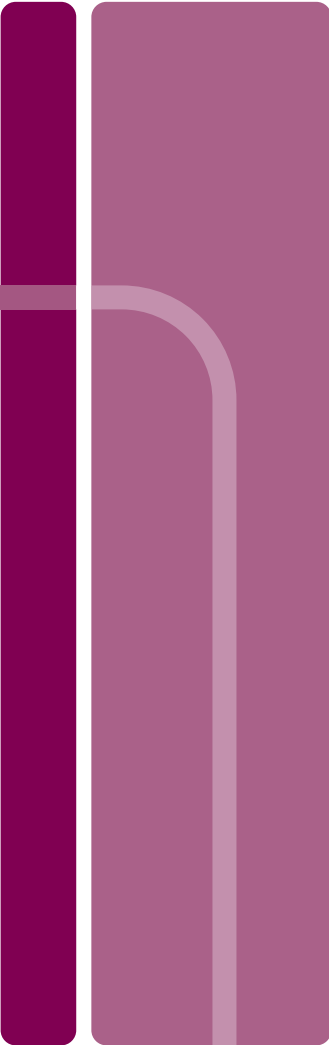


Complex learning difficulties and disabilities – are we ready?



There is a growing consensus that the population of children with learning difficulties and disabilities in our schools is changing. Children's needs are becoming increasingly complex. This is noted in school inspection reports and by schools. One headteacher observed:

'The increasingly complex population of students in our school was brought home to me by our school mini bus equipment audit. For many years, we have needed restraint straps for approximately 15–20 wheelchairs. This year, we counted 35 – showing an increase of 15 children using wheelchairs in a school student population of 70. This increase is among children in the youngest classes, who have entered the school over the last two to three years. Three years ago, we had up to seven children with gastrostomies – we now have 16. Just recently, we have enrolled two students with tracheotomies who need full time medical support.'

A teacher in another school commented on the growing number of children now entering classrooms due to medical advances. These children, earlier

in her career, would not have lived to start school.

The challenge for schools of meeting the multi-faceted needs of these learners with complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD) is immense (Carpenter, 2010). Are we adequately prepared as a professional body to meet their needs in the most responsive, appropriate and effective ways? Do we have the solid foundation upon which we can develop and deliver the necessary pedagogy for truly person-centred learning and teaching?

The *Salt Review* (Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF), 2010) addresses the issues of effective continuing professional development for teachers of pupils with severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties. As one teacher stated:

'Ongoing CPD is vital, partly because the landscape is always changing. It also makes you feel like you are "valid"; it freshens you up, stops you being complacent, and opens you up to new ideas.' (p 42)

Professional development – finding the focus

The introduction of the national curriculum in the 1990s shifted the professional development focus in special education. The largely developmental curriculum of the 1970s and 1980s centred on comprehensive, functional and evidence-based assessment of individual learners, their relationships with people and their environment. With the entitlement to a 'broad and balanced curriculum', the special educational needs and disability (SEND) professional debate moved away from specialist pedagogy, curricula and professional expertise towards making the new curriculum accessible and meaningful for learners with diverse barriers to learning.

While the national curriculum enriched education for many learners with SEND, the initial teacher training (ITT) subject competency focus has been at the expense of key elements of child development and psychology. Apart from the mandatory qualified teacher status (MQTS) programmes for teachers of children with hearing, visual and multi-sensory impairments, the minimum requirements around SEND-related training are scant.

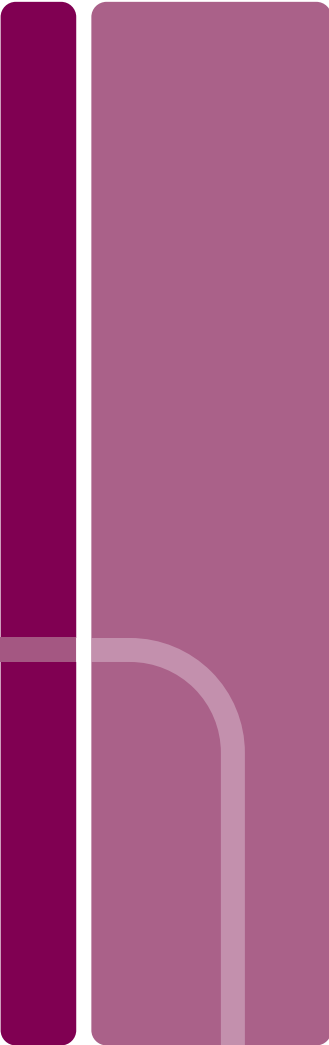
Some universities do offer SEND opportunities above the minimum requirement (eg school experience placements in special schools or inclusive practice blocks). Those offering SEN as a stand-alone module can create cv-related dilemmas for student teachers – ICT or SEND? What a choice! However, delivering a curriculum to children with CLDD requires experience. If teacher training is indeed to be fast tracked, what will be left out – or left in?

For experienced teachers, specialist SEND training often competes with rolling programmes of professional development at the expense of key issues such as assessment and pedagogy. Our challenge is to redress the balance. As Hartley (2010) writes:

'Steps must be taken to ensure that special schools can recruit teachers with specialist knowledge... relevant to the particular needs of the children they teach so that some of the most vulnerable children with the most complex and severe needs can be adequately provided for.'

Professional development – a whole school perspective

Effective, high quality and individualised staff development is vital to meeting the school’s agenda.



With ever increasing pressures on school budgets it is becoming more and more necessary to implement innovative ways of working that can meet the needs of our 21st century schools. The headteacher has to achieve best value for students and families, and provide time for staff to plan, prepare, moderate and assess learning.

‘New Bridge School, Oldham, is an extended community school, open seven days per week, 48 weeks per year. Our 180 staff support a 300-place school on a mainstream site for students aged 11–16 years with SEND, and a 16–19 learning centre two miles away. In delivering and sustaining our school’s strategic intents – including breakfast, after school and holiday clubs – we have had to build an extremely diverse and wide workforce that can meet the needs of the young people and their families throughout the year. While the effective running of the school and entitlement to students always take priority, we offer our staff flexible working, including variable hours and time off in lieu. This helps the school to manage its workflow, and its

staff to combine their work and personal commitments.

‘At New Bridge, we recognise that effective, high quality and individualised staff development is vital to meeting the school’s professional development agenda, realising future goals and ambitions, and contributing to the development of a responsive and supportive staff. Our flexible training routes information planner (TRIP) allows for three fixed training days each year to cover all compulsory training elements for all staff, and 10–15 flexible training hours for staff to personalise their own development. TRIP has supported colleagues into qualified teacher status from the initial positions of classroom support assistants and higher level teaching assistants. This “grow your own” model not only offers colleagues the opportunities to develop their skills, but makes economic sense for the school and is less risky than using more traditional employment routes.’
(Quinn and Righini, 2010)

Creating a professional development culture

As a first step we need to try to capture and share the expertise and talents that we already have – in our schools, our families, our local authorities, local universities and beyond... and do this now before some of our most experienced and knowledgeable colleagues retire!

We have to:

- **Value and invest in our workforce**
People with passion or flair inspire others. We need to capitalise on the strengths, interests and talents of our colleagues. How can we spread their knowledge with best effect?
- **Review and reflect on practice**
The opportunity to share and compare practice – to spend time really looking at our own or a more experienced colleague's teaching, and discussing and reflecting on it – is a luxury. Reviewing even a very a short piece of video can give enormous insight and awareness, offering a chance to note the significant responses and needs of students you are not interacting with directly.
- **Joint teaching**
Joint teaching with shared reflection may be another means of professional

development – either with internal or external education colleagues or those from other disciplines. Considering and examining practice can offer new ideas, skills, understanding and reassurance.

- **Peer mentoring or critical friendship**
Mentoring is well-established for supporting new teachers in school, but what about very experienced colleagues who are suddenly faced with learners completely outside their experience? We have all been there and wondered, 'Where do I start?'

Over time, peer mentoring can give rise to supportive and inspiring relationships. Coaching and mentoring principles, and a focus on both learner responses and adult roles, can raise awareness and clarify plans for action. Discussions within an accepted structure quickly become framed in a positive light giving colleagues confidence to ask questions and to challenge, with a view to improving understanding and practice.

The peer may be someone who can bring an outside perspective – for example, a university colleague or a local authority specialist teacher.

- **Networking**

Networking is a crucial factor in broadening our ideas and knowledge base. However effective and successful a school is, it will never hold all the knowledge – and things change. Schools working alone will, often unknowingly, develop insular views. We can identify and creatively exploit the potential opportunities for professional development within education and wider interdisciplinary professional networks (eg special interest groups or specialist support networks).

- **Developing working partnerships**

Partnerships can enable us to research and drive forward the development of the understanding and pedagogy we need for our learners – and for our teaching profession. Whole school development will strengthen the foundation from which teachers can make sound judgements around teaching, learning and progress for children with CLDD. It can enable them to justify and evidence even the smallest steps of lateral progress, with a clear picture of what factors and contexts influence and enable this learning to take place – and, importantly, to plan the most relevant and motivating next steps. This is what Ofsted is looking for, but also, most importantly, what we need – a return to our true profession.

Case study: specialist teaching assistants

Barrs Court School in Hereford trains specialist teaching assistants to support the work of professionals from different disciplines across the school. Each teaching assistant works closely with an associated professional – speech and language therapist, occupational therapist, sensory integration specialist or Connexions worker. They support students during withdrawal sessions, act as an information conduit between the class teacher and specialist professional, and support ongoing therapeutic input for the student through class-based, small group or withdrawal sessions.

In addition to their classroom role, the specialist teaching assistants also have a tutoring role in the school's mandatory, two-year training course for teaching assistants. This has been a significant benefit to the school, and the headteacher, Richard Aird, has now changed the job title of the specialist teaching assistants to 'training instructor' to reflect their workforce training responsibilities. He has also arranged access for the postholders to a Certificate in Education qualification in adult education, in addition to disability related qualifications such as PECs Tutor.

Collaborative partnerships

Everyone supporting the student is working with them towards a common goal.

Interdisciplinary working

Effective education for children with CLDD needs colleagues from different professions to work collaboratively to overcome each student's barriers to learning. Some schools have developed creative ways of working.

St Nicholas School in Canterbury has developed 'shared goals' for their students with CLDD. Every half-term, the shared goals coordinator organises person-centred meetings for families and all professionals working regularly with the young person. Practice, development and progress are shared, current goals are reviewed, and new goals are set. This ensures that everyone supporting the student is working together with them towards a common goal, and increases the likelihood of success for the young person. It also means that family needs and different professional inputs are harmonised, and not in conflict.

Special schools as leaders of learning

The Department for Education, in commissioning the SSAT's CLDD research project, articulated a vision that special schools would become 'leaders in teaching and learning practice for children with the most complex learning difficulties'. The SSAT's leadership suite of courses for SEN supports this.

Collaborative work between the University of Northampton, local authorities and schools has demonstrated that even the most experienced teachers from mainstream and local authority advisory/support services need a high level of support and specific professional development to enable them to work effectively with children with CLDD. One school leader, who builds this into the school plan year on year, commented that in reality it may take two years for a teacher who is new to this field to become competent in delivering appropriate teaching and learning.

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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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