Preverbal Communication Schedule (PVCS)

The purpose of the Preverbal Communication Schedule (PVCS) is to help teachers working with pupils with minimal verbal or signing skills. The PVCS assessment of pupils helps to establish the pupils' existing abilities and identify targets for teaching programmes aimed at establishing use of speech or signs, symbols or other form of non-verbal communication as appropriate.

The authors of the PVCS were Chris Kiernan and Barbara Reid. They argued that the whole approach to teaching communication skills should be pupil-led rather than teacher-led. In order to learn communicative skills pupils need opportunities to control their environment; they should be allowed to make choices, to express preferences, to express rejection of things or activities, and to achieve pleasurable interactions with others. If pupils are to be encouraged to communicate, they must have something to communicate about that they need or that interests them. They must gain something pleasurable from their interactions with others. The PVCS approach was described in detail in its manual by Kiernan and Reid (1987) and by Kiernan (1988)

The PVCS was developed more than 30 years ago when there were no other assessment procedures that asked questions about the abilities of this group of children with severe learning difficulties or how they used their communicative skills to affect the world around them. The PVCS also allows teachers to make a decion about selecting appropriate alternative or augmentative communication systems (e.g. sign language or pictorial systems) because it considers the influence of any existing sensory or physical disabilities. These days there are other assessment systems that ask similar questions such as the *Early Communication Assessment* described by Coupe O'Kane and Goldbart (1998).

The PVCS comprises the schedule itself and a manual which describes the development of the schedule and, the scoring methods and the interpretation of the information which is gathered.

The PVCS schedule consists of 195 items divided into 27 sections. The majority of the items in the schedule are checklist items which ask whether a particular ability or behaviour is shown by the pupil. Some items, mostly concerned with imitation skills and the understanding of non-vocal communication, ask the teacher to test the pupil on simple tasks.

The PVCS schedule focuses upon checklist items because it is assumed that the teacher will complete it conjunction with other people who know the child well already – parents, carers, support staff, etc. Observational assessments can be time-consuming and can interfere with everyday teaching activities and they do not necessarily pick up on behaviours which can be fairly rare in occurrence or which only occur under particular circumstances.

		U	R	N	Comments
5 PI	Waves goodbye without prompting when another person is leaving or when she is leaving.				
6 NS	Uses a simple gesture to indicate needs, e.g. pretends to drink, points to pants to indicate need to go to the toilet.				
7	Spontaneously draws attention to the presence of an object or person through gestures, e.g. a gesture for 'cat' to draw attention to the cat's presence.				
8	Indicates spontaneously through gestures that she wants to go to the toilet in order to leave the classroom for a while.				
9 SN	Waves goodbye to indicate that she wants another person to go away.				
10	Uses complex gestures or a sequence of gestures to indicate needs, e.g. when she wants a drink pretends to pour from a bottle and then to drink.				

18 COMMUNICATION THROUGH MANIPULATION

		U	R	N	Comments
1 AS	Approaches and touches another person to get attention.				
2 SN	Pushes another person's hand away when she does not want help or does not want interference.				
3 NS	Pushes or pulls another person to induce them to go somewhere or get something she wants, e.g. pulls another person to recreation room or bathroom when she wants to go to these rooms.				
4	Brings objects to another person or takes the other person to objects and then indicates that the person should do specific things, e.g. putting the other person's hands on a doorknob and then turning their hands to indicate turning knob, a child may push the adult's arm up to a high shelf.				
5 SA	Pushes or pulls another person *only to show them* something or someone.				

19 COMMUNICATION THROUGH POINTING

In this section, one set of items (1, 2, 3, 6) deals with objects which the student *wants to have*; the remaining items (4, 5) deal with objects which the student wishes only to *draw attention* to.

		U	R	N	Comments
1	Touches an object she *wants* but does not look at the other person.				
2 NS	Touches an object she *wants* and then glances at the other person and object alternatively, until the other person responds. The equivalent of saying '*give me*' or of asking permission.				
3	Reaches for objects she *wants* and which are out of reach, but without real effort, meanwhile glancing at the object and another person. Again the equivalent of saying '*give me*'.				
4	Touches objects in order to draw attention to them without actually wanting you to do anything except to pay attention. For example she may touch the object and look back and forth between the object and another person until the other person shows that they have paid attention.				
5 SA	Points with hand and/or arm to distant objects to draw attention to them.				
6 NS	Points with hand and/or arm to distant object she *wants* whilst looking alternatively at the other person and the object.				

20 COMMUNICATION THROUGH LOOKING

Although these items are similar to section 19 (Communication through Pointing), we are interested here in students who only *look* at objects which they want and do not *point* to them. If the student has passed the stage described in item 1, credit her with the item and make a note under Comments.
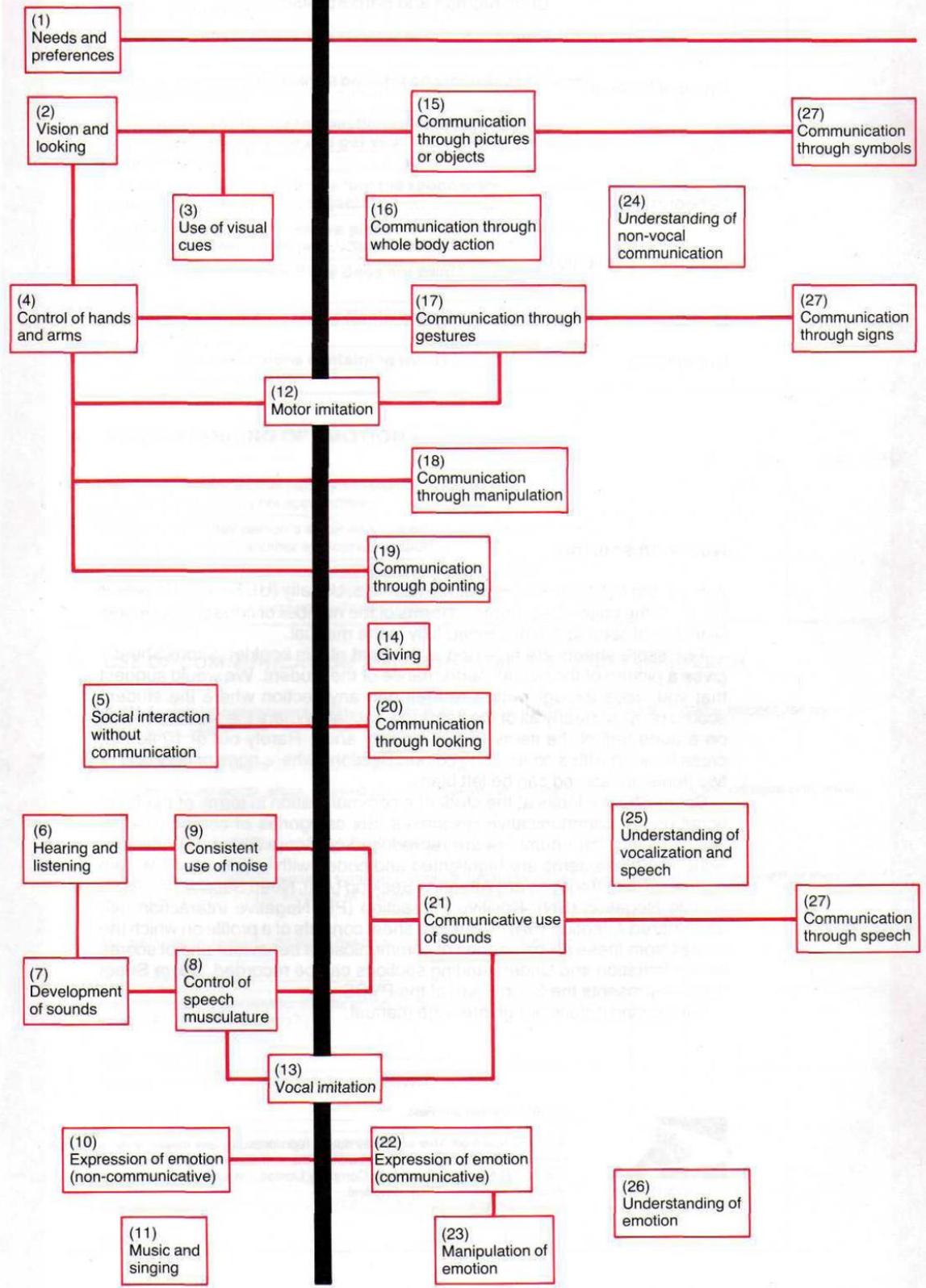
		U	R	N	Comments
1	Looks at something she wants but does not seem aware that she has to have another person looking as well in order to communicate.				
2	Looks at something she wants and then looks back and forth between the other person and the object until he or she responds.				

Score Sheet 1

Pre-Communicative Behaviours   **Informal Communicative Behaviours**   **Formal Communication Skills**

(1) Needs and preferences

(2) Vision and looking

(15) Communication through pictures or objects

(27) Communication through symbols

(3) Use of visual cues

(16) Communication through whole body action

(24) Understanding of non-vocal communication

(4) Control of hands and arms

(17) Communication through gestures

(27) Communication through signs

(12) Motor imitation

(18) Communication through manipulation

(19) Communication through pointing

(14) Giving

(5) Social interaction without communication

(20) Communication through looking

(6) Hearing and listening

(9) Consistent use of noise

(25) Understanding of vocalization and speech

(21) Communicative use of sounds

(27) Communication through speech

(7) Development of sounds

(8) Control of speech musculature

(13) Vocal imitation

(10) Expression of emotion (non-communicative)

(22) Expression of emotion (communicative)

(26) Understanding of emotion

(11) Music and singing

(23) Manipulation of emotion

The 27 sections fall into five broad clusters: *pre-communicative behaviours* which are relevant to the development of various modes of communication; *imitation*; *informal communicative behaviours*; *understanding*; and various *formal communication skills* covering use of signs, symbols and spoken words*.*

Several sections cover pre-communicative behaviours that are the prerequisites of signing and symbol use. These assess the pupil's vision and visual tracking skills and the ability to recognise things or people in pictures or photos. Skills in these areas could indicate the value of teaching use of photos, pictures or more abstract graphic symbols as a means of communication. Items that assess control over the use of arms and hands and in simple motor imitative skills may indicate whether teaching use of signing is viable. Assessment of hearing, listening, control of speech musculature (breathing, eating and breath control) and vocal imitative skills indicate the potential for teaching use of speech for communication.

Other sections are concerned with identifying the pupil's needs, interests and preferences, the expression of emotion and the level of social interaction. The PVCS, therefore, helps to identify the degree to which the pupil is socially or emotionally withdrfawn or outgoing. It even includes a section on the ability to sing and respond to music because of the fact that some case studies report that children have been unable to speak but can articulate words when singing familiar songs.

The PVCS includes assessment of motor and vocal imitation. These help to show how well the pupil attends to what others do and how responsive they are to others as well as indicating how good they are in copying the behaviour of others. Good imitative skills can be very helpful in developing the use of spoken words and signing as well as learning to do a whole range of other things. Indeed, an assessment showing poor imitative skills would indicate a need to teach the pupil to imitate as part of their teaching programme.

Nine sections of the PVCS are devoted to assessing informal communicative behaviour: through whole body action, eye pointing, pointing with hands or arms, giving, manipulation of adults, pushing and pulling people, and gestures. This cluster also assesses the pupil's communicative expression of emotions, e,g. to attract attention. Some items assess the extent to which the pupil understands how their behaviour can evoke reactions from others which is a form of communication of itself.

Three sections assess understanding of non-vocal communication, vocalization and speech, and emotion. Two distinct patterns may emerge from the assessment. Firstly, the pupil may score well on comprehension and poorly on all sections concerned withcommunication. In this case, some kind of aphasi may be indicated and teaching needs to concentrate on expression, using signs or symbols, with speech as the main receptive mode. Secondly, the pupil may show both poor receptive skills and poor expressive skills. Teaching may focus on developing communication through gesture, signs and use of pictorial systems because these can be more easily prompted than speech.

The final section of the PVCS covers the conventional use the spoken word or of signs and pictorial systems. Often, these may only be produced on demand rather than spontaneously for communication. In this case, teaching has to focus on conveying to the pupil that use of words or signs or pictures will get them things or activities that are pleasurable or that they need.

The PVCS also identifies six categories of communicative acts: Attention Seeking, Needs Satisfaction, Simple Negation, Positive Interaction, Negative Interaction and Shared Attention. These broadly accord with other descriptions of communicative acts identified by Judith Coupe O'Kane and Juliet Goldbart in their book. The first three categories are pretty basic tpes of communication: simple attention seeking for its own sake, acting to gain wanted items or activities, and rejecting particular items when they are proferred or types of interaction. Negative Interaction covers a range of provocative behaviours which are unacceptable expressions of emotion or ways of gaining or prolonging interactions in unacceptable ways. Positive Interaction patterns that are learned may include social greetings, giving things to people, expressing affection and turntaking. Shared Attention covers behaviours where the pupil calls attention of others objects or people or events simply to share information and comment rather than wanting to satisfy a basic need as in Needs Satisfaction.

The PVCS provides only limited assessment of understanding of non-vocal communication, vocalisation, speech and emotion because these behaviours are difficult to assess using this type of assessment schedule. The PVCS has acknowledged gaps in coverage of more sophisticated levels of communication which are addressed by other assessment tools. However, the PVCS remains a very useful tool for developing teaching programmes for non-verbal or minimally verbal pupils.

It takes about two hours to answer all the checklist items of the PVCS and some additional time must be allowed for the direct test items on Motor Imitation and Understanding. Directly testable items are scored as yes/no or as a numerical score. Other items are scored as 'usually', 'rarely' or 'never'. The PVCS record form has a limited amount of space for brief comments which should be added when they help to define the pupil's behaviour.

The Full PVCS is completed when the aim is to gather general information prior to programme planning. The Full PVCS is summarised in Score Sheet 1 Score Sheet 1 is a lattice of boxes representing each of the 27 sections of the PVCS. All of the items in the PVCS are used for scoring Score Sheet 1. On Score Sheet 1 the pre-communicative behaviours are shown to the left of the vertical dividing line and *'informal communicative behaviours'* and *'formal communication skills'* are shown to the right.

References

Kiernan, C. (1988) Assessment for teaching communication skills. In Coupe O'Kane, J. and Goldbart, J. (eds) (1988) *Communication Before Speech: Normal Development and Impaired Communication* London: Croom Helm First edition.

Kiernan, C. and Reid, B. (1987) *The Preverbal Communication Schedule (PVCS).* Windsor: NFER-Nelson. Out of print.

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