

Food for thought

"THINK! Think for yourself." How often did I say those words during the very enjoyable project spent with a group of six deaf teenagers in Northern Ireland.

I now realise that many of the group had never needed to think for themselves during most of their life. Many of their interactions with other people were one-way only. This is to say, hearing adults had been speaking to them (without using signs) and they had become very adept at nodding in the right places.

It should be said this was also the case even when, in later years, deaf adults used signed communication to most of the group members. I have no doubt that this sad state of affairs came about because of a lack of basic language acquisition in the early critical years. I am using the word language here and not speech because several of the group can not quite intelligible speech. Their underlying knowledge, however, of the English language or indeed of British Sign Language is frustrating for all concerned.

This article by research psychologist SUSAN PHOENIX is about deaf children in Northern Ireland. Susan, who is on the committee of the Northern Ireland Workshop with the Deaf, discusses her work with four-year-old and 16-year-old children.

When I was asked to run this experimental social and life skills project, funded by the youth service, for the 16-plus group, I had thought it would be relatively easy and relaxing in comparison to my previous project working with pre-school profoundly deaf children.

It proved, however, to be exhausting, frustrating, although stimulating work for six short months from September, 1985.

My remit was to provide a programme of learning experiences to facilitate young deaf people moving from school to Youth Training Programme courses, using informal social and life skills training. I should have realised that I would need to become a teacher of basic numeracy, literacy, and

communication skills, before the programme of life skills could commence.

My teaching resources came from material which I had used to encourage language development in two profoundly deaf little girls in the 1983-85 Total Communication playgroup.

This playgroup was the pioneer for introducing pre-school deaf children in Northern Ireland to Total Communication. The results were very encouraging but unfortunately it is now closed due to lack of support and understanding from parents and professionals.

The playgroup, which I believe was five years before its time, was initiated by the Rev George Grindle of the Keshigan Mission and funded on a purely voluntary basis by the Mission. As is often the way, however, the resources built up by my deaf colleagues, Agnes Carberry, and myself, were not wasted when yet another pilot project was offered to me with the 16-plus group.

INDEPENDENT

In teaching this group of 16-year-olds how to think, reason and be independent, I found myself continually comparing them with the previous year's four-year-olds.

In fact, it would be fair to say that the profoundly deaf four-year-olds, who had been used to Total Communication in their everyday environment, were capable of more independent thought than the 16-year-olds, who had been educated orally until the final years of their education.

I qualify this statement by using the example of questioning behaviour and the spontaneous volunteering of information by the four-year-olds. They would ask many 'what? where? why?' questions and make statements such as 'that fallen spoon is like a dead tree!' It took many months of hard work before any such similar out of imagination or interest was evident from most of my 16-year-old group.

I found it painful that these bright, attractive teenagers accepted everything that happened to them without thinking about why things happen. "Why am I staying at school



• Nicola Hamilton — one of the girls Susan taught in her Total Communication playgroup, 1983 — 85.

for another year?" "Why do I get an allowance book for money now?" "What will happen to me next year?" None of these questions were asked by the boys until the final weeks of the course. The two girls in the group were always more socially aware, although they too often lacked the necessary language (signed and spoken) to expand upon their questions or thoughts.

The majority of the group could not fully explain their daily lives to their parents. The boys found it impossible to communicate more than basic facts in the home. How different to the previous year's four-year-olds who could go home every day to tell their parents about the fun or visits they had with the playgroup. They were able to communicate their every need and experience to their parents. The 16-year-old young adults could not and cannot communicate similarly with their parents.

By outlining these simple comparisons, I hope that parents and teachers will think about their own methods of, and attitudes to, communication. Any doubts may be further clarified by reading the most recent facts as presented by committed teachers like Joan Montgomery and Terry Morris in the latest Scottish Workshop with the Deaf publication, *Beyond Hobson's Choice*.

Joan writes about normalisation of language development and emotional behaviour through Total Communication. The only word possible to describe the profoundly deaf four-year-olds who left Northern Ireland's first TC (Total Communication) playgroup, last year, is 'normal'. They made the same comments and exhibited the same behaviour as my own hearing children at the same age.

PERSONALITIES

How very different were the teenagers! Their individual personalities were so obviously suppressed by their lack of language and resultant lack of access into the experiences of everyday life, it would be impossible to compare them favourably with my own teenage children. Why? The system has failed them!

I have been researching the system in Northern Ireland for the past five years. In 1982 the Keshigan Mission for the Deaf asked me to visit the homes of 22 deaf teenagers who had left school in the preceding three years. I had hoped that my findings, at that time, were not typical. Experience, however, and each successive year's research, has clearly illustrated that nothing has changed in the last 20 years. Oh yes, technology, is improving daily — and early diagnosis in Belfast with sophisticated equipment is perhaps the most successful in the British Isles. But from the point of diagnosis onwards, little has changed.

The parents of my original survey group of 22 teenagers complained of a lack of ad-

'Let us work together in Northern Ireland to build first class deaf teenagers who can think for themselves'

quate counselling, a lack of suitable communication methods in education (all were educated orally), a lack of continuing and further education after the age of 16 years and the lack of communication and counselling classes to teach them how to communicate with their non-communicating teenage children.



• The Playgroup members in 1983. (Left to right) Jane Young, Susan Phoenix, Aaron Abernethy, Nicola Hamilton, deaf language assistant Agnes Carberry, and Benjamin Burke. Aaron and Benjamin are both hearing children of deaf parents.

From the group of 22 young intelligent people, all but one used sign language in their everyday life. Only one family reported using sign language to communicate with their sons and daughters. A common statement from the young people was: "We feel like a pet dog in our homes!"

Let I end this short resume of my experiences in Northern Ireland's deaf community on a negative note, I must say that I meet many dedicated teachers of the deaf, social workers, voluntary workers, and other professionals in Northern Ireland's system for the deaf, who share a commitment to improving the system. Indeed I have stood on many platforms and praised their work.

There are some profoundly deaf success

stories of course and many partially hearing success stories. As a psychologist and a mother, however, I am more concerned about the problems of those many young intelligent profoundly deaf children and some partially hearing children who have missed, and are still missing, meaningful warm communication within their everyday lives.

TECHNOLOGY

Oral/aural communication is fine — if it works. But what happens if, as happened recently, a child must spend a few days, weeks or months, without a hearing aid? If Total Communication is used, language never stops being learned, copied and enjoyed. Technology can fail — a mother's warm, careful, clear communication cannot.

I am inspired by the work being done by the dedicated staff, under Cherry Glenville's committed leadership in Doncaster College for the Deaf. The continual support of eminent colleagues across the water such as Dr Montgomery and Dr Donmark, Chris Jones and the British Deaf Association personnel, helps those of us in the Northern Ireland Workshop with the Deaf to keep going. We must keep our dream for improvement.

My plea for tomorrow is that everyone in Northern Ireland can forget past grievances and work together to build first class deaf teenagers who can think for themselves, not second class hearing copies who live in a concrete, passive world of acceptance.

• If you want to find out more from Susan Phoenix about her work with deaf children, write to her at the Northern Ireland Workshop with the Deaf, Bryson House, Bedford Street, Belfast, Northern Ireland.

Further reading

Beyond Hobson's Choice: An appraisal of the methods of teaching language to deaf children. Edited by George Montgomery. Published by the Scottish Workshop with the Deaf. Price £5.50. Available from Donaldson School, Eastcoates, Edinburgh, Scotland.