The Core Word Classroom - supporting students with communication disorders

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Biography:
After completing a degree in neuroscience at The University of New South Wales and working in a neuropsychology lab studying emotion processing and communication deficits following traumatic brain injury, Nicklas sought to apply his passion for evidence-based research in an education setting with a focus on the unique requirements of children with language difficulties. From here he completed a Bachelor of Education through Macquarie University and gained a permanent position as a classroom teacher at St George School in 2018. He was recognised by the network for his outstanding work as an early career teacher in 2018.

When a student has communication difficulties, we need to support them to learn and develop language skills. We teach them to use language to communicate for a wide variety of reasons. Students who are non-verbal or have limited verbal communication can get really good at asking for things. Using an AAC system, they can make requests for food, favourite shows, places to go, YouTube videos, etc. Making requests is motivating. It may be one of the first reasons they use their AAC system.

However, there is far more to language and communication than just requesting. We also use language for social interaction, and to give and receive information. It is important to give students the words to share information, tell stories, make comments, and tell us what they think. Developing these skills makes real connections possible.

This workshop will focus on the use of core words in the classroom. While spoken language has at least 250,000 words, only 200 words account for about 80% of the words you use every day! These words are called 'core words'. These few words can be combined in different ways in different contexts to mean different things.

If we give students access to these core words, we're providing them with a powerful and flexible tool to communicate whatever they want to say. Rather than relying on preprogrammed sentences or phrases such as "I want" and "I see", or subject-specific words, they can combine a relatively small set of words to communicate their understanding of subjects, express ideas, share information, and socialise, no matter where they are. Rather than only making choices from photos of objects, they can learn to communicate for a variety of reasons across contexts.

The workshop will also highlight the importance of modeling. For a student to learn to use a language based on symbols, they need to see others use it successfully across different contexts. When modeling, we point to words on the user's AAC system as we talk to them during day-to-day interactions and lessons, and use AAC devices ourselves. And just like we model vocabulary and different ways to combine words, we also model examples of different communication functions. We can show how we communicate different messages for different reasons using AAC. We do this by modeling regularly and reliably.

The workshop will include activities and practical ways of supporting the use of core words in the classroom.