; Malekoff, 2002; Simecek & Rumbold, 2016). Poetry group seemed to reflect these findings, with students using poetry to express their thoughts and opinions on aspects of their lives. Sometimes the deeper meaning behind the students' poems only became clear once family members shared some background information about the student or their life. This again reflects the importance of having communication partners who know a lot about the person communicating (Carragher et al., 2024) although as discussed in theme two, poetry group helped to develop these relationships.

Examples of the students both advocating for themselves or rejecting the tasks or expectations were noted, and these were discussed with a positive light across all data sources. The SLT-S and one TA reflected on a moment where Banker Pig had continued to advocate for himself to be allowed to listen to music after poetry group. They both reflected on the importance of poetry group having given Banker Pig the opportunity to share his thoughts, and that he knew his thoughts would be listened to and acted upon. Banker Pig referred to this session during his interview when discussing what he had enjoyed about poetry group, highlighting how having the space to advocate for himself was enjoyable, notable and important for him. This very clearly aligns with Lundy (2007) and the interpretation of Article 12 of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) and the importance that people feel their thoughts and opinions are given due weight. Poetry group was a place where Banker Pig felt he could advocate for himself and is noted in the reflexive journal to have done so on multiple occasions. Watson (2016) strongly emphasises the importance of people with multiple disabilities being able to advocate and make decisions for themselves. Watson (2016) examined the experiences of five people with profound cognitive disabilities and their support network during a decision-making process. Emphasis was placed on the importance of believing that the person has the ability to have opinions and make decisions about their

life. Having a supportive network who will be responsive to the decisions that are made is crucial. As the example with Banker Pig highlights, poetry group provided opportunities for self-advocacy, which was reflected on by staff as being an important skill. This supports that people in Banker Pig's network have the belief that he is able to make decisions and act on these as appropriate.

Poetry group appeared to impact the classroom culture outside of poetry group, which TA1 described as the student's knowing *"somebody's going to listen to me".* TA2 said poetry group had acted as a reminder of the importance of having high expectations for the students. Environment is an important factor in Light and McNaughton's (2014) aspects of communication competency, but one that the AAC user often does not have much control over. While the physical environment mostly did not change during poetry group, the classroom culture changed during this time to give more time, space and weight on the student's communication. This may explain some of the impacts that were observed from poetry group that were not expected as direct outcomes, such as self-advocacy. It is promising that there already appear to be signs that this is transferring to the classroom beyond this group.

Theme Four: The Benefit of Poetry Group on Strengthening and Developing AAC skills, Independence, AAC exploration, and Self-confidence for Students and Staff

Light (1989) and Light and McNaughton's (2014) communication competencies defined features that make an AAC user competent with their AAC. The students in poetry group had different levels of experience with their AAC prior to the group, however, the group gave the students space to work on different factors of AAC competency. Three of the students in the interviews said they felt that poetry group had helped them with their AAC. The two students who did not agree with this question have had their high-tech communication devices for over a year, are more context-dependent communicators

(Dowden, 1999) and they may already feel quite competent with AAC. This is strengthened by Banker Pig agreeing with the SLTR when she commented on him already being quite proficient with PODD. For the students who did feel that poetry group had helped with their AAC, the interview question did not ask the students to highlight specific aspects they felt they had improved on. However, an important aspect of AAC competency is psychosocial. This competency was added by Light and McNaughton (2014) to highlight an AAC user's sense of self as supporting their overall competency with their AAC. Poetry group appears to have encouraged student's independence with their AAC, as noted in the reflexive journal, with students advocating for themselves during their writing to impact their overall work. Hurd (2005) suggested that one of the most important psychosocial aspects for an AAC user was independence. This is supported by Light and McNaughton (2014) as a key feature of psychosocial competency. There were multiple moments of independence noted in the reflexive journal. From Emily Dickinson instructing staff how to present her poem, to Banker Pig asking to complete his writing himself, students showed signs of independence, especially as the sessions continued and they became more confident with the expectations of the group. Dowden's (1999) AAC profiles highlighted independence as the ultimate goal for AAC users, so the students making progress towards more independence with their AAC shows that they are developing as communicators. Autonomy (Porter & Burkhart, 2012) or conversational agency (Valencia et al., 2020) is another way this can be framed, as while complete independence may be a far-off goal, autonomy and agency are achievable, even while still mastering other skills. Conversational agency was something staff felt was important, as TAs mentioned in the reflexive journal and focus group the importance of allowing the students to write their own work. This again highlights the importance of the AAC user being able to say what they want to say.

Another important psychosocial factor displayed in poetry group was confidence. Three of the students agreed in the interview that they felt that poetry group had helped them with their confidence. It was noted in the reflexive journal and focus group that students showed pride and confidence in their work. The focus group also identified poetry group as giving the students a safe space to make mistakes, with the teacher and TAs commenting on students seeing the importance of it being their own work, their own voice and that it didn't have to be perfect, to be right. Beaumont (2022) also found that poetry gave students who were English language learners a way to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes. Poems were discussed as freeing the students from grammatical and linguistic confines, and that poems could be both brief but profound. Beaumont's study focussed on performance of poetry, but students were encouraged to reflect on the poems they were reading by acting and discussing them. Students were able to use the rhythm of the poems to help with reading them aloud, and this along with their acting helped to smooth over any mistakes made in their presenting. In the current study, Emily Dickinson was a key poetry group member who benefitted from having poetry group as a place where she could explore her communication device for fun and be okay with making mistakes. As poetry group progressed, she became more confident and carefree with her poems, and it is noted in the reflexive journal that her enjoyment appeared to grow as well, with her last poem in poetry group written in between laughter. Confidence is one of the key psychosocial factors that Light and McNaughton (2014) highlight. One of the ways confidence can be inspired in AAC users is by seeing others using AAC. Being able to see an AAC user who is able to competently use their AAC system is vital to the success of other AAC users, and their belief that they too can learn to communicate with a high level of competency (Light & McNaughton, 2014). Poetry group gave space for students and staff to see others using AAC but also to see others accessing AAC using similar access methods and communication

systems. The Ministry of Education (2015) also highlights learning through arts and culture as having a positive impact on confidence.

Staff confidence was also commented on in the focus group and reflexive journal as increasing over the course of poetry group. As well as AAC users appearing to benefit from seeing AAC being used (Light & McNaughton, 2014), the staff in the poetry group felt they benefitted from seeing and hearing each other use AAC, for example, when TA2 commented on hearing other people using PODD gave her more confidence to use it as well. Most staff commented in the focus group on feeling an increase in confidence using AAC over the course of the group. With students with multiple disabilities, especially students who use partner assisted scanning, operational tasks may be carried out by communication partner, so having someone who is confident in how to carry out these tasks is important (Light & McNaughton, 2014). Hanley et al. (2024) found in their systematic review around communication partners that one of the key themes was the preparedness of the communication partner, which included the belief of the communication partner in AAC and having a supportive team. Having all of the class staff go through the training and poetry group together means they were able to learn together with the students and support each other. As mentioned, while discussing theme two, having a positive AAC environment will be of huge benefit to the AAC users (Light & McNaughton, 2014).

Theme Five: Poetry Group Fostered Enjoyment of Students and Staff

The students all enjoyed poetry group, as was recorded across all data sources. There were only two questions that had complete consensus across the student interviews; that the students felt happy in poetry group and that they enjoyed using their AAC in poetry group. The students being able to confirm their enjoyment beyond observations mentioned in the reflexive journal and focus group is very powerful. As mentioned previously in the discussion, psychosocial factors impact communication competence, and enjoyment and

having a good sense of humour are both likely to be important (Light & McNaughton, 2014). Baker (2005) discussed the motivation formula for AAC users, that what the AAC user communicates about has to be motivating enough to overcome the physical, cognitive and temporal barriers to communication. The implication being that the students found enough enjoyment through poetry to be inspired to use their AAC and to write their poems.

Poetry for Life is one of the key factors that Wagner and Musselwhite (2020) emphasise as a benefit to poetry; that poetry can foster enjoyment, connection with others and become a lifelong interest of AAC users. Students were asked in their interviews if they would do poetry group again. Three of the students indicated yes, suggesting that poetry has become an interest that they would like to pursue further beyond this study. As TA1 pertinently identified, the new experience and learning of poetry group *"makes their world a bit bigger".* It is important to provide students with complex learning needs a variety of learning opportunities and experiences, in ways that are accessible, to expand their knowledge (Ministry of Education, 2026).

Interestingly, the other two students chose to not answer if they would do poetry group again, so while they did not say yes to doing poetry group again, they also did not say no, or I'm not sure. There are some possible reasons for this non-response. First, the question was one of the last questions asked in the interview, which was about 30 minutes long, which was an extended period of time for the students to be focused for in a one-on-one environment. Additionally, the SLTR was the one asking the questions, and the students may have been trying to avoid upsetting them. While efforts were made to mitigate this effect, and students were reassured that any answer they gave was fine, these students may have still felt concerned. Or perhaps the students were simply unsure if they wanted to do the poetry group again, especially when the interview was after finishing the group, and they may have preferred to take a break. Yes or no questions can be difficult as they can have unintended

meaning or require more clarification before answering (Thompson & Behnami, 2018). Both of these students agreed to having enjoyed poetry in their interviews and were noted throughout the reflexive journal to have shown signs of enjoyment such as smiling and laughing. Sally even laughed throughout her interview, indicating she was enjoying the whole process.

A lot of laughter was noted in the reflexive journal across the weeks of poetry group. Students sometimes laughed while listening to the warmup poems, which showed they were engaging with the work. Poetry has been thought to foster enjoyment for a number of reasons. Maynard et al. (2005) surveyed a group of children's librarians, to examine their perspectives on the benefits of poetry, and what they believed made poetry pleasurable and drew children to poetry. Poetry was seen as being more accessible, especially for children who found reading difficult, as well as children enjoying hearing poetry being read aloud. In this poetry group, the nonsense poem *'On the Ning-Nang-Nong' by Spike Milligan* seemed to be a favourite, with students sharing they felt happy or excited by the poem. Emily Dickinson was reportedly so inspired by the poem that she indicated to her teacher that she wanted to write a similar "silly" poem. Her foray into nonsense poems made her laugh a lot of the next few weeks, as was noted in both the reflexive journal and the focus group. Having a good sense of humour was identified as an important psychosocial feature for an AAC user to have (Hanley et al., 2024). The reflexive journal noted that previously Emily Dickinson had been hesitant to make mistakes using her AAC, but nonsense poetry seemed to free her from this, and the humour allowed her to use her AAC more openly.

Poetry presentations at the end of each session often were mentioned as a source of enjoyment in the reflexive journal and focus group. As mentioned in theme three, presenting and sharing poems is an important way for people with disabilities to engage with their audience (Keylin, 2024). Students were often noted to initially refuse to share their poems

until they heard their peers work and then to change their mind. Presenting time was often mentioned in the reflexive journal as a time when a lot of students communicated, advocated for their turn (or to have another turn, and another turn), and when students showed signs of joy such as smiling and laughing. One week, as noted in the reflexive journal, Sally looked forward to presenting her work so much that she spent the session smiling and looking through her PODD, and forgot to write anything. The following week when it seemed she might do the same, she was reminded how much she wanted to share last week, and this motivated her to write her poem, so she had something to present at the end. Presenting work is important for students with communication needs, even if it may look different from what is expected (Ministry of Education, 2015).

Students and staff seemed to find poetry group a positive and enjoyable environment for communication, as all data sources noted. One of the key purposes of communication is social closeness (Beukelman & Light, 2020). As Beukelman and Light (2020) discuss, communication for social closeness is often not so much about the content of the communication. Rather, it is about the joyous feeling of having a shared interaction with someone and being in a connected moment with them. Poetry group provided the time and space to foster relationships, as discussed in theme two. Having moments of shared joy and understanding between students and staff seemed to be one of the more pertinent aspects of poetry group, as discussed in the focus group by several members of staff, and in the reflexive journal.

Summary

This chapter has discussed the five key themes from the study, as developed through thematic analysis, in relation to the current literature. Overall, the findings suggest that poetry group fostered a positive environment for new opportunities and experiences for staff and students with multiple disabilities. The final chapter will contain the conclusion of this

study, outlining strengths in terms of trustworthiness, limitations and challenges, clinical implications from these findings and suggestions for areas of future research.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This chapter summarises the purpose, design and rationale for carrying out this study which aimed to accurately describe the opportunities and experiences of a poetry group for students with multiple disabilities who use AAC and the staff who support them. It also draws together the key findings. Following this, the trustworthiness of the research is considered in relation to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness criteria for qualitative studies. Limitations and challenges are then discussed, before identifying areas for possible future research. Finally, the clinical implications are explored.

Students who have multiple disabilities and use AAC require varied, creative, and interesting learning opportunities. Expanding their world perspective and their use of AAC will aid them to access their learning and the world around them. Additionally, providing training and support to the adults who support their communication has also been shown to be beneficial. This study focused on the potential benefits of a poetry group for a group of students with multiple disabilities and the staff that support them. A poetry group was the creative context used to facilitate AAC opportunities for both students and staff. Although literature supports the use of poetry as a learning tool for children, there is limited research about students who use AAC and poetry. What is available predominantly lies in clinical literature (Musselwhite et al., 2021; Wagner & Musselwhite, 2020), as opposed to research studies. To the author's knowledge, there are no research studies focused on students with multiple disabilities who use AAC within a poetry group.

Given the benefits of poetry for student learning, this research therefore aimed to explore the opportunities and experiences available for the students and staff in a poetry group. The staff attended a pre-learning seminar prior to supporting students within a 10-week poetry group. Qualitative data were collected from the SLTR's reflexive journal and a staff

focus group. The data collected were thematically analysed. Student interview data were also collected, and this was quantitatively analysed and the collated with the developed themes.

Study findings highlighted many reported positive effects of poetry group for both the students and staff, including benefits for communication, as well as personal wellbeing and development. As a result of poetry group, changes to the class culture, such as staff describing students feeling they were going to be listened to, staff having a deeper appreciation for communication autonomy, and students advocating for themselves, were reported by staff, as well as positive changes to AAC use, for both students and staff. This included students and staff reporting feeling more confident with AAC and staff understanding and using more co-construction techniques.

Practical considerations (e.g. routine, space, time) were managed throughout the study, which appeared to facilitate overall success of the poetry group. It is important to note that these students had a range of physical, sensory, and communication needs, and the group was successful when these needs were appropriately recognised, supported and accommodated.

Trustworthiness

As this research adopted a case study design, it was important to employ several methods to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study. These are discussed in terms of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility refers to the trustworthiness of the research, and that the way the findings have been presented are a truthful and accurate representation of the data. Confirmability involves examining the researcher's biases and minimising the impact. Dependability requires the research process to be clearly documented and described so the study could be reproduced accurately. Finally, transferability relies on the provision of rich description and clear details so that the reader can find what is applicable to their own areas and feel confident with possible outcomes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Within this study,

credibility, confirmability, dependability and transferability have been strengthened in several ways.

Participants were involved in the poetry group over a 10-week period, providing a prolonged period of participation (Mills, 2014). Over this 10-week period, data were collected in the form of poetry samples, session logs and the SLTR's reflexive journal. Interview and focus group data were collected following the cessation of the group. Having varied data collection methods at multiple timepoints helps to strengthen the credibility and dependability of the research (Mills, 2014). The SLTR's reflexive journal, acting as ongoing data collection, gave opportunities for problem-solving as problems or challenges arose during the poetry group (Yin, 2018). Additionally, the reflexive journal acted as an audit trail to document decision making throughout the study. Triangulation of data sources, evidenced by the three main data collection sources used in this study, helps strengthen credibility and dependability of the findings (Mills, 2014). Using verbatim quotes from the interviews and focus group also strengthened the credibility.

Bias was something the SLTR was acutely aware of, having an existing relationship with students and staff, and holding the dual role of SLT and researcher. Potential forms of bias included: researcher bias, where consciously or unconsciously the researcher interprets observations or data to support expected outcomes or beliefs (Hecker & Kalpokas, 2025), interviewer bias, where consciously or unconsciously the interviewer causes participants to feel uncomfortable or unable to express their true opinions (Salazar, 1990), or confirmation bias, which is seeking data that confirm expected outcomes (Hecker & Kalpokas, 2025). Steps to mitigate bias were taken, including using the SLTR's reflexive journal to document and justify decisions, and ongoing discussions with the supervisors about topics such as development of interview questions, interpretation of data and consolidation of themes. These discussions with supervisors

continued throughout the poetry group, and throughout the data analysis process. Both supervision and self-reflection are an important part of confirmability (Mills, 2014).

Thematic analysis was conducted using the reflexive journal and staff focus group as data sources. Student interviews were quantitatively analysed before mapping to the established themes. The analysis process included consultation with supervisors throughout the process. Clarity around data collection, analysis and who is consulted during the process strengthens the dependability and confirmability of the study (Mills, 2014).

A case study is designed to examine and describe a case within specific boundaries (Yin, 2018). The goal of qualitative research is to describe within boundaries, so that others may take meaning from the case described, rather than to provide a fully transferable design with relevance to the general population (Mills, 2014). The aim of the study was to explore the experiences and opportunities that a poetry group provided for students with multiple disabilities who use AAC and the staff who support them. By describing the methodology of the study and the participants involved, the reader can understand this poetry group, make informed judgement about the quality of the research and decide what is transferable to their particular context and participants, as the reader finds relevant.

While the sample size was not large, this is a heterogenous group of students and staff, with various ages, cultures, experience and disabilities represented. This aids in providing a more representative group of the population, which strengthens the confirmability. The participants and context have been described in detail, as well as the methodology of how the poetry group was carried out. The data collection and analysis processes have also been clearly outlined. This rich description strengthens dependability, credibility and transferability.

Limitations and Challenges

Despite the steps taken and outlined above, there were some limitations and challenges that arose during the study. These will be addressed below, before moving into the potential avenues for future research, which may address some of these limitations.

Consideration of Setting

This poetry group was carried out in a specialist school in Aotearoa New Zealand. The school leadership and culture take pride in student voice and honouring communication. This top-down support of communication undoubtedly had an impact on the classroom culture, the AAC systems that were available, and the existing knowledge of the students and staff of AAC. The classroom consisted of students with multiple disabilities, and the environment is set up to support these students with their needs as much as possible. In this study, practical considerations were identified as a major theme during thematic analysis; therefore, it is likely that this study would have resulted in different outcomes had it been conducted under different conditions, where practical considerations might be more difficult to manage.

SLT Experience

The SLTR has several years of experience working with students with multiple disabilities who use AAC. This continues to be a relatively niche area of speech-language therapy, and it is possible another speech-language therapist may not have the same level of expertise or experience in this area. As a result, the group may have been facilitated differently, particularly in relation to confidence in leading the sessions, knowing how and when to appropriately extend the students and supporting staff with AAC related questions. The SLTR also had experience working with the specific students and staff in the group and was familiar with communication styles and other personal factors to be aware of. If this group was facilitated by someone who was not familiar with the participants, this may have also impacted the group and the outcomes of the study.

Social Validity

The poetry group was led by the SLTR. Having an SLT in the classroom on a weekly basis is not the norm in most classrooms across Aotearoa New Zealand. An SLT implementing this group with an emphasis on communication and AAC use may have impacted the focus and outcomes. For example, the poetry tasks set, particularly at the beginning of the group, encouraged the students to explore different vocabulary areas within their AAC system. This closely resembles the social environment at this specialist school, with an SLT implementing a group session with support from staff, and this impacted why this implementation model was chosen. Future research may benefit from having the group carried out by a teacher, as this may widen social validity for other contexts.

Future Directions

The findings of this research, focused on the benefits of a poetry group, appeared to be positive and provide scope for further research in this area. From conducting the literature review, a gap in the literature around people with multiple disabilities was abundantly clear. Research that includes and amplifies voices of people with multiple disabilities, especially in the field of education and speech-language therapy, would be of great interest to all those who work with these individuals. Documenting what these students can do, and their achievements, is important. In regard to the future directions identified from this study, these have been described below.

Measurable Changes in Communication

Due to various factors such as time and wanting to avoid unnecessary pressure on the student, it was decided to focus on post-interview data. However, it would be interesting to collect more objective data about the students' AAC use, such as, communicative turns taken, mean length of utterance or time taken to convey a message. If these data were collected both pre- and post- intervention phase, then it could be used to make comparisons

about the impact of poetry group. This could then include a pre-interview asking the students about their feelings around using AAC and other factors such as confidence both pre- and post- poetry group. It would be interesting to examine what gains may be made by students with multiple disabilities over a relatively short period of time.

Other AAC Systems

PODD was the predominant AAC system used by the participants in this study and was an initial guiding consideration when identifying participants for the study. Whilst PODD is a fairly common AAC system in this particular specialist school, it may not be the most used system in Aotearoa. The PODD design is fairly unique in its layout of category and activity-based pages, with a mix of core and fringe vocabulary. This unique design often guided how poetry structures were laid out and likely led to more inclusion of certain subsets of words (for example, adjectives under descriptions). A possible avenue for future research would be to include students who use either a different AAC system, or a heterogenous group of AAC users who used different AAC systems. This may impact how the group was run, as well as impact results from AAC implementation, use and comprehension of the AAC system by students and staff. It would be interesting to explore whether some AAC systems support more descriptive language or social communication than other systems. Whether the benefits that were seen as an outcome from this poetry group would also be experienced by other AAC users who use different systems, or perhaps by one system more than another would also be of interest.

Long Term Impact

Falling outside the scope of the study was the measurement of any potential long-term impact on AAC use, classroom communication culture, or other findings. Although some aspects of these were commented on positively in the focus group, this was carried out directly upon finishing the poetry group. It would be beneficial to know if running a group of

this kind had long term implications for students with multiple disabilities or their support staff. Adding another data collection timepoint would allow for long term follow-up. This would give more information on any sustained benefits for the students or staff.

Different Facilitators

This poetry group was run by an SLT. As discussed in the social validity section, having an SLT to run a 10-week group may not be attainable across all settings. Having the group be run again with joint facilitators (such as teacher and SLT), or to have it be a teacher run session may increase both the social validity, and aid with making this program more sustainable to be carried out long term or on a wider scale. Perhaps a schoolwide program could be implemented with multiple classroom teachers fulfilling the roles of facilitator.

Clinical Implications

This study supports the existing body of research for students with multiple disabilities being given more varied learning opportunities and to communicate more effectively and competently using AAC. Several clinical implications have been identified from the study for people working with students with multiple disabilities who use AAC.

Poetry Context

Although there is existing research for creative contexts being used to foster learning for students with disabilities, there is a limited amount of research including people with disabilities and poetry. The results from this study appeared to support the use of poetry as a basis for creative exploration of AAC. Poetry should be allowed to be the student's own voice and give an insight into how they see the world. To quote the teacher *"they can just write anything... And whatever they are writing is beautiful".* Students who use AAC need to be given time to explore their AAC, and to discover that their voice has power and meaning. For clinicians or teachers working with students who are AAC users, the findings of this research

suggest that poetry may provide a rich basis for exploration of AAC, self-expression and helps to build and maintain strong relationships between students and staff.

Staff Buy-in and Training

The success of poetry group was supported by the staff involvement throughout the 10-week group. The staff in the classroom spend the most time with the students throughout the day, and thus it is so important that the staff have confidence and understanding of how the students communicate. Outside of the staff in this study, the students are supported by a transdisciplinary team of other therapists, teachers and TAs. The ongoing support and learning from these additional members of staff mean that the students are able to be ready to learn. In order to have effective use of AAC, the findings of this study suggest that it was necessary for the staff to have a strong knowledge base of why and how to implement AAC with students with multiple disabilities.

Initial training and ongoing support from the SLTR were commented on positively from the focus group. Overall, however, the ongoing support seemed to have more influence on the confidence of staff to use AAC, as was commented on in the focus group and in the reflexive journal. This research supports that initial introduction of an AAC system is not enough, and in order to have functional use of an AAC system, ongoing support of the AAC user and their communication partners are needed.

Inclusion of Student Voice

Children who use AAC are often provided with opportunities to request, and share wants and needs. However, communication is so much broader than that, and AAC users need to be supported to have opportunities to communicate for all of the other fun and exciting ways we communicate with one another. Poetry group was reported to provide these students with communication opportunities such as story-telling and social closeness. These aspects of communication are as relevant as any other, as communication is how we connect with

others. SLTs and teachers who support AAC users should focus on including learning opportunities for a variety of communication purposes.

This study included the lived experiences of students with multiple disabilities who use AAC, through the information they shared in their interviews, as well as observations recorded throughout the study, in the reflexive journal and in the focus group. Being able to capture the voices and opinions of the participants was extremely powerful and helped bring validity to the study. More research needs to be conducted that includes and amplifies the voices of students with multiple disabilities.

Final Thoughts

This study examined the opportunities and experiences of a poetry group for students with multiple disabilities who use AAC and the staff who supported them. Overall, these experiences were positive, with all students stating they were happy in poetry group, and the opportunities presented by the group were numerous. The findings suggest students with multiple disabilities who use AAC benefit from having a supportive environment, knowledgeable communication partners, and varied and creative opportunities for learning.

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Appendix A

Figure 1: Conceptualising Article 12 Figure Permission

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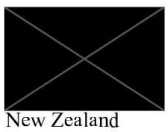
Requestor Location	 New Zealand
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Appendix B

Ethics Approval

TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA | MASSEY UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

7/03/2025

Dear: Catriona McKenzie

Re: Ethics Application - OM2 24/71 - Opportunities and Experiences of a Poetry Group for Children with Communication and Learning Needs

Thank you for the above application that was considered by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee:

Ohu Matatika 2 at their meeting held on ***Thursday, 12 December 2024***

On behalf of the Committee I am pleased to advise you that the ethics of your application are approved.

Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely



Professor Tracy Riley,
Acting Chair, Research Ethics Chair's Committee

Research Ethics, Graduate Research School and Ethics
Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North, 4442, New Zealand
E humanethics@massey.ac.nz; animalethics@massey.ac.nz
www.massey.ac.nz/research/ethics

Appendix C

Principal Information Sheet

Dear [redacted]

As you know, I am undertaking a research project as part of my Master of Speech and Language Therapy degree at Massey University with Associate Professor Sally Clendon and Dr Lisa Furlong. The project will involve implementing a 10-week poetry group for students with communication and learning needs (CLN). Students would attend weekly 50-minute poetry group sessions, where they would be asked to use their Pragmatically Organised Dynamic Display (PODD) books, or other communication systems to write poems on a variety of topics. The aim is that students will learn more about literacy and poetic functions, expand their use of their communication systems, and find enjoyment in literacy. I am writing to ask you to consider this research being conducted at [redacted] School.

Background Information

My interest in pursuing further study arose because I was keen to learn more about the importance of supporting creativity, communication and literacy for our students with CLN. Through my studies, I have found research evidence that learning in a creative way can support literacy and communication skills. With good communication and literacy skills, students with CLN can become more autonomous communicators and engage in their communities.

Project Aims

This project aims to add to the limited research in this area and explore what experiences and opportunities are available for children with CLN in a poetry group. This will include looking at the perspectives of students and staff.

Project Plan

I would like to recruit 4-7 students (who are already on my regular caseload), and the school staff (teacher, teacher aides and SLT) involved with these students to participate in the study. The student participants will be selected from one classroom and will have CLN. The study would run during the school year 2025, with the implementation of the poetry group in 50-minute weekly sessions from weeks 1-10 of Term Two.

Please see the attached table detailing the timeline for this research project, including the activities and forms of data that will be collected.

What is required of student participants?
Students will attend weekly 50-minute poetry group sessions for 10 weeks. Students will be asked to participate in one 30-minute individual interview following the 10-week poetry group to explore their experiences of the poetry group.

What is required of staff participants?
Staff will attend one 45-minute professional learning workshop prior to the 10-week poetry group on the topic of co-construction and being an effective communication partner. Staff will support students throughout the 10-week poetry group and during this time, will be asked to provide feedback on students' engagement and participation through a short observation form and/or written or verbal comments. At the conclusion of the intervention, staff will be asked to attend one 45-minute focus group discussion to share their perspectives and experiences of being involved in the poetry group.

I will collect each child's writing and a short form from the staff member who has worked with them each session. I will also be collecting feedback from verbal and written communications with staff (e.g. Storypark, emails). I will keep notes and a reflective journal.

The intervention will be implemented as part of the usual classroom programme, with some extra activities related to the research project. I will have a dual role as the SLT and as the researcher. I will organise and run the poetry group. I plan to carry out the professional learning workshop for staff and the implementation of the poetry group as part of normal service delivery. I will also require some time to complete the interviews to find out the perspectives of the students and staff about the poetry group. I will complete the analysis and interpretation of data and the thesis write-up outside of school hours. The data will be analysed in Term Three and Term Four and written-up for my master's thesis.

Benefits and Risks
The benefits to the school of participating in this research include the opportunity for staff to upskill in an area that may help improve students' participation and quality of life. More broadly, this research will provide useful information about supporting the communication and literacy skills of students with CLN.

To mitigate the risk of potential participants feeling pressured to participate in this study, I would like to ask you to recruit participants via an Information Sheet, and for consent forms to be returned to you. The Information Sheet will explain that choosing to participate or not will not impact the employment of staff or affect the regular provision

of therapy for the students. I have attached the Information Sheets and Consent Forms for both participant groups (students and staff) for your information.

There is a small risk that participants may be identifiable to others within the school community due to familiarity with the students and staff. All participants will be given a pseudonym for the purposes of the research, and all documents, forms, and findings will be de-identified. Findings and examples of student's writing may be used in presentations and publications arising from the research, but no names or other identifying details of individuals or the school will be used.

Some of the poetry group sessions will be video-recorded for the purpose of discussing implementation of the poetry group with my supervisors and allowing me to reflect on the poetry group sessions and make adjustments accordingly. This video footage will only be viewed by me and my supervisors. The video footage will not be used for analysis or research findings.

I have indicated in the information sheets that staff, parents, and students may be asked for permission by the research team to use images, videos, or writing samples for educational purposes (e.g., school trainings). If this occurs, a separate media release form will be used.

I am happy to provide a summary of my research findings when I submit my thesis.

Contact Information
Please do not hesitate to contact my supervisors or me anytime with any questions about the project. Contact details are as follows:

Student Researcher	Supervisor 1	Supervisor 2
Catriona McKenzie Student Researcher Massey University [redacted]	Associate Professor Sally Clendon Massey University [redacted]	Dr. Lisa Furlong University of Canterbury [redacted]

This project has been reviewed and approved by the MasseyUniversity Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, Application OM2 24/71. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact the Chairperson, Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, email humanethics2@massey.ac.nz

Thank you very much for considering this request.

Appendix D

Staff Information Sheet



Opportunities and Experiences ofa Poetry Group for Children with Communication and Learning Needs

INFORMATION SHEET FOR STAFF

My name is Cat McKenzie and as you know I am a speech language therapist (SLT) working at [redacted] School. I am undertaking a research project as part of my Master of Speech and Language Therapy at Massey University with Associate Professor Sally Clendon and Dr Lisa Furlong. The project will involve implementing a poetry group for students with communication and learning needs (CLN).
[redacted] (the principal) has consented for [redacted] School to be the participant school, and you are receiving this information sheet because I would like to invite you to be part of my research project. The poetry group will be implemented as part of the classroom programme, and some extra activities will be related to the research. I will have a dual role as the SLT, and as the researcher.

Background Information
My interest in pursuing further study arose because I was keen to learn more about the importance of supporting creativity, communication, and literacy for our students with CLN. Through my studies, I have found research evidence that learning in a creative way can support literacy and communication skills. With good communication and literacy skills, students with CLN can be autonomous communicators and engage in their communities.

Project Aims
This project aims to add to the limited research in this area and explore what opportunities and experiences are available for children with CLN in a poetry group.
This will include looking at the perspectives of students and staff.

Project Plan
I would like to recruit 4-7 students (who are already on my regular caseload), and the school staff (teacher, teacher aides and SLT) involved with these students to participate in the study. The student participants will be selected from one classroom and will have CLN. The study would run during the school year 2025, with the implementation of the poetry group in 50-minute weekly sessions across weeks 1-10 of Term Two.

What is required of staff participants?

- Staff will attend one 45-minute professional learning workshop prior to the poetry group commencing on the topic of co-construction and being an effective communication partner.
- Staff will support students throughout the 10-week poetry group and asked to feedback through a short form and/or written or verbal comments.
- At the conclusion of the poetry group, staff will be asked to attend one 45-minute focus group discussion to share their perspectives and experiences being involved in the poetry group. This will be transcribed.

I will collect each child's writing and a short form from the staff member who has worked with them each session. I will also be collecting feedback from verbal and written communications with staff (e.g. Storypark, emails). I will keep notes and a reflective journal.

I may video record the poetry group for the purpose of receiving advice from my supervisors and for self-reflection. This video footage will only be viewed by myself and my supervisors. The video footage will not be used for analysis or research findings.

You may be asked if we can use images or videos that include you for purposes beyond the research study (e.g., staff training). If so, we will provide you with a separate media release consent form.

The total time expected to take for staff involvement is 9.8 hours (8.3 in class with students for the poetry group, 1 x 45-minute professional learning workshop, 1 x 45-minute focus group discussion). The 45-minute focus group discussion will be additional to normal programme implementation. This will be during your regular working hours.

Benefits and Risks

The benefits to you include the opportunity to upskill in an area that may help improve students' participation and quality of life. More broadly, this research will provide useful information about supporting the communication and literacy skills of students with CLN.

The potential risks for your involvement in the study are low, and every effort will be made to mitigate these risks. These risks include:

- Privacy – There is a small risk that you may be identifiable to others within the school community due to familiarity with the students and staff. All participants will be given a pseudonym, and all documents, forms, and findings will be de-

identified. It is difficult to mitigate this risk, but every effort possible will be made to protect your privacy and confidentiality.

- Participation and Special Relationships – There is a risk that you may feel pressured to participate in this study as you know the student researcher in her role as an SLT in the school. To mitigate this risk, the principal will recruit participants via a letter and consent forms will be returned to the principal. It will explain that choosing to participate or not participate will not impact your employment.

Additional Information

The data will be used to address the research aim above. Transcription will either be completed by myself or I will use a professional transcriber who signs a confidentiality agreement. All identifying information will be removed from the written transcriptions of the interviews to protect the confidentiality of participants. Data will be safely stored in a Massey SharePoint folder while the project is being completed and will be kept for 5 years from the end of data collection and then deleted.

The project report will include no names or other identifying details of individuals or the school. Findings may also be used in presentations and publications arising from the research. I am happy to provide a summary of my research findings when I submit my thesis.

Your Rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- Ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- Decline to answer any questions in the interview or leave the focus group;
- Provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used; • Be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

Contact Information

Please do not hesitate to contact my supervisors or me at any time with any questions about the project. Contact details are as follows:

Student Researcher	Supervisor 1	Supervisor 2
Catriona McKenzie Student Researcher Massey University [redacted]	Associate Professor Sally Clendon Massey University [redacted]	Dr. Lisa Furlong University of Canterbury [redacted]

If you agree to participate in this research, please fill in the attached consent form and return to [redacted]

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, Application OM2 24/71. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact the Chairperson, Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, email humanethics2@massey.ac.nz

Thank you very much for considering this request.

Yours sincerely,

Cat McKenzie
Student researcher

Appendix E

Whānau Information Sheet



Opportunities and Experiences of a Poetry Group for Children with Communication and Learning Needs

INFORMATION SHEET

Who am I?

My name is Catriona (Cat) McKenzie, and I am a speech language therapist working at [redacted] School. I am a currently undertaking a research project as part of my Master of Speech and Language Therapy degree at Massey University. My project is being supervised by Associate Professor Sally Clendon and Dr Lisa Furlong. [redacted] has given permission for me to carry out this research within the school. The purpose of this letter is to invite your child to be part of my research project. I am seeking your approval for your child to participate in a 10-week poetry group, and to then be interviewed at the end.

What is this research about?

I want to explore what experiences and opportunities are available for children with communication and learning needs (CLN) in a poetry group. Students who have CLN may use Augmentative and Alternative Communication, such as visuals, a Pragmatically Organised Dynamic Display (PODD) book, or a communication device.

Students will attend weekly 50-minute poetry group sessions as part of their regular classroom programme, where they will use their PODD books, or other communication systems to write poems on a variety of topics. The aim is that students will learn more about literacy and poetic functions, expand their use of their communication systems, and find enjoyment in literacy.

This project aims to add to the research around the importance of supporting creativity, communication, and literacy for our students with CLN. Through my studies, I have found research evidence that learning in a creative way can support literacy and communication skills. There is currently not a lot of research around using poetry to support children who use AAC, especially within the Aotearoa New Zealand context. This research will include looking at the perspectives of students and staff involved in the poetry group.

Benefits and Risks

This research has the potential to offer benefits in multiple areas. First, it can empower children with CLN by giving them a creative outlet through poetry, allowing them to express themselves in a different way. This may help develop their communication skills and confidence.

Second, the information we gather from the children and staff on how children with CLN experience and engage with creative activities could lead to improvements in how educational and therapeutic programs are designed, making them more inclusive and effective.

Finally, this research could contribute to the broader field of AAC by highlighting the importance of creative expression in communication development. It may inspire future research and practices that further support AAC users in achieving their full potential.

The potential risks for your child's involvement in the study are low, and every effort will be made to mitigate these risks. These risks include:

- Privacy – There is a small risk that your child may be identifiable to others within the school community due to familiarity with the students and staff in future publications or conference proceedings arising from the research. All participants will be given a pseudonym, and all documents, forms, and findings will be de-identified. It is difficult to mitigate this risk, but every effort possible will be made to protect your child's privacy and confidentiality.
- Participation and Special Relationships – There is a risk that you may feel pressured to participate in this study as you know the student researcher in her role as an SLT in the school. To mitigate this risk, the principal will recruit participants via a letter and consent forms will be returned to the principal. It will explain that choosing to participate or not participate will not impact your child's regular provision of speech language therapy, nor will it affect your child's relationship with any member of staff.

What will your child be asked to do?

Your child will be included in a poetry group once a week for 10 weeks of term 2. Following the poetry group, your child will be individually interviewed where they will share their opinions and experiences of the poetry group.
It is anticipated that the interview will take approximately 30 minutes. The precise timing of the interview and the location will be negotiated with your child's teacher. Questions will be short and involve your child sharing their perspectives on their communication and poetry group through grouping things into categories (e.g. like, don't like). This will be supported with visual resources to support their understanding and expression. Their responses will be recorded.

The total time expected of your child is 8.8 hours (8.3 hours in class as usual, 30-minute interview time).
I will collect your child's writing and a short form from the staff member who has worked with them each session. I will also be collecting feedback from verbal and written communications with staff (e.g. Storypark, emails). I will keep notes and a reflective journal.
I may video record the poetry group for the purpose of receiving advice from my supervisors and for self-reflection. This video footage will only be viewed by myself and my supervisors. The video footage will not be used for analysis or research findings.
You may be asked if we can use images, videos, or writing samples from your child's participation in the poetry group beyond the research study for educational purposes (e.g., staff training). If so, we will provide you with a separate media release consent form.

What will happen to the data?
The data gathered from the poetry group and interviews will be used to address my research aim above. Transcription will either be completed by myself or I will use a professional transcriber who signs a confidentiality agreement. All identifying information will be removed from the written transcriptions of the interviews and any writing samples to protect the confidentiality of participants. Data will be safely stored in a Massey SharePoint folder while the project is being completed and will be kept for 5 years from the end of data collection and then deleted.
No names or other identifying details of individuals or school will be used in the project report. Findings may also be used in presentations and publications arising from the research. I will provide a summary of my research findings when I submit my thesis.

What rights do I have?
You and your child are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decline your child's involvement in the research, they will still attend the poetry group. However, they will not be interviewed, videoed and information about your child will not be collected or reported.
If you consent for your child to participate you/your child have the right to:
• Ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;

- Decline to answer any questions in the interview;
- Withdraw from the study up until data is analysed. There will be a check in point before data analysis and if you wish to withdraw from the study all data will be deleted;
- Provide information on the understanding that your child's name will not be used;
- Be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

If you agree to take part in my research project, please complete the attached consent form and return it to [redacted] or your child's classroom teacher.

If you have any concerns about the process of gathering data from the poetry group or interview, you can contact myself or my supervisors. Contact details are as follows:

Student Researcher	Supervisor 1	Supervisor 2
Catriona McKenzie Student Researcher Massey University [redacted]	Associate Professor Sally Clendon Massey University [redacted]	Dr. Lisa Furlong University of Canterbury [redacted]

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, Application OM2 24/71. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact the Chairperson, Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 2, email humanethics2@massey.ac.nz

Thank you for considering this request.

Yours sincerely,

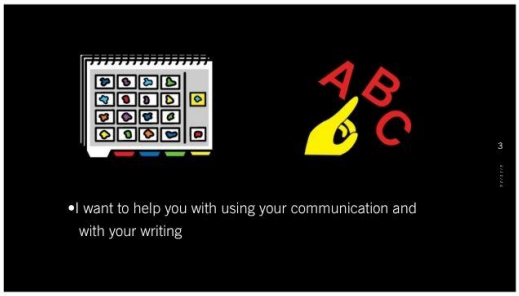
Cat McKenzie
Student researcher

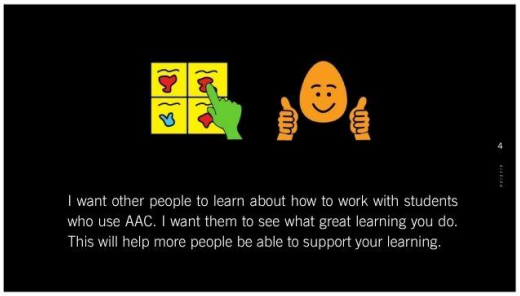
Appendix F

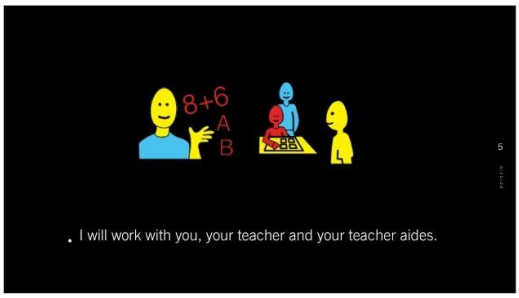
Student Assent Presentation

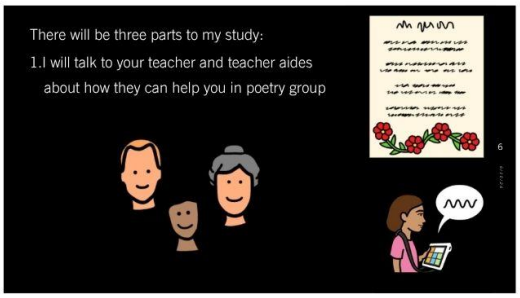


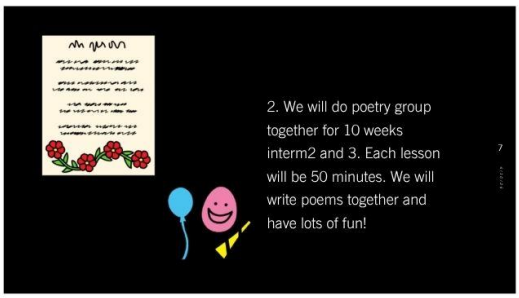






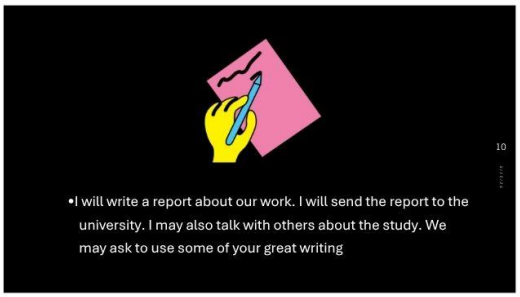




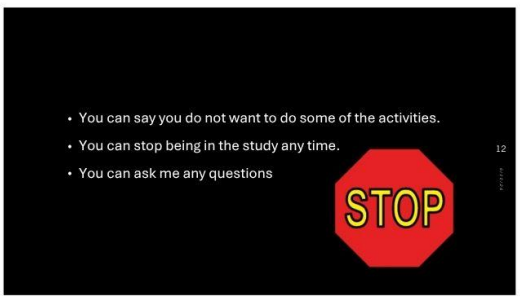

2. We will do poetry group together for 10 weeks interm2 and 3. Each lesson will be 50 minutes. We will write poems together and have lots of fun!
7

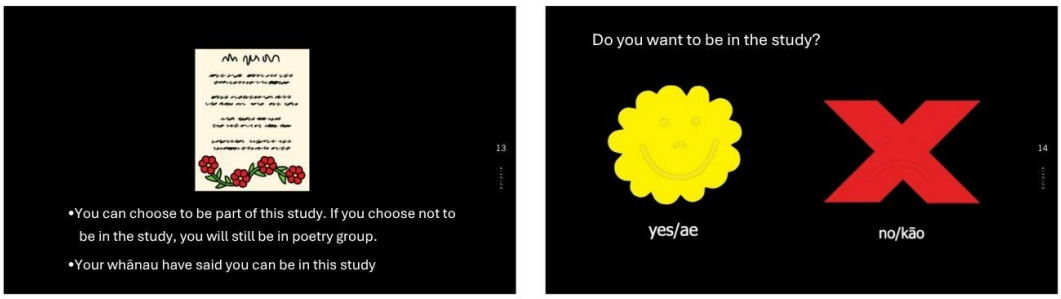

3. We will talk together about what you thought of poetry group and what your experience was. I will also talk to your teacher and teacher aides
8


I can tell you, your class team and your whānau about what I find out
9


•I will write a report about our work. I will send the report to the university. I may also talk with others about the study. We may ask to use some of your great writing
10


•The report will not say your name or the name ofour school. There is a small chance others at school may know who you are, but other people will not
11


• You can say you do not want to do some of the activities.
• You can stop being in the study any time.
• You can ask me any questions
STOP
12



Note. Created using Boardmaker software. PCS® is a registered trademark of Tobii Dynavox®. All rights reserved. Used with permission. See Appendix O for permission.

Appendix G

Page One Samples from Codebooks

Focus Group Codes

Name	Description	Files	References	Examples
Students alert and engaged	Students being engaged and having fun	2	11	"Also, I just think. I'm thinking of Maya Angelou in particular, just her joy when she's doing… when she's making her poems. She's just like, yes! She loves it, you know? Gives me chills."
Express ideas	Students expressing their ideas	2	10	"It's a skill, isn't it? Yeah. And, um… Yeah, I think for our students. If you don't give them that opportunity. They… they won't be able to… they won't know how that- they can express their ideas, and so this gives them an opportunity to, um. Yeah, to give their ideas, and to share them with others,"
'We had the time'	Time as an influencing factor	2	7	"From the student's perspective, they're getting a

Name	Description	Files	References	Examples
				communication partner who's really listening. And is really focused on that time communicating, you know?" "I just wanted more time, and more resources… You know what I mean? It's like, oh, I wish we could do more with these guys."
Learning seminar	References to the pre-intervention learning seminar or topics discussed in it	1	5	"And we can see how much, you know, understanding that they have. You know that we would always assume competence, but it's just a reminder, you know. To do that assuming competence. We need to have quite high expectations of them sometimes."
Confidence with AAC	Staff confidence around using AAC	2	4	"It actually helped me, really learning how to use the PODD consistently"

Name	Description	Files	References	Examples
'Didn't have to be perfect'	Students exploring their AAC and being okay making mistakes	2	3	“Yeah, and like you said, nothing's wrong, there's no right or wrong, but whatever they say is acceptable... I think also having the different kinds of poems up front, like an example, at the start, kind of show them that anything else can be a poem.”

Reflexive Journal Codes

Name	Description	Files	References	Examples
The students seemed alert and engaged	Students being engaged and having fun	10	32	"Emily Dickinson and Banker Pig especially seemed really happy and excited. They were using their switches lots and getting lots of work done."
'less time and less staff'	Poetry group not having enough time, running late or not having enough staff	9	25	"We once again had to re-jig the timing of the session which is a bit of a theme of this term." "I think it went pretty well considering we had less time and less staff."
Enough staff	Having enough staff in poetry group	3	4	"I thought it was a really nice session. We had two students away which meant we were 1:1 plus 1."
Enough time	Having enough time for poetry group	2	3	"I went in early today with my SLT student, so we were able to help setting everything up earlier."

Name	Description	Files	References	Examples
Poetry group at different time	Poetry group was held on a different day or time	2	2	"It was good to try out a different time slot as I have wondered if a middle block would be better than its usual first block time."
Share their work	Students sharing or presenting their poems	7	22	"Today everyone was very keen to share their poem." "She seemed so happy when she got to share her poem on the switch."
Staff 'getting it'	Staff showing comprehension of the activities or the purpose of Poetry Group	5	17	"I felt like the teacher aides were approaching me with some good questions." "[TA5] had such a strong reaction to this line, it showed that she really 'gets it.'"

Appendix H

Principal Consent Form



Opportunities and Experiences of a Poetry Group for Children with Communication and Learning Needs

Consent form for Principal

I have read the information in the letter and in the information sheets provided. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask more questions at any time.

- On behalf of my school, I agree to staff and students taking part in the research under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.
- I also agree to send information sheets to parents and staff inviting them to be part of the study and have consent forms returned to me.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Full name (printed): _____

Appendix I

Staff Consent Form



Opportunities and Experiences of a Poetry Group for Children with Communication and Learning Needs

Consent form for Staff

I have read the information in the information sheets provided. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask more questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider my participation in this study, and I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that choosing to participate or not participate will not impact my employment.

- I agree to the poetry sessions being videoed and shared within the research team to support the student researcher with completing her master's research.
  Yes/No

- I understand that if the research team want to use images/videos that include me beyond the research project (e.g. for school training purposes), then a separate media release consent form will be used.
  Yes /No

- I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Full name (printed): _____

Appendix J

Whānau Consent Form

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

Opportunities and Experiences of a Poetry Group for Children with Communication and Learning Needs

Consent form for whānau

I have read the information sheet and understand the information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I may ask more questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider my child's participation in this study, and I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that choosing to participate or not participate will not impact the services my child receives.

- I agree to my child being videoed participating in the poetry group. I understand that this will be shared within the research team to support the student researcher with completing her master's research.
  Yes/No

- I understand that if the research team want to use images/videos/writing samples from my child beyond the research project (e.g. for school training purposes), then I will be asked to sign a separate media release consent form.
  Yes /No

- I consent to my child participating in this study under the conditions set out in the Information sheet. I understand that my child will also be asked to provide their assent.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Full name (printed): _____

Appendix K

Session Log Form

Adult's name:
Student's name:

Today's poetry topic is:

How did the student write their poem today? (Tick any you used)

- ❑ PODD (from page one)
- ❑ PODD (from categories)
- ❑ PODD (taken to page ___)
- ❑ Alternative pencil / Alphabet
- ❑ Suggestions from an adult (listing ideas, naming things not in the PODD etc.)
- ❑ Anything else? _____

How did the student seem this session? (Tick any that apply)

- ❑ Awake/alert
- ❑ Tired/asleep
- ❑ Unwell (e.g. trouble breathing/coughing/seizures)
- ❑ Happy/having fun
- ❑ Did not want to engage
- ❑ _____

Anything else (anything fun/special/different)

_____
_____

Appendix L

Staff Focus Group Guide

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

Opportunities and Experiences of a Poetry Group for Children with Communication and Learning Needs
Post Intervention Interview Schedule for Staff

Have kai available.
Karakia mauri oho - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLVZornP1-c
Share mihi

Kia ora koutou. Thank you all for talking with me. The aim for today is for me to learn more about the opportunities and experiences the students and yourselves had during poetry group. Before we begin, I want to remind you that this is being transcribed, but no identifying information will be published. You can decline to answer any questions, and you can leave at any point. You can answer however you like, there are no right or wrong answers. You can ask me questions at any time.

Q1. What do you think the students got out of poetry group?

If needing a prompt – I can share some of the aspects of the poetry group that I will be asking the students about. Thinking about the students you were helping; do you think they enjoyed or experienced these aspects?

- Being in a group
- Sharing or presenting their poems
- Using their PODD/talker
- Learning more about poetry
- Their writing
- Their confidence
- Sharing or exploring their emotions

Q2. Have you seen any transfer or improvements in any other classroom activities? Any examples?

Q3. Thinking more about your own experiences now, how did you find the professional learning seminar we had at the beginning of term?

Q4. What did you get out of poetry group?

If needing a prompt, do you feel you increased in confidence using the PODDs/talkers, confidence interacting with these students, confidence giving students access to new opportunities?

Q5. Did you enjoy poetry group? And do you feel the student(s) you were working with enjoyed the poetry group? Any examples?

Q6. Do you have any suggestions for how poetry group might be improved?

Q7. Any other thoughts, comments or stories you would like to share?

Thank you so much for talking with me.
Closing karakia _____

Appendix M

Student Interview Guide

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

Opportunities and Experiences of a Poetry Group for Children with Communication and Learning Needs
Post Intervention Interview Schedule for Students

Spoken instructions	Description of visual supports
Kia ora, thank you for meeting with me. *Karakia maurioho. Share mihi.* I want to talk to you about your communication and your work in our poetry group. I want to hear what you have to say, and we have plenty of time. Before we start, remember: - You do not have to answer every question - We can stop anytime - If you look uncomfortable, I will check in with how you are going You can ask me any questions - Do you have any questions before we start?	High contrast visuals for: Question, talk, poetry group, stop Slides from student assent presentation
First, I want to ask you some questions about how you feel about how you communicate with different people and in different places. The options for each question are; happy, in the middle, sad, another feeling or I don't know. I will go through all the options and then one at a time so you can select one. SPAA-C Childform	High contrast visuals for: Happy, middle, sad, something different, don't know
Thank you for answering those questions. My next questions are all about poetry group. We will use Talking Mats to answer these questions. Let's practice using Talking Mats first. *SLT will model using Talking Mats to answer a question such as "do you like this animal?" The student*	Talking Mat (top scale yes, I don't know, no)

can then practice using the Talking Mat to answer the same question.	
Interview questions Additional questions asked after each question: You have told me yes to (items); you don't know about (items), and no to (items). Is this correct? Do you want to change any of these? Would you like to tell me anything else?	Talking Mat
Q1. How do you feel in Poetry Group? • Happy • Tired/hard work • Having fun	High contrast visuals for: happy, hard work, fun Talking Mat
Q2. Did you like: • Being in a group • Sharing or presenting your poems • Using your PODD/talker • Learning more about poetry	High contrast visuals for: group, share, PODD, learn Talking Mat
Q3. Do you think Poetry Group helped you with: • Using your PODD/talker • Your writing • Your confidence • Sharing or exploring your feelings	High contrast visuals for: PODD, write, confident, feelings Talking Mat
Q4. Would you like to do poetry group again?	Talking Mat
Thank you so much. I have one more question. I have your finished poems here. Which poem are you most proud of? *List titles of poems* Is there anything else you would like to tell me? Thank you very much for talking with me.	

Appendix N

Student Interview Questions and Responses

Some students chose the option 'different feeling' and used their AAC to explain, while others chose 'different feeling' but did not expand. If a student explained, it has been added below.

Some students did not answer after being asked a question twice. Some students would say they did not want to answer a question, while other students did not respond. One student was upset about a set of questions, so they were skipped. These responses have been marked in the 'declined/did not answer' column.

Table 1: SPAA-C Questions

How do you feel...	Happy	In the middle	Sad	Different feeling	I don't know	Declined/did not answer
About how you talk	2			1 (*Happy, love* and *not confused*) 1 (*scared*) 1		
When you talk with friends	3	1		1 (*worried*)		
When you talk with family	4					1
When you talk with teacher	3				1	1
When your teacher asks a question	1	2		1 (*Not feel love* and *embarrassed*)		1

When you talk to the whole class	2	1		1		1
When someone doesn't understand you		3	1			1

Table 2: Poetry Group Questions

	Yes	**I'm not sure about that**	**No**	**Declined/did not answer**
Q2. How did you feel in Poetry Group?				
Happy	5			
Tired/hard work	4	1		
Having fun	4	1		
One student added they felt: "love." Another added they felt: "excited."				
Q3. Did you enjoy this in Poetry Group?				
Being in a group	3	1	1	
Presenting your poems	3	1		1
Using your PODD/AAC	5			
Learning more about poetry	3	2		

One student added: "pack up" – this was in reference to one session that he told us to pack up because he wanted to listen to music.				
Q4. Did Poetry Group help you with this?				
Using your PODD/AAC	3		2 (The interviewer made a comment to one student already being good at their PODD, they said 'yes')	
Your writing	3	1	1	
Your confidence	3	1	1	
Sharing your feelings	4		1	
Q5. Would you like to do Poetry Group again?	3			2

Table 3: What poem are you most proud of?

Hairy Maclary	**What am I poems**	**Similes**	**Free form poems**	**All of them**
1	2	(One student added this was the most fun)	1	1

Appendix O

Figure 3 and Appendix F Boardmaker PCS Permission

Gmail

Cat McKenzie [redacted]

PCS Maker Free Permission

Jordan Cooper <[redacted]>
To: [redacted]
Cc: PCS Licensing <PCS.Licensing@tobiidynavox.com>

Fri, Sep 11, 2026 at 2:30 AM

Catriona,

Thanks very much for your licensing request. We are pleased to approve your request for PCS use in your thesis. The essential terms are as follows (see attached for full terms and conditions) –

1. Permission is valid for 1 calendar year from the date of this approval (or for duration of time that materials are to be displayed or distributed).
2. Permission is valid for the use of PCS in this instance only.
3. If not already a user, you will need to have a purchase of or subscription to Boardmaker 7 or TD Snap in order to access PCS. Please reply to this email and we'll be glad to assist you.
4. You acknowledge that all rights and copyrights for the PCS remain with the Company and agree to include attribution where applicable on all resources and reference pages of materials that include PCS as follows:

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5. Share a photo of the communication boards with us once completed and Tag us in any social media posts related to the project! We love to celebrate our makers with our team and beyond!

If you have any additional questions regarding this permission letter please email PCSLicensing@tobiidynavox.com.

Would you like to be a featured speaker to share your amazing creation at one of our global webinars? Please get in touch with us

Thank you,

Jordan Cooper
Accounts Manager

[redacted]

tobii dynavox