

Facilitated communication method hotly debated

(continued from page 1)

that D.E.A.L.'s claims of success in teaching autistic individuals to communicate at a high level "betray ignorance of the nature of the disorder." Symptoms of autism, they say, "are present from very early in life, and are not susceptible to sudden transformation . . . even high functioning autistic children are deficient in the use of symbolic and abstract thought and language; they remain literal, concrete, and lacking in social knowledge."

In a rebuttal (in press) to Biklen's article in the Aug. 1990 *Harvard Educational Review*, researchers Robert Cummins and Margot Prior, members of the Inter-Disciplinary Party, say that the sophisticated conversations reported by Biklen would indicate that the individuals he spoke with were "all...highly gifted as well as autistic," which they say "seems statistically improbable and wildly at variance with previous research." Cummins and Prior also found it peculiar that the individuals Biklen observed rarely made the type of mundane everyday comments about daily life that are common to normal conversations.

Study results debated

Because of concerns about the lack of scientific data on facilitated communication, the Intellectual Disability Review Panel conducted a research study in 1989 to determine if this communication method is influenced in any manner by nondisabled facilitators. They note some difficulty in obtaining study subjects, and say that D.E.A.L. was reluctant to participate, making it necessary to obtain participants from other programs.

The first two studies involved recording sets of questions asked by the facilitator which were randomly played back to three disabled individuals. The tapes were played back under four conditions:

1. The facilitator and the disabled individual heard the same questions, with neither wearing headphones (the baseline condition).

2. The facilitator (wearing headphones) and the disabled individual heard the same question.

3. The assistant (wearing headphones) was asked a different question than the disabled participant.

4. The assistant heard only music through the headphones while the question was played for the disabled individual.

The researchers compared results of the four conditions to see if participants' answers were correct more often when facilitators knew the answers, thus indicating facilitator influence.

Results of the test indicated, the panel reports, that "the communication of one of the three clients was validated using the assisted communication technique The validity of the remaining two clients' communication when using the assisted communication technique was not established."

However, they say, the data indicated that "in all three cases of the controlled study [including the case in which the technique was validated], client responses were

influenced by the assistant . . . it appeared that a given assistant could influence some client responses and leave others uninfluenced."

Cummins and Prior say that the panel's conclusions from the data were "overly generous," since the one client whose communication was considered validated had answered only two of four questions correctly in condition 3, and none in condition 4.

"Our conclusion from this," they say, is that the independent communication of [that client] has NOT been validated by these data." They conclude that "where the assistant had no access to the client's question, not one client was able to provide a single correct response to any of the questions that were asked." (In condition 3, assistants were sometimes able to hear both their question and the disabled participants' question.)

In another experiment by the panel, information was given to a disabled individual out of the hearing of the facilitator, who then returned to the room and had the message conveyed to him or her by the client using facilitated communication.

The panel reported that the message-passing test appeared to confirm, for all three subjects who participated, that the facilitated communication technique was successful. All three subjects were able to communicate to the facilitator the nature of the gifts they had been given during the facilitator's absence. But Cummins and Prior argue that "the ability of these particular clients to communicate independently was not in question," and that the clients may not even have been autistic.

While the panel reports that it found some validation for facilitated communication techniques, Inter-Disciplinary Party member Nell Jones, who has observed the D.E.A.L. program, comments that "there is no evidence of improvement in everyday living skills such as would be expected when the 'true' intellectual level of the child is revealed. Reports of problem-solving ability and creativity evidenced in assisted communication are not supported by any evidence of increased ability to solve simple daily living problems."

On the other hand, the review panel's report noted that "for the clients whose communication was validated, it appears that the use of the assisted communication technique has greatly contributed to their progress into regular schools . . . and there appears to be a gradual development in the degree to which clients generalize their communication to others."

St. Nicholas findings negative

The Inter-Disciplinary Party notes that an investigation of an earlier facilitated communication project by Crossley at St. Nicholas Hospital in Australia in 1984 and 1985 found no evidence that the participants actually were communicating, and considerable evidence that "the success of the assisted communication system was directly related to the assistant's belief in the com-

munication ability of the client, and whether the assistant had knowledge of what was to be communicated." Researchers investigated individuals' responses under three conditions: where both the assistant and the client knew what was to be communicated; where the assistant did not know this information; and where the assistant was intentionally given incorrect information. They found that:

- correct answers were obtained when the assistant knew what was to be communicated.

- incorrect responses were obtained on 89% of occasions when the assistant was unaware of the correct response. (In other words, the Inter-Disciplinary Party report notes, "correct answers were at a chance level.")

- on 94% of the occasions when the assistant had been given incorrect information, that incorrect information—rather than the correct information given to the client—was communicated.

Project Manager Tony Catanese reported that after Crossley's hands-on involvement ended, "staff have independently become aware that they are unable to obtain responses from students when they are unaware of what the responses should be."

Controversy continues

Cummins and Prior argue that "the success of assisted communication has very little to do with emotional support . . . and very much to do with physical control by the assistant; either in the form of overt control of the client's movements or by supplying covert cues which are used by the client to control his or her movements." They note that the assistance provided by D.E.A.L. staffers often is "intrusive," and may include holding the client's arm, wrist or hand during communication sessions. In addition they note a number of seeming inconsistencies, such as clients who are said to be communicating when exams by ophthalmologists indicate they actually do not have the visual ability to discriminate the symbols on the communication device.

"The validation of client communicative competence remains an empirical question," they say, "as long as there is any degree of physical contact between the client and [the] assistant." Biklen disagrees, and is continuing his own facilitated communication project recently begun in the Syracuse City School District in New York.

With evidence both supporting and questioning the technique's validity, and concerns about the influence facilitators may have in making important decisions for clients, it is not yet at all clear to many professionals whether facilitated communication is a major breakthrough or an educational tool of value to only a few. What is clear is that Crossley's technique will remain a "hot topic" for some time.

Editor's Note: please see letters page in this issue of ARRI.