Summary and Critique of Article

“Demographics of Preschoolers Who Require AAC”
By Cathy Binger and Janice Light

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Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC for short) is an alternative to traditional speech that has been increasingly employed to help those who have complex non-verbal communication disorders such as Down Syndrome, autism and cerebral palsy. In certain cases, AAC can be the most efficient form of communication as the term encompasses a wide range of services consisting of electronic devices and manual signs as well as communication books and boards. While a great deal of research has been done to examine the use of AAC, few studies have focused purely on preschoolers until the research conducted by Cathy Binger and Janice Light in 2006, which was outlined in their paper “Demographics of Preschoolers Who Require AAC”. Their goal was to better understand the demographics of preschoolers (3;0 to 5;11) who required AAC, through the use of a survey given to speech-language pathologists (SLPs) who worked directly with preschoolers. This research has provided new information about the users of alternative communication in this age group, and represents their ethnic backgrounds, sex, disability, and special education in order to recognize and prepare for the needs of preschoolers.

In order to collect the information Binger and Light required, a survey needed to be created which could be clearly understood without instruction that would provide all the desired demographics. They worked in stages, testing and modifying their survey until it could be clearly understood by all. The final product contained a cover page detailing the survey as well as describing the definition of augmentative and alternative communication with examples of children who may need or use AAC. Within the survey itself, nine questions regarding each child's age, sex, race, and type of AAC system currently in use (if a system was in place) were asked.

Early intervention supervisors were the original targets for this research survey, but due to time restraints and the magnitude of the survey it was reformatted to be completed by SLPs. It was important to try and obtain a large representative base by questioning as many SLPs working in Pennsylvania as possible, so a “modified snowball sampling technique” (Binger and Light, pg. 201, 2006) was employed. This technique relied on the participation of special education agency supervisors, who were requested to distribute and collect the surveys from the SLPs who worked in their agency. This method proved to be successful as out of the 11 agencies contacted, 10 returned their surveys, for a total of 189 contributing SLPs.

The results of this study showed that 12% of preschoolers who were receiving special education services required AAC, and provided informative demographics on these children. Binger and Light found that those needing AAC came from a variety of racial backgrounds, and had a variety of disabilities, but males were more likely to need AAC than females. This information led them to conclude that all speech-language pathologists who were working primarily with preschoolers needed to be prepared to offer AAC services in the event of having such a child on their caseload.
Critique

I believe Binger and Light chose an excellent age to study. They recognized the apparent lack of research done on preschool aged children (3;0 to 5;11) as well as the dated nature of the results, and decided to research this topic in order to provide updated demographics. This lack of information may have been due to the fact that preschoolers are not attended to by the same professionals who work with other school age children, therefore when other studies examined young children in schools, preschoolers went unaccounted for. I believe it is extremely important to research the demographics of preschoolers in order to be able to better provide early-intervention to the children who need it, making this study especially relevant.

When conducting research, it is important to be flexible and capable of altering parts of the study to ensure accurate results, which I believe Binger and Light were able to accomplish in their study. Originally, they formulated their survey to be completed by early intervention supervisors who would compile data from all their cases, but that proved to be too time consuming and was yielding poor response rates. Due to this, the researchers reconfigured their survey to be completed by speech-language pathologists. I believe this was an extremely effective way to sample the SLPs, as it allowed the researchers to delegate the collection and distribution and because the supervisors had a much better understanding of which SLPs needed to be contacted. They had more information readily available regarding who worked with each age group, therefore it was more attainable to survey the majority of SLPs working in Pennsylvania.

One negative critique I would make regarding this paper is the statement that “[t]he results of the current investigation indicate the need for all preschool SLPs to be prepared to provide such services to the children on their caseloads” (Binger and Light, pg. 206, 2006). While I understand and agree with their findings that show a number of children require AAC services, I do not believe every SLP working with preschoolers should be responsible for complete offerings of AAC. It is clearly important for most SLPs to have a basic understanding of AAC, but I believe it would be far more beneficial for a select few to specialize in this area, and then referrals can be made. I believe this would provide a better service to the children, as they would have the assistance of a specializing professional, rather than a speech-language pathologist who may only experience an AAC caseload once or twice in their career.

This paper was an engaging read as it was well written and clearly explained, which made it accessible to most university students and professionals. I especially enjoyed it because it was on the topic of augmentative and alternative communication which I find to be an interesting field. Binger and Light were able to research this previously studied field and successfully produce brand new information and demographics, illustrating the continuing need for updated research, and proving that more research can always be done.
Reference: