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Editorial

This issue of the SLD Experience continues the tradition of having a mix of articles from academics and practitioners. Richard Aird’s article raises some very controversial issues: the future of special schools, the utility or otherwise of P Levels, and, in particular, whether there should be ‘a discreet National Curriculum for this sector’. Education, and not just special education, or school education, but the whole field, needs those who are prepared to question the current consensus, whatever that may be, and I hope that readers will respond to the issues that Richard raises.

Those who have been following the recent debate about P Levels and other ways to assess progress for this group of pupils on the SLD Forum will be aware that the issue of how to measure progress for those pupils with the most profound level of learning disability remains one of the most intractable problems in education. Perhaps what would help us most in making progress on this issue is an in depth discussion on what we are trying to achieve through education. Aird draws attention to this issue through his call for a curriculum based on ‘what teachers in SLD schools really ought to be teaching their pupils’. But what that is may not be as clear as Aird implies.

Through working with people from a variety of backgrounds, and through my ten years in Ireland in particular, I have come to realise that different people have subtly different priorities when it comes to the aims of education. The Primary Curriculum in Ireland, for example, has as one of its explicit aims ‘to enable the child to live a full life as a child’ (Government of Ireland, 1999 p7). This is nowhere made explicit within the National Curriculum aims in England (see QCA, 2009), although I suspect that many teachers here would concur with such an aim. Those who do will find in Keith Park’s Mother Goose a welcome opportunity to have some fun with their pupils. Perhaps part of the diversity for which we ought properly to allow for in education is a range of priorities within the overall aims.

Conversely, there is, I believe, no better way to stimulate thinking about the aims of education than to consider what those aims mean for learners with severe or profound learning disabilities. In this context Tony Cline’s article about learning difficulties within a multicultural and multilingual society is an important reminder that we should never see someone just in terms of their difficulties in learning. Each individual is unique and has needs relating to their cultural and linguistic background as well as their learning abilities and disabilities. Tony challenges us to think about our practice in relation to the whole child and their context.

In different ways Sally Millar, Paul Herring and Hollie Rawson also challenge us to think about our practice. Sally’s article is very practical and I’m sure that readers for that reason alone will welcome it enthusiastically; nonetheless, she brings us back to the issue of what we are trying to achieve. So, in a different way does Hollie Rawson, who writes about a transition project in an area which has long been an issue for teachers of pupils with SLD and PMLD, that of life after school. Paul Herring, like Sally, considers the role of technology for a particular group of learners, this time those with ASD. He introduces us to an ambitious project designed to see if the benefits of various high and low tech attempts to encourage children with ASD to communicate spontaneously can be combined.

In their very diverse ways each of this month’s contributors once more underlines the critical importance of education to the quality of life of people with severe and profound learning disabilities. The articles by Cline, Millar, Herring and Aird all highlight how much more we need to know, and how much more research and thinking is needed, if we are to be clear about our aims and how to go about achieving them.

Jean Ware

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SLD Forum http://lists.becta.org.uk/mailman/listinfo/sld-forum

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Severe and profound learning difficulties in a multilingual society

Tony Cline

Introduction
In January 2008 one pupil in five attending a special school in England came from a minority ethnic background and one pupil in ten came from a family where the first language was known or believed to be a language other than English (DCSF, 2008, Tables 3 and 4). In the past, discussions of the special education needs of pupils from minority ethnic communities have often focused on issues of fairness and equity in assessment. Were black and Asian children being over-assessed as having moderate learning difficulties (Tomlinson, 1984) or was bias operating in the other direction: were children from minority backgrounds who had significant special needs being overlooked and deprived of the special help they should have had? (See, for example, Cline and Shamsi (2000) on literacy learning difficulties and Marchant et al (2006) on autistic spectrum disorders.) However, when SEN are easy to identify, as is the case with SLD and PMLD, there is less likelihood of bias in the initial assessment process. There may be some anomalies across ethnic groups. For example, when Lindsay et al (2006) undertook an analysis of national schools data in England, they found over-representation of SLD among pupils from traveller families of Irish heritage and Gypsy/Roma families and over-representation of PMLD among pupils from Gypsy/Roma families and Pakistani families. But, if problems exist about educational provision for children with severe and profound learning difficulties from minority ethnic and/or linguistic backgrounds, they do not focus mainly on equity and fairness at the point of identification.

Like colleagues across the education system, staff working with children who have SLD or PMLD need to respond to new forms of diversity in the population they serve. Severe special educational needs are not likely to be overlooked, but it may be easier for the particular needs associated with linguistic and cultural diversity to be overshadowed. There is little firm evidence on this phenomenon, but hints of its possible scope may be found in debates on the assessment of moderate learning difficulties (MLD). In the past it has been common for SEN statements for children in MLD schools to ignore language competence in languages other than English. An example can be found in an analysis carried out by Curnyn et al (1991) of the records of need for 35 children with MLD who were learning English as an additional language (EAL) and were attending Glasgow primary and secondary schools in 1990. They found that in about half the sample the assessment report completed by the school did not mention language at all when describing the child's strengths and difficulties, while bilingualism was referred to in the language assessment in less than one-fifth of the cases. The assessment reports prepared by psychologists showed a similar pattern, mentioning the child's bilingualism or EAL status in only two-thirds of the cases and referring to an assessment of the child's first language in only half of the cases. In less than one-fifth of the cases examined did these professionals qualify their overall assessment by indicating that it should be interpreted in the light of the child's bilingual or bicultural status. Findings of a similar kind were reported by Cline (1991) and Desforges et al (1995).

If those working with children who have SLD or PMLD avoid such errors and pay attention to the linguistic and cultural status of their pupils, what difference will it make to what they do? In this short article I will refer to the guidance that is given for teachers working with pupils learning EAL in primary and secondary schools in order to consider what lessons may be drawn from it for those working with children who have severe or profound learning difficulties.

The planning process
When a school in the UK has some pupils who are not exposed to English regularly at home, it will not be able to meet their specific needs and those of their families unless thinking about those needs is embedded in the normal planning routines of the school. Just as staff will automatically consider the particular needs of older and younger pupils and of boys and girls,
they will need to give consideration automatically in their planning to the particular needs of children who are exposed to English as an additional language at school. This will affect every aspect of school planning. Strategic appointments and/or training will help to ensure that there are teachers, learning support assistants or midday supervisors who have EAL expertise and/or bilingual or multilingual skills. These members of staff will be able to make a specific contribution to individual planning for the pupils with whom they share a linguistic and cultural heritage. Explicit planning of curricular initiatives and family liaison will help to ensure that work on everyday skills, tools and materials builds on the family’s routine practices and provides continuity between school and home. The school’s policy on language and communication will have a central role, but all aspects of the curriculum will need to be reviewed with a more diverse pupil profile in mind (cf. DfES, 2004, Section 2, Part 3). Two of these planning issues are now considered in more detail.

**Staffing**

The introduction of some teachers, support staff and/or family liaison workers who share the main minority languages of the pupils’ families allows those parents whose English is limited to communicate more easily with the school and gives a wider group of staff direct access to a personal perspective on the children’s cultural background. Uncertainty and miscommunication about issues of diet, dress, family practices and routines become less likely. Misleading myths about the strengths and weaknesses of a community’s treatment of its disabled members are more likely to be countered. One such myth involves many teachers and social workers overestimating the availability of extended family support for Pakistani and Bangladeshi parents who have a child with severe disabilities, leading to reduced offers of substitute and respite services (Chamba et al, 1999; Fazil et al, 2002).

While special schools were generally rated highly by South Asian parents in one survey, few were considered to make adequate provision to meet the cultural and religious needs of the children (Hatton et al, 2004). A particular anxiety for some parents is the sense of impotence in enabling their children with learning difficulties to develop a knowledge and understanding of the family’s cultural beliefs and religious practices. When some staff in a school setting come from the same background, it is more likely to be possible to help parents maximise their child’s engagement and understanding. This is even more important when a child’s access to their home language is considered – a topic that is discussed next.

**Communication and languages**

Key principles in work with pupils who are learning EAL in primary and secondary schools are that bilingualism is an asset and that a child’s first language has a continuing and significant role in their identity development, their learning and their acquisition of additional languages. When a child’s learning difficulties mean that all language learning is challenging for them, it is easy to forget the advantages of bilingualism and to focus only on the additional challenges it brings. There is strong evidence from research on bilingual and multilingual speakers who do not have learning difficulties that students’ understanding and confidence benefit when they learn and consolidate new concepts in their strongest language (Cummins, 2000). A child’s first language may have emotional associations that influence the intensity and persistence of key memories (Pavlenko, 2006). There has as yet been very limited systematic research validating these findings with individuals who have severe or profound learning difficulties, but anecdotal evidence supports the prediction that the further development of a child’s communication skills is encouraged when it is supported through communication in their home language (Lowry, 2007). The arrangements for facilitating this in one specialist school for children with SLD and PMLD involved the use of a Panjabi-speaking member of staff to:

- provide one-to-one support to help the teaching of IEP targets in the mother tongue
- lead a weekly meeting of Panjabi pupils who were taught in Panjabi to assist concept development covering work that would be repeated in English at another time
- run a weekly meeting with a group of Panjabi-speaking parents who were to plan and deliver activities relating to Pakistani and/or religious themes
- join teaching staff in providing training for Panjabi-speaking midday supervisors to enable them to address individual feeding programme aims that incorporated communication targets
- run regular workshops for parents within the school day and involving their children aimed at ‘bringing the curriculum to life’ and showing what was done at school through direct teaching (Fergusson and Duffield, 2003, p43)
It is a basic assumption of the education of children with SLD and PMLD that effective non-verbal communication must underpin all successful learning interactions. As was found in past research on the learning of EAL, the teaching of unrelated sub-skills does not help children to become active participants in a conversation or to use those skills effectively in learning situations. The goal of supporting responsive and purposeful communication requires the mastery of pragmatic aspects of communication. Approaches such as Intensive Interaction build on a model of what is assumed to happen naturally between a caregiver and an infant. The emphasis that is placed on key processes such as sharing control and synchronising movements in a one-to-one interactive game may be universal, but teachers need to be alert to the possibility that some other aspects of these strategies may be more culture-specific.

What should happen when parents use different communication styles with their children from those commonly adopted by the white European parents whose behaviour was the model for the development of the approach? For example, Fergusson and Duffield (2003) suggested from observations in the school where they conducted a case study that the ‘parents of pupils from Pakistani origins appeared to have a different, more tactile, interaction style with their sons and daughters’ than those of European origin (p36). The key question here is not whether that observation is valid for many other parents but whether the overall strategy of Intensive Interaction has sufficient flexibility to adapt to the needs of children whose history of interactions with others differs from that with which their teachers have become most familiar. There seems no doubt that this approach and others like it have the potential for such flexibility, but that potential will not be realised unless teachers and other staff are sensitive to the possible need for it.

The sensitivity that is required will help not only children with SLD and PMLD from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds: it is necessary for all children with significant learning difficulties. It appears that many of the challenges of a culturally and linguistically diverse specialist school can be effectively addressed by conducting regular ‘meaning audits’, an approach to individual planning that has been advocated for all pupils with SLD and PMLD by Goss (2006). This involves a systematic analysis of what appears to be most meaningful to the child, drawing on reports from parents and carers as well as the teacher’s own observations. In order to facilitate meaning-led teaching and learning Goss argues that certain key steps are necessary:

- ‘First, staff need to provide a framework for regularly auditing the perspectives and reflections of those involved with a pupil. This audit should be concerned with what is meaningful for the pupil and patterns of, or past influences upon, current behaviours and interests...
- ‘Next, staff should develop learning activities that reflect meaningful aspects of the pupil’s life and responses... A useful term for describing the nature of the learning experiences that should be facilitated and one that provides a useful criterion for judging their effectiveness is ‘lucid’. Whether it is applied to language, visual imagery or sensory experiences, this term conveys a sense of clarity or vividness. Staff need to aim to provide lucid learning activities within a meaningful curriculum’

This outline mirrors key emphases that are regularly found in accounts of effective teaching for pupils learning EAL, an emphasis on activating a pupil’s prior knowledge in order to ensure that both language work and curriculum work build on that knowledge and an emphasis on providing a rich contextual background to make all language input comprehensible. However, perhaps the most important echo of all comes in another part of Goss’s analysis. He presses the need to build into school policies and practices ‘a clearer emotional dimension, incorporating the impact of meaning on pupil learning in order to promote relevance and depth’ (p218). The negotiation of personal and social identities is challenging for all children from linguistic and cultural minority communities. Those challenges are exacerbated when they have, in addition, an uncertain place in those communities because of others’ reactions to their learning difficulties and a sense of confusion about identity arising directly from those difficulties.

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Mother Goose: developing language and communication skills through drama

Keith Park

A pantomime script of Mother Goose was used as a means of providing pupils with severe and profound learning disabilities the opportunities to develop language and communication skills. The script was originally prepared for a group of five children aged between three and five and was then done separately with a group of teenagers. Finally, the two groups came together on stage at The Churchill Theatre (Bromley, south-east London) and the teenagers ran the workshop for the younger children.

The script is set out below together with the storyline and the communication aims of each episode. These aims were devised with the speech and language therapists collaborating with the teaching staff. The early communication skills of awareness, anticipation, turn-taking and gaze alternation are the building blocks upon which more sophisticated forms of language and communication are based (Coupe-O’Kane and Goldbart, 1998; Grove and Park, 1996).

Mother Goose

Mother Goose has varied origins and meanings. In the USA, Mother Goose is the fictional character that tells Mother Goose poems and stories, whereas in the UK it usually refers to the pantomime version of Mother Goose first performed in 1902 (www.its-behind-you.com). There is a Mother Goose fairy tale of European origin, first written down by Frenchman Charles Perrault in 1695. The term Mother Goose was already known in Europe in 1650.

The British pantomime story tells how Mother Goose is about to be thrown off her land because she cannot pay the rent. Along comes Priscilla the Goose. Mother Goose doesn’t know the good fairy has sent her to help: Priscilla lays golden eggs and Mother Goose is rich. Along comes the Demon King (sometimes called ‘Demon Discord’), who has a bet with the fairy. He claims there is no one on earth who is happy with what they have got – everyone wants more. The fairy disagrees and uses Mother Goose as an example of goodness.

The Demon King tempts Mother Goose with things she doesn’t have – youth and beauty. He persuades her to give him Priscilla in exchange for a visit to the ‘Pool of Beauty’. She gives him Priscilla and enters the pool, emerging as (she thinks) a beautiful young woman.

None of her friends like her now – they want the old Mother Goose back. Too late she realises that youth and beauty are not everything and that she must get Priscilla back. They have to go to Goose Court in Gooseland to plead for Priscilla, in which they succeed and all ends happily ever after.

1 Mother Goose

**Storyline: Mother Goose is about to be thrown off her land because she cannot pay the rent.**

**Activity:** this is a version of ‘grandmother went shopping’, with the list of names of pupils and staff in the circle followed by a word that rhymes with it to describe where all the money went. Rhyming is not essential and sometimes impossible, so a funny alternative can be invented, for example, ‘Jatinder – don’t ask!’

**Communication:** declarative pointing, gaze alternation and shared attention. Everyone is encouraged to look and/or point at the person being named.

We’re broke, what a joke!
Where did all the money go?
Holly bought a dolly

We’re broke, what a joke!
Where did all the money go?
Holly bought a dolly

Sue got the flu – aitchoo!

We’re broke, what a joke!
Where did all the money go?
Holly bought a dolly
Sue got the flu – aitchoo!
Reese bought a fleece
And then with each verse add the names of everyone in the group:
Rebecca went to Mecca
Helen bought a melon
Brian got an iron
Pam bought a yam
That’s where the money went!

2 Priscilla the Goose

*Storyline: along comes Priscilla the Goose. Priscilla lays a golden egg and Mother Goose is rich.*

*Activity:* Everyone speaks the words together and then, from the second verse, the words are replaced by sound effects, until it is no more than a sequence of sound effects. It can be very funny.

*Communication:* awareness and anticipation. The words are replaced by sound effects made by individual members of staff, in a clockwise direction, so that by the end of the activity the sound effects go right round the circle. By the fourth week, two of the children were visually following the direction of the sound effects and one pupil was anticipating where the next sound was coming from by looking at the next member of staff.

Priscilla the Goose
Has laid a golden egg (repeat these 2 lines 3 times)
And Mother Goose can put it in her bank account!

Priscilla the Goose
Has laid a golden egg
And Mother Goose can put it in her dingo-linga-ling!

Priscilla the Goose
Has laid a golden (squawk!)
And Mother Goose can put it in her dingo-linga-ling!

And so on until everything is communicated through sound:

Oooh! The honk
Has wurgh! A-ching! Squawk!
And Mother Goose can put it in her dingo-linga-ling!

3 The Demon King

*Storyline:* along comes the Demon King, who says that nobody is happy with what they have got. Everyone wants more. He shows the fairy some children on Christmas Day.

*Activity:* a long piece of bright pink glittery material is spread over everyone’s knees and held lightly. Instead of repeating the list of presents everyone provides the sound effects as described below. On the ‘Ooohhh’ response after the words ‘and a posh pink lamé frock’, everyone waves the material up high.

*Communication:* shared visual attention of the glittery material and anticipation of the various sound effects. In the fifth session in the classroom, one of the children in one of the performances clearly vocalised an ‘ooh’ for the first time.

On Christmas Day I got
A posh pink lamé frock! Ooooohhhh!
And there’s more:
On Christmas Day I got
Two smelly socks (pooh!)
And a posh pink lamé frock! Ooooohhhh!
And there’s more:
On Christmas Day I got (etc)
Three jellied eels (wurgh!)
Four wagon wheels (mmmm!)
Five jars of mustard (hot hot hot)
Six bowls of custard (slurp slurp slurp)
Seven yellow jellies (wibble wobble wibble wobble)
Eight pairs of wellies (stamp stamp stamp)

4 Mother Goose

*Storyline:* The fairy disagrees and uses Mother Goose as an example of goodness. The Demon King tempts Mother Goose with what she doesn’t have—youth and beauty. She gives him Priscilla in exchange for a visit to the Pool of Beauty.

*Activity:* this is a parachute game, in which one or more people go into the middle of the circle, the words are called out and then, as the person is named, everyone lifts up the parachute in a melodramatic way with an accompanying ‘Ooohhh!’

*Communication:* anticipation, response to name, joint attention.

Magic mirror in the pond
When I wave this magic wand
I will see something magical
Someone young and beautiful
Just
Like
Kelly!

Ooooh!

5 Mother Goose goes teenage

Storyline: Mother Goose enters the pool and then emerges as: an ASBO-teen!

Activity: in one school, a group of teenagers learned the script very quickly and so they came to run the session in the early years group. This episode was put in for them, so they could enjoy being stroppy teenagers and do bad impressions of Catherine Tait.

Communication: anticipation. For some reason, people of all ages in the group seemed to find the final line of ‘Whatever’ very funny, so the episode started slowly and gradually got quicker until the long-drawn out final line.

I am so not happy innit
It is so not fair!
‘Clean your room’ said mum and dad
Parents are so sad
’Cos they were like ‘Now!’
And I was like ‘Doh!’
Talk to the hand
The face ain’t listening!
Bovered? Am I bovered?
Does this face look bovered?
Yeah, but, no but, yeah but, no but
Losers!
Whatever!

6 Mother Goose’s friends

Storyline: all her friends want the old Mother Goose back, so they go to Goseland to get Priscilla. They ask the Judge of Goose Court, but he’s asleep, so they have to shout.

Activity: the lines are repeated three or four times with a different style, sad, happy, excited, angry, and so on until someone decides to finish it by saying ‘Oh, all right then’.

Communication: exploring different emotional states.

Can we have our Goose back?
Yoo hoo! Mister!
OK – angry
We want Priscilla
Not young Godzilla!
Not one scintilla
Of doubt about:
Can we have our Goose back?

Oh, all right then

7 The end bit

Storyline: everyone goes back home and lives happily ever after.

Activity: a second parachute game to finish the story, with the parachute lifted up high on the final line.

Communication: shared visual attention, anticipation.

Mother Goose!
The Goose is loose!
Let’s vamoose!
Let’s fly away
Right now! Today!

Weeeeeeeee!

Keith Park has worked with children and adults with multi-sensory impairments in a variety of educational settings in the UK and Australia. He was until recently an advisory teacher for SENSE and is now a freelance teacher of drama, poetry and storytelling. Keith's Bible Stories in Cockney Rhyming Slang were published in February 2009 by Jessica Kingsley (see What’s new).

References


A commentary on the National Strategies DCSF Special Education Needs/Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (SEN/LDD) Progression Guidance Project 2008–09

Richard Aird

Introduction

Those with a long memory will recall that a little over a decade ago the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA, 1997) reported that 34 per cent of teachers in schools that catered for pupils with severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties (SLD/PMLD) disagreed that the National Curriculum offered a curriculum that was appropriate to the needs of these learners. It is the word ‘appropriate’ that one should keep in mind when considering the Department for Children: Schools and Families (DCSF) guidance document, Special Education Needs/Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (SEN/LDD) Progression Guidance Project 2008–09, upon which the authors are requesting feedback (www.nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/116684). Despite the SCAA note of caution, the National Curriculum has continued to dominate the education of SLD/PMLD learners since that time, as has the related framework of teacher assessment commonly referred to as the P Levels. Aird sought in 2001 to highlight the risk to distinctive SLD/PMLD pedagogy from the wholesale acceptance that P Levels represent a comprehensive and/or secure measure of pupil progression. Aird and Aird also commented on this topic in 2006 when linear progression was highlighted as not being a characteristic of the personal learning styles typical of learners who have PMLD. More recently, at conferences organised by bodies such as the Federation of School Leaders and National College of School Leaders, colleagues have regularly expressed their view that the SLD/PMLD sector requires a curriculum and assessment framework that is of more immediate relevance to the holistic needs of these complex learners.

However, despite the long history of concerns about the appropriateness of the National Curriculum, the DCSF has continued to drive forward the use of P Levels to the point where, as headteachers will know from their conversations with Ofsted inspectors and School Improvement Partners, they feature in everything from the setting and review of pupil performance targets to that of school improvement planning. Wherever one looks, be it Specialist School Status, School Improvement Partner work, or Ofsted Inspections, the use of P Level data is used to determine how schools catering for SLD/PMLD learners are performing when compared to other schools. When headteachers are subjected to this kind of unrelenting professional ‘bullying’, it is not surprising that very few headteachers are prepared openly to challenge the progression guidance principles that are now to be imposed on the SLD/PMLD sector. This article seeks to support colleagues who may wish to challenge the passive acceptance of these three principles by providing a commentary on each principle in the order of how they have appeared in the DCSF guidance circulated thus far.

1 High expectations are key to good progress

Contrary to what is claimed in the Special Education Needs/Learning Difficulties and Disabilities (SEN/LDD) Progression Guidance Project 2008–09 paper (p2) there is no evidence to support the statement that data collection in the P Scale levels of core subjects of the National Curriculum provides a forensic
approach to the removal, or minimising, of learning barriers. This is a spurious claim. Target setting in the P Levels of core subjects of the National Curriculum, as currently being proposed, is actually contrary to what is generally accepted to be good pedagogical practice in the education of learners who have SLD/PMLD, particularly for those who have PMLD. For example, writing in 2001, the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) and also the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) stated that effective target setting for pupils with SEN ought to be SMART targets, ie, specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timed. This joint statement came very soon after it was known that the majority of schools catering for pupils who have PMLD held the view that target setting for pupils with PMLD is only of value when targets are ‘measurable, realistic and achievable’ (DfEE, 2000). The 2004 Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) publication, Setting Targets for Pupils with Special Educational Needs (page 9) expressed concern about the use of P Levels as a basis for informing mandatory teacher assessment in schools catering for pupils who have PMLD and reported these schools would ‘experience particular difficulties’.

On page 2 of this progression guidance paper it states ‘the national expectation is that all pupils will make at least two national curriculum levels of progress over each key stage’. It is important this statement is considered against what practitioners understand about the intellectual capacity of learners who have PMLD. Were this expectation to be applied to learners who have PMLD, we could expect PMLD learners to attain Level 2 in core subjects of the National Curriculum proper by the time they left school at 19 years, so why do we persist in donning these emperor’s new clothes to discuss the performance of learners who have these sorts of learning difficulties?

The progressions guidance paper makes no reference to the setting of IEP targets and despite the claim on page 2 that data collection about pupil performance in the core subjects of the National Curriculum can provide a ‘forensic approach to the removal of learning barriers’, this sort of data collection can have absolutely no impact without a complementary, more robust IEP target setting process or a corresponding strategic intervention. Ideally, strategic interventions designed to help overcome learning barriers should be rooted in specialist, developmental curricula specifically designed to intervene in the handicapping effects of different types of profound disability (Aird, 2001).

The organic nature of learning barriers that are typical of PMLD is such that, without the careful use of IEP target implementation (or of a similar, holistic and strategic approach), these complex and idiosyncratic learners could not be expected to make any significant progress in academic subjects.

It is 15 years and more since the DCSF/QCA issued any guidance on IEP target setting. This is in direct contrast to Scotland where the authorities have taken the IEP target setting process seriously and have invested heavily in raising the standard of IEP target setting across the entire education service (Teaching and Learning Scotland, 2008).

It is, perhaps, no more than a red herring when this progression guidance paper claims it is addressing wider ranging assessment through ‘separate but linked development of school-level indicators’. Historically, the DCSF/QCA has frequently stated its aim to improve the consistency, quality and multi-agency design of assessments for vulnerable children, ie, those who have profound disabilities (DfES 2004), but in reality little guidance has been made available to support holistic assessment. Every Child Matters (ECM) outcomes, although a laudable concept and referred to in this guidance as one of the ‘other school-level indicators’, are woefully inadequate and undefined at the current time for helping measure how PMLD learners are progressing in holistic terms. Perhaps the ECM agenda can be used as a vehicle for re-inventing strategic interventions into learning barriers, but the fact remains that the DCSF is seriously at odds with the guidance being provided by Teaching and Learning Scotland via their IEP Scotwrite infrastructure.

In England, the DCSF and QCA seem to have systematically confused IEP target setting with National Curriculum target setting, thus further eroding what little good SLD/PMLD practice has been able to survive the demise of initial specialist teacher training in SLD/PMLD pedagogy since the mid 1980s. This gradual erosion of best practice has been compounded by local authorities (LAs) that have incrementally moved away from quantifying therapeutic provisions in Statements of SEN, with the consequence that few pupils with SLD/PMLD now benefit from proper levels of therapeutic support in response to their disability. A narrow focus on target setting and data collection in the core subjects of the National Curriculum can only contribute to degrading SLD/PMLD pedagogy even further because school leaders will inevitably opt to focus on the DCSF’s demand for academic 'why do we persist in donning these emperor’s new clothes to discuss the performance of learners who have these sorts of learning difficulties?’
data, rather than commit resources to ensure that pupils are achieving progress within their IEP targets. Unlike the Scottish HMI, Ofsted very rarely inspect, or comment, on the IEP target process, thus rendering it fairly unimportant in school improvement planning.

There is an assumption in the DCSF guidance that each P Level is of equal value in terms of its inherent skills and knowledge and yet there is no evidence to substantiate this and nor were P Level descriptors ever generated with the intention of achieving such an outcome. The same argument is also true when one considers whether a P Level has the same incremental value as a National Curriculum level proper. The expectation of two National Curriculum levels gain per key stage is a purely subjective view and one based on a framework of assessment that has never been norm referenced, nor proven to represent accurate stages of cognitive development. Why opt for ‘two level gains’ when it is obvious that no one level has the same value as another in terms of skill, knowledge and understanding?

Rather than risk continuing to confuse the special education of SLD/PMLD learners, perhaps it is time to consider the need for a discrete National Curriculum in this sector, together with a meaningful framework of assessment, based on what teachers in SLD schools really ought to be teaching their pupils. The current National Curriculum remains only a relatively small part of the taught curriculum for these learners and yet the DCSF maintains a distinct lack of interest in evaluating the quality of teaching and learning within the bulk of the SLD/PMLD whole curriculum. The increasingly popular term ‘mainstreaming’ and associated trends such as ‘narrowing the learning gap’ are based purely on a blinkered social interpretation of disability. The current Government has indicated its belief that special schools have a future role to play in the education system (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee 2005–06), but has failed to understand that special schools should be demonstrably different from mainstream school provision in terms of their design, function and also in the outcomes they achieve for pupils.

The only benefit to result from bullying special schools to evolve into watered down mainstream schools will be to help Government statisticians measure the associated value for money out-turn data.

Should this DCSF progression guidance be adopted, the data will undoubtedly demonstrate that there is no difference in the attainment outcomes of SLD/PMLD learners between special and mainstream schools because the proposed assessment framework is too narrow, crude and subjective to result in any other finding.

Whether or not there is a hidden, more sinister anticipated outcome of this ‘mainstreaming’ guidance is a matter of conjecture, but history shows that there will be LAs that will use the resulting data to close relatively expensive special schools rather than invest in large, multi-function mainstream schools.

2 Age and prior attainment, not primary need, inform expectations of pupil progress

A reluctance to consider the primary needs of SEN learners is to take the social interpretation of disability to its most meaningless conclusion and is in stark contrast to how progression is considered, for example, in the USA, where Farrell (2008) reports on the finely detailed categories of need that are used as reference markers before judging standards of pupil performance. A learner can be 15 years of age, but may have extensive brain damage that imposes a developmental age of a newly born infant, regardless of the child’s chronological age. Analysis of existing academic data clearly demonstrates that the attainment levels of the most profoundly disabled learners plateau, particularly after Key Stage 2, and this is consistent with the handicapping effect of PMLD. The need to build on prior attainment is a rather less ridiculous statement to make, but even this ignores the very familiar uneven attainment profile typical of learners who have SLD/PMLD. Spiky profiles are not only uneven in terms of attainment levels in different subject areas, but also very often on a day to day basis, driven by the influence of factors such as epilepsy, poor postural control and medication regimes. What one may presume to be prior attainment one day is likely to be rather less in evidence the following day, if ever, in some circumstances.

The progression that SLD/PMLD learners can be expected to make cannot be condensed into such a narrow amount of data, particularly if that data is based on summative teacher assessment against just one performance descriptor per subject strand, as is sometimes the case (ie, the all too familiar end of year teacher assessments using QCA or commercial schemes such as PIVATS). Even when teachers are diligent enough to amass a large body of pupil work throughout the year to substantiate their assessment, the education of PMLD pupils demands that teachers have a
demonstrably sound understanding of PMLD aetiology and associated distinctive pedagogical approaches in order to interpret what constitutes ‘attainment’ in the early P Levels.

Since the demise of initial specialist teacher training, there are woefully few teachers that have any sort of accredited level of understanding and the extent to which teachers are able to assess the abilities of pupils who have PMLD is governed by what teachers actually understand about distinctive PMLD pedagogy (Jones, 2004). The fact that very few teachers now have any proper degree of training in PMLD pedagogy compounds the risk that statutory subject setting by reference to the P Levels is more likely to degrade the quality of teaching and learning in this sector rather than raise standards.

There is strong evidence to support the notion that mandatory target setting in the P Levels for pupils who have PMLD will not be a useful undertaking, so the question needs to be asked why a more meaningful approach to statutory assessment has not been developed nationally. Why should the education of learners with SLD/PMLD be degraded in order for it to reflect a model that was specifically developed for their non-disabled peers?

Ofsted reported in 2004 that, ‘Targets based on pupils making notional improvement of “one P Level” are of questionable value’ (p14). The proposals included in this DCSF guidance appear to contradict this view and also the view of the Department for Education and Employment and QCA which together reported that P Levels were developed for ‘summative use’ only (DfEE and QCA 2001), thus further undermining the unsubstantiated hypothesis that target setting in the P Levels can be ‘forensic’. Since 2001, however, the DCSF has obviously had a change of heart and made the very odd decision that P Levels can now be used to predict rates of ‘good’ progression regardless of depth of disability and can also, quite amazingly, minimise learning barriers.

**3 Moderation is key to reliable teacher assessment**

There is a role for moderation, but only in the ‘higher’ P Levels when examples of pupil work, such as writing, can be assessed and compared against nationally recognised benchmarks. In the earliest P Levels, however, what we are actually assessing are subtle changes in a pupil’s behaviour in response to externally applied stimuli that cannot readily be compared to another profoundly disabled child’s change in behaviour. This is because the actual manifestation of PMLD is idiosyncratic and evidence of pupil attainment is usually based on an individual child’s ability to control facial muscles, operate a switch, vocalise etc. in order to respond to an external stimulus. Each of these behavioural changes is absolutely unique to a specific child and no matter how much evidence is collected in terms of digital video evidence, etc, it is almost impossible to compare one child’s behaviour with that of another without prior intimate knowledge of the personal learning styles of both learners. Moderation for P Levels 4 and above is more easily achieved, but why should we ignore the needs of the most disabled learners simply to satisfy a politically driven demand for data? Can, therefore, the progression guidance be considered as being truly inclusive – or is it discriminatory? Of course it is the latter.

**Concluding comments**

RAISE online has been of no benefit to SLD schools since this facility was developed and this is because it is a model developed for use in mainstream schools to help evaluate pupil progression within a National Curriculum that was also developed for use in mainstream schools with non-learning disabled learners. Should the DCSF continue in its demands for mandatory target setting and data collection, particularly in the early P Levels, this will not only herald yet another era of wasted time and energy in the special school sector, but could well lead to an accelerated deterioration in the quality of SLD/PMLD school provision in England.

Being SMART and accountable ought to be bywords that typify special school practice’

Being SMART and accountable ought to be bywords that typify special school practice, but such things will not come to pass until the DCSF ensures that target setting is properly child-centred. This response is not intended to undermine the efforts of the DCSF to make special schools more accountable for the quality of their educational provision. It is, rather, to urge policy makers to value the small number of pupils who have SLD/PMLD sufficiently highly so as to define more meaningful ways of appraising the quality of their education and forsake mainstreaming strategies that will only result in a sham of special school accountability and a shameful degradation of distinctive PMLD pedagogy.

At Barrs Court Special School, which is an Ofsted outstanding school (2007–2008) and SSAT accredited high performing specialist school, considerable work has been done to develop a holistic framework of assessment across the whole curriculum. The school’s curriculum is partially made up of subjects of...
the National Curriculum, but it includes a considerable amount of specialist content on which Aird and Aird commented in this journal in 2006. At time of writing some 85 special schools have implemented the Barrs Court Specialist Curriculum and these schools have welcomed the holistic and clearly defined pedagogical approaches contained within this specialist approach.

In contrast to the efforts of special schools, what has the DCSF provided in terms of relevant curricula and distinctive pedagogical approaches to help facilitate the kind of objective teacher assessment the Department is now demanding? For the answer we must look back to the Education Reform Act (1988) and record a ‘W’, ie, ‘Working towards, but not quite yet hitting the required standard’.

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Richard represents special schools on the DCSF’s Foundation and Trust School Practitioner’s Steering Group and is vice chair of the West Midlands branch of the Federation of Leaders in Special Education.

References


Teaching and Learning Scotland (2008) The IEP Scotwrite User Guide IEPScotwrite@LTScotland.org.uk
Meaningful technology for early level learners

Sally Millar

Introduction

This article aims to provide some practical information that may help to support successful use of simple technology by children and young people with PMLD. Technology is not in itself the answer, but it provides some useful tools. At the same time, technology can sometimes create considerable confusion.

Understanding cause and effect

Sometimes a student will click, click, click on a switch and it can be hard to tell whether or not they have understood the link between cause (their switch press) and effect (the toy play, sound or whatever). Perhaps s/he is not motivated by the activity or the effect; s/he may be preoccupied by the sensory stimulation of the switch itself, interpreting her/his interaction with the switch (tactile feedback, kinesthetic feedback, auditory click etc) as the effect/reward (and not registering any additional events). As a further possibility, s/he may be bored and need to move on to more varied and challenging activities.

Sometimes we as staff are inconsistent in how we present tasks or we misinterpret students' behaviour or reinforce the wrong behaviour/skills (we may foster prompt dependence instead of independent exploration). Sometimes switch use itself is perceived as an educational target rather than as a means to other cognitive ends and educational activities. Some children's targets are defined in quantitative terms 'Jack will hit a switch to operate a toy on three consecutive occasions', with little or no reference to whether, for example, Jack is aware that his switch hit is what operates the toy, whether he is interested in the toy or whether he is mainly motivated by the switch itself – or indeed how one might be able to assess which of these were true.

It is agreed that the acquisition of contingency awareness (or cause and effect to use the more familiar terminology) is a key cognitive milestone. But cause and effect understanding is easy to under- or over-estimate a child's mastery of cause and effect understanding and attribute her/him with contingency awareness (the understanding that 'aha – this action that I have carried out on this switch at this time has caused this effect') when in fact s/he is still only at the stage of contingency responding ('mmm, this switch is maybe quite interesting – things seem to happen...'). Such confusion might be seen as an argument to strip away all distracting variables and work in a more and more disciplined, behavioural way until one can be certain that the concept is firmly established. But often that does more harm than good – the child may opt out completely.

Perhaps some of these problems arise when teaching and learning cause and effect is treated as an end in itself and as if it were a once and for all 'aha' experience. It is not – it develops at different rates in different situations and it can be established in some settings but can take much longer in others. Twenty years ago Schweigert (1989) showed that an action that had as its reward a human being coming over immediately to interact led quickly to switch behaviour that was much more reliable and persistent than when a reward involved only an inanimate object. The child soon lost interest in operating a vibrotactile cushion but persisted when operating the cushion simultaneously 'called' someone over to play.

What are we actually trying to achieve beyond the 'magic' gateway of cause and effect? Surely it is the child's acquisition of intentionality, both in communication and in cognition (Goldbart, 2008). Communication intentionality develops through interactive social routines and joint shared attention. Technology use should therefore be part of a programme aiming to increase participation and interaction, not to replace these. Cognitive intentionality develops gradually through the experience of exploring and learning to control the immediate environment.

Equipment needs

Classrooms need a basic stock of portable equipment that can be integrated into everyday activities (not isolated in a special room) and that provides options to personalise, to match individual children's physical abilities and personal interests/preferences. In my view, money is better spent on a mix and match kit of
switches, adapters, timers and interfaces than on buying a few very expensive switch-adapted toys. The most relevant suppliers are listed at the end of this article. A wealth of practical information and advice and troubleshooting problem areas is provided at www.inclusive.co.uk/infosite/index.shtml (scroll down to the switch section).

**Battery operated toys and adapted devices**

Toys are sold already specially adapted for switch operation, mostly soft toys such as a ‘snoring pig’ or a ‘singing alligator’. See also the OneSwitch website (see Suppliers, at end of article). Technical folk can also make battery adapters themselves, cheaply: see www.ataccess.org/resources/wcp/enswitches/enadaptingtoy.html.

*Battery adapter*

A pictorial instruction sheet showing how to use these with toys can be found at www.inclusive.co.uk/catalogue/acatalog/battery_adapt_guide.html

For anyone technically minded, detailed instructions are available for switch-adapting toys and devices yourself. For example, a switch-operated remote controlled fart machine proved especially popular in one setting, see www.callcentre.education.ed.ac.uk/downloads/quickguides/switchandint/batterytoys.pdf

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'Using switch-activated toys works only if the play is truly rewarding'

These are attractive but you will need to buy a number of them for variety, as even the most enthusiastic user will soon tire of the same one toy! However, at £35–£60 each, this is beyond many classroom budgets. The reward they offer is limited: adding similar but different toys can prolong the experience but ultimately does not lead to much progress in developmental, social or curriculum terms.

One alternative is to adapt cheaper toys and devices that may lend themselves better to social interaction. Ready-made battery adapters that slip between the battery terminals can be bought inexpensively (£11 each), eg from QED or Inclusive.

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**Instant reward?**

Cheap and cheerful bubble machines are popular and easy to adapt. However, they may take a few seconds to get going and produce bubbles, so, although they may be good to play with, they are not ideal for teaching cause and effect, when you want the effect to be immediate and clearly noticeable.

A game using a simple voice output device that says ‘More!’ that stimulates a human helper to immediately tickle the child (or give her/him another mouthful of favourite food or whatever) may be more motivating than any toy.

One excellent toy is a switch-operated water gun (see www.oneswitch.org.uk/1/hydro-x-blaster.htm) – because of the exciting response the user can get from the people s/he soaks with water! (The suppliers point out that you can also use it to: water plants; play target practice outdoors or in the bath; use watered down coloured inks to create splatter art; fill a bird bath or an animal’s water dish; rinse the dishes; shoot at paper targets.)
Switch latch and timers (SLATs) or toy control timers
These are valuable components of every classroom’s switch equipment kit to allow staff to adjust the rewards from battery toys. Without one of these timers, a child can get caught in the trap of random clicking in the ‘grey area’ between contingency responding and contingency awareness, as a momentary switch press may be too short for her/him to register whether or not an effect played:

Switch latch and timers
- the Single Switch Latch/Timer (£68) lets you extend battery toy play for up to 60 seconds (maximum reward for minimum effort)
- the Choice Switch Latch/Timer (£85) helps a user to learn to make choices between two toys or appliances. The user has two switch inputs, but, once one device has been activated, the other will not function until the preset time on the first is complete. This means that random or uncontrolled clicking has no result/is not reinforced
- the Dual Switch Latch/Timer (£85) allows two switch users to play together, each controlling their own toy, game or appliance

Exploring environmental effects
Rather than toys, children may be more interested in effects that are directly sensory or that allow them to interact with and control their immediate environment. Turning on favourite music is particularly motivating. Environmental effects to try:
- switching on a battery operated radio or basic cassette tape player
- a fan (like table top ones for offices) perhaps with coloured ribbons or foil/tinsel streamers tied on so they float in the air
- turning a light on and off (use a small cheap table lamp, vary the effect with different coloured bulbs or silk scarves placed over the shade)
- foot spa – preferably the sort with bubbles and vibration as well as heat can be used for hands as well as feet (add oils or perfume to intensify effect)
- gently vibrating electric toothbrush used on the hands and other areas of the body

Controlling mains-powered appliances
To switch control everyday appliances safely, giving interesting effects that are powered by mains electricity, not batteries, we need a mains control unit. Like the SLATs, this offers a range of settings that support progression. For example, we might start a user off using a timed setting: say one switch press gives 20 seconds of music playing to give her/him plenty of time to register the reward and get her/him interested. We then gradually reduce the timing to the minimum so that the user learns to anticipate the timed stopping of the reward and the need repeatedly to press the switch to keep the reward going/repeat the reward. Eventually, s/he may come to understand the direct connection between holding the switch down and having control over the appliance.

Mains control units
The AbleNet PowerLink 2/3 (£129) controls one mains device, offering direct, timed or latched control via a single switch:
- direct – the appliance connected operates as long as the switch is held down
- latching – press the switch to turn on, press again to turn off
- timed seconds – set for seconds and choose the desired operating time – such as 5, 10 or 15 seconds
- timed minutes – set and choose the time

It can be operated by any ordinary switch or (PowerLink 3 only) by a wireless infrared switch (extra cost, £71). (The wireless switch requires its own battery, which can run down and sometimes confuses staff.)
The brand-new **Click-On** device from Inclusive is a modern – and marginally cheaper version at £119 – version of the old PowerLink, with easy to use design and extra features. It allows control of two mains devices and as well as the usual settings, as above, it offers additional settings:

- co-operation – where two switches both need to be pressed at the same time to switch on an appliance
- two switch on/off – press one switch to turn the appliance on and the other to turn it off. This is a much easier concept than latching on/off with the same switch

**Variants of this have also been tried:**
- taking orders and making popcorn for ‘customers’ with a hot air popcorn maker (popular)
- activating a switch-adapted electric carving knife to prepare bananas and apples for snack time (less manageable/popular)

**The milkshake boy**

One little boy, Bobbie, has a programme whereby, on one or two mornings a week, he goes around each child in his small group:

- using a single voice message B.I.G.mack (operated by a head switch) he asks, ‘What kind of milkshake do you want?’ He then offers the child a coloured, laminated photo chart showing strawberry and chocolate (and an associated pink or brown milkshake), so they can point to the one they want
- his assistant then helps him mark the order on an order sheet in the form of a bar chart – one level coloured-in per order (Maths – more/less, basic adding on one and graph making) and to calculate how many of each he has to make
- he then makes the milkshakes one by one, using his head switch with a switch-adapted toy mixer

This is a great programme, because the technology is integrated as one element only within a wider activity that emphasises social interaction and communication. It takes a long time in the morning but that is fine – the task is his curriculum, incorporating communication, maths and ICT targets in one meaningful activity. The boy likes the task as it has a clear purpose and gives him some authority. And everyone likes the milkshakes!
operating hairdryer to dry nail varnish in a small group pampering session or pretend play as hairdresser

- pretend play – child operates a beauty parlour where ‘clients’ come (and choose and ‘pay’ for) foot spa or heat massage pad treatment, which the child switches on and operates for them

- operating toaster, food mixer, blender or smoothie maker in Home Economics sessions

- operating electric drill (locked on a stand) or other tools in technical/technology sessions

- controlling the music for a classroom activity such as ‘play the Monday song’ or group game, such as variants of Statues, Pass the parcel, with a cassette tape player

NB Do not throw out your old cassette tape players and favourite cassettes. Try to collect old ones from friends and colleagues – switch users need them.

The digital age

Electrical equipment rapidly becomes ever more sophisticated and it is hard for equipment for switch users to keep up. Most places now use CDs or MP3 players and DVDs rather than cassette tapes and video. Sadly, mains control units do not give access to electronic devices like these with a standby mode.

QED sell an expensive (£210) switch-adapted CD player.

Inclusive has recently brought out a switch accessible MP3 player (£89). You plug in a USB stick or SD card containing MP3 files and music is played through the built-in speakers.

These may appear to solve the problem but there is a snag. Switch users can switch devices on and often also expect a timed/repeat function whereby they press their switch again when the music stops in order to set it playing again. That is what staff would require in order to teach cause and effect. However, these new players operate differently – a single switch controls both play and pause: press the switch to start the music and press again to stop it.

This might be confusing for cause and effect learners and will only be useful for users functioning at a higher cognitive level. Users who are able to understand multiple functions and operate two or more switches can operate the MP3 player with three switches: 1 to play/pause; 2 to advance through the tune tracks; 3 to go back a track.

Infra-red control

In order for a switch user to operate some of the most modern toys and gadgets with a switch, we now need programmable infrared controllers that are unfortunately more expensive and more complicated to set up. You have to teach the I-R controller with the code for a specific function, eg play CD, next track, etc (but once it’s learnt, it holds the code and works like a remote control).

The new Micro Jack from Inclusive (£213) allows control of 2 functions.

The Big Jack (£310) allows control of up to 6 functions.
It can be simpler to play CDs and DVDs through the computer. Software can be cheaper and simpler to set up than some of the equipment mentioned above and gives flexibility in controlling and adjusting the different variables involved in tailoring a task to the switch user’s level.

**Computer switch interfaces**

There is a confusing range of switch interfaces to choose from for connecting your switch user to the computer, ranging from 2 to 6 switch inputs and offering simplicity (Simple Switch Box £35, JoyCable £49) or complex multiple functions (Crick USB Switch Box £99, Inclusive Multiswitch £95).

The best bet is probably a compromise between the two – a device that has no software to install and does not need Internet access to update itself but which provides a fair range of input options, ie:

- **QuizWorks USB Switch Interface Plus** £59 from Inclusive (includes Clicker 5 control)
- **Don Johnston Switch Interface Pro** £75 from QED (no Clicker 5 control)

**Software**

An excellent first step is to download the free SEN Switcher software from www.northerngrid.org/ngflwebsite/sennew/sen_software.html

This program, designed for users with profound and multiple learning difficulties, comprises 132 different activities covering eight progressive stages in skills development ranging from purely experiential visual stimulation and tracking, through cause and effect, switch building, timed activation and simple row scanning. Be sure to download and read the Teacher’s Notes and full documentation accompanying SEN Switcher. This is much more than just a manual for the software: it is a multi-stage switch skills curriculum and includes links and checklists for task analysis and record keeping.

**Progression with computer software**

The following table is a rough guide to progression through the stages of switch access, working largely, but not exclusively, with Inclusive software (Incl):

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**QuizWorks USB Switch Interface Plus**

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Software</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>SEN Switcher</td>
<td>Visual stimulation and tracking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>SEN Switcher</td>
<td>Cause and effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>SEN Switcher</td>
<td>Simple switch building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>SEN Switcher</td>
<td>Timed activation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>SEN Switcher</td>
<td>Simple row scanning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>SEN Switcher</td>
<td>Complex multiple functions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>SEN Switcher</td>
<td>All functions combined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>SEN Switcher</td>
<td>All functions combined (Incl)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Set up screen from SEN Switcher**
It is hoped that this article will have helped not only inform you about the available technology but also to use it as an integral part of the curriculum for children and young people with PMLD.

Sally Millar is Joint Coordinator of CALL Scotland (Communication, Access, Literacy and Learning) at Edinburgh University. Tel: 0131 651 6235 e-mail: sally.millar@ed.ac.uk Website: www.callscotland.org.uk

Sally is a speech and language therapist specialised in working in education with pupils with complex communication support needs, covering assessment, staff training and development work. She is known for Personal Communication Passports and the CALLtalk dynamic screen vocabulary.

References


Schweigert, P (1989) Use of Microswitch technology to facilitate social contingency awareness as a basis for early communication skills Augmentative and Alternative Communication 5, 192–197

Websites
This site provides a number of short articles on developing a switch use programme: www.inclusive.co.uk/infosite/index.shtml

Free software:
SEN Switcher from www.northerngrid.org or www.inclusive.co.uk/downloads/downloads.shtml
www.priorywoods.middlesbrough.sch.uk/resources/restop.htm
www.helpkidzlearn.com
www.inclusive.co.uk/downloads/downloads.shtml
www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/grownups/special_needs/physical_dev/switch/
www.oneswitch.org.uk/

Suppliers
Five suppliers of useful switch devices are listed below. They supply similar equipment (switches, battery adaptors, switch-adapted toys, switch latch and timers, switch interface boxes for computer etc) but each also offers unique products so it is worth exploring them.

QED Ltd
www.qedonline.co.uk
Switch devices and switch-operated music technology, infrared controllers, eg the Big Jack
Quality Enabling Devices Ltd
Unit D16, Heritage Business Park, Heritage Way
Gosport, Hampshire PO12 4BG
Tel: 02392 580600
E-mail: sales@qedonline.co.uk

Inclusive Technology Ltd
www.inclusive.co.uk
Switch devices and a very wide range of excellent switch software.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of use</th>
<th>Software</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experiential level and then working up through the levels</td>
<td>SEN Switcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple (random) cause and effect</td>
<td>Big Bang (Incl)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prompted switch press to get repeat of same effect</td>
<td>Priory Woods resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prompted switch press through a meaningful sequence</td>
<td>PowerPoint with timed switch prompts (set up to prevent the user clicking her/his way through a sequence without paying attention)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timed switch press</td>
<td>Switch Skills 1 (Incl) – games relying on accurately timed hit, eg football</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scanning 2 choices (no wrong answer)</td>
<td>Choose and Tell software (Incl) range – making simple win-win choices as part of story building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to simple scanning (selection from 2, 3, 4, 6) for correct answer</td>
<td>ChooseItMaker 2 software (Incl) – introduction of choice-making and basic scanning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using scanning to ‘speak’ and ‘turn the page’ in talking stories</td>
<td>Clicker 5 (Crick Software)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scanning through a grid of several options, to answer questions, build messages/stories/sentences etc</td>
<td>Clicker 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Micro Jack controller, switch access
MP3 player
Inclusive Technology Ltd
Riverside Court
Huddersfield Road
Delph, Oldham OL3 5FZ
Tel: 01457 819790
E-mail: inclusive@inclusive.co.uk

Liberator
www.pri-liberator.com
Switch devices and toys
Liberator Ltd
Minerva Business Park
Lynch Wood
Peterborough PE2 6FT
Tel: 0845 226 1144
E-mail: info@liberator.co.uk

One Switch (online only)
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Can computer assisted learning help autistic children communicate?

Paul Herring

Introduction

Autism is a neuro-developmental disorder estimated to affect up to 1 in 100 children in the UK (National Autistic Society, 2007). Characteristics of children with autism include deficits in social interactions and speech and non-verbal communication, with up to 50 per cent of children with autism failing to develop any useful language ability (Miranda-Linne and Melin, 1997). Children with autism also have varying levels of impairments in cognitive flexibility (Ozonoff et al, 1994), a failure to generalise and an inability to understand others’ intentions, possibly due to a Theory of Mind deficit (ToM) (Baron-Cohen, 1985). It is estimated that approximately 50 per cent of people with autism may also have severe learning difficulties (Howlin, 1998).

Autism is typically diagnosed between three and four years of age (Charman, 2002). Earlier diagnosis and intervention may help to improve the prognosis for an improved quality of life (Wetherby et al, 2007). For instance, Remington et al (2007) reported an increase in participants’ IQ scores (in some cases by 40 points) using Early Intensive Behavioural Intervention, though it should be noted that this improvement required parents and participants to dedicate 25 hours each week to the therapy and currently no other study has verified these results.

A key predictor of such positive outcome for individuals with autism is the acquisition of speech (Paul et al, 2008). In contrast, individuals who do not acquire speech may become frustrated and show increasing levels of anxiety, leading to tantrums or possibly other coping strategies such as repetitive behaviour (Siegel, 2003). It has been argued that aggressive behaviour, such as hitting or pinching, can be an alternative way of communicating wants, needs and anxiety, especially if the chosen method has proved successful before (Clements, 2005).

Traditional communication teaching methods

In the UK, once a child has been diagnosed with autism there is still typically a lengthy delay before interventions are made available (Wall, 2006). A speech and language therapist (SLT) normally administers initial assessment and ongoing management of an individual’s speech and communication needs in conjunction with the child’s teacher and support staff. Speech and language therapy addresses the way in which speech is produced including intonation, articulation and methods to entice children to speak.

Unfortunately, the UK has a national shortage of qualified SLTs. A recent study by the National Autistic society found that only two per cent of schools who responded to their questionnaire reported that students with autism routinely received more than two hours speech therapy a week. In addition to this, the study found that most of the schools reported that, on average, students with autism received less than 30 minutes SLT contact time in a week, while 31 per cent of schools had no access to SLT at all (Barnard, Broach, Potter and Prior, 2002).

A number of different communication interventions has been used with non-verbal children with autism. Communication interventions generally fall into two basic types: (1) unaided manual symbolic methods such as sign language and Makaton and (2) aided methods like Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS).

Manual symbolic communication methods such as signing have been used successfully for many years to aid children overcome communication deficits. For some children with autism manual signing is a helpful communication method, though in most cases signing vocabulary is restricted to requests that are important to the individual and generally are not initiated spontaneously. The use of manual signs can be problematic for children with limited motor skills who have difficulty learning or using even a small number of signs. Furthermore, it has been argued that signs and...
sign language are not generally understood by society, making it difficult for children with autism to use it as a communication method outside of their home or educational environment (Mirenda, 2003).

Makaton vocabulary is the most popular language and communication system for people with intellectual disabilities in the United Kingdom (Ohene-Djan et al, 2004). It uses ‘key word’ signing as its primary goal to initiate communication. In addition to signing, Makaton uses symbols to support written communication and the use of symbols has become increasingly popular in schools for children with autism and is a key part of the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS).

PECS is a much more frequently used intervention than Makaton for children with autism. PECS is an augmented communication system based on pictograms or symbols (Abbott and Lucey, 2005). The initial focus of PECS is to provide spontaneous communication between the autistic person and their peers (Bondy and Frost, 1994). PECS communication is initiated by the autistic participant who requests a desired item by choosing the appropriate symbol(s) needed, adding them to a request board and exchanging the request board with a communication partner to obtain a desired item outcome (see Figure 1). More advanced users will use a combination of signs to request items by colour, size or other features.

PECS has been used by pre-school (verbal and non-verbal) children with autism for spontaneous communication (Bondy and Frost, 2002). Research has shown that PECS can, in many cases, enable and enhance verbal communication in children with autism. In a study by Charlop-Christy et al (2002) three students between the ages of 3.7 and 12 years were taught to use PECS over a three month period. All of the children progressed to the advanced phases of PECS use with a reported heightening in social communication, behaviour and use of speech. Furthermore, unlike Makaton and sign language, PECS is much less dependent on the communication partner being familiar with the method used, as symbol use is easy to understand and includes textual labels on each token.

Children with autism will, however, usually require a great deal of support by trained staff at least in the early stages of PECS system adoption. Typically, a child with autism is introduced to PECS at the age of five when they enter the education system as parents of autistic children will, in most cases, have had no previous training or experience of the PECS system and have been unable to support its use prior to school entry.

**Potential benefits of ICT and CAL based interventions**

Information Communication Technology has been used to support children with autism with some success, although some concerns have been raised about possible negative effects of computer oriented teaching methods in this context. For example, it has been suggested that children with autism might experience reductions in social interaction and decrease in speech due to increased computer use (Whalen et al, 2006; Bernard-Opitz et al, 1990). On the other hand, a number of the studies have found that ICT and CAL based technologies can help to instigate and develop communication skills. Whalen et al (2006) compared the effectiveness of computer-based reading and traditional reading books for children with autism. They found that when students were supported by an educator or parent during computer use, there was an increase in spontaneous commenting such as 'some concerns have been raised about possible negative effects of computer oriented teaching methods'.
as requests for help or showing items of interest (from 27 instances using traditional methods to 111 instances using CAL based methods). In addition to this, an increase in the recorded use of language was logged (from a mean of 44.6 words during book reading sessions, compared to a mean of 99.5 words during computer reading sessions). This was also accompanied by a reduction in echolalic speech and an improvement in socially acceptable behaviour. The outcomes suggested a linkage between the increase in language and social interaction using computer based support vis à vis traditional reading methods.

Further support for Williams’ conclusions has been provided by Whalen et al (2006) who investigated computer based teaching methods and their impact on language use and social interaction in children with autism. Four children used a software application called Teach Town, designed to make use of applied behavioural analysis methodology and intermittent reinforcement techniques. The study found that spontaneous commenting increased for all four children with autism, two of whom showed a substantial increase.

Similar positive developments have been noted in interactions with robots. In a small scale study Robins and Dautenhahn (2006) used robots as a communication mediation channel between children with autism and non-autistic people. They found that when a researcher actively participated in the session, the participant would spontaneously comment with the researcher about the robot. This was particularly interesting as one of the participants had been observed not to instigate interactive behaviour prior to the study.

These research findings (Williams et al, 2002; Whalen et al, 2006 and Robins and Dautenhahn 2006) support much earlier suggestions by Jordan and Powell (1990) that Computer Assisted Learning based interventions can be beneficial when supported by a teacher.

In addition to instigating communication, recent studies show that ICT based teaching methods can provide further benefits through:

- increased levels of participant attention and motivation: children with autism in most cases enjoy using computers and have shown a greater degree of subject focus when using computer based interventions compared to traditional teaching techniques (Chen and Bernard-Opitz, 1993; Williams et al, 2002)
- increased levels of curiosity and length of time participants spend on a subject; for instance Williams et al (2002) found that during a reading session of 15 minutes children with autism and a chronological age of between 3.1 and 5.9 years would concentrate on a computer reading task for an average of 9.9 minutes when presented via a computer, compared with only 2.8 minutes when reading the same story from a book
- allowing participants to repeat key tasks consistently without any issue of tutor fatigue. This is critical for children who have been shown to acquire skills much more effectively through rote learning

Alongside these triad approaches (pupil-teacher-computer), a more radical use of computer technology has developed in which the computer is used to support or potentially replace the teachers’ role.

**Voice Output Communication Aids (VOCA)**

The Voice Output Communication Aid (VOCA) is an electronic device that produces verbal utterances when a user either selects a ‘hot keyed’ request from a selection of options, or, in more complex systems, types in requests via a keyboard. In simpler systems request buttons are identified by symbols for easy recognition. Pressing these causes digitised pre-recorded requests to be uttered. In more complex systems using keyboard input, a dynamically generated synthetic voice using Text To Speech (TTS) technology is used.

VOCA systems like the one shown in Figure 2 have proved to be a useful communication method for children with no speech compared to manual signing or symbol pointing interventions, particularly when interacting with people who are not familiar with non-verbal communication methods (Mirenda, 2003).

VOCA systems may represent an alternative to PECS for non-verbal children with autism. In a
recent literature review comparing outcomes of PECS and VOCA studies carried out between 1992 and 2006, Lancioni et al (2007), observed that VOCA systems produced similar increases in participant requests and reductions in repetitive and unsociable behaviour to those observed with participants using PECS. Although PECS systems have been shown to produce higher levels of speech output compared to VOCA systems, Lancioni et al observed that participants in PECS studies tended to have higher levels of cognitive ability compared to people taking part in VOCA studies. This complicates meaningful intervention comparisons from available study results. It should also be noted that improvement in speech could also be due to influences outside of the control of the research team (Lancioni et al, 2007).

**Communication tutor**

A number of studies have used a software generated virtual tutor to teach language and reading skills. The most frequently used communication tutor in autism research is an application known as Baldi, originally developed by the Center for Spoken Language Understanding (CSLU) in Oregon, USA. Baldi is provided as a programmable toolkit and is capable of providing accurate facial movement during speech. The system is also capable of interpreting speech requests via its speech recognition interface and text to speech input via a keyboard.

Bosseler and Massaro (2003) used a modified Baldi application (shown in Figure 3) to develop speech in children with autism and have claimed positive results. The study included one non-verbal and seven verbal children with autism. The study results indicated that students could learn new words using a synthetic voice and text to speech system. Students also demonstrated an 85 per cent recall of words learnt in the study, 30 days later. Bosseler and Massaro found that word association learnt using the Baldi system could also be generalised in tests outside the computer environment. They noted, however, that no testing of spontaneous new word use was carried out during the study.

The Baldi virtual tutor approach may offer opportunity for further developments in this area. The aim of our current research is to develop a CAL based communication intervention based, initially, on the Baldi system to combine the key advantages of PECS with those of computer systems. By doing this we hope to discover if a CAL based PECS system can be effective in helping children with autism develop their symbol vocabulary and encourage spontaneous communication. The study is adopting a pupil-teacher-computer triad approach, similar to the strategy employed in the Williams et al (2002) study, to provide greater opportunities for social communication between the parent and/or carer and the child with autism.

Children using our system will interact with a computer generated virtual tutor using picture symbols of a similar design to those used in PECS, rather than limiting the user to a small number of buttons on a touch sensitive screen, or using a keyboard similar to those found in VOCA systems (see Figure 4).

It is hoped that this strategy will also provide greater accessibility to children with motor skills deficits, who may otherwise be excluded from using input devices such as keyboards or mice.

**Conclusion**

Autism is a complex mix of developmental deficits that can have profound ramifications for the individual in later life if a useful intervention is not found. The main barrier and a key indicator of prognosis for an individual in later life is the level of useful speech acquired early in the child’s development. Traditional techniques are successful in providing communication for many children. However, Non-verbal VOCA user Carly Fleishman, a 13-year-old teenager with autism, was until recently considered severely cognitively impaired, exhibiting repetitive behaviours and with no verbal or non-verbal communication skills. In 2005 Carly began to exhibit a higher level of anxiety-related behaviour with no apparent trigger. Carly was introduced to a word processor based VOCA in the hope that some communication would be possible. The first words that Carly typed on the system were HURT TEETH HELP. On investigation it was discovered that Carly had a missing filling. Since this time Carly has astounded researchers by communicating spontaneously with parents and clinicians via her VOCA system and has even taken part in a web based question and answer session via ABC news (Hinman 2008).

Carly provides a revealing view of life for people with no speech or understanding of social communication in a society that is reliant on verbal and social interaction.
lengthy delays are reportedly experienced between diagnosis and being introduced to an intervention. In addition, there is a significant burden for parents and carers in the training needed and the access required to appropriate technology, if these interventions are to be most effectively supported outside the school environment.

Indications are that ICT based interventions can instigate and support communication use, increase attention spans and reduce inappropriate, ritualised and repetitive behaviours often associated with anxiety and frustration. Fostering and supporting acquisition of speech and communication use, shortly after autism is diagnosed, may provide a much more positive future for a child with autism.

No one intervention has so far proven to address communication deficits in all individuals. It may, however, be possible better to support and engage children with autism to communicate if an holistic approach is used. By combining advantages of proven interventions such as PECS, VOCA and communication tutor applications like Baldi, it should be possible to provide improved support for children with autism. Early development of communication in an affected child's development is critical in terms of attaining a fulfilling life through to adulthood and it is hoped that using the pupil-teacher-computer/virtual tutor triad approach to develop non-verbal and possibly verbal communication in our research will help achieve these goals more effectively.

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Transition Solutions: an evaluation of the role of Sunfield’s Transition Solutions Advisor

Hollie Rawson

Introduction
Sunfield provides education and 52-week residential care for young people between the ages of six and 19, with severe and complex learning difficulties. The children enjoy a high quality of therapeutic support while at Sunfield, as evidenced in the most recent Inspection Report (Ofsted, 2006). However, since 2004 there has been increasing concern around the number of students who experience problems or lose their adult placements after leaving Sunfield (Smart, 2004). This is both upsetting and frustrating for all concerned: for the families and staff who have invested a great deal of time, skill and commitment into the young person’s life and, most importantly, for the student themselves.

The Transition Solutions Project (see www.sunfield.org.uk) was conducted over a three year period to gather evidence as to why transitions to adult placements failed on such a regular basis and to encourage and help agencies and Local Authorities to involve families earlier and more positively in order to produce creative solutions to transition. The project also aimed to help families to gain a greater understanding of the complexity of the transition process and to develop their knowledge, expertise and assertiveness in order to ensure greater participation in the transition process. The focus of the current research was to evaluate the role of the Transitions Solutions Advisor from the perspectives of the families and the key workers. This article offers a summary of the key research findings.

Method
With every child at Sunfield having such varied needs and learning experiences, it is inevitable that their transition experiences will all be unique. Qualitative methods were therefore used to enable maximum feedback and expression of experience from participants. Questionnaires were sent to parents and key workers of 24 children who had left Sunfield between the times that the role of the Transition Solutions Advisor (TSA) project was in progress (2005–2008). The questionnaires consisted of 16 questions around the ways in which the role of the TSA impacted upon service delivery, including how useful the TSA was, the degree of input the TSA had and suggestions for improvement. Of 27 questionnaires that were sent to parents, 11 were returned. Only 18 questionnaires were sent to key workers as some transitioned more than one student, some members of staff had since left Sunfield, and two young people were day students and therefore did not have key workers from the care department: 12 of the 18 were returned.

Returned questionnaires from parents were paired with the questionnaires of their child’s key workers. From this, any corresponding key worker and parent pairs who indicated in their questionnaire that they were happy to be further involved in the project were asked to expand on issues highlighted within their responses through short, semi-structured interviews. There were only two corresponding pairs who were happy to be interviewed and these are referred to as Case Study 1 and Case Study 2. One other parent (Parent 3, Case Study 3) was also interviewed on the basis that their questionnaire responses discussed a particularly noteworthy transition experience. The remaining data from the other questionnaires were used for descriptive statistics and quotes to compare to the case studies.

Interviews with parents were conducted over the telephone, primarily because of geographical distance and time constraints; key worker interviews were conducted in person on site. The interviews covered the general transition process for any features of the process that went particularly well or badly and their use of the TSA.

Coincidentally, of the two pairs interviewed, one pair (Case Study 1) reported that they felt that the Transition Solutions project had not fully begun when their young person was transitioning so did not experience the support...
that families did with the TSA. This enabled a comparison between a transition profile with the TSA in post (Case Study 2) and one without. Pair 2 and Parent 3 were asked whether or not they felt it valuable to have one sole member of staff dedicated to transition, while Pair 1 was asked whether or not they felt it would have been valuable to have some like the TSA in post while they experienced transition.

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (cf Smith and Osborn, 2003) approach was used to extract themes relevant to the research question by analysing the qualitative data obtained via questionnaires and interviews. This approach enabled the research to be grounded in the participants’ own experiences and the thematic strands to be interpreted in terms of the value of the TSA. All identifiable details have been omitted or altered to protect respondents’ confidentiality.

‘It would be good to have someone to know every child and their needs and how best to accommodate them’

Results and discussion

The analysis of parent and key worker responses from both the questionnaires and the interviews reflected an overwhelmingly positive response to the role of the TSA. Of all the respondents who considered the TSA to be in place at the point of transition, 96 per cent of the cohort felt that the role of the TSA positively contributed to their young person’s transition. Of these respondents, all considered the role of the TSA to be helpful, with 74 per cent reporting that they felt the TSA improved co-ordination and 85 per cent of respondents reporting that the TSA provided all information necessary. Throughout the analysis, five main themes emerged as key to the role of the TSA and of paramount importance to the success of the young person’s transition. These themes were:

1. having one person dedicated to transition
2. co-ordination
3. personalised support
4. TSA as a source of information
5. follow-up visits

Theme 1 – TSA as a single role

A major factor in favour of the TSA was that there was one person whose sole job focus was dedicated to transition. Many respondents considered this valuable as there was a clear point of contact or as one parent put it, ‘a one-stop shop’, reporting it refreshing to deal with one person that had knowledge on all areas. With numerous people being involved in the process there is a potential for a complicated procedure. Indeed, Parent 1 spoke of the struggle that they endured during the years of planning, describing the difficulty in knowing the most appropriate person to consult at each juncture. When Parent 1 was asked if they felt it would have been beneficial for their transition process to have a dedicated member of staff, they agreed saying:

‘It would be good to have someone to know every child and their needs and how best to accommodate them’

In this way, for the individuals who had the support of the TSA the process was simplified.

Theme 2 – Co-ordination

Many felt the TSA’s input improved co-ordination, facilitating the process by liaising with external bodies such as social services, local authorities and placement staff. Several respondents commented that they felt the TSA’s positivity and enthusiasm constructively augmented reviews. In particular, all key workers felt that the TSA improved co-ordination, reporting that this was achieved through reassurance and support, facilitating communication and liaising between parties, understanding of process, and co-ordination of visits and meetings. The key worker from Case Study 2 explained that this was particularly useful as it kept the transition process moving, giving house staff the opportunity to focus their attention on preparing the young person for the imminent changes. Another key worker noted:

‘TSA contacted social workers who can at times be difficult to contact within shift hours’

Around half of parents felt that the TSA improved co-ordination, stating similar reasons. Parents who responded that co-ordination was not improved with the TSA’s input offered that either the co-ordination time was too short, as with Parent 3 who experienced a particularly rushed transition; or that, while out of the TSA’s control, lack of third party workers’ input made co-ordination difficult. This was very much the situation for Case Study 1.

Theme 3 – Personalised support

A factor of the TSA’s role that was important to both parents and key workers was the support that she offered, both in practical and emotional capacities: having just one person laid the foundations for a rapport to develop and for trust to grow. For most concerned, transition can be a traumatic experience: young people endure significant changes to their routines, which, for young people with severe intellectual disabilities, even minor changes to routine can be distressing; parents face many decisions often feeling vulnerable after the security of their child being within a familiar setting; key workers lose students with whom great bonds have developed. Therefore at difficult times such as these, as Parent 1 states,
having ‘a warm and interested person on the end of the phone’ in whom you trust is often very much appreciated. Another parent seems to express this same notion:

‘Transition into Adult Services is terrifying for families and I know the protective fight and enthusiasm from the TSA confirmed our belief that we must keep on going until things were in place in the time frame to meet [the young person’s] needs’

Through this the TSA is offering not only practical support but also emotional support where necessary. Working closely with each family allowed for an individualised transition experience and personalised support specific to each young person and their families. The TSA’s efforts to become familiar with each young person, their specific circumstances and their families proved invaluable to the transition experience for many parents and key workers. It was through this familiarity of experiencing and understanding that essential knowledge was acquired. Developing a grounded knowledge of each young person, their family and key worker enabled the TSA to advocate the most appropriate level of care, support and environment that the young person may require in the future.

**Theme 4 – TSA as a source for information**

For many respondents, a key feature of the role of the TSA was that when looking for information, they were not alone; they were supported along the way in many areas. Parent 1 spoke of the boundaries that they encountered while discovering ‘what they were allowed to ask for’, observing that having advice around this issue would have been gratefully received. Parent 1 went on to say how they believed that receiving support of a TSA during their transition process would have reduced time, effort and frustration. This belief was confirmed by another parent who stated that by having the TSA’s support they were able to shortcut the searching process and thus alleviate pressure by considering only appropriate settings. She said that:

‘Shortcutting appropriate placements was FANTASTIC’

Some parents who experienced a similar search for schools before they found Sunfield welcomed having support in this way. For key workers, the TSA offered a point of contact for queries. Key worker 2 stated that the TSA was accessible to answer any questions and would seek answers to anything she could not answer herself. As stated above, 85 per cent of respondents felt that the TSA provided all information necessary. This is an encouraging statistic as investigation prior to an advisor being put in to post revealed many parents felt there was a significant lack of information available (Smart, 2004). The Adult Service Provider database, which holds details of adult provisions all over the country, was felt to be a particularly useful source of information.

**Theme 5 – Follow-up visits**

Following the move to adult services, the TSA visited the new placement to ensure that the young person has settled and that new staff were adequately supported with the necessary information. Many respondents expressed that these visits were a particularly worthwhile element of the TSA post. While parents noted being impressed with this level of commitment, key workers stressed the value of the TSA’s visits. On many follow-up visits the TSA has taken an existing Sunfield student to visit their friend with whom they used to share accommodation. This acts as a method for the TSA to maintain contact with the ex-student while providing an opportunity to reduce any sense of isolation that the young person may be experiencing, alleviating potential feelings of rejection. By taking a current Sunfield student, the visit also allows the student to maintain contact with their friend, enabling them to see that not only is their friend settled and happy but also may help reduce any anxieties they may be experiencing over their own impending transition.

**Suggestions for improvement**

Among the positive feedback there were few criticisms, generally relating to external factors. One suggestion offered by a parent was to ensure there is a clear plan of action free of ambiguity for reviews and meetings, which is understood by all parties involved with the intention of minimising misunderstandings. This would require good organisation and communication between TSA, parents, social workers and placement staff, as well as any other parties involved.

Another issue illuminated in the survey was the importance of the time-scale of transition. For Parent 3, whose transition was particularly rushed, they experienced quite an unsettled transition. While in most instances this is not a direct fault of the TSA’s, the situation has emphasised the significance of having a long, well-planned transition to minimise distress in the final stages of transition at the new placement.

Anecdotally considering the responses, it appears that the more negative responses are
from young peoples’ families and key workers who transitioned at the earlier stages of the Transition Solutions project. This implies that the TSA’s support improved over the course of the project, presumably by building on experiences through a natural course of trial and error. It can be assumed that there is further room for the role of the TSA to develop through experience over time.

**Conclusion**

While the value of the TSA is near unanimously considered as worthwhile, it seems important not to overshadow the significant support that other members of staff provide, such as key workers, house staff, education staff and members of Family Services, as well as staff from the adult provisions. Many parents in particular acknowledged the influence of the dedication of Sunfield house staff to the success of the transition. From the survey, there appears to be a trend between the pre-transition efforts of the new placement staff and the overall satisfaction of parents and key workers – their own satisfaction and their judgement of the young person’s satisfaction. This could be perceived as evidence for adopting a large transition team, with representatives from all parties involved, rather than sole emphasis on a Transition Advisor. However, considering the feedback respondents gave pertaining to the value of one dedicated person, it seems that the transition would lose some of the personal feel and individualised care and familiarity, and thus eliminating some of the elements that have been reported to make the transition successful. This could be interpreted as an exposure of the necessity for a strong trans-disciplinary approach to transition, an adopted and successful strategy for many areas of Sunfield’s approach; one which encourages input from many domains, yet is co-ordinated by an organised, knowledgeable facilitator of the whole process, such as the TSA.

A limitation of this evaluation is the lack of feedback sought from external professionals such as social workers or placement staff and from the young people themselves. The original evaluation outline aimed to include external staff; however, with such high staff turnover at placements and with some of the young people now in different placements to their initial houses, coupled with the fact that many young people included in this study transitioned up to three years ago, it was decided that data from this source would be restricted. Due to the limited verbal communication and understanding many of Sunfield’s students have, time constraints and geographical distance prevented them being involved. This has resulted in the neglect of potentially pertinent feedback. However, with the utilisation of face-to-face resources to facilitate communication, the inclusion of the young people’s voice could make for an interesting area for future study.

To summarise, it is apparent that having a member of staff in a position such as the TSA is valuable for parents and key workers, but also, perhaps more importantly, for the young person. With grounded expertise and a positive approach, young people are experiencing more successful transitions, whilst parents and key workers are enduring less of the strain that is so often synonymous with the process of transition.

Hollie Rawson recently completed a Research Assistant post at Sunfield. She has a background in psychology and has particular research interests in families of people with intellectual disability, particularly siblings, and the impact of labelling on social identity.

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Involving individuals with learning difficulties and disabilities in the research process is now accepted good practice. However, in the case of children and young people with more complex needs, the task is a challenging one and it is therefore commonplace for the voices of these individuals to be absent. In the paper *Researching the views of pupils with multiple and complex needs: Is it worth doing and whose interests are served by it?*, Kevin Wright describes a small-scale practitioner-based study, conducted in Scotland, which sought to elicit the opinions of individuals with multiple and complex needs. The term ‘multiple and complex needs’ is the preferred term used in Scotland to cover a wide range of additional support needs. An aided communication system, Talking Mats™, was used. Talking Mats was developed by Joan Murphy (1998) and is a visual framework that uses picture symbols as an aid to enabling people with communication difficulties to express thoughts and opinions. Wright’s rationale for the choice of Talking Mats over other augmentative and alternative communication systems was that it has the potential to contribute to inclusive educational practice.

Through a Talking Mats task Wright wanted to find out:

- if pupils with multiple and complex needs could use Talking Mats to express satisfaction/dissatisfaction with their learning activities
- whether or not these views were consistent over a short period of time
- whether or not these views were consistent with those of the adults who worked closely with the pupils

Wright’s study focused on three pupils with significant learning disabilities, physical disabilities and non-verbal communication. The pupils attended a mainstream secondary school in a rural area in Scotland. Two pupils, Alistair and Barbara, were both in their third year of high school, and the third pupil, Christopher, was in his first year of high school. All three pupils attended a support unit within their local mainstream school and followed alternative, individualised curricula devised by school staff and visiting specialists.

For the study the pupils’ curriculum was broken down into a series of recognisable learning activities. Boardmaker™ software was used to produce pictorial representations of the various activities. Twenty activities were identified, with examples being ‘number work’, ‘swimming’, ‘lunch’, ‘painting’, ‘minibus’. A textured mat was used as a board with an area for satisfaction, represented by a Boardmaker smiley face, and an area for dissatisfaction, represented by a Boardmaker sad face. The pupils were already familiar with Boardmaker symbols and it was established that they understood the two emotions and could differentiate between them. The Talking Mats task required the pupils to consider each activity symbol and to place it on the side of the mat that represented either satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The task was completed in the pupil’s own classroom as part of his or her everyday work with Wright. In an attempt to gauge consistency of responses the task was repeated four times for each pupil over a two-week period. In order to gain supporting data, on the day of the task the pupil was observed. Also, Additional Needs Assistants (ANAs) who worked with the pupils were interviewed. In an attempt to ensure that the pupils’ views did not influence those of the ANAs, the ANAs were interviewed before the pupils. With regards to their perceptions of their pupils’ satisfaction/dissatisfaction with activities, ANAs were given a third option of ‘so-so’.

In terms of the pupil responses, Alistair expressed satisfaction with 19 learning activities on Talking Mat 1, and satisfaction with all 20 learning activities for Talking Mats 2, 3 and 4; Barbara expressed satisfaction with 17 learning activities on Talking Mat 1, 19 on Talking Mats 2 and 3 (although her dissatisfaction changed between the two mats) and satisfaction with all 20 learning activities on Talking Mat 4; Christopher expressed satisfaction with 16 learning activities on Talking Mat 1 and satisfaction with all 20 learning activities for Talking Mats 2, 3 and 4.
It can be seen that all three pupils expressed high levels of satisfaction with their learning activities and, while there was some degree of inconsistency across the four tasks, in general the pupil responses could be judged to display a good degree of consistency.

In terms of the ANAs’ responses, Alistair was considered to be unanimously satisfied with 12 learning activities, 8 learning activities were described as ‘so-so’ and 1 activity was considered to be a source of dissatisfaction; Barbara was considered to be unanimously satisfied with 13 of the learning activities and 5 were described as ‘so-so’ to some extent; Christopher was considered to be unanimously satisfied with 7 of the learning activities and 12 were described as ‘so-so’ to some extent. Comparing the two sets of responses (pupils’ and ANAs’), it can be seen that there is a degree of difference for all pupils, with ANAs generally considering pupils to be less satisfied with a number of learning activities than is indicated by the pupils’ own responses. One speculative explanation offered by Wright for this relative inconsistency was pupils’ mood swings, ie sometimes they (particularly Christopher) could be settled and co-operative while at other times may present more challenging behaviour; ANAs therefore may be ‘hedging their bets’ when making judgments regarding pupil satisfaction/dissatisfaction (an option permitted by the inclusion of a ‘so-so’ judgment).

It will be recalled that Wright wanted to find out if the pupils could use Talking Mats to express satisfaction/dissatisfaction with their learning activities and if these views were consistent over a short period of time and with those of the adults who worked closely with the pupils. It appears that the answer to the first two questions is a qualified ‘yes’ while the answer to the third question appears to be ‘to some extent’.

Wright acknowledges there are issues in relation to the validity and reliability of the pupils’ responses, eg the high level of satisfaction expressed by the pupils may be due to ‘… a tendency towards acquiescence’ and there may be ‘…agreement without protest’ (p38) – traits recognisable to practitioners working with individuals with multiple and complex needs. In addition, the study relies on interpretation of pupil responses and inferences drawn from observations: thus there may be a tendency towards ‘wish fulfillment’ on the part of the practitioner researcher, ie a wish for the results to be positive. There is also the issue of the very small sample size.

Despite these methodological limitations, Wright considers that the general level of consistency between the views of professionals and pupils suggests that Talking Mats ‘… has the potential to provide an effective low-tech communication system to pupils with multiple and complex needs that gives such pupils a “voice”’ (p39). They also demonstrate that pupils with multiple and complex needs can be ethically included in the research process. Finally, Wright maintains that the findings allow for self-reflection on the part of the practitioner researcher and the possibility to reconsider practice within school. As such, concludes Wright, ‘… these factors …[have] made the study worthwhile’ (p40).

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References
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