Passive children in the classroom: How to break down the barriers for optimal participation

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Introduction

In the field of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) we are confronted with a heterogeneous group of children with severe disabilities, some portraying passive behavior. Severe disability has a negative influence on the child's ability to participate without anxiety, limitations or inhibitions (Du Toit, 2004). Their difficulty to access materials and equipment inhibit active participation, while delays in cognitive, physical, affective or communicative skills may also limit the child's ability to participate. Voluntary action undertaken by the child is therefore impaired. It is for these reasons that learned helplessness and passive behavior are often observed as it stems from the theory that motivation governs action, but action is the manifestation of motivation.

Creative ability relates to a child's preparedness to function at the maximum level of competence (level of mastery). However, this population experiences a variety of barriers in reaching mastery. This brings into question methodologies to break down these barriers so that they can also demonstrate behaviors that would lead to optimal performance. As a child with severe disabilities develops (or progresses) sequentially through the levels of motivation and action, s/he will gain new skills. Specific adaptations regarding the child, the environment, and the presentation of activities need to interconnect, before optimal participation could occur.

This poster illustrates the stages of self differentiation, self presentation and passive participation according to the Model of Creative Ability (Du Toit, 2004), as these are developmentally appropriate for children. Some important aspects of communication development have been correlated with each of these stages in order to facilitate goal setting. AAC principles and practices for the three levels that could counteract passive behavior in the child with severe disabilities have been identified in order to assist professionals to deal will diverse populations in the classroom.

Self Differentiation

Communication development characterised by:
- Object permanence develops (Piaget, 1978).
- Cause and effect develops. Child realizes that if he does something, he will produce a response (Beukelman & Mirenda, 2005).
- Means-end develops. Child realizes that he has to do something specific to attain a desired response (Beukelman & Mirenda, 2005).
- Communication develops form pre-intentional to intentional and non-symbolic to symbolic (Beukelman & Mirenda, 2005).
- Characterized by one word utterances (Sternberg, 1995).
- Learns that a specific object/action can be represented by a symbol.
- Learns that specific words are linked to specific meanings (semantics).
- Pre- and emergent literacy development (Dunst, Trivette, Masiello, Roper & Robyak, 2006).

Guidelines for Intervention
- Follow the lead of the child in order to establish joint attention. Utilise joint attention to skillfully direct attention to create learning opportunities.
- Teach representation – a symbol represents a meaning e.g. a cup means "I am thirsty".
- Include unaided and immediate communication systems, e.g. gestures.
- Encourage symbol exchange – e.g. a child brings mother a cup and in return gets a drink of water.
- Select and teach functional vocabulary from the natural environment to facilitate activity participation e.g. "more", "finished", and "sleep".
- Teach functional object use e.g. a brush is used to brush hair.
- Use of switch operated toys to facilitate cause and effect.
- Respond to any incidental communication attempts.
- Provide exposure to voice output devices (1 Step) e.g. Big Mack.
- Use visual scenes for display and refrain from grid based displays.

Contrasting types of AAC displays (Blackstone, 2005)
Traditional grid displays   Visual scene displays

Self Presentation

Communication development characterised by:
- Mayor development is language and conceptual (Piaget, 1978).
- Development of emergent and early literacy skills, e.g. rhyming and book orientation (Beukelman & Mirenda, 2005).
- Combine words to make sentences – start with 2 – 3 words.
- Grammar development.
- Learn meaning of more complex/abstract representations, e.g. emotions.
- Expanding vocabulary or number of symbols used.

Guidelines for Intervention
- Work towards using line drawings as symbols – stick to one symbol set e.g. PCS.
- Focus on linguistic and social competence. Linguistic competence refers to the receptive and expressive skills in a person's mother tongue, while social competence includes the skills of interaction with others (Light, 1989).
- Modelling and prompting strategies.
- Use of visual schedules to organize day programme.
- Use of story and song boards.
- Use of remnant books to increase communication between home and school.
- Use of communication aprons where the symbols are constantly available to see.
- Use voice output communication aids (VOCA) due to focus on social interaction at this stage as well as proposed positive influence of voice output on language acquisition (Millar, Light & Schlosser, 2006).
- Utilise grid based displays for organization.
- Carefully consider number and type of symbols, size of display and methods of access to VOCA or low technology according to individual abilities.
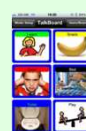
Passive Participation

Communication development characterised by:
- The development of early literacy and literacy.

Guidelines for Intervention
- Use of a VOCA essential for academic participation.
- Move from picture symbols to orthography.
- Literacy goals for AAC users similar to speaking peers (McNaughton, 2006).
- Choice of VOCA:
  - dedicated communication devices (e.g. Toby Churchill, Dynavox or PRC devices)
  - non-dedicated devices with appropriate software (e.g. iPad, or laptop).
- Utilise dynamic displays.
- Rate enhancement strategies utilised, e.g. encoding.
- Address operational competence in using communication system, e.g. caring for the device.
- Teach strategic competence, e.g. using a communication repair strategy when your device breaks down.

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