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## DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW EDUCATIONAL COURSE 'ALTERNTATIVE AND AUGMENTATIVE COMMUNICATION FOR CORRECTIONAL WORKIN THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS. International Education Project with the Participation of Universities from Sweden, Russia and Belarus

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The concept of Augmentative and Alternative Communication/AAC<sup>1</sup> is still not widely known in post-Soviet countries. Moreover, in 2008 the society of AAC specialists, users and producers celebrated the 25th anniversary of this field's delineation as a separate interdisciplinary branch of knowledge. The concept owes its worldwide fame to the ideas of "normalisation", "inclusion" and "participation", which changed the way assistance was provided to children and adults with disabilities. The terminology

of AAC may be described in terms of methods and technology used for rendering support to people with severe communication disorders<sup>2</sup>.

The field of AAC started to actively take shape at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s as a result of cooperation between United Kingdom, Canada, the US and Sweden as part of a large-scale international project concerning severe communication disorders. This international cooperation served as a basis for the creation of an international organisation called the International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication (ISAAC)<sup>3</sup>. ISAAC is an extremely

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<sup>1</sup> Augmentative and Alternative Communication/ AAC is a translation derived from English. Hereinafter, to emphasise the fact that the area we are developing is part of international research in this field, the acronym used throughout the text will be the original English abbreviation, i.e. AAC.

<sup>2</sup> According to WHO data (2001): communicative disability – is not a disease, illness or disorder, but rather a term that describes a condition of a "human existence", which is characterised by functional limitations in expressing one's needs, feelings and intentions, as well as difficulties in exchanging information and maintaining social relationships.

<sup>3</sup> ISAAC/International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication. This organisation includes specialists, users and producers of AAC around the world. The headquarters of the organisation is located in Toronto (Canada). For more information, visit the website of the organisation at: [www.isaac-online.org](http://www.isaac-online.org).

active organisation that relies on its subsidiaries in various countries of the world. The dominant representatives of the society are the countries of North America and Western Europe. Since 1997, some formerly socialist countries, among which the most active are Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland, have become members of ISAAC [3]. ISAAC has strong research traditions: the organisation issues scientific and research periodicals<sup>4</sup>, scientific monographs, as well as regularly arranges and conducts methodological seminars and conferences<sup>5</sup> on current AAC issues.

AAC is used to render assistance to those, who, due to congenital or acquired disorders, cannot produce oral speech at all or whose speech is significantly limited. At the same time, *augmentative communication* is in high demand by persons with underdeveloped oral speech abilities. It consists of a system of special methods and tools designed to, on the one hand, help children with delays in speech development and, on the other, to support better understanding of verbal communications by those with severe speech disorders. *Alternative communication* is appropriate in the complete absence of oral speech and involves mastering of a completely different communication system, where non-verbal communication (involving objects, photos, gestures, symbols, etc.) gain particular importance.

Depending on the level of speech comprehension and potential ability to master impressive and expressive speech, three groups of augmentative and alternative communication users are distinguished. The first group includes persons who understand speech well enough, but are not capable of verbally expressing their needs. As a rule, these are people with severe movement disorders, who do not experience any sensations from the movement of

speech organs and are unable to perform voluntary directed movements. For them, AAC is a method of expressing of their health condition, needs, wishes and interests and they use AAC constantly throughout their lives. The second group includes those with development delays and significant difficulties in mastering a language (intellectually impaired children, children with motor alalia). In this case, AAC is a temporary fix and aids in the formation of impressive and expressive speech. This group also includes those whose speech is only understandable thanks to additional special equipment (for instance, in the case of childhood autism). The third group includes individuals for whom oral speech as a means of communication is too difficult (for instance, in the case of severe multiple disorders) and who constantly, for a long period of time, require an alternative appropriate for them. Users in this group are taught both to understand speech and to express their needs.

AAC uses a wide range of tools to help people to express their thoughts and communicate effectively. Modern AAC tools can be categorised into three main groups.

1. Simple tools: objects, gestures, photos and images, symbols. These aid in expressing or sending signals about current vital needs, communicating regarding a sequence of events over a certain period of time, as well as mastering the main language structures.

2. Communication tools consisting of simple equipment: tape recorders that play one message, sound making toys, talking notebooks and photo albums, personal communication devices, etc. These devices help record and save

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<sup>4</sup> AAC: Augmentative and Alternative Communication/The official Journal of the International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication (scientific peer reviewed journal),

<sup>5</sup> The next methodological seminar will be arranged at PSU named after M. V. Lomonosov in the city of Arkhangelsk on 3 July 2009 (information about the conference – on the university's website: touch.pomorsu.ru).

voice messages, fostering active communication for people with significant verbal communication limitations.

3. Multifunctional communication tools based on complex technical devices: touch screens, speech generators, etc. These ensure significant expansion of vocabulary, allow one to establish a topic of conversation and combine several subjects simultaneously, make remote communication possible, simplify communication in a group and by phone.

The AAC field addresses both issues related to mastering various means of communication, development of communication behaviour (motivations, planning, initiation, support, holding a conversation and assessment of interaction), and issues associated with the creation of a communication environment adequate to a child's capabilities. For this reason, special training in AAC is needed, not only for those with communication disorders, but everyone in their immediate environment, in particular family members. The experience of the countries of North America, Western and Central Europe, which actively introduced AAC technologies into their abilitation and rehabilitation practice, proves that their systematic application expands the functional abilities of people with disabilities in all areas of activities (cognitive, labour, leisure, etc.) and significantly improves their quality of life.

In the last decade, the countries of Eastern Europe have begun to show an interest in AAC. The rapid development of national systems of special education, including a special focus on early comprehensive assistance for children with unique psychophysical development and severe multiple disorders in such systems, has created favourable conditions for the penetration and introduction of AAC ideas in practice.

For the first time, targeted work on approbation and implementation of AAC technologies in the Republic of Belarus was carried out within the framework of implementing Belarusian and German education

projects (2005 – 2006 and 2007 – 2008), initiated by the Belarusian Association for Help to Disabled Children and Young Disabled People and the Belarusian State Pedagogical University named after Maxim Tank (BSPU). This work was strengthened due to the launch in 2007 of another international educational project with the participation of Stockholm University (Sweden), Pomorskiy University (Russia, Arkhangelsk) and BSPU.

In the course of preparation for the project, the participants studied AAC experiences featuring specialists in education, healthcare, social security systems, parents who have children with limited communicative abilities, as well as their feedback on how to expand and deepen competences in this area. The research results showed that the experience of using AAC is only a mass phenomenon in institutions within the educational system. In healthcare and social security institutions, as well as parents' organisations, there are only isolated users of these technologies. The participants of pre-project surveys and meetings unanimously spoke out in favour of the development of this kind of assistance for people with disabilities in the Republic of Belarus and helped determine a system of priority tasks aimed at the development of the AAC field. Interest in the interpretation of leading methodological ideas of AAC, deep and systematic study of AAC methods and technologies, new ideas for the use of AAC by various communication partners, creation of an infrastructure that would enable concentration of resources and accumulation of experience of work in the AAC field became the fundamental goals and contents of the Belarus-Sweden-Russia project.

The main goals of new international cooperation in the AAC field include development of a basic university educational course in "Augmentative and Alternative Communication", as well as the creation of an AAC resource centre in Minsk on BSPU premises. Their implementation will

facilitate wider propagation in Belarus of methodological ideas and methodical tools for rendering specialised assistance to people with special communicative needs. This project was supported by the West-European Committee of Sweden, the Swedish Institute of Education, the Department of Special Education of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus, the Department of Medical Assistance of the Ministry of Healthcare of the Republic of Belarus, as well as the Office of UNICEF in Minsk represented by the Head of the Office B. Ekich and the Head of Programmes of Early Child Development N. Mufel.

Within this project, the Swedish party carries out expert examination of all kinds of activities, provides scientific and financial support, while the Russian party ensures advisory support and the Belarusian party implements the project. Joint efforts by professors of all three universities resulted in the development of programmes for multilevel, target-oriented, advanced training courses for specialists who would work with potential AAC users. Elementary level “Augmentative and Alternative Communication as a Means of Improving the Quality of Life of Persons with Unique Psychophysical Development” is aimed at providing general information about the purpose of AAC, its main users and areas of application, the expansion of life opportunities provided by AAC technologies and their successful application by children and adults. The main objective of this level is to stimulate interest in AAC, assess the possibilities for its application in the professional activities of the participants, and establish goals, tasks and a productive implementation strategy. Advance level “Augmentative and Alternative Communication as a Means of Normalisation of Life Activities of Persons with Unique Psychophysical Development: Methodological Aspect” ensures awareness of the leading methodological ideas of AAC, mastering its various

methods and tools, as well as training strategies training for both potential users and their communication partners. The main goal for the participants of this level is to determine their particular demands in the AAC field, master the technologies in demand at their current stage of professional activity and implement them into their work. These programmes were successfully implemented during advanced training courses held at the Institute of Advanced Training and Retraining of Personnel of BSPU in May and November 2008.

Within the framework of the project, professors of the three universities are completing work on the creation of a basic university training course in “Augmentative and Alternative Communication”. This programme will feature urgent issues for specialists and parents such as:

- communication culture with the help of AAC;
- principles for communication with AAC users;
- cooperation between families and specialists when using AAC;
- diagnosing AAC needs;
- work methodology with various AAC tools;
- creation of a communicative environment adequate for the AAC user's needs;
- support infrastructure for AAC development and implementation.

The content of the programme takes into account the status of implementation of AAC technologies in the Republic of Belarus, as well as other countries of Eastern Europe (Russian, Ukraine, Moldova, etc.) and represents a rather universal tool for training specialists in regions that are only now taking their first steps in mastering AAC.

Institutions and specialists participating in the international education project place special emphasis on the need to create specialised centres in different regions of the Republic of Belarus that are capable of providing assistance in using

AAC for employees of various establishments (educational, healthcare, social security) and parents. Within the framework of the project, a model AAC resource centre is being developed. Its main functions include the following considerations:

- accumulation of hardware and software, didactic and methodical AAC resources (creation of information banks and catalogues);
- development of instructions and methodical recommendations for the application of AAC technologies;
- specialist consulting on matters of AAC implementation;
- practical seminars on issues related to AAC use;
- development of classes for students and advanced training courses for specialists on AAC matters;

- facilitation of consulting for parents and classes for children in AAC training.

In accordance with the project, such a centre will be created at BSPU.

So, active cooperation between the universities of three countries has created favourable conditions for the development of a new area of corrective work in “Augmentative and Alternative Communication” in the Republic of Belarus, which represents another step towards improving the quality of education, as well as quality of life of persons with unique psychophysical development. Within the framework of the project, this field is being developed both on a theoretical and methodological level and on a practical level. The results will be summarised in a learning and teaching guide, which will serve as a starting point for further planning of scientific studies, as well as implementation programmes related to AAC issues.

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