



**Culturally Responsive AAC Through International Internships**  
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### **AAC International Internship Model**

Funded from 2015-2020 and extended through 2021, Project Building Bridges (Project BB) prepared 58 speech-language pathologists (SLPs) to serve students with complex communication needs and their families with *diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds*. Students in Project Building Bridges completed a series of courses, clinical training, AAC service-learning and school internship experiences and earned the AAC Certificate as part of the Master of Science Degree in Speech-Language Pathology. The two-week AAC service-learning experience placed students in culturally and linguistically diverse communities to collaborate in developing sustainable AAC tools with teachers, families and students.

Beginning in summer 2018, Project Building Bridges PBB Scholars traveled to international settings including Belize, Bali, Malaysia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia for two-week AAC service-learning experiences. In 2020, the international



Internship transitioned to a virtual experience through ZOOM. Our partners included the [Nika Project](#), a non-profit organization of volunteer AAC specialists; the University of Hawaii and College of the Marshall Islands through the [Navigating Student Success in the Pacific Project](#), a USDOE grant to prepare Special Education Teachers. Our partners provided AAC Mentors who supervised and guided PBB Scholars to assist teachers, families, and students in the host countries. This helped to advance AAC services by creating communication and learning tools for children with disabilities that reflected local languages and cultures.

The international internships significantly changed PBB Scholars' perspectives and competencies by placing them in unfamiliar cultural and language

contexts. This effectively ‘disrupted’ their prior beliefs and expectations about educational models and AAC services. This type of cultural immersion is described in transformational learning research as an ‘intentional intense experience’ where PBB Scholars were challenged to respond outside of their backgrounds and expectations (Addleman, et al., 2014; Kiely, 2005; Onosu, 2021). PBB Scholars’ reflections and observations by their AAC mentors demonstrated transformations in their cultural learning and competencies to collaborate with teachers, families, and students in the culture and language of the host country. As a result of the international internship, PBB Scholars subsequently transferred their learning to school internships, collaborating with families and students to include preferred cultural traditions and languages spoken at home.

### **Transformative Learning Experiences in Culturally-Responsive AAC through International Internships**

Project BB PBB Scholars gained competency to assist teachers and families to create communication tools that reflect individual cultures and languages. To date, 42 students completed International AAC Internships. This poster features the experiences of PBB Scholars who traveled with the Nika Project to Indonesia and Bali; and PBB Scholars who traveled to the Marshall Islands with University of Hawaii faculty in the Summer of 2019.

#### **Nika Project: Bali, Indonesia and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia**



Six SF State students traveled with a team of AAC mentors in partnership with the NIKA Project to work in schools with children, families, teachers, and university graduate students. SF State students had the opportunity to create and to implement AAC systems through teaching families and teachers, thus contributing to the power and sustainability of communication tools for children with disabilities in each location. More about NIKA is available at <https://nikaproject.org/>.





In Bali, Indonesia, the students and NIKA mentors conducted all-day training at the schools, Sjaki-Tari-Us School and Yayasan Widya Guna, for their teachers and therapists. The PBB Scholars introduced mobile technology tools to them, worked in creating digital books, as well as social stories. They also created vocabulary, literacy activities, and customized communication systems for teacher and student response. Each Scholar selected a target student and created individualized AAC supports and intervention.

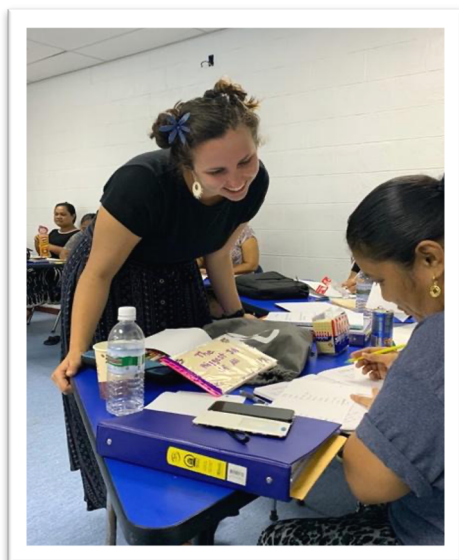
In Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, the students partnered with the National University of Malaysia's (NUM) Speech and Language Pathology department. Together SFSU students, NIKA mentors, and NUM students addressed the needs of Kiwanis Down Syndrome National Center, Kuala Lumpur School for Autism, Spastic Children's Association Of Selangor & Federal Territory, and Public School KD11. Each Scholar performed assessment, provided teacher training in AAC and assistive technology, and created AAC supports. At the end of the week, PBB Scholars and NUM students presented the outcome of their projects to NUM faculty, students, and NIKA mentors.



## Navigating Student Success in the Pacific Project (NSSP) with the College of the Marshall Islands and University of Hawaii



In partnership with the College of the Marshall Islands in Majuro and the University of Hawaii Center on Disability Studies, two PBB Scholars participated in the summer of 2019 with faculty mentors, Dr. Kathy Ratliffe and Ms. Mellanie Lee, and teachers in the CMI Summer Institute to develop AAC tools with families and children in the Marshall Islands. PBB Scholars assisted faculty in teaching and partnered with NSSP Teachers from throughout Micronesia to develop AAC strategies to implement with children and families upon return to their own island communities.



PBB Scholars prepared lectures for NSSP Teachers earning a B.Ed. degree. These lectures ranged from topics including introduction to AAC, AAC communicator profiles, making a switch from scratch and making a core vocabulary communication board. Activities accompanied the lectures allowing for creation of AAC systems and switches to implement in practice. Following the lectures, the students were given a quiz to test for comprehension and application. Materials and supplies for the activities were brought to the island by the PBB Scholars or were created using local resources. Pre- and post-data regarding Teachers' knowledge of AAC showed significant positive changes.



In addition to teacher training, the PBB Scholars partnered with teachers to aide in intervention which took place in families' homes with children with disabilities. Together with the NSSP teachers, PBB Scholars worked with families and translators to conduct evidence-based AAC assessment and intervention. Assessment reports were written by the PBB Scholars for approximately 20 children with complex communication needs on the Island.



### Outcomes of International AAC Internship Experiences to Date

#### PBB Scholars' Short-Term Impacts

PBB Scholars completed reflections at the completion of in-person and online internships with international partners. Representative comments from 42 Project BB PBB Scholars show the significant impacts on Scholar's perspectives and culturally responsive AAC competencies to incorporate into future professional practice, resulting from the international experiences:

#### AAC Assessment



*When we entered homes, there was nothing more than a bed or single rug in the room where the entire family would sleep together. It was their way of life, and they simply wanted their children to be seen and understood by someone other than themselves.*

*I learned that a sincere question to understand the cultural differences is an important way to accept the differences and build a relationship over a conversation with one another.*





*This experience helped me to have another perspective on the history of different cultures and why they make certain choices. It enhanced my understanding of their perspectives and being able to 'step back' without imposing my own beliefs.*

### AAC Intervention

*The use of locals as translators was a huge strategy, we implemented during home visits. Most families spoke little to no English and translation on why we were there and what we were doing was important in order to provide proper services.*

*I would like to mention that learning and using the local language showed vulnerability and willingness to learn more about the culture. It opened up conversations and opportunities for jokes and laughter. I did not expect to bond with so many, many lovely people!*

*I learned that parents want children to succeed universally. I recognized that there were cultural differences in teaching that were different from the states. In order to gain buy-in from parents/teachers it is important to demonstrate the effectiveness of the tool and the way it benefits the student's life.*



### Professional Development

*I was unsure of the interaction we would have with the teachers we were working with and how we could make an impact in such short of a time frame. The teachers truly comprehended the content we provided and ran with it. They began creating their own materials and were doing so well.*



*I did not realize that a majority of the work I would be doing would be focused on training professionals as opposed to implementing intervention with children. I also found that providing training to professionals, rather than implementing intervention, was much more sustainable.*

*I learned quite a bit about myself and my ability to be flexible in a culture that is so different from my own. I really enjoyed being outside of my "comfort zone." Seeing the teachers get excited about materials, and get excited about AAC, was really rewarding. It showed me how important it is to understand just how diverse the world is.*



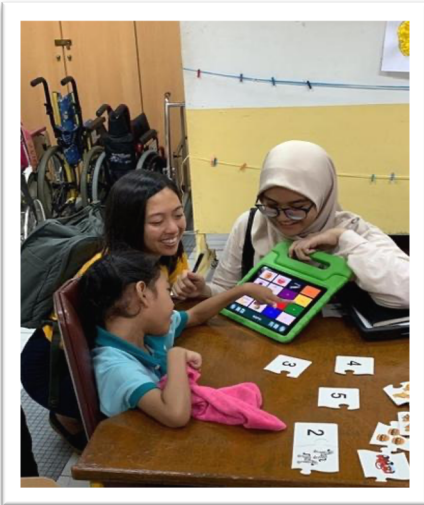
*Being in an environment where everyone around me spoke a language that I didn't understand put me in a vulnerable position. I felt I was a part of the minority and was different. It positively affected my personal and professional values that I will carry throughout my SLP career.*



### **PBB Scholars' Long-Term Career Impacts**

A group of PBB Scholars who completed in-person internships in the Summer of 2019 were asked to reflect on the long-term impact, two years after their international AAC Internship. Those who responded provided the following assessment of the impact on their careers to date.

#### *Impact on Working with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students and Families*



*Working in an international location helped me to be more flexible in my use of AAC as an intervention strategy. Not everyone can afford to have speech generating devices. Sometimes you have to be creative and use what you have.*

*The experience taught me how to be flexible in my practice and thinking so that I can provide what is realistic in certain situations. I also got a lot of insight into how our assumptions about other cultures can shape our practice. Sometimes we assume people within a culture are one way or another, but just like in our own culture, every person/home/family is different and has to be approached as such.*





### Impact on Confidence and Competence in AAC

*Initially, I was very nervous about my skills and if I truly had anything to contribute to teaching the Teachers in the college where we worked. Sometimes you have to trust that you have knowledge that others may not have, and to share that knowledge can be helpful.*

*Just as much as I taught our collaborating Teachers, I also learned from them and their experience. Now I know I can go into a situation and simultaneously learn while I help teach someone else. This gives me confidence to go into new situations because I go in with an open mind.*



### Impact on Career to Date

*Since completing the internship and my training in AAC, I am now in my first year as a licensed SLP working as the AAC specialist in my school district where a large portion of the student population are English language learners, coming from families with diverse cultural backgrounds. I make a point of including home languages and culture into my practice in order to help students and family members feel more comfortable.*

*I have students who do not feel comfortable speaking English, so I try to incorporate their home language into sessions, even in groups with English speaking students. I have become more aware of the little ways that students from diverse backgrounds can be left out, and how those things can amount to so much more than we realize when we look at the big picture.*



## Impacts for Teachers in Host Countries

PBB Scholars who traveled to the Republic of the Marshall Islands developed the *Marshallese Communication Competency Self-Assessment (MCCSA)* to determine the effectiveness of the two-week AAC training for the NSSP Teachers. Fourteen NSSP Teachers from the Federated States of Micronesia of Yap, Pohnpei, Kosrae and Chuuk; and the Republic of the Marshall Islands completed the pre- and post-self-assessments, using a 1-5 rating scale. At the end of the two-week training, Teachers demonstrated significantly increased understanding and confidence of AAC.



## Marshallese Communication Competency Self-Assessment (MCCSA) Pre/Post Self-Assessment Results

Pre/Post Self Assessments		
	PRE	POST
1. I understand the different types of AAC users and how they communicate.	1.6	4.5
2. I understand the different types of skills AAC users have.	1.4	4.4
3. I feel confident working with AAC users.	1.3	4.1
4. I understand what Core words are.	1.1	4.4
5. I understand what Fringe words are.	1.0	4.5
6. I understand why symbols are important in AAC.	1.7	4.6
7. I know how to pick words and symbols for an AAC user's system.	1.7	4.6
8. I understand how to assess an AAC user.	1.4	4.4
9. I know how to assemble a basic communication board.	2.5	4.6
10. I know how to assemble a basic switch.	1.3	4.6

## International AAC Internship Resources

### International AAC Internship Teaching Materials

The International AAC Internship was formalized in a course, SLHS 881, that is now offered regularly as part of the AAC Graduate Certificate at San Francisco State University in the Department of Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences.

[SLHS 881 Syllabus](#): The International AAC Internship syllabus is available for adaptation. Citation of the source is requested.

[International AAC Internship Guide](#): The Internship Guide for International Service-Learning online is available for downloading and adaptation, as needed.

[Project Building Bridges Culturally Responsive AAC Competencies](#): Competencies developed for Project Building Bridges were published in ASHA Perspectives in 2018. A copy is linked here.

### [Marshalllese Communication Competency Self-Assessment Tool \(MCCSA\) Pre- and Post-Survey](#)

Developed by Brittany Davis, MS, SLP-CCC and Rebecca Matthews, MS, SLP-CCC, the MCCSA was developed as a pre- and post- measure of training Teachers in AAC concepts and application. The [MCCSA](#) is based on key areas of AAC practice and can be adapted as needed. Citation of the authors is requested.

### Cloud Based AAC Apps

Several Open Source Apps provide culturally responsive images and language translation to develop AAC Communication Tools online. Links to resources are below:

[CoughDrop](#): CoughDrop provides online collaboration to design communication boards that can be used online, offline and printed. Support for language translation and access to global symbol sets and alternate access methods.

[Open AAC](#): Open AAC is an initiative to create and encourage international open-licensed resources and tools to support AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) users.

[Avaz](#): Avaz is a picture and text-based AAC app in multiple languages for children and adults with complex communication needs to express themselves and learn.

[Arasaac](#): Arasaac stands for Aragonese Center of Augmentative and Alternative Communication. Arasaac has a collection of more than 10,000 pictograms in 20 different languages.

[Free iPad Apps for Communication and Learning](#): A collection of free Apps were developed for access by international teams to adapt for their students to develop communication tools and to participate in academic, social and play activities.



### **Low-Tech Communication Tools**

Adaptable low-tech tools for use in international locations with intermittent internet and electricity can provide back-up for high-tech tools.

[PicSeePal](#): The PicSeePal communication system is a lightweight, portable, customizable, splash proof, and modular communication book.

[AT Tool Kit](#): Materials for a low-tech AT Tool Kit are listed to complete assessment and to develop low-tech tools is provided for adaptation.

### **Online AAC Assessment Tools**

Online AAC assessment provide a means for teams to complete assessments together.

[Communication Matrix](#): The Communication Matrix provides up to 5 free assessments for families and professionals to identify the communication status, progress, and unique needs of anyone functioning at the early stages of communication.

[DAGG Pathways Goals Grid](#): The Goals Grid is a systematic way to assess an individual's current skills and will assist in developing a comprehensive, long-term plan for implementing AAC and teaching new skills.

More Culturally Responsive AAC Resources are available at [AAC Studies at SF State Website](#)



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