

Complex Learning Difficulties and Disabilities Research Project: Delivering meaningful pathways to personalised learning

PROJECT STATEMENT

Why did the project take place?

The Department for Education identified through feedback from schools that educators are finding it difficult to find effective teaching and learning strategies to meet the needs of children and young people with complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD). The SSAT were commissioned to develop a framework for teaching and learning practice to support the educators of these children and young people.

New generation pedagogy for new generation children (Carpenter 2009, 2010)¹

Schools want every child and young person to succeed. Children and young people are now coming into our schools whose needs are more complex than we have seen before. Many present with previously unknown disabling conditions or permutations of special educational needs unfamiliar to teachers. They struggle to engage and learn in our classrooms, and cannot respond to familiar approaches or strategies of support. Their difficulties demand that we re-engineer our curricula so they can have the same opportunities as other children and young people to make choices, lead a valued life and have their voices heard.

Excellent educational practice with this new group of children and young people with CLDD is evolving within schools building on existing differentiated teaching strategies. But until now, there has not been the framework within which educators can shape and justify their approaches in a systematic way. Excellent practice should be shared among schools and other settings. A framework that will signpost effective ways to identify the best practice, approaches and resources which educators can use to improve the educational experience for these children and young people can promote this.

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The SSAT research team for this project worked with educator researchers from 96 schools supporting children and young people with CLDD (including children and young people with PMLD) to explore and identify excellent practice in supporting these children and young people. The schools included UK and international primary and secondary age special schools, and mainstream settings, including early years, primary, secondary and transition stages.

¹ For more about New Generation Children and Pedagogy go to Professor Barry Carpenter's 'Think pieces' papers at <http://blog.ssatrust.org.uk/thinkpiece/>.

The project will never be able to cover all possible difficulties and issues that may arise when educating children and young people with complex difficulties, but, through the Engagement for learning resource framework, it will aim to provide a series of structured and systematic responses that will enable professionals supporting children and young people with CLDD to follow a clear pathway to personalised learning.

The CLDD Engagement for learning resource framework will aim to recognise and share the ‘new generation pedagogy’ (Carpenter, 2010) developed with schools. It is founded on the principles of:

- Personalising learning pathways
- Development of ‘Engagement profiles’
- Multidisciplinary target-setting with families and therapeutic professionals
- Transdisciplinary practice
- Promoting emotional well-being
- Acknowledging, enabling and listening to the voice of the child.

The Framework will support educators to develop and deepen knowledge of the children and young people they support. It has been informed by the Every Child Matters outcomes – that every child and young person should be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic wellbeing.

Researching with schools

The CLDD project research team has worked alongside highly skilled educator researchers in 96 schools, and a multidisciplinary advisory group, which:

- Have high expectations of their children and young people with CLDD
- Promote children and young people’s skills and confidence to support a pathway to adult life
- Promote inclusive learning practices
- Work with families and colleagues from education and other professions to evolve holistic, personalised learning pathways for children and young people
- Want to share knowledge and experience with other schools.

Together, we worked to answer the following key questions:

First, for the children and young people participating in the research, how do they learn, how do they engage, how can we personalise their learning pathways to engage them as learners?

And then, what are the principles, and the questions educators ask, which lead them to develop such strategies?

The research partnership

In having been asked to create a framework for children and young people with CLDD, schools and the SSAT were given an unparalleled opportunity to make a difference for the children and young people who most challenge our pedagogy, our thinking and our practice.

The desire to achieve the best possible research outcome for these children and young people was at the heart of this project.

The project relied upon:

- The wisdom and insight of all educators – including teaching assistants, families, therapeutic professionals, as well as teachers – and the wider range of professionals working in health and social care who contributed valuable insights to the children and young people's development and progression
- Acknowledging, enabling and listening to the voice of the child
- Everyone sharing their ideas – however small they seemed
- Trialling ideas by doing – some things worked and some did not. All were valuable to the project
- Project outcomes being manageable and sustainable in real classrooms
- Professionally constructive comments delivered with sensitivity and honesty and received with openness among everyone involved in the research to improve outcomes for children and young people with CLDD.

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