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This concluding chapter briefly summarizes the main issues raised, and discusses some of the implications for future research and training.

The main impetus for this book grew from the need to raise more explicitly some of the issues and ideas that many professionals, AAC-users and communities have to deal with on a daily basis when planning and implementing the use of AAC strategies for people who have little or no functional speech (LNFS) within low-income contexts. Even though many of the intervention issues remain the same as in industrialized countries, the intensity of the challenges tend to be much greater due to poverty, i.e. adverse socio-economic, health and educational conditions. It is this intensity of human suffering on individual, family and community levels that necessitates a commitment towards collaborative partnerships in moving towards long-term impact. Clearly, the call is for critical reflection on approaches towards AAC intervention to ensure that professional efforts in working with AAC-users and their families can have more lasting impact – not only for individual families, but also for communities. While various challenges are identified, certain suggestions are described as potential solutions. The operative word clearly is potential – as many of these ideas need to be applied in systematic ways to assist us in furthering the field with a view to evidence-based practice (Schlosser, 2003). As we move towards this process, it is pertinent to recognize that while the aim is to enhance understanding of processes underlying AAC intervention in low-income contexts, one of the biggest challenges remains the diversity and heterogeneity typical of low-income or poverty contexts. Whereas lack of trust and limited social capital can be a typical characteristic of many poverty contexts, trainers and researchers need to remain cognizant of the diversity represented in low-income communities. As stressed in Chapter 4, the complexity of the associations between disability and poverty necessitate caution in the search for intervention strategies. Over-generalizations and stereotyping have never positively impacted on the development of meaningful solutions in any intervention context.

Synopsis of main issues

It is against this background that the following major, underlying ideas can be identified as basic themes that run through this book.

- **Sustainability in intervention**: Perhaps one of the strongest underlying threads of the book lies in the focus on intervention impact. Issues of effectiveness, sustainability and versatility of intervention are discussed in an attempt to highlight different components of the process. What is emphasized is the responsibility of interventionists to move beyond the confines of the therapy or intervention context, to facilitate the development of better support structures for the family or immediate support network of the individual, i.e. support-based AAC intervention.

- **Collaborative team intervention**: Teams that include professionals, immediate support networks and representatives from the community need to form the basis for intervention. To work for 'the good of all' and to extend intervention beyond the limits of the individual context need to become priorities if intervention in low-income contexts is to become sustainable. A joint vision needs to be developed to build capacity beyond the 'here and now' individual intervention context. This in no way involves minimizing the importance of a focus on the individual in AAC interventions, but requires a new approach in using the individual intervention context for broader impact.

- **Cultural and socio-economic influences on AAC intervention strategies**: There is a need to understand more clearly the different ways in which individuals and communities perceive and interpret visual symbols in communication. The field of sociolinguistics has largely focused on the study of verbal language variations, but these principles need to be extended into the field of AAC symbols to facilitate more systematic investigation. While it can be argued that the main issue for AAC-users is 'learnability' of symbols rather than iconicity, the association between iconicity or familiarity of symbols and ease of learning has been well explored (for reviews see Lloyd and Fuller, 1990; Lloyd et al., 1997). These issues, together with a better understanding of the impact of different AAC systems on interactional patterns within socio-cultural contexts, are pivotal in furthering the field of AAC intervention within diverse sociocultural contexts.
• Accessible and appropriateness of AAC technology: Rather than dealing with AAC technology with the focus only on individual needs, implementation of assistive technology needs to be seen within a broader development perspective. The development approach has been well formulated internationally (Chambers, 1983; Riedijk, 1987), but there has been limited reflection on this process in the field of AAC technology.

The notion is clearly that technology is not good, bad or neutral: it depends on how it is used, to either facilitate socio-economic and political autonomy or dependence. The use of technology is a value-driven process, and communities and individuals might vary greatly in relation to their perceptions and evaluation of the outcomes of using technology. Reflecting on the basic tenets for the use of assistive technology (AT) within specific contexts is thus most relevant. It is not good enough for manufacturers and distributors to ‘wait and see’ if infrastructures for the use of technology can be developed in low-income countries. They also need to actively problem-solve with interventionists, communities and policy-developers towards facilitating access to state-of-the-art AAC technology for people with little or no functional speech in low-income countries.

• Resource-based approach in dealing with challenges: Although it is a major underlying issue within poverty contexts, the book includes relatively little discussion on funding issues. Clearly, financial issues are important, but only as an outflow of a resource-based approach towards intervention. For many years, the approach has been to highlight upfront the economic difficulties and lack of resources (needs-based approach – see Chapter 2. While these remain important, the context within which they need to be raised has to be based on an approach that focuses on empowering communities. Challenges need to be addressed from a position of relative strength rather than from a position of economic need.

Future needs for research and training

1. Changing the training paradigm of professionals: Focusing on professionals’ roles in facilitating the development of support systems for intervention clearly implies a changing paradigm in professional training. Although the issue of transdisciplinary intervention has received some attention in the field of AAC (Lloyd et al., 1997; Beukelman and Mirenda, 1998) and the field of early childhood intervention (e.g. Winton et al., 1997), more specific guidelines for the training of professionals need to be developed. Issues revolving around multiskilling of all involved in the intervention team need to be considered as a basis for developing support-based approaches to AAC intervention. This might well indicate a need for web-based training programmes focused on addressing issues relating to implementation of AAC within a diversity of poverty contexts to enhance multiprofessional and international collaboration in moving towards solutions.

2. The development of a methodology for the use of individual case studies in intervention as a basis for extending capacity into the communities: Conscious effort needs to be exerted to involve more than just the individual and close family members in the intervention process, by including relevant members from community associations that can facilitate the integration of the individual into the community. These community members are then in a position to use the information gained through the intervention process to the benefit of the broader community. Clearly, this approach to intervention necessitates careful planning to ensure that the process of capacity-building into the community is well-structured and accountable. Strategies of how to involve community associations in intervention with a view on extending the benefits of exposure beyond the individual level need to be understood and refined to ensure more extensive impact of intervention efforts.

3. Exploration of models for the effective transfer and development of AAC technology for sustainable use in low-income contexts: While manufacturers and distributors need to make a living, it is important to realize that infrastructures take time and effort to develop. Only by investing long-term effort into conceptualizing and assisting in the building of support structures in low-income countries will AAC technology become integrated into these contexts.

4. A more fundamental understanding of factors impacting on long-term effectiveness of AAC strategies in culturally and socio-economically diverse contexts: There is a critical need for data in relation to the effectiveness of AAC strategies in varied cultural contexts, including both industrialized and low-income countries. This implies systematic research into perceptions and processes that both facilitate and inhibit the implementation of AAC strategies. For this to happen requires more basic research on how symbols are used and interpreted within different cultural contexts.

5. Research studies on dual or multiple disadvantage: From discussions in various chapters, but particularly in Chapter 4, it is clear that more attention should be paid to projects focusing on dual or multiple disadvantage, for example disability and poverty as well as gender concerns. Priority funding needs to be considered to ensure that at
least some specified percentage of funding is allocated for research on dual or multiple disadvantages, particularly in relation to disabilities. Only by developing a more in-depth understanding of the interplay between these different variables can we make progress to facilitate socio-economic and policy development oriented towards facilitating vocational placement and integrated community living for those involved.

6. Further exploration of the theoretical paradigms of communication to emphasize the symbolic interaction process and the development of meaning between people: A closer association between theoretical models used and the impact of AAC strategies in facilitating these communication processes is important in the further development of AAC strategies. Interaction is much more than a routine exchange of messages (participation); it implies involvement in a rich, creative process of developing meaning between people. This process needs to be better understood to further enhance and refine AAC intervention strategies.

7. The need for the development of collaborative partnerships in training and research between industrialized and low-income contexts: It is evident from the discussions that there are indeed many similarities and differences between the AAC intervention challenges experienced in both low-income and industrialized contexts. The solutions to these difficulties do not lie in isolated struggles of professionals within countries, but rather in the building of international support, training and research networks. The complexity of moving towards sustainable solutions in intervention requires professional preparation programmes that are sensitive to the facilitation of international dialogue on cultural and socio-economic issues represented by a broad range of countries and contexts. This could take the form of informal interactions, for example through the ISAAC Emerging Countries Committee www.isaac-online.org and the list serv isaccem@kendy.up.ac.za, where people from both low-income and industrialized countries can share ideas, or it can be more formalized in the way of training and research collaborations.

The collaborative efforts between the AAC Programme at Purdue University and the CAAC at the University of Pretoria identified a variety of ways in which more formal collaborations can be initiated, which might stimulate further thinking in this regard. These include:

• Pregraduate study-abroad programmes that sensitize students to the different cultural and socio-economic contexts, to learn more about the diversity of conditions, activities and needs that varied contexts impose on AAC-users and their families. These exchanges could be formal – between training institutions – or through community organizations such as Rotary International.

• Joint postgraduate training at Master’s and PhD levels through web-based interactions as well as on-site visits to the different locations. Exchanging research agendas and the development of cross-cultural studies need to be high priorities for facilitating quality data on cultural influence in AAC interventions.

• Faculty exchanges between training institutions to allow staff to gain first-hand experience of training and research in different locations.

Perhaps the most fundamental point of departure in all these ventures is sharing and mutual gain. Gone are the days where industrialized-country solutions can be ‘transferred’ to low-income countries. The challenge is a joint responsibility – to develop long-term, sustainable AAC-intervention solutions while accepting the heterogeneity and richness of the contexts and countries that AAC-users and their families live in.

To communicate is human; to keep communicating – is what living is about.

References