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The rules of engagement

Barry Carpenter, Sue Rose, Hollie Rawson and Jo Egerton discuss a major initiative to engage children and young people with complex learning difficulties and disabilities in learning

Children and young people are now coming into our schools whose learning difficulties and disabilities are more complex than we have seen before. Many present with previously unknown disabling conditions or permutations of SEN unfamiliar to teachers – for example, rare chromosomal disorders, extreme prematurity or multiple disabilities at birth, or prenatal maternal drug and alcohol abuse. These children and young people struggle to engage and learn in our classrooms, and cannot respond to familiar approaches or strategies of support.

Children with complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD) have been described as a 21st century frontier for education. As one school governor reports: “The diverse range of children...is causing us to restructure our school.” Although these children are not a homogenous group, their unifying factor can be described as

“pedagogical vulnerability” (Carpenter, 2010a), which may manifest in complex learning patterns, extreme behaviour and a range of socio-medical needs which are new and unfamiliar to many schools.

The population of these children in our schools is increasing. The numbers of children with severe and complex needs in one local authority more than doubled between 1981 and 2001 (Emerson and Hatton, 2004). Between 2004 and 2009, there was a 5.1 per cent increase in children with severe learning difficulties, and a 29.7 per cent increase in those with profound and multiple learning difficulties (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010). From the Family Resources Survey,

The time has come to refocus on learning and the learning context

Blackburn et al. (2010) found there were 950,000 families in the UK with a disabled child, and they suggest this is a 250,000 underestimate. Blackburn attributes the rise to “intergenerational poverty and modern medical progress” (Ramesh, 2010).

Adapting to new patterns of learning

The learning patterns of children with CLDD are different to those we have previously known. We have spent the last 20 or more years focusing on the delivery of a curriculum. There has been some wonderful innovation in this time that has genuinely broadened and enriched the learning framework for children with SEN. This will form the bedrock upon which to build, but the time has come to refocus on learning and the learning context. We must strive to capture a pedagogy for our new group of learners. Do we have the same depth of understanding of learning style, or appreciation of learning need, for the child with fragile X syndrome, the infant born premature or the young person with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) as we have for children with more established and well-researched disabilities, such as visual impairment, Down syndrome and cerebral palsy?

The Department for Education (formerly the DCSF) identified that educators were finding it difficult to find effective teaching and learning strategies to meet the needs of children and young people with CLDD, and commissioned the Specialist



Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) to explore with teachers how to develop meaningful pathways to personalised learning for children and young people with CLDD. From September 2009 to March 2011, the CLDD research team worked alongside educators, families and their multidisciplinary colleagues in 96 schools to develop resources which would support the learning of students with a wide range of complex learning difficulties and disabilities. These schools included special



and mainstream settings (including early years, primary, secondary and transition groups), both in the UK and internationally.

Engagement for learning

The learning needs of students with CLDD are so complex that off-the-peg approaches, applied to a small class group or even a few students, rarely meet their educational needs. Many are disenfranchised and disengaged from learning, causing concern for their families and educators. Over the course of the project, the CLDD research team, together with schools, developed three resources to support teaching and learning for this group of young people based around the concept of engagement. These resources make up the CLDD engagement for learning resource framework.

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children with learning disabilities (Iovannone et al., 2003). Without engagement, there is no deep learning (Hargreaves, 2006), effective teaching, real attainment or quality progress (Carpenter, 2010b). “Sustainable learning can occur only when there is meaningful engagement. The process of engagement is a journey which connects a child and their environment (including people, ideas, materials and concepts) to enable learning and achievement (Carpenter, 2011).

Taking an engagement approach allows educators to personalise the student’s educational experience to their learning strengths and interests so they can learn effectively and progress. The resources in the framework are child-centred, building on the unique abilities of every young person, but also allow educators to quantify and track the student’s progress numerically in terms of engagement. They include:

CLDD briefing packs

Knowledge of the profile of learning difficulties associated with a young person’s condition, and implementing the teaching and learning strategies known to be effective in supporting them, is the first step towards personalising learning. Each of the ten CLDD briefing packs focuses on a condition which is often found overlapping with others in children with CLDD, and gives information on effective educational strategies. The packs cover: attachment disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism and autistic spectrum

disorders (ASD), FASD, fragile-X syndrome, mental health, prematurity, rare chromosome disorders, sensory impairments, and maternal drug use. Each pack includes three sheets pitched to meet different levels of practitioner need from classroom practicalities to more extensive information.

The engagement profile and scale

This is a classroom profiling and monitoring tool which enables educators to observe, record and chart the engagement in learning of a student with CLDD towards a personalised learning target and their subsequent progress. The tool quantifies engagement in terms of seven engagement indicators: awareness (or responsiveness), curiosity, investigation, discovery, anticipation, persistence, initiation. By focusing on these indicators, teachers can ask themselves questions such as: “How can I change the learning activity to stimulate Robert’s curiosity?” or “What can I change about this experience to encourage Nina to persist?” It allows teachers to focus on the child’s engagement as a learner and create personalised learning pathways.

The inquiry framework for learning

The Inquiry Framework for Learning is an educational practice framework, inclusive of multidisciplinary involvement. It is designed to support educators in exploring and developing personalised learning pathways for children with CLDD, and provides starting points for a process of systematic discussion and reflection. Under 12 “inquiry areas”, questions are posed which may be helpful in themselves or give rise to further questions and debate, allowing educators to structure appropriate learning pathways for their students.

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Case study: using the CLDD engagement for learning resource framework

Springhead School in Scarborough was involved in trialling the CLDD resources, and Sue Rose, Assistant Headteacher, describes below the school's experience of using them:

We wanted our school to be part of the CLDD research project because we recognised that there were some students who always made us ask "What else can we do?", "What can we do to motivate them?", and "How can we tap into their abilities?" We also wanted to be able to offer a way to empower the staff. We don't have all of the answers, but through the CLDD research project we now have a tool that can help us to work out some of the answers.



Using the engagement profile and scale

When I first saw the engagement scale and profile I thought: "Been there, done that", and if we hadn't been part of the research project, we may not have pursued it much further. How wrong I was, though. I can honestly say it has inspired me and changed my way of thinking about teaching and learning – it has given us a very practical approach with our most complex pupils and has helped with empowering staff. It has given us a way to go forward with our questions and thoughts that we did not have before.

The whole notion of observing someone at their most engaged immediately starts the process with positives. Then, framing the

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observations and what we know about the child into a very positive engagement profile – which immediately focuses on how the child engages in their learning, not on their challenging behaviour (if indeed they have any) – is refreshing and immediately feels empowering for the staff.

Leo (not his real name) is a 13-year-old boy with diagnoses of global developmental delay, profound and multiple learning difficulties, and behavioural, social and emotional difficulties. He is supported by a wide range of professionals, including a speech and language therapist, physiotherapist, occupational therapist and orthotist.

During my first lesson observation of Leo, using the scale, I would usually have thought it an excellent lesson for him because he had remained calm. However, the score on the engagement scale was two out of 28. The teacher was upset, initially, until we really talked about what we were looking at. It is still fantastic if Leo is calm because he often is not, but when he is calm are we absolutely making the most of these times to engage him appropriately and meaningfully?

What the work using the engagement scale and profile showed was that Leo is consistently at his most engaged when he is lying stretched out on the floor on his side, when he has a few small objects to explore (which should always include a sound maker of some description). During these times the staff can now start with things that Leo likes, add new things and so broaden his experiences.

Using the inquiry framework for learning

We then went on to use the inquiry framework for learning. When I first looked at it, there was so much to take in, but it is well worth taking the time to look through it. We focused on key areas for Leo using the audit sheet.

We first profiled Leo's difficulties using the question, "What are the sticking points" or difficulties for this student?":

Emotional issues

Leo's anxieties are heightened throughout the day. He therefore presents as being upset and unsettled often during the day unless he is able to use his computer. He has recently developed more strategies for managing his emotions and for communicating using symbols. His behaviour challenges staff and other pupils throughout the day and this is difficult to manage.

Learning

Identifying a truly meaningful area to work on with Leo is extremely difficult.

Environment

Leo has an "obsession" with the computer. It is difficult to find other things that fascinate him sufficiently to keep him engaged.

Relationships

We recognise that a key factor in Leo's learning is building relationships with staff so that he feels safe enough to move from the computer and accept new activities/equipment.

Then, in the "engagement for learning" area of the Inquiry framework for learning we took one key question – "In what circumstances is the student most receptive to learning?" Through the process of using the engagement profiles to guide observations of Leo's learning journey, we were able to identify

key points that help to answer the above question. These are:

- when he's not at the computer but calm – this is usually when he is lying down on his side flat on the floor
- when he lies down on the floor in the hall, in the corridor, in the playground or in the “studio” (classroom with no computer)
- when there is repetitive auditory stimulus/reward (that is, when he gets an auditory reward within two seconds)
- when he has initiated interaction with an adult, and when this is a “positive interaction”. He will always choose to initiate this with a preferred adult
- when there is no expectation that he will be engaged for more than five minutes in any activity other than using the computer or lying down outside
- when there is a settled time in the class (no transitions imminent)
- when he has one to one support
- when an activity is repeatedly modelled and done in parallel to Leo.

We then used this information to set targets for Leo, and also addressed a few of the other key questions, such as “What are the student's priority areas for development?” and “How can this (the circumstances in which Leo is most receptive to learning) be built into the student's curriculum in a way that will engage him?”

The impact of the framework

We have found that the CLDD research project, and the engagement for learning resources that have been produced, have sparked enthusiasm and interest in our school. The resources have already had a positive impact on pupil voice for person-centred annual reviews and on our focus for learning during lesson observations. We are also looking at

other ways to use the tools to address the idea of subject leadership, and we are using them to help support work with other services. One of the most significant uses is that our pupils with CLDD now have a very positive profile that can be one of the first things people get to know about them – giving them a voice and providing a tool to help people focus on their abilities and positives rather than their complexities.

Conclusion

Educators in a class team want the students they work with to achieve, and are willing to change their practice to support how the student learns best. The engagement profile and scale allows them to trial different ways of working with students and to collect evidence about which approaches work best for the student. Collaboration is a corner stone of the inquiry approach – with families, with colleagues from other disciplines, with the whole class team, and with the student him/herself. Insights from one perspective can create success for the student across their whole learning experience.

Over the course of the CLDD research project, research schools carried out these inquiry-based interventions on a short-term basis. Each period of intervention lasted for one term. For many students who had been priority concerns for their schools, this was long enough for educators to gain an insight into ways of engaging them. The educators were then able to generalise the adaptations they had made to engage the student in other learning areas, and move their focus to other students who were disengaged. Other students needed an extended period of intervention so that school staff could explore in depth how they could engage the student in learning.

The capacity to transform a child's life for the better, and equip them to enjoy active citizenship, is at the heart

of education. Many students with CLDD are disengaged from learning – actively or passively. To re-engage them as learners requires more than differentiation (Porter and Ashdown, 2002); an intensive approach is needed. Students with CLDD need to follow unique learning pathways, which take educators beyond differentiation into personalising learning. At this level of student need, educators need to respond with practitioner-led, inquiry-based approaches. **SEN**

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Further information

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Further information about the CLDD engagement for learning resource framework is available at:
<http://complexld.ssatrust.org.uk>