

PMLD Voice: Action Research Project

Getting past Groundhog Day

Did you see the film 'Groundhog Day', when the characters relived the same day over and over? Sometimes it feels like some of our pupils are stuck in a loop and repeat the same "conversations", activities and behaviours over again.

The PMLD Voice project was an attempt to find ways to break into the loop to offer pupils a way to make more choices and decisions and widen the narrow world that some of them live in.

Sometimes they can appear passive and because we anticipate their needs so well, we may not allow them enough control over what happens in their day. Sometimes they are so rigid in their behaviours or so insecure that they need the security of repetition, or they may not be aware of the choices available.

The door that opens the world of decision making can be as simple as teaching/recognising a consistent yes/no response and the means to express it.

At Bettridge we have worked hard on Pupil Voice over the past few years, especially with the School Council and the more able pupils. We have also tried to address the needs of those with ASD/Complex needs with initiatives such as Sherborne at Sunfield which looks at engagement, communication and relationship building. But I felt that there had not been enough attention given to the PMLD pupils so I've been exploring ways to increase the participation in decision making of those pupils who do not use speech as their major means of communication.

Apologies to those with expertise in PMLD if I am telling you what you already know!

There is little literature or published assessment material in this area. However part way through the project I discovered Routes for Learning, which I wish I had known about at the outset!

Routes for Learning: (Produced by the Qualifications and Curriculum Group, Department for Education, Wales 2006) is a fit-for-purpose assessment for learners with PMLD which takes a holistic view of learners and focuses on how they learn. It takes account of learners':

- preferred learning channels and ways of processing information (e.g. visual, auditory, tactile)
- ways of communicating
- ways of integrating new experiences with prior learning
- ability to remember and anticipate routines
- approaches to problem-solving situations
- ability to form attachments and interact socially.

'Learners should be involved in their learning. They should be provided with opportunities for choice and will need motivating experiences to enhance their self-esteem, support increasing independence and empower them to take some control over their lives.'

Who works with these pupils and how they work has a huge impact on their learning. The Headteacher of a school in Carlisle said 'Some staff have a way of getting under the skin of such pupils, finding out how they tick, locking into their pathways and empathising in ways that most staff can only wonder at. It's a wonderful talent and it needs to be bottled. We must watch the staff who have these talents and find a way of understanding their success as well as observing and analysing the child, because learners need to feel secure with the people around them'. (Corinna Cartwright 2010, response to Think Piece 2 online at <http://blog.ssatrust.org.uk/thinkpiece/>; accessed.25.5.10)

As Aitken and Buultjens state in *Vision for Doing*, we'll probably find that these people:

- share the learner's perspective
- recognise abilities and not only disabilities
- follow the learner's lead, giving time for them to explore
- try to develop activities so that the learner leads and they follow
- use techniques and methods which emphasise learners having control over events, objects and places in their world
- value the learner
- give the learner time to respond.

There are four basic reasons for communicating with other people. These are:

1. to refuse things we do not want
2. to obtain things we do want
3. to engage in social interactions (positive/negative)
4. to provide or seek information.

(Routes for Learning, 2006)

Project outline:

Our project began by selecting one pupil from each of our PMLD classes in consultation with the class teachers. The plan was to establish a baseline assessment of pupils' communication strengths, and then devise a programme to involve them more in making decisions by developing and using those strengths in a more structured way.

We devised a baseline assessment and gave it to parents and staff, then recorded the information.

PMLD VOICE ASSESSMENT

	Initial Assessment	Reassessment
How communicate?		
Body movements/ gestures		
Eye pointing at objects/photos		
Vocalising/facial expressions		
Responding/listening to voices/sounds		
Other		
Favourite item		
Least favourite		
Yes/No response		
How indicate yes/ no?		
Consistent?		
Further information		

1. We carried out an Early Communication Profile Assessment in liaison with the Speech and Language Therapist to establish communication strengths and where the gaps were, to suggest areas for development.
2. We located each pupil on Pre-intentional, Intentional, Formal chart to identify areas of strength and determine which route to follow to build on those strengths and develop other areas.
3. We analysed the results of all the assessments and wrote individual programmes to build on communication strengths.
4. I discussed the programmes with the Speech and Language Therapist, class teacher and member of staff who works on a daily basis with the pupil.
5. A recording schedule was devised and trialled and amendments made.
6. I worked with pupils every week during the Spring terms on their programmes and analysed the records regularly.
7. The recording sheets were evaluated to determine progress towards targets.
8. Parents and staff were asked to reassess using the original baseline criteria.
9. Reassessments were then incorporated into individual reports which were sent to parents and teachers, along with recommendations for future development.

An example

Pupil L.

Baseline Assessment:

Communication Strengths:

Responsiveness to sounds and sight of objects
People person - good response to voices, sight of people and interactions
Yes and No – currently kicks feet and smiles for Yes
Looks at and tries to reach for desired object

Gaps in Assessment:

Requesting 4: “Gives clear and consistent signals which can be interpreted as requests for attention or for a desired object”

Choosing 4: “Attends to more than one item on offer and consistently signals a choice/preference”

Rejecting 4: “Gives clear and consistent signals which can be interpreted as request to remove or cease stimulus/activity”

Need to develop

Requesting attention, requesting and choosing
Use of objects to communicate

Initial Activities:

Establish preferred objects.

Planned Activities:

1. **Consolidate Yes and No.** Currently signs “Please” for “Yes” and cries or frowns for “No”. This is not totally consistent. Want to refine to indicating Yes and No consistently. Teach signs so that he can use the sign to make his choice/communicate. Use head nod to indicate “Yes” Always reinforce sign vocally. Once signs have been taught then use them to facilitate decision making. Work on sign for “finish” as this is distinct from his other signs.
2. Use the objects he selected as favourites for decision making and rewards (Begin with choice of 2 and increase gradually).
3. Once this is consistent introduce PECS strip with “I want” and photographs of favourite objects.

Session Recording Sheet: Pupil L

Date of session: 16th March 2010

Staff name Sally

<p>Yes and No: Signs</p> <p>“Finish” sign</p>	<p>Shaking head for No, nodding and smiling for Yes.</p> <p>Looked at symbol and my modelling of sign. I put his hands on top of mine and moved our hands in midline to imitate.</p>
<p>Decision making: objects and pictures</p>	<p>Offered tambourine and mike. Showed objects individually then offered both photos vertically. Reached out and touched photo of mike (top photo). Helped him grasp and put onto I want strip. Watched as I read, vocalised and tried to nod. Helped him hold mike to play.</p> <p>Offered Music tin and sparkle stick. Selected sparkle stick photo (bottom photo). Helped to put onto strip. When confirmed he nodded all by himself and vocalised what sounded like ‘Yeah’. Put stick in his hand, he smiled.</p> <p>Offered spinners and ladybird. Watched spinners, reached out to touch. Warned him about the ladybird noise, no startle reaction, he laughed. Chose ladybird (bottom photo) Nodded when I confirmed. Held it in his right hand.</p> <p>Offered tambourine and music tin. Shook head at both objects. Selected music tin (bottom photo) and confirmed with smile and nod. Tried to pick tin up with both hands.</p>
<p>Evaluation: successful session? Why?</p> <p>Suggestions that may help for future sessions</p>	<p>Varied pairs of toys presented from last time. Trying hard to place photos on I want strip and looking as I read it back to him.</p> <p>Nodding becoming more deliberate: insist on sign/imitation next time. Also trying hard to put picture onto I want strip. Encourage this next time. Introduce objects not used before.</p>

Progress at March 2010

After weekly sessions over the term Pupil L. had made very good progress:

1. He was making choices by selecting from up to 3 photos presented vertically on a strip. He chose by touching desired photo and attempting to place it onto "I want" (symbols) PECS strip.
2. He confirmed his choice by consistently nodding his head for Yes and shaking his head for No.
3. Had clear favourites, selected and handled/attended to favourites and rejected others by shaking his head or not reaching out to touch.
4. He understood the meaning of the "Finish" symbol; could nod or shake his head to confirm whether or not he wanted to finish. He was attempting to make the sign for finish (bringing hands into midline).
5. He had vocalised "No" clearly and made a good approximation to "Yes" ("Yeah").

The gaps in Assessment identified at the outset had largely been filled:

Reassessment: May 2010

Initially he indicated yes by smiling and kicking his legs, and no by frowning or crying. These responses were not consistent. Now he has consistent head nod for yes and consistent shake of head for no.

Comments from home: Have noticed change in communication and willingness to make choices, particularly since Xmas.

Comments from staff: Choices –looks and reaches for item. He tends to communicate with more familiar adults. Head nod more prominent.

Recommendations:

Now that there is a consistent yes/no it will be possible to offer more choices and involve him more in decision making, using the familiar format outlined on his weekly session notes.

PECS can be introduced more formally so that he can have a set of photos and the symbols for "finish", yes and no. Gradually replacing photos with symbols and building up a personalised symbol bank.

Remember the importance of teaching "**No**" and "**Finish**". Not only to use yes/no to confirm choices made but also to give a "No" option in all choices for example 'blackcurrant or orange?' assumes pupil wants a drink, need to have the "No" option there so that pupil can say doesn't want either. Equally "Finish" is important because it allows pupil to end a game or interaction, to say in effect "no more", or "leave me alone". Obviously those choices must be respected during the teaching phase.

Once he is used to the system work can concentrate on him initiating requests and seeking attention.

The project continues this year on a weekly basis with Post 16 students.

Post 16 Communication group

We wanted the students to have lots of opportunities for choice and motivating experiences to enhance their self-esteem, promote independence and empower them to take more control over their lives.

During the autumn the brilliant team in P16 worked with me to establish students' preferences for music, objects, colours, textures, smells, patterns etc. Then based on these favourites they practised choosing/decision making and using yes/no symbols to answer questions. In the spring they continued practising these skills and extended the work to incorporate reading facial expressions and body language. We continued the 1-1 sessions to promote social interaction, choosing and fun. We worked on recognising emotions and used photos and mirrors to study facial expressions.

This term we are developing the students' thinking skills through problem solving.

QCA: "Thinking combines perception, memory, forming ideas, language and use of symbols – the basic cognitive skills which underlie the ability to reason, to learn and to solve problems.

Early thinking skills include:

- Predicting and anticipating
- Remembering
- Understanding cause and Effect
- Linking objects, events and experiences
- Thinking creatively and imaginatively

Conclusion:

Working with the pupils, families and staff on this project has been a privilege and a joy. I hope that this project will contribute to the excellent work going on in with our PMLD pupils and that we can all pool our ideas to enable our pupils to fully engage and actively participate in decisions and choices about their lives.

Sally Thorn
Deputy Headteacher
Bettridge School, Cheltenham

May 2011