POWER Hour: Making AAC Trainings POWERful!

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The presenters work for a special education cooperative in Illinois (Belleville Area Special Services Cooperative) that services the special education needs of 23 member districts. Many of the educational teams that work in the cooperative's direct programs support students who present with complex communication needs and who have or could benefit from AAC supports. .

At last year's ATiA Conference, we attended the session, "AAC Training for School-Based Teams Using POWER: AAC Online Modules," presented by Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN) and Gail Van Tatenhove CCC-SLP. After reviewing the POWER AAC project, we felt it could be a beneficial training initiative to increase AAC knowledge within our cooperative. The project's pre-test questions were utilized as a needs assessment to determine potential benefits.

Results indicated a lack of knowledge within our cooperative in the five key principles of the POWER AAC project:

- Practice powerful communication PARTNER skills
- Create powerful communication OPPORTUNITIES
- Implement power WORDS in social and instructional contexts
- Continually utilize EVIDENCE in decision making about AAC systems and supports
- Create, implement, and share powerful RESOURCES

From this data collection and through review of the project, the development of a training initiative centered around the POWER AAC modules was determined to be a beneficial professional development offering. The modules provide presentations, supplemental material, and application assignments intended to build the capacity of educators to improve communication skills for students who need or use AAC. By utilizing the POWER AAC training series, which has presentations and materials ready to go, we did not need to put together high quality content - Gail and PaTTAN did that for us! This allowed us to focus on organizing and implementing the training series to effectively support the growth of the professionals within our cooperative.

Project Goals

The main objectives for providing the POWER AAC project as a training initiative within our cooperative:

- To provide the training series for professional learning community use to build the capacity of those who serve students with complex communication needs and AAC systems.

- To implement the POWER AAC project with key features of effective professional development to support growth and change in participant practices to improve communication skills for students who need or use AAC.

Program Description

We delivered the POWER AAC training series in a format designed with key elements of effective professional development in mind - offering content focused trainings of sustained duration, with opportunities for feedback, active learning and collaboration (see sources):

- We provided our initiative as a POWER Hour cohort offered once a month throughout the school year. This allowed for multiple contacts over time to practice, implement, and reflect upon new ideas and practices.   Additionally, we presented the training in a flipped style classroom format, in which participants reviewed the modules independently. This allowed time for the cohort to explore the content and included supplemental materials in depth through reflective conversation.

- In order to provide coaching, mentoring, and performance feedback to the participants during the in-service trainings, POWER Hour providers asked all participants to write thoughts, practice questions, issues, and revelations from each module. These were then reviewed and discussed as a group to structure our conversation. This allowed for a means of reflection in a more comfortable environment, as opposed to the providers asking for questions or calling on an individual participant to speak in the middle of the group, both practices that we quickly realized did not lend itself to generating the supportive learning "community" feel we were going for. Providing this coaching or performance feedback by a PD provider during an in-service training is detailed in the literature as a key feature of effective PD initiatives (see sources).

After completing the modules, provided post-test questions were completed by the participants. Compared to pre-test scores, there was an overall increase in understanding of the key principles of the POWER AAC project. Participant feedback was collected through survey questionnaires. The responses indicated that participants found this training initiative to be effective in increasing AAC knowledge and skill. Furthermore, observation of therapy rooms and classrooms during the completion of the cohort demonstrated educational teams transforming into POWER AAC classrooms.

About POWER AAC Modules and Our Favorite Takeaways

POWER AAC is a training series developed by PaTTAN with Gail Van Tatenhove, CCC-SLP. Gail, a speech/language pathologist with over thirty years of experience in the field of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), has collaborated with AAC practitioners in Pennsylvania intermediate units over the course of several years on this project. The result is a series of brief modules, which can be used for professional development by individuals or groups who are supporting students with complex

communication needs and who need or use AAC.

Module 1: Welcome to POWER AAC - provides an overview of the series and materials. Our favorite take away: Does a great job of introducing the program!

Module 2: Assess Classroom Practices - common classroom practices with students who use of require AAC systems. Use of flexible, generative, "core" vocabulary is explained. Our favorite take away: POWER AAC can work with any type of instruction, curriculum or classroom set up.

Module 3: Develop Personal AAC Systems - reviews the various multi-modal AAC options to consider for students who need/use AAC, from no-tech, through low-tech, to high tech. Our favorite take away: Collaborative team process.

Module 4: Select Core Vocabulary Words - covers the important topic of selecting words for a student's AAC system. Our favorite take away: You don't have to teach core in isolation, it's already in what you are doing.

Module 5: Represent Vocabulary Words - addresses issues regarding the representation of vocabulary words with pictures. Our favorite take away: All the different ways to represent vocabulary

Module 6: Provide Support and Scaffolds - covers the visual supports and educational scaffolds that are essential in a POWER AAC classroom environment. Our favorite take away: All the examples of environmental engineering and prompt hierarchy.

Module 7: Practice Partner Skills - covers the important topic of communication partner skills. Our favorite take away: Be an active communication partner.

Module 8: Teach Vocabulary - presents a variety of strategies for teaching core and extended vocabulary for an AAC system. Our favorite take away: Instructional strategies

Module 9: Use AAC in Class - addresses the four purposes of communication as defined by Janice Light in her work on Communicative Competence – wants and needs, information transfer, social closeness, and social etiquette. Our favorite take away: The in depth explanations of the functions of communication and how to make that translate within a classroom.

Module 10: Use AAC at Home - focuses on the role of parents and the family in their child's AAC communication program. Our favorite take away: Collaborate, collaborate, collaborate!

Module 11: Collect Evidence - provides guidelines, resources, and some starting points for collecting data on students' progress in their use of their personal AAC systems. Our favorite take away: The five data collection questions.

Module 12: Share Resources - provides resources to help you connect with a community of others who share a commitment to the principles of a POWER:AAC classroom. Our favorite take away: The resources!

Going Forward

We will continue the cohort offering next school year. The small group setting appeared to make participants comfortable, attentive, and engaged. Also, having the sessions spread out through the entire school year, as opposed to just over a quarter or semester, allowed time for reflection upon new strategies and change in practice. Meeting consistently over a period of time promoted a sense of community and allowed the participants to make connections.

We plan to continue with the flipped style format. This allowed time to dig into self-evaluation, reflective conversation, and discussion. Participants reported that this time to participate in practice reflection and group discussion was one of the most valuable takeaways from the sessions. The literature suggests that high-quality PD provide time within a session to allow participants to think about, discuss, and reflect on changes to their practice (see sources).

We are discussing a way to incorporate a mentorship component between new participants and the cohort providers who have the completed POWER AAC Modules. Mentors could observe and consult with the mentee in their therapy room/classroom in order to reinforce in-service learning. This component would support implementation of skills learned and discussed during the modules and would help to make deeper connections in our cooperative's AAC provider community. Providing coaching and support in job-embedded context is defined in the literature as a key element in effective PD (see sources).

Acknowledgments:

Sources:

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