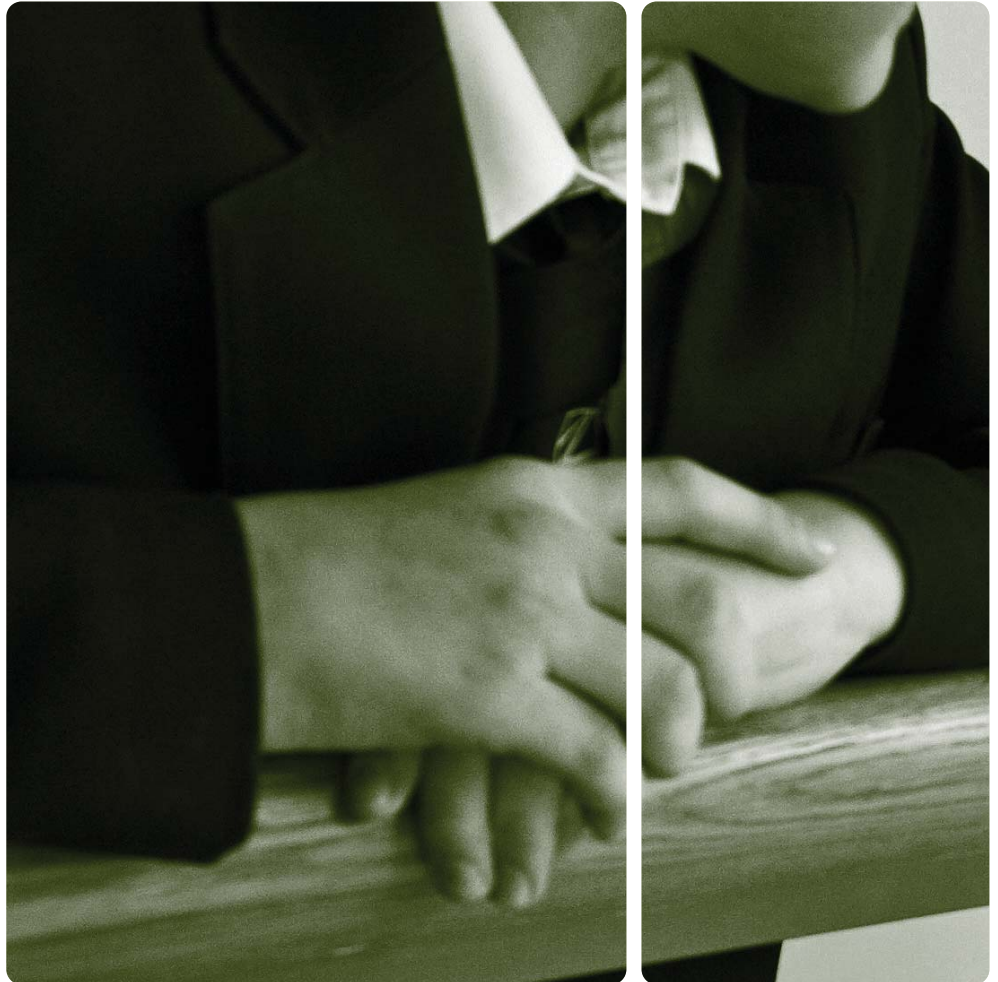


# Curriculum reconciliation and children with complex learning difficulties and disabilities

Barry Carpenter

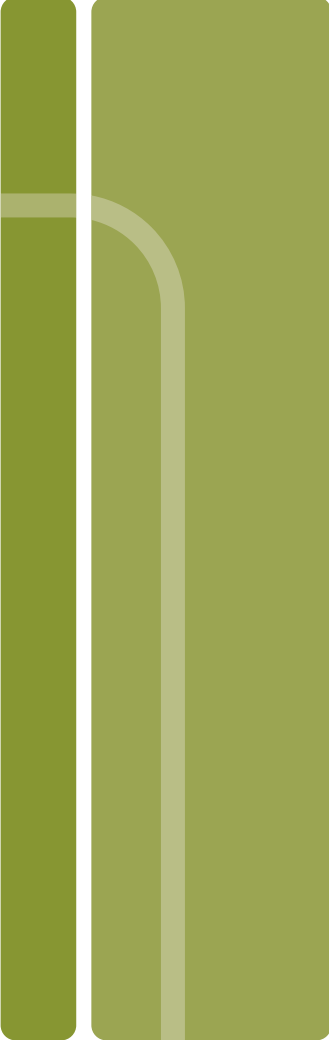
COMPLEX NEEDS SERIES

No.3



## A new generation of learners

It is the right of every child to be included as a learner within the curriculum, however great their degree of disability or learning difficulty.



**These children challenge us as teachers. They push our knowledge of curriculum and skills as teachers to their limits and beyond... We have to understand how their brains work and how we can help the rewiring of their brains. Experienced special school headteacher**

The nature of the children in our classrooms has changed. Increasing numbers are acknowledged by schools and Ofsted to have complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD). What distinguishes these children with CLDD as a new generation of learners in this 21st century is their raft of unmet need (described in the second booklet in this series) and their diversity. This group includes children known traditionally as having profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD). However, through the SSAT's CLDD research project, it has become clear there are children with new generation PMLD, who also present with complex and spiky learning profiles. These children are characterised by erratic, at times polarised, islets of attainment in different developmental areas.

All children with spiky learning profiles show significant developmental inconsistencies between different areas of learning. For example, they might be working at national curriculum level 4–5 for literacy, yet at P6 for numeracy; or at level 3 for science, but at P5–6 for PSHE. Planning to meet such diverse needs within one child is a significant challenge to any teacher, however skilled, experienced or talented. Even where a child has a positive and strong area of learning, the lack of interfacing support from other developmental domains (eg emotional) may make engaging them in a continuous learning dialogue difficult to achieve.

How do we design learning environments and learning activities that will ensure that children with CLDD are active participants in all aspects of the learning process? Central to this is the right of every child to be included as a learner within the curriculum, however great their degree of disability or learning difficulty.

# Calibrating the curriculum for children with CLDD

The often variable profile of need and attainment of the child with CLDD can easily result in a fragmented curriculum which lacks cohesion, congruence and continuity. Delivery of the curriculum to the child with CLDD needs to be sharp, focused, meaningful and purposeful, as well as balanced. The child has to see relevance and to find themselves truly engaged in a dynamic and coherent process of learning that makes sense to them.

In curriculum calibration, the child's profile of need is critically reviewed, and their patterns of engagement profiled. A personalised curriculum experience is sought to match each strand of their learning need.

We should not underestimate the magnitude of this challenge, which demands a significant shift in thinking and a more inquiry-based style of teaching rather than the curriculum driven styles of the last two decades.

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## Case study: curriculum calibration

Fifteen-year-old Liam struggles with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD), learning difficulties and stressful life experiences. His low self-esteem, anxiety and frustration have led to non-compliance, aggression, disengagement and poor school attendance.

Taking engagement as a key tenet of personalising his curriculum, Liam's school devised, with him, a programme that included a baking enterprise, key curriculum classes and a nurture group. This built on his interests, and gave coherence to his core subject and social skills development in a way that was meaningful to him.

Prior to the intervention, Liam had found it challenging to access the curriculum in any way. With his personalised programme, despite some difficulties, he remained engaged for whole sessions at a time, even entire days. He seemed happier and less anxious. His assessment scores for engagement and positive behaviour almost doubled.

# New generation pedagogy

To educate these 21st century children meaningfully, effectively and purposefully we must evolve new generation pedagogy. This pedagogy needs to be within the framework of practice that currently exists in schools. Our layers of pedagogy in the classroom therefore become: 'for all'; 'additional'; 'new, innovative and personalised'.

The three components of new generation pedagogy are:

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**Pedagogical reconciliation:** This may require 'pedagogical re-engineering': adapting or adjusting an approach from our existing teaching repertoire. In this process, we carefully analyse the structure and components of other successful pedagogies in the field of special educational needs (Lewis and Norwich, 2005), and match them to a new generation of children with CLDD. This is a process of analysis, deduction and refinement, reconciling those pedagogies to the unique profile of the learner with CLDD.

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**Creation of new and innovative teaching strategies:** Alongside pedagogical reconciliation is the need to create and innovate a new pedagogy that is responsive to the new profile of learning need presented by this evolving cohort of children with CLDD. What are the teaching strategies that will enable us to engage this child as an active participant in the dynamics of our lesson, programme or learning environment? We need specific interventions (Wolke, 2009).

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**Personalising learning pathways:** Personalising learning enables us to mould the learning experience directly around the child with CLDD. To do this we have to discover the learning needs and pathways of these very diverse children, and establish their learning capacity and learning effectiveness.

# The context for new generation pedagogy

For the new generation pedagogy to be meaningful for both the child as a learner and the teacher as a practitioner it must seek to operate in four contexts:

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**School organisation:** If our pedagogy changes, what are the implications for the school environment, resources and organisational systems?

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**Family perspective:** We must work creatively with the family as the child's first educators: what are their insights into how their child learns; what are their expectations of their child as a learner; how can we bridge a relevant new generation pedagogy across the school and family contexts?

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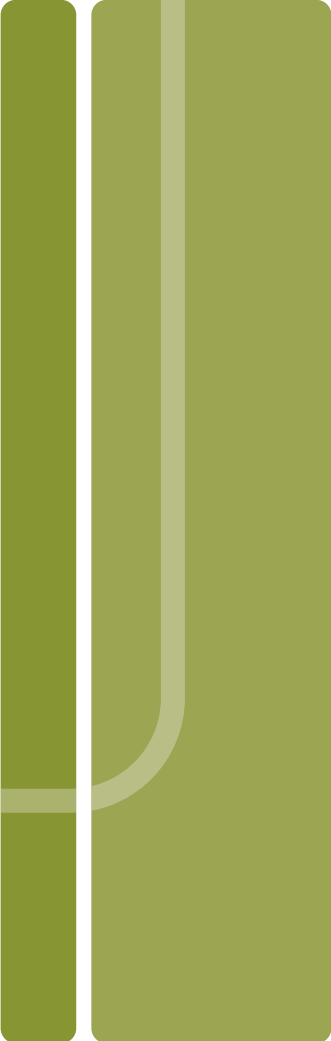
**Interdisciplinary interface:** What is the contribution of other professional groups in schools to the design and delivery of new generation pedagogy? Will we need to evolve new models of practice that are more transdisciplinary in nature? How do we share targets and strategies between all the professionals involved with the child?

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**System synchronisation:** The wave of children with CLDD hitting our schools is demanding significant pedagogical shifts. What is the impact on the education system? How will it support and unify schools in their endeavours to develop and deliver new generation pedagogy?

## Differentiation and beyond

It is the process of personalisation that envelopes the child as an engaged learner.



Children with CLDD require something more than differentiation – the process of adjusting teaching to meet individual needs (Porter and Ashdown, 2002). But what can that be? High quality differentiation should be the hallmark of high quality special education. The creative differentiated learning routes arising from special educational needs settings over the past two decades (eg extended programmes of study) have demonstrated this abundantly (Carpenter et al, 2002).

Differentiation has served us well in meeting a whole range of special educational needs for children. However, for children with CLDD, we need an additional ingredient – the process of personalisation (Hargreaves, 2006). While differentiation takes us helpfully along a pathway that focuses on the child's individual needs, it is the process of personalisation that envelopes the child as an engaged learner. Optimal engagement will in turn produce better outcomes and secure attainment, and register meaningful progress for these children.

What are the teaching strategies that will enable us to engage children with CLDD as active participants in the dynamics of our lessons, programmes or learning environments? The overall goal of the pedagogy is 'engagement for learning'. Our quest is to engage the learner with CLDD in their environment. Our challenge is how to achieve engagement. How do we recognise when a child is engaged? How do we measure engagement? How do we chart its outcomes?

The teacher must remain committed to engagement for learning as a core tenet of curriculum experience for the child with CLDD. The permutations of special educational needs presented by some children can send a teacher off at a pedagogical tangent or embroil them in a level of detail not helpful to the learning process. With engagement as a focus, the practitioner is armed to transcend these complexities.

# Progression and children with CLDD

Effective teachers promote high expectations and good progress for all learners. For children with CLDD, progression can be lateral as well as hierarchical. For example, providing that practice is planned and evidence-based, for children with deteriorating conditions 'preventing or slowing a decline in performance may be an appropriate outcome' (DCSF, 2009).

What are the drivers of progress for children with CLDD? These children need to be taught in ways that match their individual learning styles by teachers who recognise their abilities and potential for engagement in learning. A focus on engagement can underpin a process of personalised inquiry through which the teacher can develop effective learning experiences. Using evidence-based knowledge of a child's successful learning pathways, strategies can be identified, high expectations set, and incremental progress recorded on their journey towards optimal engagement in learning.

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## Case study: overcoming regression

Eva is a five-year-old girl diagnosed with tuberous sclerosis, epilepsy and global delay. Her teacher and parents identified communication difficulties as her key barrier to making meaningful choices. Observing her, school staff realised that, due to Eva's regressive condition, her symbol-based communication system had lost meaning for her. Her typical request strategies were now sitting on someone's lap for a cuddle or screaming.

Break time was chosen as Eva's most motivating opportunity to communicate formally. Staff replaced the symbols in her picture exchange communication system (PECS) with True Object Based Icons (TOBIs). The tactile quality of these thick, cut-out, photographic shapes allowed Eva to focus on and understand what they represented.

Temporarily sitting Eva apart from the noise of her peers, minimising verbal instruction, increasing processing time and focused support, also, with persistence, allowed her to attend to and re-learn formal choice-making through picture exchange. Over time, PECS replaced screaming for Eva, and opened up communication options for her once again.

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## Booklets in the Complex Needs series

- 1 A vision for the 21st century special school
- 2 Children with complex learning difficulties and disabilities— who are they and how do we teach them?
- 3 Curriculum reconciliation and children with complex learning difficulties and disabilities
- 4 Mental health and emotional well-being
- 5 Professional learning and building a wider workforce
- 6 The family context, community and society



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