

Having new eyes: engaging children and young people with complex learning difficulties and disabilities in learning

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'The only real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes'. *Marcel Proust*

The 21st century professional challenge

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 such as rare chromosomal disorders, or prenatal maternal drug and alcohol abuse. The Department for Education (DfE)'s SEND Green Paper, *Support and Aspiration* (DfE, 2011), explicitly refers to the changes in the child population, and the impact of SEND upon mental health in particular.

If the population of children and young people in our schools is changing, how has their learning changed? Do we have the teaching repertoire to meet the teaching challenges of students with different patterns of learning? If we do not, how then can we teach them?

The Complex Learning Difficulties and Disabilities Research Project

The Department for Education commissioned the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) to explore with educators how they might develop meaningful pathways to personalised learning for this growing population of children and young people with CLDD (September 2009 to March 2011). The research team worked with 96 schools to support the learning of children/young people with a wide range of complex learning difficulties and disabilities. The schools included special and mainstream (including early years, primary, secondary and transition settings), both in the UK and internationally.

Engagement for learning

High quality differentiation should be the hallmark of high quality teaching in special educational needs (Carpenter, 2010). However, children with CLDD require something more of us than curriculum differentiation

(Porter and Ashdown, 2002). Our work must be to transform these children with CLDD into active learners by releasing their motivation, unlocking their curiosity and increasing their participation.

Research suggests that engaged behaviour is the single best predictor of successful learning (Iovannone et al., 2003). Unless a child is engaged in learning, there can be no deep learning, effective teaching, meaningful outcome, real attainment or quality progress.

The Engagement profile and scale

One of the resources developed through the CLDD research project is the Engagement profile and scale, as children/young people with CLDD are often disengaged from learning. The Engagement profile and scale enables educators to use evidence-based knowledge of a child's successful learning pathways in highly motivating activities to identify strategies, set high expectations, and record incremental progress in activities of low interest. The seven different aspects of engagement – the 'engagement indicators' – make engagement an accessible concept which can be addressed in a practical way. The indicators are:

- Awareness / Responsiveness
- Curiosity
- Investigation
- Discovery
- Anticipation
- Initiation
- Persistence

The Engagement Profile

As a first step, educators observe the child or young person in an activity or activities which they are highly motivated by – this can be anything in any setting – and use the engagement profile to write personalised definitions against each of the seven engagement indicators. The child/young person's high interest activity enables educators to see the higher level of engagement the child is capable of. It allows them to:

1. Develop high expectations of the child/young person's potential for engagement in other learning areas in which they currently show low engagement
2. Analyse what it is about the high interest task that draws the child/young person in, so that these aspects can later be applied to low interest activities to increase their motivation to engage
3. Use the child/young person's higher engagement behaviours as a benchmark when scoring on the Engagement scale. All other engagement scores are made in relation to this.

Case study: Alfie's engagement journey – part 1

Alfie (not his real name) is a four-year-old boy with PMLD, including global developmental delay, epilepsy and physical difficulties. His high interest activity was watching and listening to pouring water. His lowest engagement activity was food technology – he would self-induce sleep at the beginning of the lesson and wake up at the end! His teacher wanted him to remain engaged and enjoy the lesson.

The class team carried out an engagement profile for Alfie watching and listening to water being poured into a tin from a height. They noted his enjoyment of water, of watching the way the water poured and where it came from, and of the sound. They also noted how his behaviour showed that he was engaged – his body stilled; he paid close attention and tracked the water from its source to its destination; he vocalised.

Alfie's behaviour during the water pouring activity showed the class staff team how intently he could be engaged. They now knew how he could respond if he was interested in an activity – and they had an idea of what interested him.

[Alfie's engagement profile and scales can be found online at <http://complexld.ssatrust.org.uk/project-resources/engagement-profile-scale.html> as part of the SEN and Early Years version of the 'Engagement Profile and Scale document'.]

The Engagement scale

The Engagement scale is carried out with low engagement activities for the child/young person, the first two or three scales being completed before any changes are made to the activity to increase their engagement in it. This provides a 'baseline' so that

educators can demonstrate the progress the child/young person has made from when they first started. It is important to note here that 'progress' is not just a series of higher and higher scores, but, at specific times, will also include lower scores when the activity is changed to extend the student's skills (e.g. introducing peer interaction, using more or different materials in the activity, transferring the activity to another setting).

Case study: Alfie's engagement journey – part 2

Initially the class team, including the CLDD research assistant, completed an engagement scale for Alfie's involvement in food technology without making any changes to it, so they had a starting point for their interventions. The first engagement scale showed that Alfie had a very low level of engagement in this activity.

Over a number of weeks, the class team made a series of changes, one at a time, so they could see which changes made the difference to Alfie's engagement in the activity. In this way, they slowly altered the learning activity so that the context for learning was understandable and meaningful for Alfie, and he was able to achieve. They completed an engagement scale after each change had been made. The changes were as follows:

- The class team reduced aspects of the food technology session that Alfie seemed to find invasive. They moved him away from the busy and noisy main table to a calmer area of the classroom. Instead of having his hands quickly wet wiped with a paper towel to clean them before handling food, he was encouraged to dabble his hands in a bowl of water.
- They overcame Alfie's confusion by reducing the number of foods they were expecting Alfie to work with from three (bread, butter and sandwich filling) to one (icing).
- They broke down the learning target into steps, so instead of expecting him to watch, touch, make and taste the food within one session, these were spread out over several sessions.
- They transferred some of Alfie's favourite parts of his high engagement activity to the low engagement one. The icing had some of the properties which had intrigued Alfie about water – it could be poured into a container from different heights, and made a noise while being poured.

Alfie was entranced by the discovery of icing being poured. With support and encouragement, at a pace he could cope with, he became interested in touching the substance to find out what it felt like and, eventually, what it tasted like.

Once Alfie was confident with the icing, the class team slowly re-introduced the elements of sandwich making one at a time: one week the mashed banana filling, and over the next sessions, the bread and butter. Finally Alfie was able to engage fully in the activity which had previously so overwhelmed him.

Unlocking potential

It is the right of every child/young person to be included as a learner within the curriculum, however great their degree of disability or learning difficulty. The capacity to transform a child's life for the better, and equip them to enjoy active citizenship, is at the heart of education. The Engagement profile and scale, by providing a means of conceptualising engagement (the seven indicators), together with a way of recording increases and decreases in engagement in a learning activity over time, enables educators to address issues of engagement in learning for the child/young person with CLDD in a systematic and deductive way.

Before using the Engagement profile and scale, the teacher working with Alfie had struggled to engage him in anything. He had been completely disengaged both socially and from learning. However, Alfie's own interests, and his mother's suggestions, together with the Engagement Profile and Scale, provided the teacher with a way of identifying and unlocking Alfie's potential for learning and recording his progress. The strategies her team developed to engage Alfie were generalized across all curriculum areas of learning with great success, and these strategies could also be used as a source of ideas in engaging others like Alfie. From being the child in her class who most concerned the teacher, he had become responsive – engaging not only in learning, but also socially, interacting with his staff through eye gaze and body language – where previously he had shown no interest.

In addition to the Engagement Profile and Scale above, the CLDD Project's other resources can be found online at <http://complexld.ssatrust.org.uk>.

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