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P O R T A G E

Report of a conference held at the Centre on 26 June 1979

Chairman: Mr Roger Blunden, Director, Mental Handicap Research Unit, Wales

Guest speakers: Alma Frohman (teacher) )  
Richard Boyd (psychologist) ) Cooperative Education Service  
Agency 12, Portage, Wisconsin, USA

1. Background to the Portage Scheme

Portage is a town in the state of Wisconsin, its population of about 9,000 is widely dispersed through the rural area. The scheme adopted in Portage, to provide educational and developmental aid to pre-school handicapped children, was one of twenty-five different models run as experiments in the United States. The Portage scheme took teaching to the clients in their homes as the area served, some 3,600 square miles, made a centre-based project impossible. Initially a development grant funded the project for three years.

The scheme began with four home teachers and served fifty-five children. They now service around 150, and have an average case-load of twelve children per home teacher. In 1972 the development grant ended, and the local school service took over the funding; since then it has become mandatory for school services within the United States to provide a service to the handicapped between the ages of three and twenty-one.

Since 1972 the Portage model has been replicated in sixty sites, embracing widely varied cultures from Eskimo to the Navaho Indians, and including one example based within a state institution where adoptive grandparents performed the teaching role usually taken by the parents. The scheme encompassed physically handicapped, emotionally disturbed and other 'at risk' children as well as meeting the needs of mentally handicapped pre-school children.

2. Outline of the Portage System

- a) Once the child has been referred as a possible client, the home teacher makes a visit to the child's home and carries out an assessment.
- b) An individual curriculum is then planned for the child based on present behaviour patterns.
- c) Home visits of approximately one and a half hours a week begin, during which the home teacher models teaching processes to the parent/s, who then follow 'activity charts' left by the home teacher during the rest of the week.
- d) Home teaching staff meet together for a half day per week to discuss cases and exchange ideas. They have a supervisor who also attends these weekly staff meetings.

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It is important to note that the home teachers work closely with other professions providing services for these children (such as physiotherapists and speech therapists).

### 3. Sources of Referrals

Letters were sent to all doctors working as family practitioners within the area, but this produced no response. Better results were achieved by contact with the county health nurses whose work within the community gave them a good knowledge of potential clients. The most effective source of referrals, however, was widespread publicity via the local press and radio and from speaking at local voluntary organisations. The founders of Portage occasionally went door to door to recruit clients. In all cases the parents written permission (by signature) was obtained before involving the child in the scheme.

### 4. Assessment

The initial visit to the child's home gives an opportunity to explain the scheme to the parent and to make an assessment of the child. Assessment within the Portage scheme takes four forms: formal, informal, curriculum and ongoing. Five developmental areas are recognised for assessment purposes: cognitive, motor, social, self-help and communication.

The Alpern-Boll method of assessment is used to cover the formal assessment requirements of Portage, and it has been found to give satisfactory results with the exception of behavioural and speech problems which it does not cover. Alpern-Boll assessments are given at the time of the first home visit, and, if the child is approved for the Portage scheme, thereafter in September and May of each year (Portage operates during the standard school year with a long summer vacation).

Informal, curriculum and ongoing assessments are longer term and do not occur at set times as do the formal assessments. For curriculum assessment the home teacher will take a baseline of the child's present level and, once this is established, proceed to select activities for the child to pursue in order to build up skills. Each activity is designed to be carried out over the course of one week, and should be closely monitored. At the end of the week the child will progress to the next activity if the required level has been reached; if it has not been achieved the activity will be modified.

Informal assessment takes place by the home teacher observing the child, and talking to the parent; this is often the most productive form of assessment.

Ongoing assessment is obtained by regular monitoring of the child's progress through various activity charts and by recording activity chart results onto a behaviour log over the months.

### 5. The Parent as Teacher

The Portage scheme rests upon the concept of the parent as a teacher, and seeks to encourage and develop the parent in this role. This is felt to be the best method of aiding the child because

- a) the parent is the child's first teacher
- b) parents know their children better than anyone else can hope to
- c) the parent/s have a caretaking role in the lives of their children, especially in the case of mentally handicapped children

- d) they are able to provide useful, functional learning relevant to their child's life
- e) learning problems are minimised if the parent teaches the child
- f) behavioural problems can be corrected by the parent as part of the learning process
- g) parent-child interaction can be observed by the home teacher or other professionals, and the parent helps to resolve any difficulties in the relationship
- h) documented evidence in various researched situations has shown that in practice the most effective learning situation is that in which the parent teaches their child.

## 6. Curriculum Planning

Materials for curriculum planning are in three sections:

- a) set of 580 cards colour-coded by age.
- b) a checklist of the five Alpern-Boll developmental areas (cognitive, motor, social, self-help and communications).
- c) a manual to act as a guide to curriculum planning skills the child already has, are checked off on the card to establish the level already obtained: skills are not in a sequential order and children will develop skills over a range of difficulty. Activities are devised to help the child obtain a certain skill, and these activities are broken down into stages which should take one week to complete: the parents are not given the cards but receive weekly 'activity charts' on which they are to record the progress over one week towards that week's goal. It is possible to devise activity charts for infants and very severely handicapped children where the activity is performed by the parent and is carried out to stimulate the child.

Problems have been known to occur where the manual is not properly understood: people fail to observe the child doing different tasks, and turn to the guide as a test of the child rather than a means of beginning to plan a programme.

There may also be a tendency to concentrate upon one area of development, especially if the child is weakest there, at the expense of the others. It is also important to avoid overdeveloping 'splinter skills' (e.g. numbers), and pursuing activities, whether or not the child is ready for them.

It is crucial to be able to define clearly behavioural objectives (see Naylor's 'Writing Behavioural Objectives') i.e. you must know exactly what you are going to teach to whom, and under what circumstances. A sample might be:

Who : Fred

Will do what : stand on one foot

Under what conditions : without support

To what degree of success: for ten seconds

In some activities, especially those involving speech or cognitive skills, 100% success rate would be required.

The terms of a behavioural objective must be clear and unambiguous, such that a stranger would be able to follow the activity with the child.

### 7. Task Analysis

Task analysis is the breakdown of goals into a series of activities which, if followed through, will achieve the skill required. A hierarchy of smaller tasks are thus used to lead up to the acquisition of a terminal objective. There is no limit to the number of steps there may be within a task analysis. A child might be taught to recognise a square by a series of activity charts commencing with the parent showing the child squares and saying the word 'square', then getting the child to say the word too, then getting the child to say the word with a little prompting ('what's this Johnny? It's a sq...') until, after passing through activity charts including the process of distinguishing a square from other shapes, the child has learnt to recognise and name a square.

Directions on how to teach a skill must be thorough and include the materials to use, place to work, manner of presentation, reinforcement to be given, correction procedure, how to record results and how often to practice the activity. Every response should be recorded.

In answer to a question on how behaviour was maintained, Richard Boyd said that behaviour was maintained by review, and also because each skill was a pre-requisite of the next. Christmas holidays were a useful time to review old activities and reinforce acquired skills.

### 3. Precision Teaching

Precision teaching is the name given to the whole process of teaching and evaluation. It has five stages:

- a) Pinpoint the task: by setting a behavioural objective and breaking it down into stages by task analysis. The objective must be observable and measurable.
- b) Record: take baseline data, especially for responses which develop over a long period.
- c) Consequent response: use reinforcement procedures for correct responses, and apply correction procedures for wrong responses.
- d) Record again: post base-line. This validates that the child has acquired the skill or response.
- e) Try and try again!

A question was asked as to the frequency with which the checklist should be updated; the frequency that was suggested was once every eight weeks.

### 9. The Home Teaching Process

The steps which make up the home teaching process are as follows:

- a) Teacher obtains post base-line data, i.e. the child is ready for the next stage of the task analysis.
- b) Teacher presents new activity and new base-line, showing the parent how to work in each new activity. It is important not to do the activity too much before handing over to the parent.
- c) The parent models the activity for the home teacher.

- d) Parent and teacher review activities and responses.
- e) Parent then records results during the week on the activity chart and feeds back information into the curriculum planning process.

Difficulties which may be encountered in the home include the problem of overhospitable parents; the home teacher should arrive with base-lines ready and look at the week's activity charts. Distractions caused by dogs, siblings and the television or radio must be overcome: this may include the home teacher providing activities for the other children in the family. The home teacher must also be clear that their role is not to be a social worker to the family. Home teachers must also be willing to handle children's temper tantrums if they are to expect the parents to do so.

10. Reporting

The results of the activity charts are recorded onto a behaviour log to see long-term progress and to ensure that a balanced range of skills are being taught.

Verbal reporting of some cases takes place at the weekly staffing meetings, where expertise and outside help can be obtained by the home teachers, and where they can exchange ideas.

11. Parent Materials

Interest grew in establishing some data about how parents were developing skills in association with the Portage programme. Several models of home teacher-parent-child working were found.

- a) the parent-mediated model (home teacher → parent → child)
- b) the parent training model (parent → child .i.  
child .ii.  
child .iii.)  
home teacher ↑ )
- c) the parent as teacher model (parent → child  
home teacher ↑ ↓ )

The best of the above models is the third, model c, in which the parent has acquired and built up a range of teaching skills and is able to help the home teacher with ideas and suggestions.

Parents learn that their actions stimulate a reaction in the child, and are able to control this condition by avoiding antecedents which lead to wrong behaviour in the child, and by following wrong behaviour with certain consequents (e.g. if Mary always cries when asked to go for a walk the parent must reduce the attention given to her until she ceases to cry for attention on these occasions; 'time out' may be used to help in this situation where the child is removed from the situation to another room for a few minutes each time misbehaviour occurs.)

Parents can be encouraged to record their own responses as well as the child's; this helps the parent to take corrective action - perhaps reduce the number of times they pay attention to minor misbehaviour, or to increase the verbal praise they give when the child performs an activity correctly.

A set of Portage parent readings are available which help the parent to anticipate work for them as well as for the child.

12. The Instructor's Manual

This manual includes information on such matters as how to use generalised questions to produce discussion between the instructor (home teacher) and the parent; ways to get parents to extend activities out; helping parents to agree to both adopt a certain management method for their child/children. It is especially important to get both parents to do, and want to do, the same things with regard to their offspring.

13. Questions

The speakers then invited questions from the floor. (The symbols 'Q' and 'A' in the margin indicate commencement of a question or answer).

Q Is it difficult to convince parents to do base-lines ?

A They will do them because they are desperate for help.

Q Is Portage built into the educational/social services or is it fee-paying ?

A Portage is an intermediate unit to service the school districts. The service is free to parents, but Portage has a contract with the school district and recharges them for each pupil serviced. Portage is, however, a non-profit making scheme; any money made is 're-invested' into further research.

Q What training is given to home teachers ?

A A two-week course at the start of each year is taken by both new and existing staff (the experienced staff helping to train the newer ones). The weekly half-day staff meeting provides in-service training, including visits from other professionals and guest speakers. Specialists are also available to go on home visits with home teachers.

Q How do you justify trying unobtrusively to modify parent behaviour ?

A Most parents are aware of the targets you are seeking and that you are trying to achieve some change in behaviour. They are aware that you are making records, and what it is you are recording, and that the purpose of the exercise is to improve their abilities.

Q Do they have any links with the Doman-Delacato system ?

A No.

Q How early in a child's life would Portage intervene ?

A There have been several referrals at birth, but the youngest child actually on the scheme joined at six months old. In America a service to the mentally handicapped is mandatory for years ~~three~~ to twenty-one, but permissive from birth to three years.

Q Is there any home teacher training available in Britain ?

A Training was set up at Ely in Cardiff but is no longer being carried out. Home teacher training is certainly one problem in implementing Portage in Britain.

- Q What expertise is required to run a Portage-based scheme ?
- A Other specialists should be available to assist if required, and community resources (clinics etc) are also required. When selecting home teachers you need to look for a person who works well with adults as the aim is to develop the parents as teachers. Home teachers need to be assertive without being aggressive, and to have a high level of tolerance. They need to be adaptable people, and it has sometimes been found valuable to employ as home teachers, persons of the same ethical/cultural background as the families being served.
- Q Could the Portage system be used in a parent workshop situation ? Does much resistance from schools occur ?
- A Schools should use parental involvement as it is a great resource. It is difficult if the Portage Instructor is not able to work as part of the team as the feedback from other members of a team is very valuable. Group implementation of Portage is possible but it means a very heavy reliance upon the parents and what they carry out at home. There have been 'lunchbox' data systems whereby the child carries activity charts to and from school so that both school teacher and parent can use the Portage system with the child. It may be useful to hold problem-solving workshops for the parents where they can see the scheme in a broader light and exchange information.
- Q Have you had any failures ?
- A Autistic children have been found to need something more intensive and usually have a six-month residential course, towards the end of which parents and home teachers are involved to facilitate the child's return home.
- Q How many families drop out of the scheme ?
- A One or two never take it up. Very few actually drop out; in fact the reverse problem occurs and they become too dependent. Very positive growth in the parents level of confidence with their children is noted, and there has also been a lot of positive feedback from the parents.

14. Chairman's Summary

Roger Blunden complimented the speakers on the full and clear presentation they had given. He noted in particular the importance of realising that to follow the Portage model one needed both the system of teaching and the Portage structure. He also pointed out that Portage has already been shown to be viable in Britain by the replication models in Cardiff and Wessex.



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