Challenging Communication - Using Informal and Non-Symbolic Systems with Pupils with Severe and Profound Learning Disability

Conventional communication systems may not be appropriate in interacting with pupils with severe/profound learning disabilities. It is necessary to change our traditional views of intervention from client-directed programmes to environmental-centred programmes which incorporate informal methods and approaches to communication. In this context, a challenging behaviour, to the teacher or team worker, can be a challenging communication.

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INTRODUCTION

A revision of traditional work practices and the examination of received opinion on education and communication were required when exploring the possibilities of curriculum development for children with a severe or profound learning disability (Griffen et al 1988).

RE-DEFINING COMMUNICATION FOR CHILDREN WITH SEVERE/PROFOUND DISABILITY

Alternative definitions of established concepts in the area of communication were already available. MacDonald (1983) described a conversation as an event in which two persons exchanged messages with each other: for example taking turns describing the sights while riding in a car or exchanging gestures while figuring out how to open a car. It is interesting to contrast this view with the more traditional definition of conversation as naturally occurring talk between

two or more participants, taking care to emphasise the non-verbal aspects of this talk (McTear, 1985). Watzlavick et al (1967) defined communication as any behaviour that either intends to send or unintentionally has the effect of sending a message to another person. MacDonald (1983) stressed that the important point to remember with delayed children was that any behaviour at all could communicate and that every child was ready to communicate in some way. These ideas were developed by Coupe and Goldbart (1988)..."In order to meet the needs of pupils defined as precommunicative we need a more flexible definition. Communication can be said to occur when one person's behaviour is interpreted or inferred as meaningful and understood by their partner in the interaction... the behaviours produced act as signals or message carriers which are then received/processed and responded to. This broadening of the definition of communication allows us to view all children as communicators. Indeed by treating them as communicators they become communicators".

KEYS TO UNLOCKING COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS

The concept of intentionality, the possibility of its absence and the observable and measurable reality of behaviour are the keys that can unlock communication for people with severe learning disabilities. With this approach, children and adults with severe communication problems can participate in the process of information exchange.

NON-SYMBOLIC COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS

Communicating about communication is not always straightforward. We do not always share the same meanings and this is particularly true in the area of early communication development. Terms such as non-linguistic, pre-verbal, non-vocal or pre-symbolic are employed to describe the same idea and also to describe very different ideas depending on the user. Here, the term non-symbolic is used to refer to signals that are not representational. While developmental progression is always an aspiration, the primary intention is to stress the intrinsic value of such systems in their own right. They may be used as an alternative to or as an augmentation of symbolic systems. A nonsymbolic system will include signals that are reactive, active, instrumental and social. Meaning or content is expressed in a direct, concrete mode and its function may be unintentional or intentional. An informal system will be based on the client's idiosyncratic signals and may include a symbol system that is tailored for his/her particular needs. Such a system will be known and recognised by his immediate carers.

TABLE 1 :
HOW MESSAGES ARE SIGNALLED :
INFORMALLY AND NON-SYMBOLICALLY

REACTIVE SIGNALS	: facial expression, eye contact, undifferentiated movement.
ACTIVE SIGNALS movement,	: pointing, gesture, mime, head whole body action, manipulation.
VOCAL SIGNALS	: crying, cooing, babbling, shouting, laughter, proto-words, stereotypic word usage.
AIDED SIGNALS	: objects, pictures.
SOCIAL SIGNALS	: posture, proximity, orientation, etc.
PARALINGUISTIC SIGNALS	: emotional tone, pitch, volume.

Sum of signals = Client's Communication System

IDIOSYNCRATIC AND CONVENTIONAL COMMUNICATION

MacDonald (1983) identifies two major kinds of communication: idiosyncratic and conventional. Idiosyncratic communications are those which only the client's significant others understand and accept. Conventional communications are those which are understandable and acceptable to strangers. Kiernan and Reid (1987) distinguish between informal communication behaviours and symbolic communication skills. Here informal is used to refer to symbolic or non-symbolic idiosyncratic systems. The concept of intentionality and its development is discussed by Coupe and Goldbart (1988).

CHANGING COMMUNICATION / CHANGING BEHAVIOUR

Changing the aspect from which we examine and discuss communication can alter perspectives on management and intervention. Communicative behaviours

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can be viewed as an ECO-SYSTEM. If one changes or modifies a behaviour or a set of behaviour patterns one also changes a communication system. Challenging or unsociable behaviours can provide the user with a much more effective non-symbolic system than many formal systems of communication. Compare the attention-direction value of a sharp kick in the ankle with a more sedate manual sign for "Look at me". Which one is the conversation partner most likely to ignore? A child who throws his dinner may have no other mode to express his dislike of food. Depending on its communicative value to the client, it may not be advisable to change or eliminate a certain behaviour. If a behaviour must be changed, its communicative function should be examined and replaced with a more acceptable behaviour if possible.
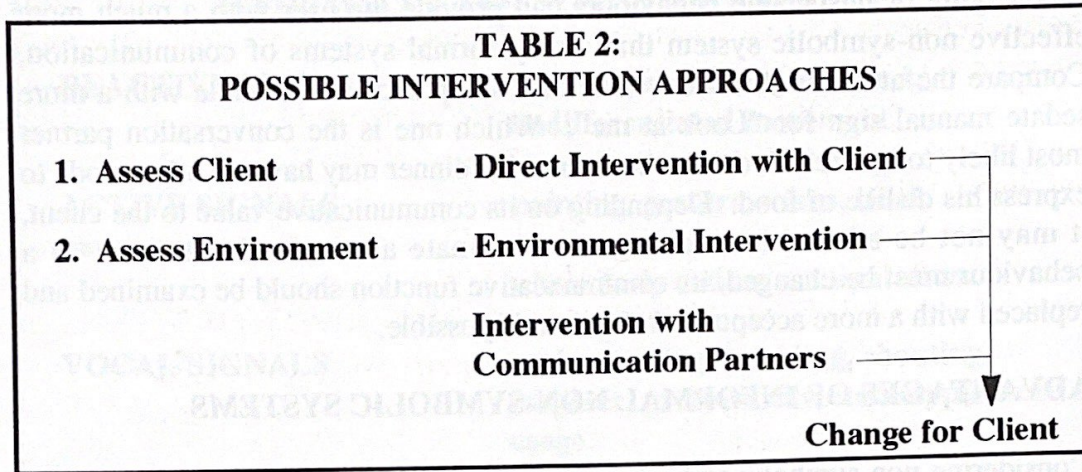
ADVANTAGES OF INFORMAL NON-SYMBOLIC SYSTEMS

Considering non-symbolic and informal communication as an investment, where time, energy and even money is spent on improving opportunities for better exchanges, is guaranteed to pay dividends. This will be noticed in the areas of education, behaviour management, interpersonal and social development. Non-symbolic and informal communication is an environmental issue. McTear (1985) stresses that what the child learns about conversation from his experience of interaction with caregivers is that particular behaviours receive predictable responses. Lovett (1985) states that the best place for a person to learn a skill is in the natural environment where that skill is used. Siegel-Causey and Guess (1988) promote the view that natural contexts occurring in any daily setting - educational, leisure, domestic or vocational can provide a potentially continuous learning environment for the individual with severe disabilities, ...'Intervention situations that are arranged precisely for the purpose of teaching specific communication skills may lose some of the child's natural interest and spontaneity.'

CHANGING OUR VIEWS OF INTERVENTION

Here, it is considered important to stress the importance of changing our traditional view of intervention, shifting from client-directed programmes to environmental-centered programmes; to look at clients' activities, surroundings, time-schedules and communication partners.

The new emphasis should highlight the increased responsibility on us all, as carers to change our *attitudes* and *approaches*; to learn to accept and value the client's system of communication. There should be less responsibility on the

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client who has the least capability for change to alter his/her system. It is easier for us as carers, to learn the client's language, than it is for him/her to learn ours.

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                        TABLE 2:
            POSSIBLE INTERVENTION APPROACHES

1. Assess Client         - Direct Intervention with Client ─┐

2. Assess Environment    - Environmental Intervention ──────┤

                           Intervention with
                           Communication Partners ──────────┤
                                                            ▼
                                              Change for Client
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NON-SYMBOLIC COMMUNICATION AND THE FORMAL CURRICULUM.

The importance of communication in education is well recognised. Harris (1988) looked at the role of language as a tool that permits the transmission of the formal curriculum as well as being a subject. The vehicle for the transmission of the curriculum when the pupil is non-linguistic or pre-linguistic is less clear. However, it is possible to match informal or non-symbolic systems with parallel linguistic features. Both have form, content and function. Both can be described as a medium for expression or comprehension. Messages can be exchanged. The curriculum can be transmitted.

Informal and Non-Symbolic Communication can also be introduced at subject level as a developmental, augmentative or autonomous feature. Intervention at the level of non-symbolic communication may form the basis of a developmental approach to therapy; laying the foundation for formal systems. Co-existing with formal systems it can enhance the expressive skills of children and adults with a learning disability. Clients who have a severe or profound level of learning disability may never develop beyond the need for non-symbolic communication. Such a system may be adequate for their needs. Effective communication is the overall aim of intervention. Effective intervention is always based on realistic goals. Realistic goals reflect acceptance of the client.

FACILITATING CHANGE

Effective communication will take place in the context of a social environment that is nurturing, secure, consistent and accepting. A good communication environment will provide opportunities to interact with others, to explore, make choices, be independent and self determining. An accepting milieu will respect the client at his/her personal level of functioning, valuing his physical, cognitive and social ability.

TABLE 3
A GUIDE TO ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION

LOOKING AT COMMUNICATIVE BEHAVIOUR	LOOKING AT PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT
1. To identify Client's communication system	1. To identify significant places and activities
2. To help reduce unacceptable signals	2. To help increase opportunities for risk-taking and choice
3. To increase acceptable signals	3. To facilitate change
4. To promote the use of formal systems (when possible)	4. To safeguard the rights and security of the individual

LOOKING AT SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT	LOOKING AT CLIENT'S INNER/PERSONAL ENVIRONMENT
1. To identify Significant Other's	1. To identify significant events in Client's life
2. To increase interactive activities	2. To identify motivators
3. To increase communicative exchanges	3. To identify learning patterns
4. To identify and observe rules of Client's communication system	4. To attempt to consider Client's experiences and self-evaluation (subjective process analysis)

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POSITIVE OUTCOMES

The positive outcome of this approach to intervention should result in a better understanding of the person with a learning disability. There should be an improvement in the quality of programming and curriculum implementation, with more realistic pupil-orientated goals. A change in the perception of what constitutes a challenging behaviour should result in a reduction in such behaviours. A challenging behaviour can also be a challenging communication. Overall the primary aim of intervention will be to increase acceptance of the client in his particular environment in the context of an interdisciplinary approach to assessment and intervention.

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