Development Of Affective Communication

In the earliest stages of communication there are four basic reasons for pupils to communicate 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); and
4. to provide or seek information.

At the pre-intentional stage in the development of communication skills, pupils may show only involuntary/reflexive responses to internal or external stimuli usually associated with well-being, eg pain, hunger. These must be responded to and given meaning by adults. Their behaviours may be interpreted as expressing comfort or discomfort or showing interest in people.

Other pupils may show behaviours that are voluntary, but they are not intentionally communicative. At this stage, the pupils do not yet realise they can control the behaviour of others. Teachers interpret these behaviours as communicating something, eg protesting, wanting to continue an action, to obtain more or to attract attention.

Its essential element is to give pupils an awareness of their own ability to affect the environment and to give them something to communicate about. It is important that they are given time to communicate in the context of consistent routines and activities. All teachers must be responsive and give meaning to any pre-intentional sounds or movements they make.

At this stage, the pupil's behaviour may be very basic, such as 'stilling' (a momentary 'freeze'), a change in breathing pattern, tensing or relaxing, pupil dilation or eye movements, change in facial expression, vocalisation or movement of mouth, hands or feet.

Any preference expressed by the pupil, eg for a certain type of music, should be incorporated into the programme. It is equally important to notice and respond to behaviour that may signal rejection or the pupil's wish to stop an activity, eg turning head away.

Coupe O'Kane and Goldbart (1998) describe one approach to establishing intentional communication that is called the 'affective communication method'. The several steps in this teaching approach may be summarised as follows.

First of all, a variety of stimuli are presented to the pupil and their observable responses to each are noted. These stimuli may be auditory, visual, tactile, gustatory or olfactory or a complex combination of these, such as human contact, specific sounds, tastes of specific foods, bright disco lights, and so on. The pupil must be given time to respond to each stimulus and a provisional interpretation of the meaning of the pupil's responses – vocalisations, facial expressions and/or body actions – has to be made in each case.

The next step involves representing those stimuli that evoked the pupil's strongest responses. Checks are made for the consistency of the pupil's responses and the behaviours that may be interpreted as 'like' or 'dislike' are identified.

The final step is to actually teach the pupil that behaving in certain ways will have an effect on the people who are doing these things to him or her. Situations are engineered which are known to evoke specific potentially communicative behaviour, ie the behaviour that can be said to communicate emotional reactions to the stimuli. When potentially communicative behaviour has been evoked, the teacher responds to the pupil's behaviour in a relevant and consistent way *as though the pupil is intentionally communicating.* If the pupil's behaviour indicates 'like', the interesting or pleasing item or activity is presented again. If the pupil's behaviour indicates 'dislike' the item or activity is stopped or withdrawn immediately. The assumption is that after sufficient experiences of this nature the pupil will come to realise that they can behave in ways that communicate desires or rejection of things or activities. In such interactions are sown the seeds of simple communication and choice making by many pupils.

Assessment takes the form of noting and recording responses to a range of planned experiences. For these individuals their responses and signs can be difficult to identify and interpret, particularly for adult who are less familiar. The outcome should be records of typical like and dislike behaviours in response to each type of experience.

The views of family members and other carers will be an important guide about what experiences to offer. It is recommended that separate records are completed in different settings because the pupil's responses may vary. The records should describe the 'like/ dislike' response and what experiences were offered. It is recommended that each experience should be repeated on several occasions prior to a decision as to the pupil's preferences.

Of course, the pupil's preferences may change over time and it is important that the records are regularly updated.

Reference

Coupe O'Kane, J. and Goldbart, J. (1998) *Communication Before Speech* London: David Fulton Publishers).