The PCP Pack - supporting the exploration of children's construing with visual materials

Sam Beasley and Simon Burnham

In the PCP literature it has long been recognised that the exploration of verbal construing can helpfully be supplemented by non-verbal methods. Peggy Dalton has argued that this becomes essential when there is any degree of communication difficulty experienced by the client, and Tom Ravenette has pointed out that under any circumstances when working with children it is the responsibility of the adult to adjust their methods and materials according to the child's communication skills. This advice is particularly pertinent for those currently involved in the assessment of and planning for young people with special educational needs, as the recent Children and Families Act highlights the importance of properly understanding their views and ensuring they are heard.

Simple factors such as a child's age, maturity and confidence in social interactions can be barriers to their clear verbal communication and there is considerable evidence that children and young people whose behaviour is a cause for concern may have language and communication difficulties that are undiagnosed or poorly recognised.

Understanding that visual approaches should be a core part of a PCP practitioner's repertoire when working with children, a range of methods and materials have been devised. For example there have been modifications to Kelly's repertory grid technique to make it more accessible for children through the use of physical objects or pictures. Dolls may be used to represent significant people in children's lives such as family members, as might any other characters a child finds interesting, such as Pokémon, Go-go dolls and Doctor Who cards. Other practitioners have described the use of a laptop computer as an engaging visual stimulus to support a conversation with a child, resources such as the Blob people pictures as a method of exploring children's constructions of themselves and others, and using drawings as a way of enabling children to express ideas which they might struggle to put into words.

This paper describes a set of materials called the PCP Pack, inspired by Phillida Salmon's 'Salmon Line' technique in which the practitioner suggests or provides a construct that seems relevant to a child's situation as an alternative to trying to elicit emergent and contrast poles through conversation. In the authors' experience, newcomers to PCP work with children often find that it takes significant practice to develop the style and content of questions that are best suited to eliciting relevant information from them. Having some simple prepared constructs available at the start of a session gives both the practitioner and the child a relatively easy start to their discussion and from this start there is an increased chance of more confident and capable sharing of personal information. At the same time it should be pointed out that the Pack can also be used as a resource by experienced and confident PCP practitioners who can follow their own judgement as they pick and choose from amongst its contents, creating new materials and eliciting new constructs as required. As noted above, the use of visual materials when eliciting and exploring

children's views is frequently essential, irrespective of the skills of the practitioner using them.

The PCP Pack

The PCP pack is a collection of resources on paper and card, ideally kept in an A4 plastic wallet or equivalent, that provides some 'ready-made' constructs to be presented to children as visual prompts for conversations. The pack also comprises resources such as pictures and word cards, and spare card and other materials to allow children to create their own pictures and word labels and to allow practitioners to move beyond the 'ready-made' materials as required. The Pack is inexpensive to create and it is highly portable, being no larger than a pad of A4 paper when complete.

Suggested contents for the PCP Pack

Several A5 size re-usable construct poles printed or drawn onto card in opposite pairs. These should be pictures or symbols such as Smiley face/Sad face; Thumbs up/Thumbs down; Plus/Minus; Tick/Cross. For example:


Several A5 size pieces of plain card for improvising/creating new construct poles to supplement the above as necessary.

An envelope of individual words, ideally laminated and each one cut out separately. This will be a bank of common, re-usable, useful nouns and names, many of which are likely to be relevant to most children and young people. For example:

Mum	Dad	School	Gran	Reading	Friends	Football

A collection of generic, re-usable pictures of people, places, activities, animals, food, symbols, etc. Like the bank of words these should ideally be laminated and each cut out separately. For practical purposes each one should be as small as possible whilst remaining recognisable; a few centimetres across in most cases.

Two or three packs of sticky, Post It style notes in different sizes. These are used for adding new words or pictures to the bank of generic, re-usable ones during a conversation with a young person. Typically these will be names of people or things that are specific and personalised for the young person.

A piece of string or thin cord of approximately 30cm in length to act as the 'either/or' decision point between the two poles of the construct. Almost anything of the appropriate size could fulfil this function but the flexibility of string or cord positively invites an understanding that the midway point between the poles is not rigid.

Some pens and pencils to allow for the quick creation of new construct poles, word cards or pictures on the plain card and Post It notes.

Using the PCP Pack

As part of a general 'getting to know you' conversation, experience suggests that asking a child to sort a range of people, things and places under the Happy/Sad face poles is an easy and relatively stress-free way to start investigating their view of the world. In terms of what Kelly referred to as the range of convenience of a construct - the number of situations in which the construct is useful for the construer - this basic Like/Don't Like or Good/Bad judgement is clearly of wide-ranging value and there can be very few people of any age who never find a use for it. Depending on the age of the child the pictures representing the poles need to be chosen with care (smiley faces obviously risk patronising a disaffected teenager), and the particular meaning of each pole picture should always be agreed before the sorting begins - does the happy face, for example, mean "I like it", or "Makes me happy" or "Good", or something else?

Below is a typical initial outcome from using the Pack. The Happy/Sad faces have been provided by the PCP practitioner as a starting point and the child has sorted a relevant mixture of generic pictures and word cards, also provided by the adult, under the two poles. These have been supplemented with some personalised words and pictures that are relevant to that child's circumstances on Post It notes. A piece of cord or string separates the areas underneath the two poles. The cord represents the decision point at which something must be considered either one thing or another and most children intuitively grasp the possibility of making finer-graded judgements under each pole, so that placing something directly under the happy or sad face indicates that it is construed as more positive or negative than something nearer the middle.

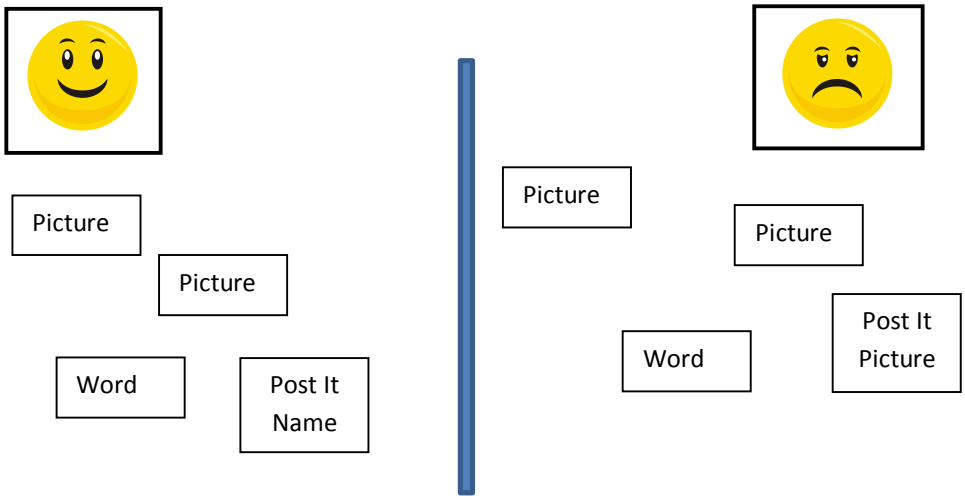

Figure 1. A typical opening activity with the PCP Pack.

Next are two examples showing the use of the PCP Pack in work with children and young people. These are not detailed case studies, just snapshots of PCP work carried out in the style of Ravenette's 'one off assessment', where the intention is to help illuminate a young person's thinking and, with their permission, to inform decision making and problem solving.

Figure 2 shows the outcome of a basic sorting of a range of people and things under Happy and Sad faces by an eight year old girl called Jenny. The psychologist had been asked to meet Jenny because her parents and teachers were concerned about some aspects of her behaviour at school and at home. The cards sorted were a mixture of words and pictures, some provided and some created during the session using the names of the particular individuals concerned. Jenny was very precise in her placement of the cards and took some care to explain why her grandparents were closer to the Happy end than her parents - she was mature enough to understand that while grandparents can spoil their grandchildren, parents have to make tough decisions that children sometimes don't like. Likewise, her pet dog, whom she adored, was nevertheless a nuisance sometimes when she took him for walks.

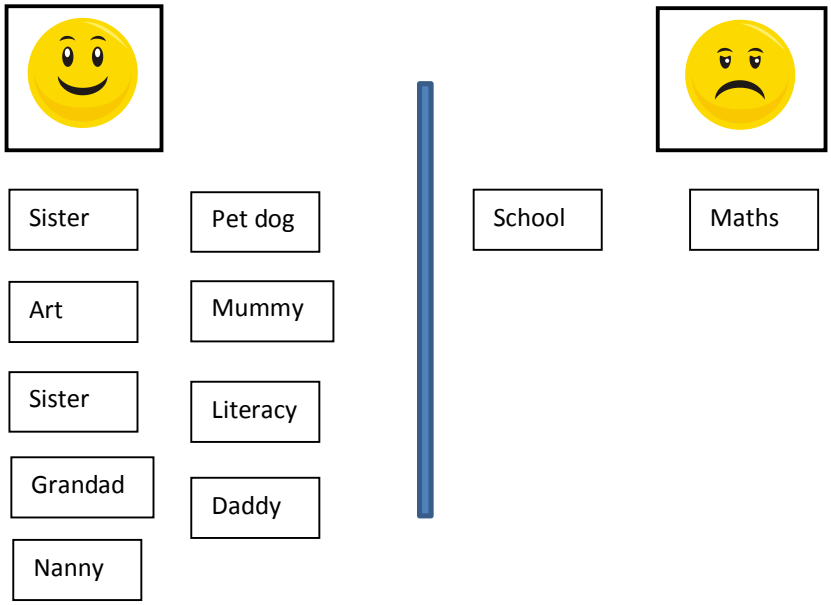

Figure 2. Eight year old Jenny sorting important elements from life at home and at school. The poles were agreed to mean "makes me happy" and "makes me sad".

Working within a PCP framework, questions that are very likely to occur to the practitioner, having first established *why* things are where they are in this arrangement, are whether the negatively construed things and people might ever be construed more positively, and under what circumstances this might happen. What was most unexpected in this discussion with Jenny was her insistence that she could

not imagine the possibility of School moving across the line from Makes Me Sad to Makes Me Happy. Jenny *could* imagine feeling different about her very strongly-disliked Maths at some point in the future - she might like it more as she grew older and kept working at it - but she could not envisage changing her view of school. This was puzzling as there were no expressed concerns from the adults involved about Jenny's work or attitude to school, partly because Jenny herself had never told anyone that she didn't like school. Talking to her in more detail about her daily experience of school revealed things that were making her anxious that she had not previously discussed. With Jenny's permission this information was valuable in subsequent problem-solving discussions with her mum and school staff that were focused on helping to reduce these anxieties.

Figure 3 shows a snapshot of part of a discussion with 15 year old John undertaken during a wide-ranging assessment of his special educational needs. In this case the psychologist suggested that it would be helpful to think of some of the significant people and things in John's life in terms of whether he felt he could influence their behaviour. John often alluded to his own sense that he had had little control over how his education had progressed so it seemed a natural stepping off point in the conversation to ask him to consider in more detail what "influence" and "control" might mean, and how he could identify his own capacity to change things around him. To start this, John was asked to sort some significant people and things under these two contrasting poles, which were written onto cards during the conversation:

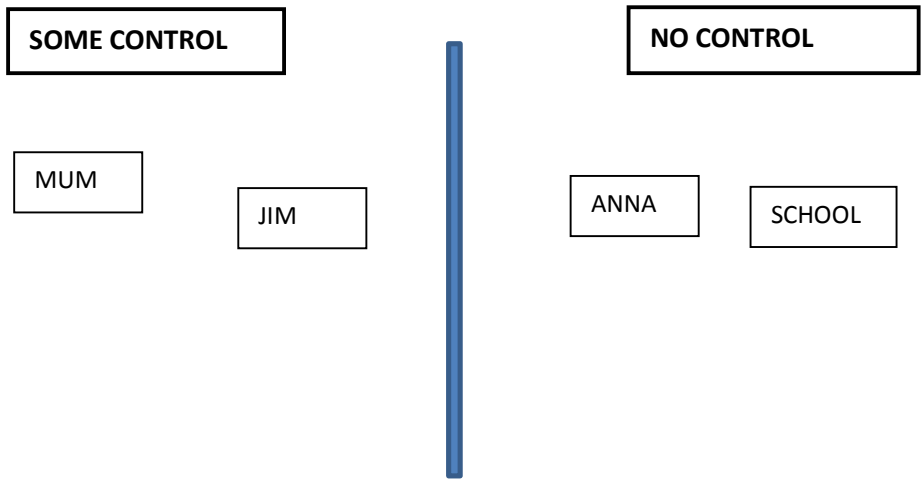

Figure 3. A construct suggested by the psychologist working with 15 year old John. The agreed meaning for the word "control" was that John felt he had some ability to influence how that person or thing behaved.

John was clear that his mum and her partner Jim would listen to him and take some notice of his views. Why was this? John felt they took notice of his views because they cared about him, and his view of school was dominated by a sense that no one there cared about him, which he construed in turn as giving him no influence over what happened there. So a construct about control became a construct about caring. This led to some further useful discussion about John's ability to identify caring in people outside of his family; people who might show caring behaviours in a manner that was different to close family members. John was able to concede that there might be some members of staff who did care about his welfare, and that because they did care it might be helpful to him to talk to them about his wishes for the next steps in his education. Likewise, with John's permission, it was helpful to make school staff aware that his behaviour and attitude in school was based partly on a sincere but misguided perception of them as "uncaring" people.

Advantages of the PCP Pack and some cautions

Experience of using the PCP Pack with a range of children and young people aged from 6 to 16 years suggests that the principal advantages of using these materials and methods within a PCP framework are as follows:

- By using visual materials that allow children to communicate a great deal of information non-verbally, practitioners can greatly reduce the chances of a child seeming to have nothing to say or being reluctant or unable to answer questions, particularly in the early stages of an assessment or therapeutic session when the child's trust or confidence may be at their lowest levels.
- Providing or donating construct poles, whilst they are invariably not the child's own personal constructs, nevertheless often provides valuable information that may not have been disclosed if the session relied only on that child's ability to describe their own thinking.
- The materials required are inexpensive and yet very engaging for children who are able to take a very 'hands-on' approach in their responses - drawing and writing on them and arranging them in many different ways according to their own judgements.
- The visual arrangements allow a practitioner to demonstrate to a child the essentially abstract idea of constructive alternativism – the possibility of seeing the same thing in a number of different ways – in a very concrete fashion. By moving the word cards and pictures into different positions under the construct poles, or changing a construct pole whilst leaving the other elements in place, the practitioner can present the child with snapshots of alternative ways of construing things and encourage them to, as Kelly puts it, 'try them on for size'.
- At a suitable point in time the whole arrangement of poles and elements organised beneath them can easily be photographed either for a final record

of the child's thinking at the conclusion of a piece of work or as an interim record to be returned to at a later date as a point of comparison.
- The materials lend themselves to a wide range of adaptations and modifications to suit a range of ages and therefore can easily be made appropriate for work with adults if required.

Some caution is also advised around the following issues:

- As is the case with Salmon Lines, when a practitioner suggests or provides the construct for a young person to use there is a risk that this construct will be far removed from one that the young person would ordinarily find a use for and therefore the views they express may lack authenticity or predictive value. This risk is minimised by the use of constructs that can reasonably be supposed to have a wide range of convenience such as Like/Dislike.
- Constructs that are provided will generally be in the form of simple opposites such as Like/Dislike or Happy/Sad. As noted above, these have many uses but a truly *personal* construct is more likely to be a contrasting judgement such as Intelligent/Popular than a dictionary-definition opposite such as Intelligent/Unintelligent. For this reason it is important to avoid giving the young person the impression that 'thinking in opposites' is required, as this may mislead them if more conventional, verbal construct elicitation activities also form part of the work being done with them.

Footnote: to protect the anonymity of the young people involved, some of the details presented in the case studies in this paper have been altered in addition to giving pseudonyms to the individuals mentioned.

Recommended reading

The relationship between language and communication difficulties and behaviour

Benner, G. J., Nelson, J. R., & Epstein, M. H. (2002). Language skills of children with EBD: A literature review. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioural Disorders*, *10*(1), 43–56.

Botting, N., & Conti-Ramsden, G. (2010). The role of language, social cognition, and social skill in the functional social outcomes of young adolescents with and without a history of SLI. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, *26*(2), 281–300.

Clegg, J., Stackhouse, J., Finch, K., Murphy, C., & Nicholls, S. (2009). Language abilities of secondary age pupils at risk of school exclusion: A preliminary report. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, *25*(1), 123–139

Cross, M. (1998). Undetected communication problems in children with behavioural problems. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, *33*(S1), 509–514.

Fujiki, M., Brinton, B., & Clarke, D. (2002). Emotion regulation in children with specific language impairment. *Language, Speech & Hearing Services in Schools*, *33*(2), 102–111.

Lindsay, G., Dockrell, J. E., & Strand, S. (2010). Longitudinal patterns of behaviour problems in children with specific speech and language difficulties: Child and contextual factors. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, *77*(4), 811–828.

Ripley, K., & Yuill, N. (2005). Patterns of language impairment and behaviour in boys excluded from school, *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, *75*(1), 37–50.

Use of visual and non-verbal methods to support work with children and young people

Burnham, S. (2008). *Let's talk: using personal construct psychology to support children and young people*. Sage Publications.

Butler, R. (1985). Towards an understanding of childhood difficulties. In N. Beail (Ed.), *Repertory grid technique and personal constructs: applications in clinical & educational Settings*. Routledge.

Butler, R., & Green, D. R. (2007). *The child within: taking the young person's perspective by applying personal construct psychology* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.

Dalton, P. (1998). Mark: relationship problems for a 13-year-old with severe hearing impairment. In D. Syder (Ed.), *Wanting to talk: counselling case studies in communication disorders*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Hardman, C. (2001). Using Personal Construct Psychology to Reduce the Risk of Exclusion. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *17*(1), 41–51.

Moran, H. (2001). Who Do You Think You Are? Drawing the Ideal Self: A Technique to Explore a Child's Sense of Self. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *6*(4), 599–604.

Ravenette, A. T. (1999). *Personal construct theory in educational psychology: a practitioner's view*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Salmon, P. (1988). *Psychology for teachers – an alternative approach*. Hutchinson.

Walker, B. M., & Winter, D.A. (2007). The elaboration of personal construct psychology. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 58, 453-477.

Wilson, P. & Long, I. (2009). The big book of blob trees. Speechmark Publishing.