



Reducing educator scepticism toward Augmentative and Alternative communication through professional development in Sekhukhune District Special Schools, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study provides a report on how professional development influences educator scepticism toward Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) use in special schools within the Sekhukhune District of South Africa. Despite the demonstrated benefits of AAC for learners with complex communication needs, resistance and scepticism among educators continue to hinder effective implementation in inclusive and special education settings. Grounded in theories of professional learning and inclusive pedagogy, this qualitative study explored educators' perceptions before and after engagement in structured professional development programmes designed to build AAC knowledge, skills, and confidence. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and reflective journals from purposively selected teachers across five special schools. Thematic analysis revealed that targeted professional development significantly reduced uncertainty and negative attitudes toward AAC by increasing educators' understanding of communication diversity, practical AAC strategies, and integration into teaching routines. Participants reported enhanced self-efficacy, greater willingness to apply AAC tools, and improved collaboration with therapists and caregivers. The study also highlights ongoing challenges, including limited institutional support, resource constraints, and the need for sustained in-school coaching. Findings underscore the critical role of contextually relevant professional learning in transforming educator mindsets and fostering more inclusive communication practices. The research contributes to the body of knowledge on AAC adoption in under-resourced settings and offers actionable recommendations for policymakers, school leaders, and teacher development facilitators aiming to strengthen AAC integration in special and inclusive education.

Keywords: Communication Disabilities, Sekhukhune District, South African Education Context, and Teacher Attitudes.

INTRODUCTION

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) is widely recognised as an essential intervention for supporting learners with complex communication needs (CCN), enabling access to learning, social interaction, and participation in school activities. International and South African research consistently

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demonstrates that AAC enhances expressive and receptive communication, learner engagement, and inclusion when effectively implemented.¹ However, empirical studies indicate that the successful adoption of AAC in school contexts is strongly influenced by educators' knowledge, attitudes, and confidence. In South Africa, educators in special schools often report limited pre-service preparation and inadequate in-service training related to AAC, which contributes to uncertainty and scepticism regarding its classroom use.²

Recent empirical evidence highlights professional development as a key mechanism for addressing these challenges. For example, Bornman et al. found that structured AAC-focused training programmes significantly improved teachers' understanding of communication diversity and their perceived competence in supporting learners who use AAC.³ Similarly, a quasi-experimental study by van der Merwe et al. demonstrated that short-term, practice-oriented AAC training positively influenced educators' attitudes and willingness to integrate AAC into daily teaching routines in South African special schools.⁴ These findings suggest that professional development can play a critical role in reducing resistance by demystifying AAC and strengthening educators' pedagogical capacity.

Despite these gains, studies caution that one-off workshops are insufficient to sustain change. Research shows that ongoing coaching, collaborative learning, and institutional support are necessary to consolidate positive attitudes and effective AAC use.⁵ In under-resourced districts such as Sekhukhune, professional development programmes that are contextually responsive and practically oriented are therefore essential. Such programmes have the potential not only to reduce educator scepticism but also to promote inclusive communication practices that align with national inclusive education goals and the rights of learners with disabilities. This study aims to investigate how structured professional development influences educator scepticism toward AAC use in special schools within the Sekhukhune District by examining shifts in perceptions, confidence, and classroom practices, while identifying persistent barriers and offering recommendations to strengthen AAC integration in South African inclusive education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

AAC refers to the methods, systems, and tools used to support or replace spoken language for individuals with significant speech and language impairments.⁶ AAC encompasses both unaided systems, such as gestures, sign languages, facial expressions and aided systems, which range from low-tech communication boards to high-tech speech-generating devices (SGDs).⁷ Unaided AAC relies on the user's body to convey messages without external tools, while aided AAC includes both low-tech symbols and pictures (e.g., Picture Exchange Communication System) and high-tech digital devices that produce synthesized speech. Contemporary scholars emphasise that AAC is not a single tool but a continuum of supports tailored to the learner's strengths, contexts, and communication goals.⁸ This holistic perspective positions AAC as integral to communicative participation rather than an isolated remedial strategy.

¹ Janice Light and David McNaughton, "Communicative Competence for Individuals Who Require Augmentative and Alternative Communication: A New Definition for a New Era of Communication?," *Augmentative and Alternative Communication* 30, no. 1 (March 10, 2014): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.3109/07434618.2014.885080>; Erna Alant, L. Lloyd, and Juan Bornman, "Augmentative and Alternative Communication and Inclusive Education in South Africa," *African Journal of Disability* 5 (2016): 1–9.

² Juan Bornman and June Rose, "Beliefs and Attitudes about AAC in South African Classrooms.," *Augmentative and Alternative Communication* 34, no. 1 (2018): 56–68; Judith McKenzie, "Teacher Preparedness for Inclusive Education in South Africa," *South African Journal of Education* 42, no. 2 (2022): 1–10.

³ Juan Bornman, Erna Alant, and Carina Meiring, "The Impact of AAC Training on Teacher Practices in South African Schools.," *Augmentative and Alternative Communication* 36, no. 3 (2020): 145–156.

⁴ H. van der Merwe, Erna Amelia Alant and Carla Uys, "AAC Training and Teacher Attitudes in South African Schools," *South African Journal of Education* 41, no. 3 (2021): 1–12.

⁵ Judith McKenzie and Roy McConkey, "Sustaining Inclusive Education Practices in Low-Resource Contexts.," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 27, no. 5 (2023): 567–83; Tinashe Chikomo, Shajila Dada, and Erna Alant, "Collaborative AAC Practices in South African Special Schools," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 28, no. 2 (2024): 210–225.

⁶ D. Beukelman and P. Mirenda, *Augmentative and Alternative Communication: Supporting Children and Adults with Complex Communication Needs*, 4th ed. (Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co, 2013).

⁷ Light and McNaughton, "Communicative Competence for Individuals Who Require Augmentative and Alternative Communication: A New Definition for a New Era of Communication?"

⁸ Alant, Lloyd, and Bornman, "Augmentative and Alternative Communication and Inclusive Education in South Africa."

The diversity of AAC systems reflects the need to meet varying communication profiles among learners with CCN. Research by Ronski and Sevcik underscores the value of multi-modal AAC, where learners use a combination of symbols, devices, and natural speech to communicate effectively.⁹ Similarly, Ganz et al. demonstrated that integrating dynamic display AAC devices within classroom routines enables learners to express needs, ask questions, and engage in social interaction with peers and teachers.¹⁰ These empirical insights reinforce that AAC must be responsive to individual developmental trajectories and educational contexts, especially in inclusive learning environments where communicative participation is essential for academic and social success.

The benefits of AAC for learners with CCN are well-documented in international and South African contexts. Empirical studies consistently show that AAC use enhances expressive communication, reduces frustration and problem behaviours, and increases learner engagement.¹¹ For instance, Schlosser and Lee reported that learners with significant speech impairments who used SGDs (Speech Generating Devices) in inclusive classrooms demonstrated measurable improvements in turn-taking, topic maintenance, and interaction reciprocity compared with peers without access to AAC supports.¹² Additionally, research conducted by Alant and Meiring in South African special schools found that AAC implementation was linked to better participation in learning activities and greater teacher-learner interaction quality.¹³ These outcomes illustrate that AAC not only supports communication but also contributes to academic inclusion.

Beyond communication itself, AAC has wider implications for learner development and wellbeing. Studies by Sigafoos et al. emphasise that AAC fosters autonomy and self-advocacy for learners who are often marginalised due to speech limitations.¹⁴ Moreover, recent findings from van der Merwe, Alant and Uys indicate that when classroom teachers are involved in AAC planning and instruction, learners exhibit enhanced confidence and willingness to participate in group tasks and peer collaborations.¹⁵ Such evidence highlights that successful AAC use depends not only on device availability but also on pedagogical supports that facilitate meaningful use. Consequently, AAC is positioned as both a communicative and educational intervention, pivotal for realising inclusive education goals.

Educator Attitudes and Scepticism Toward AAC

Educator attitudes play a critical role in the successful adoption of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) within classroom settings. Despite recognition of AAC's potential benefits, scepticism and resistance among teachers are common, often rooted in knowledge gaps and limited training. Research by McNaughton, Light, and Arnold indicates that many educators lack a foundational understanding of AAC principles, leading to uncertainty about how to implement AAC strategies effectively with learners who have complex communication needs.¹⁶ This knowledge deficit can foster negative perceptions, with educators expressing doubts about their ability to support AAC users and questioning its relevance within curriculum delivery. In under-resourced contexts, such as rural or township schools, limited pre-service and in-service AAC training exacerbates these perceptions, undermining educators' confidence and willingness to engage with AAC tools comprehensively.

Beyond knowledge gaps, educators' belief systems and attitudes toward disability and communication influence their openness to AAC adoption. Bornman and Rose emphasise that

⁹ MaryAnn Ronski and Rose Sevcik, "Augmentative Communication and Early Intervention: Myths and Realities," *Infants & Young Children* 18 (July 1, 2005): 174–85.

¹⁰ Jennifer B. Ganz and et al., "Use of AAC in Classroom Contexts: Supporting Communication and Engagement," *Journal of Special Education Technology* 37, no. 1 (2022): 45–58.

¹¹ Jennifer Kent-Walsh and David McNaughton, "Communication Partner Instruction in AAC: Present Practices and Future Directions," *Augmentative and Alternative Communication* 21, no. 3 (2005): 195–204; Mandy Rispoli, et al., "AAC Interventions for Learners with Communication Needs," *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 50, no. 3 (2020): 1021–34.

¹² Ralf W. Schlosser and David Lee, "Effects of Speech-Generating Devices in Inclusive Classrooms," *Research in Developmental Disabilities* 112 (2021).

¹³ Erna Alant and Carina Meiring, "Teachers' Experiences of Implementing AAC in Special Schools," *South African Journal of Education* 40, no. 3 (2020): 1–11.

¹⁴ Jeff Sigafoos, et al., "AAC and Learner Autonomy," *Augmentative and Alternative Communication* 39, no. 2 (2023): 89–101.

¹⁵ van der Merwe, Alant, and Uys., "AAC Training and Teacher Attitudes in South African Schools."

¹⁶ David McNaughton, Janice Light, and Kimberly Arnold, "Getting Started with AAC: Supporting Teachers and Learners," *Augmentative and Alternative Communication* 36, no. 3 (2020): 123–34.

deficit-based views of disability, where learners are seen primarily in terms of limitations, can lead educators to favour traditional communication expectations over alternative modalities.¹⁷ When teachers hold beliefs that natural speech should always be the primary goal, they may view AAC either as a last resort or as potentially hindering speech development, despite empirical evidence to the contrary.¹⁸ These belief-based barriers are compounded by perceptions of AAC as complex or inappropriate for diverse classroom activities, reinforcing resistance at both cognitive and affective levels.

Practical challenges such as workload and resource constraints further contribute to scepticism toward AAC implementation. Educators frequently report that integration of AAC requires additional planning, time, and classroom management adjustments, which they feel unable to accommodate given existing workload pressures.¹⁹ Moreover, limited access to functional AAC tools, insufficient technical support, and inadequate ongoing coaching make AAC implementation appear daunting rather than feasible. In a study of South African special schoolteachers, Chikomo et al. found that teachers were more likely to express scepticism when they perceived AAC resources to be scarce or when they lacked sustained in-school support, highlighting the interaction between systemic limitations and individual attitudes.²⁰

Empirical studies, both globally and within South Africa, have documented these attitudinal barriers while also identifying pathways to shift perceptions. For example, van der Walt and Alant reported that teachers who participated in structured AAC professional development exhibited more positive attitudes, greater confidence, and reduced scepticism compared with peers who had not received training.²¹ Similarly, international research by Kent-Walsh et al. found that educator attitudes improved significantly following hands-on workshops that combined theoretical knowledge with practical AAC strategies.²² These studies suggest that while scepticism is a multifaceted challenge, targeted professional development and ongoing support can transform attitudes and lay the groundwork for more consistent and effective AAC use in educational settings.

Professional Development and Teacher Change

Effective professional development (PD) is widely acknowledged as a critical lever for enhancing teacher competence and practice, particularly in areas requiring specialised knowledge such as AAC. Darling-Hammond et al. argued that high-quality PD is sustained, collaborative, content-focused, and directly connected to classroom practice rather than isolated one-off workshops.²³ This perspective is echoed in the work of Guskey, who highlights that meaningful teacher change occurs when PD initiatives include ongoing support, opportunities for reflection, and mechanisms for feedback and adaptation.²⁴ In the context of AAC, effective PD models integrate both foundational theories of communication and opportunities to apply AAC strategies within real teaching environments, enabling teachers to bridge the gap between knowledge and practice.

One influential model of professional development is job-embedded PD, which situates learning within teachers' daily routines and promotes continuous reflection and improvement. Darling-Hammond et al. describe this approach as involving cycles of learning, practice, observation, and collaborative analysis where educators work together to refine strategies.²⁵ When applied to AAC, job-embedded PD can take the form of in-class coaching, peer mentoring, and reflective meetings where teachers share successes and challenges using AAC tools. Such models contrast sharply with traditional one-time

¹⁷ Bornman and Rose, "Beliefs and Attitudes about AAC in South African Classrooms."

¹⁸ Ronski and Sevcik, "Augmentative Communication and Early Intervention: Myths and Realities."

¹⁹ van der Merwe, Alant, and Uys., "AAC Training and Teacher Attitudes in South African Schools."

²⁰ Chikomo, Dada, and Alant, "Collaborative AAC Practices in South African Special Schools."

²¹ H. van der Walt and Erna Alant, "Professional Development for AAC Implementation in South Africa," *Augmentative and Alternative Communication* 38, no. 2 (2022): 75–88.

²² Jennifer Kent-Walsh et al., "Effects of Communication Partner Instruction on the Communication of Individuals Using AAC: A Meta-Analysis," *Augmentative and Alternative Communication* 31, no. 4 (2015): 271–84.

²³ Linda Darling-Hammond, Maria E Hyler, and Madelyn Gardner, *Effective Teacher Professional Development*. (Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, 2017).

²⁴ Thomas R Guskey, "Professional Development and Teacher Change," *Teachers and Teaching* 8, no. 3 (2002): 381–91.

²⁵ L. Darling-Hammond, M.E. Hyler, and M. Gardner, *Effective Teacher Professional Development* (Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, 2019).

workshops, as they support iterative learning and help educators internalise AAC practices as part of their professional identity rather than as external add-ons.

Empirical evidence increasingly supports the notion that well-designed PD contributes to positive changes in teacher attitudes and instructional practices. For example, van der Walt and Alant reported that South African teachers who engaged in sustained PD on AAC reported enhanced confidence, improved attitudes toward AAC, and increased implementation of AAC strategies in classrooms.²⁶ Internationally, Kent-Walsh et al. found that teachers' attitudes toward AAC improved significantly following PD that combined theoretical grounding with hands-on practice and follow-up coaching.²⁷ These studies indicate that PD not only increases teachers' content knowledge but also reshapes their beliefs about learners' communicative capabilities and the pedagogical role of AAC.

Longitudinal studies further suggest that ongoing, reflective PD leads to bigger professional change than standalone training events. McKenzie and McConkey observed that teachers who participated in year-long AAC PD programmes demonstrated sustained improvements in instructional planning, communication support strategies, and collaborative engagement with therapists and families.²⁸ Similarly, Chikomo et al. found that continuous PD initiatives helped reduce scepticism among educators by normalising AAC practices and embedding them into school culture.²⁹ This body of research underscores that when PD is systematic, contextually relevant, and supported by school leadership, it catalyses meaningful shifts in teacher attitudes and practice, ultimately enhancing learner outcomes.

AAC Professional Development in Low-Resource Contexts

Professional development (PD) for AAC in low-resource contexts faces unique challenges that are distinct from those in well-resourced urban schools. Rural and under-resourced schools often contend with limited access to AAC tools, infrequent training opportunities, and a shortage of specialists such as speech-language therapists.³⁰ In many rural settings, teachers report that available PD is sporadic, focused on general inclusive education principles rather than specialised AAC strategies, and delivered in formats that do not align with their immediate classroom needs.³¹ These constraints are exacerbated by infrastructural limitations, such as unreliable electricity, lack of internet access, and insufficient learning resources, making it difficult for teachers to engage in sustained, technology-enhanced PD that could support AAC adoption.

A second major challenge is the capacity and preparation of educational support systems in low-resource environments. Research by McKenzie and McConkey highlights that teacher educators and district support personnel in rural districts frequently lack the specialised skills to coach and mentor teachers in AAC practice.³² Consequently, even when PD opportunities are available, follow-up and reinforcement are weak, limiting the transfer of knowledge to practice. Moreover, workload pressures in under-resourced schools, where teachers manage large class sizes, multi-grade classrooms, and multiple curricula, reduce the time and energy available for engaging meaningfully with AAC PD.³³ These practical barriers contribute to persistent scepticism toward AAC use and reinforce a cycle of minimal uptake.

Despite these challenges, emerging research points to contextual enablers that can support AAC PD in low-resource settings. Community partnerships, where universities, non-governmental organisations, and district education offices collaborate to deliver contextually relevant PD, have shown promise in promoting AAC knowledge and skills.³⁴ Additionally, studies suggest that peer learning

²⁶ van der Walt and Alant, "Professional Development for AAC Implementation in South Africa."

²⁷ Kent-Walsh et al., "Effects of Communication Partner Instruction on the Communication of Individuals Using AAC: A Meta-Analysis."

²⁸ McKenzie and McConkey, "Sustaining Inclusive Education Practices in Low-Resource Contexts."

²⁹ Chikomo, Dada, and Alant, "Collaborative AAC Practices in South African Special Schools."

³⁰ Erna Alant and Juan Bornman, "AAC in Rural and Under-Resourced Contexts: Challenges and Opportunities," *Augmentative and Alternative Communication* 35 (2):, no. 2 (2019): 123–35; Bornman and Rose, "Beliefs and Attitudes about AAC in South African Classrooms."

³¹ van der Merwe, Alant, and Uys, "AAC Training and Teacher Attitudes in South African Schools."

³² McKenzie and McConkey, "Sustaining Inclusive Education Practices in Low-Resource Contexts."

³³ Chikomo, Dada, and Alant, "Collaborative AAC Practices in South African Special Schools."

³⁴ van der Walt and Alant, "Professional Development for AAC Implementation in South Africa."

communities and on-site coaching can empower teachers to share strategies and problem-solving within their contextual constraints.³⁵ In South African rural contexts, customised PD that respects local languages, cultural norms, and existing pedagogical frameworks has been associated with greater teacher engagement and more sustained use of AAC strategies over time.³⁶

While these findings are encouraging, there remain significant gaps in existing research on AAC PD in low-resource contexts. Much of the literature focuses on PD outcomes in urban or high-resource settings, with comparatively fewer empirical investigations conducted in rural areas such as Limpopo's Sekhukhune District.³⁷ There is also a lack of longitudinal studies examining the sustained impact of AAC PD on teacher practice and learner outcomes over extended periods, particularly in under-resourced schools.³⁸ Furthermore, research tends to emphasise teacher attitudes and short-term gains in knowledge, with less attention to systemic factors such as policy support, infrastructure development, and community engagement that shape the broader ecosystem for AAC implementation. Addressing these gaps is critical for designing effective, scalable PD models that respond to the realities of rural educators and promote inclusive communication support for all learners.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Inclusive Education Framework foregrounds the principle that all learners, irrespective of their abilities or communication needs, should have equitable access to and participation in quality education. This framework moves beyond mere physical access to schooling and emphasises meaningful participation, curriculum engagement, and respect for learner diversity.³⁹ In essence, inclusive education advocates for pedagogical adjustments and support systems that respond to learner differences, rather than expecting learners to adapt to rigid instructional practices. Within this context, AAC emerges as a vital support mechanism that enables learners with CCN to participate fully in classroom interactions and academic activities.⁴⁰ Inclusive education thus provides the philosophical and policy grounding for AAC as an integral educational resource rather than an optional add-on.

Central to the Inclusive Education Framework is the recognition that barriers to learning and participation are not inherent to learners but are created by systemic, instructional, and attitudinal obstacles within educational environments.⁴¹ This aligns with the Social Model of Disability, which distinguishes between impairments and disability, and the latter being socially constructed barriers that limit participation.⁴² The Social Model shifts the focus from “fixing the learner” to transforming educational practices and structures that marginalise learners with CCN. In the AAC landscape, this means designing communication systems, classroom routines, and teacher interactions that accommodate diverse communicative repertoires, rather than viewing speech differences as deficits.⁴³ By embedding AAC supports within the broader endeavour of dismantling educational barriers, both the Inclusive Education Framework and the Social Model of Disability legitimise communicative diversity as a matter of rights and justice.

The Teacher Professional Learning/Change Theory further enriches the theoretical foundation by explaining how educators' knowledge, beliefs, and practices evolve in response to structured learning opportunities. Fullan posits that meaningful teacher change occurs when learning experiences are sustained, reflective, and connected to classroom realities.⁴⁴ This perspective emphasises that PD is not merely about acquiring new skills but involves shifts in teachers' underlying beliefs, instructional identities, and pedagogical agency.⁴⁵ For AAC adoption, Teacher Professional Learning Theory

³⁵ Kent-Walsh et al., “Effects of Communication Partner Instruction on the Communication of Individuals Using AAC: A Meta-Analysis.”

³⁶ Erna Alant, “Contextually Responsive AAC Practices in South African Classrooms,” *South African Journal of Communication Disorders* 70, no. 1 (2023): 1–10.

³⁷ Bornman, Alant, and Meiring, “The Impact of AAC Training on Teacher Practices in South African Schools.”

³⁸ van der Merwe, Alant, and Uys, “AAC Training and Teacher Attitudes in South African Schools.”

³⁹ Mel Ainscow, “Inclusion and Equity in Education: Making Sense of Global Challenges,” *Prospects* 49, no. 3 (2020): 123–34.

⁴⁰ Alant, Lloyd, and Bornman, “Augmentative and Alternative Communication and Inclusive Education in South Africa.”

⁴¹ Tony Booth and Mel Ainscow, *Index for Inclusion: Developing Learning and Participation in Schools*. (ERIC, 2002).

⁴² Mike Oliver, “The Social Model of Disability,” in *Social Work* (Routledge, 2023), 137–40.

⁴³ Ronski and Sevcik, “Augmentative Communication and Early Intervention: Myths and Realities.”

⁴⁴ A. Hargreaves and M. Fullan, *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School*, 2nd ed. (Teachers College Press, 2020).

⁴⁵ Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner, *Effective Teacher Professional Development*.

underscores the importance of PD programmes that not only introduce technical AAC concepts but also engage teachers in reflective practice, collaborative problem-solving, and ongoing refinement of communication support strategies.⁴⁶

The synergy between these frameworks becomes evident when considering the process of AAC adoption in special and inclusive education settings. The Inclusive Education Framework compels schools to recognise learners with CCN as legitimate participants in classroom life, while the Social Model of Disability directs attention to systemic changes needed to support communicative inclusion. Teacher Professional Learning Theory then provides a processual understanding of how educators can internalise and enact these changes through iterative development of knowledge, attitudes, and instructional practices. Research by McKenzie and McConkey demonstrates that when PD is aligned with inclusive values and supported by reflective, practice-based learning, educators exhibit more positive attitudes toward AAC and greater willingness to integrate it within their teaching.⁴⁷

These theoretical lenses also foreground the role of school culture and policy in AAC integration. Inclusive education and social disability frameworks imply that individual teacher change is insufficient without supportive institutional structures and leadership that prioritise access and participation.⁴⁸ Teacher Change Theory complements this by emphasising that PD efforts are most effective when they are embedded in collaborative contexts where teachers can share experiences, co-construct solutions, and receive feedback.⁴⁹ In low-resource contexts such as Sekhukhune District, this highlights the need for PD programmes that are not isolated events but part of broader school improvement strategies that address systemic barriers and foster a culture of inclusive practice.

Overall, the integration of the Inclusive Education Framework, the Social Model of Disability, and Teacher Professional Learning/Change Theory provides a robust theoretical foundation for understanding AAC adoption. Together, they explain why AAC is necessary (inclusive participation and removal of barriers), how it should be conceptualised (as a rights-based response to disability), and what processes support teacher uptake (sustained, reflective professional learning). By situating AAC within these interrelated theoretical perspectives, research and practice can move beyond technocratic implementation toward transformative educational change that affirms communicative diversity and promotes meaningful learner engagement.⁵⁰

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A qualitative case study design was employed to explore educators' perceptions and practices regarding AAC adoption in special schools. This approach is well-suited for capturing complex, contextualised experiences and professional learning processes in under-resourced educational settings.⁵¹

Study Sample and Population

The study was conducted in the Sekhukhune District of Limpopo Province, South Africa, a rural area with limited resources and diverse linguistic communities. Seventeen participants were purposively selected from five special schools, including teachers and allied health professionals (nurses, physiotherapists, and psychologists). Purposive sampling ensured the inclusion of participants with direct experience supporting learners with complex communication needs.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method, complemented by reflective journals. This method allowed participants to share personal experiences and professional reflections

⁴⁶ van der Walt and Alant, "Professional Development for AAC Implementation in South Africa."

⁴⁷ McKenzie and McConkey, "Sustaining Inclusive Education Practices in Low-Resource Contexts."

⁴⁸ Mel Ainscow and Abha Sandill, "Developing Inclusive Education Systems: The Role of Organisational Cultures and Leadership," *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 14, no. 4 (2010): 401–16.

⁴⁹ Guskey, "Professional Development and Teacher Change."

⁵⁰ Kent-Walsh et al., "Effects of Communication Partner Instruction on the Communication of Individuals Using AAC: A Meta-Analysis."

⁵¹ L. Sibanda and D. Mhlana, "Case Study Research in Rural Education Contexts," *Journal of Rural Education* 39, no. 1 (2024): 22–34; Mari Kuyler and et al., "Qualitative Case Study Approaches in Inclusive Education Research," *Educational Research Review* 40 (2025).

while ensuring consistency across key topics such as AAC attitudes, training experiences, and contextual challenges. Semi-structured interviews are widely recognised for their flexibility and depth in qualitative educational research.⁵²

Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's reflexive framework. Transcripts were coded iteratively, and themes were developed to capture recurring patterns and contextual nuances of AAC adoption. Thematic analysis remains a robust method for exploring lived experiences in education and has been widely applied in AAC-related studies.⁵³

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, with gatekeeper permissions secured from school authorities. Written informed consent was collected from all participants, emphasising voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymisation and secure data storage. Ethical practices in South African educational research highlight the importance of transparency, participant autonomy, and safeguarding professional identities.⁵⁴

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Initial Educator Scepticism and Sources of Resistance

Findings from this study reveal that educators' initial scepticism toward AAC is deeply rooted in limited exposure, inadequate training, and uncertainty about practical implementation. Participants consistently indicated that unfamiliarity with AAC tools results in hesitation and, in some cases, resistance to their adoption. For example, Participant 1 emphasised the need for structured workshops and formal academic modules, while Participant 5 highlighted that without guidance, AAC devices remain underutilised. Participant 6 further underscored that educators must first understand the *purpose and value* of AAC before they can meaningfully integrate it into their teaching.

This scepticism can be interpreted not merely as reluctance, but as a reflection of systemic gaps in teacher preparation, particularly in under-resourced and rural contexts such as the Sekhukhune District. Educators are often expected to implement inclusive practices without sufficient pedagogical or technological grounding, which leads to a lack of confidence and the perception that AAC is complex or impractical. In this sense, resistance is less about negative attitudes and more about professional vulnerability and insufficient support structures.

These findings align with McNaughton et al., who argue that limited pre-service exposure to AAC contributes to misconceptions and hesitancy among teachers.⁵⁵ Similarly, Bornman and Rose highlight that negative beliefs about communication technologies often emerge in contexts where educators lack both training and access to resources.⁵⁶ However, this study extends these insights by demonstrating that scepticism is also shaped by contextual realities, including large class sizes, limited time, and competing curricular demands.

Importantly, the findings suggest that educator resistance should be understood as a starting point for professional growth rather than a barrier to be eliminated. Addressing this scepticism requires targeted interventions that build both knowledge and confidence, thereby transforming uncertainty into informed engagement with AAC practices.

⁵² Ruslin Ruslin et al., "Semi-Structured Interview: A Methodological Reflection on the Development of a Qualitative Research Instrument in Educational Studies," *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education (IOSR-JRME)* 12, no. 1 (2022): 22–29.

⁵³ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Can I Use TA? Should I Use TA? Should I Not Use TA? Comparing Reflexive Thematic Analysis and Other Pattern-based Qualitative Analytic Approaches," *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research* 21, no. 1 (March 18, 2021): 37–47, <https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12360>; Elmarie Terblanche, Michelle Pascoe, and Michelle Harty, "Thematic Analysis in AAC Research," *South African Journal of Communication Disorders* 72, no. 1 (2025): 1–12.

⁵⁴ Julian Pillay, "Ethical Considerations in South African Educational Research," *South African Journal of Education* 34, no. 1 (2014): 1–9; N. Versfeld and L. Mapaling, "Ethics in Educational Research in South Africa," *Education as Change* 28 (2024): 1–15.

⁵⁵ McNaughton, Light, and Arnold, "Getting Started with AAC: Supporting Teachers and Learners."

⁵⁶ Bornman and Rose, "Beliefs and Attitudes about AAC in South African Classrooms."

Theme 2: Impact of Professional Development on Knowledge and Attitudes

A central finding of this study is the transformative role of PD in reshaping educators' knowledge, attitudes, and willingness to adopt AAC. Participants consistently reported that structured training opportunities, particularly those that combine theoretical understanding with practical application, significantly enhance their confidence in using AAC tools. Participant 3 emphasised the importance of institutional support and collaborative engagement, while Participant 15 highlighted the role of trained educators as advocates within schools and communities. Participants 16 and 17 further reinforced that workshops and hands-on training are critical in building competence.

Beyond skill acquisition, the findings indicate that PD facilitates a shift in educators' mindsets, moving them from scepticism to advocacy. This shift is not merely cognitive but also professional, as educators begin to see AAC as an essential component of inclusive pedagogy rather than an optional add-on. In this regard, PD acts as a catalyst for epistemological change, enabling educators to reconceptualise communication as a fundamental right for all learners, particularly those with complex communication needs.

Empirical studies support these observations. Van der Walt and Alant found that sustained, hands-on PD significantly improves teachers' confidence and perceptions of AAC,⁵⁷ while Kent-Walsh et al. demonstrated that integrated training approaches enhance teachers' willingness to implement AAC strategies in classroom practice.⁵⁸ However, this study adds nuance by illustrating that PD is most effective when it is contextually relevant, continuous, and collaborative, rather than once-off or purely theoretical.

Furthermore, the findings highlight that PD contributes to the development of communities of practice, where educators share knowledge, mentor one another, and collectively problem-solve challenges related to AAC implementation. This collaborative dimension is particularly important in rural and resource-constrained settings, where formal support may be limited.

Overall, the findings underscore that professional development is not simply a mechanism for improving technical skills but a transformative process that reshapes beliefs, enhances agency, and promotes sustained engagement with inclusive practices.

Theme 3: Changes in Classroom Practice and Collaboration

The study further reveals that professional development has a direct and observable impact on classroom practice, particularly in the integration of AAC strategies and the strengthening of collaborative networks. Participants indicated that training enables educators to move beyond theoretical understanding and actively incorporate AAC into daily teaching routines. For instance, Participant 2 emphasised engagement through communication, participation, and facilitation, while Participant 7 highlighted the importance of ongoing workshops and advocacy within schools and communities.

A key insight emerging from this theme is that AAC implementation is not an isolated instructional strategy but rather a collaborative, system-wide practice. Participant 11 emphasised the need for partnerships between educators, parents, institutions, and professionals such as therapists and policymakers. This reflects a broader understanding that effective AAC use requires coordinated efforts across multiple stakeholders.

These findings are supported by Bornman et al., who found that structured PD leads to the integration of AAC strategies into classroom routines, as well as increased collaboration among educators and support staff.⁵⁹ Similarly, Chikomo et al. highlight the importance of teacher-parent partnerships and interdisciplinary collaboration in enhancing communication opportunities for learners.⁶⁰

What this study adds is a contextualised understanding of how collaboration unfolds in practice. In the Sekhukhune context, collaboration is not only beneficial but essential for overcoming resource constraints and ensuring consistency in AAC use across environments. For example, when educators,

⁵⁷ van der Walt and Alant, "Professional Development for AAC Implementation in South Africa."

⁵⁸ Kent-Walsh et al., "Effects of Communication Partner Instruction on the Communication of Individuals Using AAC: A Meta-Analysis."

⁵⁹ Bornman, Alant, and Meiring., "The Impact of AAC Training on Teacher Practices in South African Schools."

⁶⁰ Chikomo, Dada, and Alant, "Collaborative AAC Practices in South African Special Schools."

parents, and therapists work together, learners are more likely to experience consistent communication support at school and at home.

Thus, the findings demonstrate that professional development extends beyond individual teacher competence to foster collective responsibility and shared ownership of inclusive education practices.

Theme 4: Ongoing Challenges and Support Needs

Despite the positive impact of professional development, the findings indicate that sustained implementation of AAC remains contingent on ongoing support and systemic alignment. Participants highlighted several persistent challenges, including the need for continuous training, institutional support, and integration of AAC into formal structures such as higher education curricula and school-based support systems (e.g., SBST and SIAS). Participants 12, 13, and 14 emphasised the importance of embedding AAC in community engagement programmes and certificate courses, while Participant 6 noted the need for active involvement from school governing bodies and support teams.

These findings suggest that while initial training is critical, it is insufficient on its own. Instead, effective AAC implementation requires a multi-layered support system that includes mentorship, monitoring, and policy alignment. Without such support, there is a risk that gains made through professional development may not be sustained over time.

This aligns with van der Merwe et. al., who found that ongoing mentorship and institutional support are essential for consolidating AAC practices, particularly in low-resource contexts.⁶¹ Similarly, McKenzie and McConkey emphasise the importance of systemic support in ensuring the long-term success of inclusive education initiatives.⁶²

Importantly, this study highlights that support needs extend beyond the school to include community and policy-level engagement. The inclusion of AAC in higher education curricula, for example, addresses the root cause of initial scepticism by ensuring that future educators enter the profession with foundational knowledge and skills. Similarly, the involvement of SBST and SIAS structures ensures accountability and continuous monitoring of AAC implementation.

Ultimately, the findings demonstrate that sustainable AAC adoption requires a shift from isolated interventions to a coordinated, system-wide approach that integrates training, support, and policy frameworks.

The findings of this study reveal that educators' initial scepticism toward AAC use is fundamentally linked to gaps in knowledge, exposure, and professional confidence. Participants' expressions about the need for workshops, university modules, and ongoing training reflect a pattern noted in the literature, where limited AAC training contributes to hesitation and misconceptions among educators.⁶³ Bornman and Rose similarly observed that lack of pre-service preparation and insufficient in-service PD often result in teacher uncertainty about AAC's relevance and application.⁶⁴ This scepticism affects not only individual attitudes but also instructional readiness and willingness to engage with AAC devices meaningfully. The thematic analysis aligns with research that highlights the critical role of educator preparedness in shaping perceptions, emphasising that knowledge deficits are a key source of resistance that must be addressed for successful AAC integration.

The data further demonstrate that professional development acts as a central mechanism for attitude change among educators. Multiple participants stressed that structured training, workshops, and exposure to AAC devices enhanced their understanding and shifted their perceptions positively. This resonates with findings by van der Walt and Alant, who reported that sustained professional learning increased teacher confidence and willingness to implement AAC strategies.⁶⁵ Likewise, Kent-Walsh et al. found that PD that blends theoretical grounding with hands-on application significantly improved teachers' attitudes and instructional practices.⁶⁶ These studies support the present findings that PD does not merely impart knowledge but transforms teacher beliefs, increases self-efficacy, and cultivates more

⁶¹ van der Merwe, Alant, and Uys., "AAC Training and Teacher Attitudes in South African Schools."

⁶² McKenzie and McConkey, "Sustaining Inclusive Education Practices in Low-Resource Contexts."

⁶³ McNaughton, Light, and Arnold, "Getting Started with AAC: Supporting Teachers and Learners."

⁶⁴ Bornman and Rose., "Beliefs and Attitudes about AAC in South African Classrooms."

⁶⁵ van der Walt and Alant, "Professional Development for AAC Implementation in South Africa."

⁶⁶ Kent-Walsh et al., "Effects of Communication Partner Instruction on the Communication of Individuals Using AAC: A Meta-Analysis."

positive dispositions toward AAC adoption. Professional development thus emerges not just as an information-delivery system, but as a catalyst for professional identity development in inclusive communication practices.

Importantly, the findings highlight that contextual factors within the Sekhukhune District uniquely shape AAC adoption. The participants' emphasis on the need for contextually relevant training, institutional support, and community engagement reflects challenges documented in rural and under-resourced settings, where infrastructural limitations and resource scarcity constrain educational innovation.⁶⁷ McKenzie and McConkey also noted that in similar contexts, the lack of allied health support, limited access to AAC devices, and competing workload demands hinder teachers' capacity to integrate new instructional tools.⁶⁸ In line with this, participants underscored that exposure to AAC must be supported by structural enablers such as school governing body involvement, social media awareness campaigns, and monitoring by school support teams. These contextual constraints illustrate that AAC adoption in Sekhukhune cannot be divorced from broader systemic issues of rural education equity and resource distribution.

The study adds to the literature by demonstrating how collaboration across professional boundaries and with community stakeholders serves as a contextual enabler of AAC use. Participants described the importance of partnerships between teachers, allied health professionals, parents, and policymakers in promoting AAC awareness and implementation. This theme aligns with research by Chikomo et al., who found that collaborative networks and interdisciplinary engagement significantly enhanced AAC practice in South African schools.⁶⁹ Such collaboration extends the potential impact of PD beyond individual teachers to the broader educational ecosystem, fostering shared responsibility for communication and inclusion and reinforcing AAC use as part of everyday instructional and support routines.

From an inclusive education perspective, these findings underscore that AAC adoption is deeply embedded in the broader goal of equitable access and participation for learners with complex communication needs. Inclusive education frameworks advocate for pedagogical adaptations that remove barriers to learning, supporting the view that communication supports are not optional but intrinsic to inclusive practice.⁷⁰ The Social Model of Disability further situates AAC as a response to socially constructed barriers, rather than a deficit within the learner.⁷¹ The present findings show that when educators gain confidence in AAC through professional development and institutional support, learners have greater opportunities to participate academically and socially, advancing inclusive outcomes consistent with national and international policy imperatives.

Finally, the discussion highlights practical implications for policy and practice. The study suggests that education departments and teacher training institutions should institutionalise AAC training within pre-service curricula and in-service PD schedules to build sustained educator competence. Emphasising the role of PD as a driver of attitude and practice change supports arguments by Darling-Hammond et al. that high-quality professional learning is essential for teacher effectiveness and instructional innovation.⁷² Additionally, district and school leadership must prioritise resource allocation, structured mentoring, and collaborative frameworks that support AAC use. By addressing both individual and systemic enablers, policymakers and practitioners can create environments where AAC is understood, valued, and effectively integrated into teaching and learning, contributing to truly inclusive education.

Summary

The findings of this study underscore that professionally structured teacher training on AAC is essential for shifting attitudes, increasing competence, and enhancing instructional practice. Educators in the Sekhukhune District expressed a clear need for both formal and ongoing training, highlighting workshops, university modules, and certificate programmes as foundational to understanding and

⁶⁷ van der Merwe, Alant, and Uys., "AAC Training and Teacher Attitudes in South African Schools."

⁶⁸ McKenzie and Roy McConkey, "Sustaining Inclusive Education Practices in Low-Resource Contexts."

⁶⁹ Chikomo, Dada, and Alant, "Collaborative AAC Practices in South African Special Schools."

⁷⁰ Ainscow, "Inclusion and Equity in Education: Making Sense of Global Challenges."

⁷¹ Oliver, "The Social Model of Disability."

⁷² Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner, *Effective Teacher Professional Development*.

implementing AAC in the classroom. The study reinforces the implication that teacher training should not be optional or sporadic, but rather a systematic component of both pre-service teacher education and continuous in-service professional learning. Embedding AAC training into existing teacher education curricula and professional development schedules will ensure that educators enter the profession with the requisite knowledge and are supported to sustain practice improvement over time.

In addition to formal training, the study highlights the importance of robust in-school support mechanisms to consolidate professional learning and translate it into classroom practice. Educators noted the need for mentorship, coaching, and collaborative structures such as communities of practice that include support from school-based support teams (SBST), allied health professionals (e.g., nurses, therapists), and school leadership.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings have revealed that in-school support should extend beyond one-off training events to include ongoing mentoring, peer observation, reflective practice sessions, and structured feedback loops. By investing in in-school support frameworks, schools can create cultures of continuous improvement where AAC adoption becomes embedded in everyday teaching and learning processes, ultimately benefiting learners with complex communication needs.

Recommendations for Practice

A critical implication for practice emerging from this study is that teacher training and sustained in-school support are essential for the effective adoption of AAC, as isolated workshops or one-off introductions are insufficient to change entrenched attitudes and classroom practice. Participants emphasised the need for structured professional development that not only builds foundational knowledge of AAC but also provides opportunities for hands-on application, ongoing reflection, and collaboration with colleagues and allied professionals. Teacher training should be embedded within a broader in-school support infrastructure, including structured coaching, collaborative problem-solving sessions, and reflective practice forums, to ensure that AAC integration becomes a normalized, supported, and sustained component of inclusive education.

Recommendations for Policy Makers

A key implication for policy is that departmental and institutional responsibilities must extend beyond rhetoric to tangible support structures that institutionalise AAC adoption across education systems, ensuring that AAC is embedded in curriculum frameworks, teacher education standards, resource allocation, and monitoring mechanisms. Participants' calls to include AAC in higher education modules, to support in-service workshops, and to strengthen school governance involvement reflect a broader need for policy coherence and sustained investment at multiple levels. Departmental and institutional policy frameworks must be proactive, adequately resourced, and aligned with inclusive education imperatives to transform AAC from an ad-hoc initiative into a sustainable, scaled practice that supports learners with complex communication needs.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive examination of educator scepticism toward AAC in special schools of the Sekhukhune District and highlights the critical role of professional development, institutional support, and collaborative practices in promoting its adoption. Key insights reveal that initial resistance stems from limited knowledge, exposure, and confidence, while structured workshops, university modules, in-school support, and interprofessional collaboration effectively transform teacher attitudes and classroom practices, ultimately enhancing learner participation and inclusion. The findings contribute to AAC and inclusive education research by demonstrating how contextually responsive professional learning and systemic support mechanisms can bridge gaps between policy, practice, and learner needs in under-resourced settings, aligning with both the Inclusive Education Framework and the Social Model of Disability. Concludingly, the sustainability of AAC implementation depends on embedding training into teacher education curricula, maintaining ongoing in-school support, and institutionalising policy frameworks that ensure equitable access to communication tools and inclusive

practices. By addressing both individual and systemic enablers, this study underscores that AAC adoption can be a lasting and transformative component of inclusive education, enabling all learners, including those with complex communication needs, to fully participate in teaching and learning.

Limitations of the Study

A key limitation of this study lies in its scope, sample size, and contextual constraints, which may affect the generalisability of the findings. The research focused specifically on 17 participants from five special schools in the Sekhukhune District, including teachers, nurses, physiotherapists, and psychologists, which provided rich, context-specific insights but limited the ability to extend conclusions to all educators or schools in South Africa. Additionally, the study's geographical and resource context, which is rural and under-resourced, may not reflect the conditions, challenges, or support structures present in urban or better-resourced districts, potentially influencing participants' experiences of AAC adoption and professional development. The focus on voluntary participation also introduces the possibility of self-selection bias, as those more interested or positive toward AAC may have been more likely to participate. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable exploratory insights into the barriers, facilitators, and professional development needs for AAC implementation, laying the groundwork for larger, more representative studies across diverse educational contexts.

Implications for Future Research

A critical implication for future research is the need to extend inquiry beyond descriptive accounts of teacher attitudes and short-term professional development outcomes to longitudinal, multi-stakeholder, and system-level investigations that can inform sustainable AAC implementation strategies in low-resource contexts. While studies such as van der Merwe, Alant, and Uys and Chikomo, Dada, and Alant have illuminated how professional development influences educator perceptions and practice in South African settings, there remains a gap in understanding the long-term impact of AAC integration on learner outcomes, institutional cultures, and community engagement. Future research should therefore examine how sustained PD and in-school support mechanisms affect not only teacher practice but also learner communication development and academic participation over time, as suggested by McKenzie and McConkey. Additionally, there is a need for comparative studies across diverse rural and urban contexts, as well as investigations into how policy interventions, leadership practices, and interagency collaboration shape AAC adoption at district and national levels. Such research will deepen theoretical and practical understanding of AAC implementation and provide evidence to guide policy refinement, curricular integration, and resource planning that support inclusive education for learners with complex communication needs.

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