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New Zealand Speech-Language Therapists'
Perceptions and Experiences of Supporting Preschool
Children with Complex Communication Needs.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Speech-Language Therapy
at Massey University, Albany, New Zealand.

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2017

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Acknowledgements

I would like to start by thanking TalkLink Trust, The Ministry of Education and the early intervention centres that helped to distribute my survey to speech-language therapists across New Zealand. This study would not have been completed without the 61 speech-language therapists who took the time out to complete the online survey. Your time and honesty have helped to build a picture of current AAC practice for preschool children with complex communication needs in New Zealand.

To my supervisor Dr. Sally Clendon, I could not have completed this without your encouragement, support and amazing feedback that helped me to build this thesis into what it is. I would also like to thank my second supervisor Dr. Elizabeth Doell for your guidance and time.

To my fiancé Shane, thank you for your unfailing support over the past 2 years. I am grateful for the cups of tea, hugs and pep talks when I was having doubts or working throughout the day and night. To my parents, thank you for your encouragement and for coming down to Wellington to help with wedding organisation or housework, so I had one less thing to worry about.

A final acknowledgement for the financial support received from Massey University via the Institute of Education Pathway Scholarship for Masterate Students.

Abstract

Communication allows a person to express their thoughts and feelings and participate fully in life. It is a basic human right. Children with complex communication needs (CCN) also have this right and require early access to augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) to support their development of language and communication skills. This study employed a descriptive cross-sectional survey design to gather insight into the perceptions and experiences of speech-language therapists supporting preschool children with CCN in New Zealand.

The survey was completed by 61 speech-language therapists working in early intervention. There were a number of key findings. Only 37% of the participants reported that they used AAC with all of the children with CCN on their caseloads. In terms of their education and competence in AAC, 74% of participants said that their qualification did not include a paper on AAC and 57% rated their competence in AAC as being at the novice level. Team attitudes, lack of specialist support and inconsistent use of the system were the most frequently reported barriers. Whereas, team members' willingness to try, supportive teams and education of those involved were the most frequently reported facilitators to AAC implementation.

This study revealed the need for more education and support for speech-language therapists working in early intervention with children with CCN. This support is essential to help these children to develop the language and communication skills needed to participate fully in society, education and work.