

Effecting System Change to Improve Outcomes for Individuals who Require AAC

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Background

- Many of the factors that impact outcomes for individuals who require AAC can be considered system-level variables, that is, variables related to the environment in which the individual exists (Light, 1997).
- The role of speech language pathologists has traditionally focused on the individual with a communication disability, with services aimed primarily at addressing individual-level impairments to build skills that support interaction and participation (Wickenden, 2013).
- However, to improve overall quality of life, it may be necessary to look beyond the individual to the broader system in which that individual exists, considering barriers and facilitators to optimal outcomes at the levels of the community and society as a whole.
- It has been argued that the role of the speech language pathologist should be more broadly conceptualized to include activities related to attitude change, policy development, and other system-level variables that serve as barriers and facilitators to realization of optimal outcomes (Wickenden, 2013; Beukelman & Mirenda, 2013).
- Speech language pathologists are well-positioned to understand system-level variables, yet there are few resources available to provide them with guidance for effecting system-level change.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to provide a framework for understanding the multi-layered systems within which individuals with complex communication needs exist, and to offer guidance for speech language pathologists to start to address systems-level factors that may impact outcomes for the individuals they serve.

Ecological Systems Theory and Systems Change

- All individuals exist within a broader environmental context - an “ecological system” that includes many layers and elements, all of which interact continuously (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).
- The many layers and elements of ecological systems can impact the individual, influencing behavior and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).
- Approaching change from a systems perspective may give SLPs a tool for tackling environmental barriers to progress (Foster-Fishman, Nowell, & Yang, 2007; Peirson, Boydell, Ferguson, & Ferris, 2011).

Steps to Effect System Change

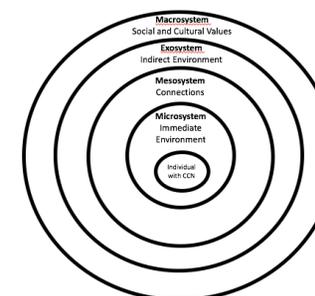
Step	Guiding Questions
Identify the problem	What is the problem? What are its root causes?
Identify the system	Which people and organizations affect and are affected by the problem? Which settings are relevant?
Understand system components	
Values	What values underlie the current problem situation? What values underlie the proposed change? Are they compatible with existing values?
Human resources	Do system members possess the knowledge and skills to support the change? What additional training is required? Are there influencers within the system who can support the change effort?
Economic resources	What financial resources are needed to support the proposed change? What resources are available? Can resources be re-allocated if needed? How will this affect the system as a whole?
Operational structures	Who controls the system’s resources? Who has power over decision-making? What are the daily practices and routines that perpetuate the problem? What policies perpetuate the problem? Are new policies required? How will they be enforced?
Understand system functioning	
Interactions	What are the current relationships and feedback loops at work within the system? How will they be impacted by the proposed change?
Succession	How open is the system to change? How has the system responded to previous change efforts?
Identify levers for change	What elements or interactions can be changed to have the greatest positive impact?

References:



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Ecological Systems: Nested Layers



Bronfenbrenner, 1979

Key System Components and Principles

Component	Description
Values	Member values, attitudes, and beliefs underlie the functioning of a system. Values influence policy development and allocation of resources. Changes are more likely to be adopted over the long term when they are compatible with existing system values (Foster-Fishman et al., 2007).
Human Resources	Human resources include the knowledge and skills of members within various levels of the system (Foster-Fishman et al., 2007). Knowledge and skills must be adequate to support the proposed change. Human resources also include individuals within the system who are likely to be instrumental to the change effort, such as opinion leaders (Rogers, 2003).
Economic Resources	Economic resources include current resources available to support change as well as additional resources required (Foster-Fishman et al., 2007).
Operational Structures	Operational structures include established practices that characterize the day-to-day functioning of a system, including established routines and the policies that support them, and the individuals or organizations with control of resources and power of decision-making (Foster-Fishman et al., 2007).
Principle	Description
Interdependence	The principle of interdependence holds that all elements of a system are interconnected. System elements cannot be understood outside of the context of the system as a whole, and a change in one element of the system will impact other elements or the relationships between them (Kelly, 1968; Peirson et al., 2007).
Succession	The principle of succession relates to system functioning and system change over time. It recognizes that all systems have a history, and this history will impact current and future functioning (Peirson et al., 2007).

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