

# Engagement in learning

Barry Carpenter, Jo Egerton, Tamara Brooks and Ruth Durdle report on the work of the Complex Learning Difficulties and Disabilities project and the Engagement Profile and Scale, which it has developed

**E**ngagement is the single best predictor of successful learning for children with learning disabilities (Iovannone et al, 2003). Without engagement, there is no deep learning (Hargreaves, 2006), effective teaching, meaningful outcome, real attainment or quality progress (Carpenter, 2010). 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 special educational needs unfamiliar to teachers – for example, rare chromosomal disorders, extreme prematurity or prenatal maternal 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.

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 CLDD Research Project

The Department for Education identified that educators were 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), and commissioned the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) to explore with teachers how to develop meaningful pathways to personalised learning for these children and young people (September 2009 to March 2011). This has been further emphasised with the explicit reference to the changes in the child population, and the impact upon their mental health in particular, in the Green Paper (DfE, 2011).

The CLDD research team worked alongside educators, families and their multidisciplinary colleagues in 96 schools to support the learning of students with a wide range of complex learning difficulties and disabilities. The schools included special and mainstream, both in the UK and internationally.

## The Engagement Profile and Scale

The concept of engagement in learning underpins the development of all the resources developed in the course of the CLDD Research Project (see <http://complexld.ssatrust.org.uk>).

The Engagement Profile and Scale is a classroom resource that 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. It allows teachers to focus on the child's engagement as a learner and create personalised learning pathways. It prompts student-centred reflection on how to increase the learner's engagement, leading to deep learning.

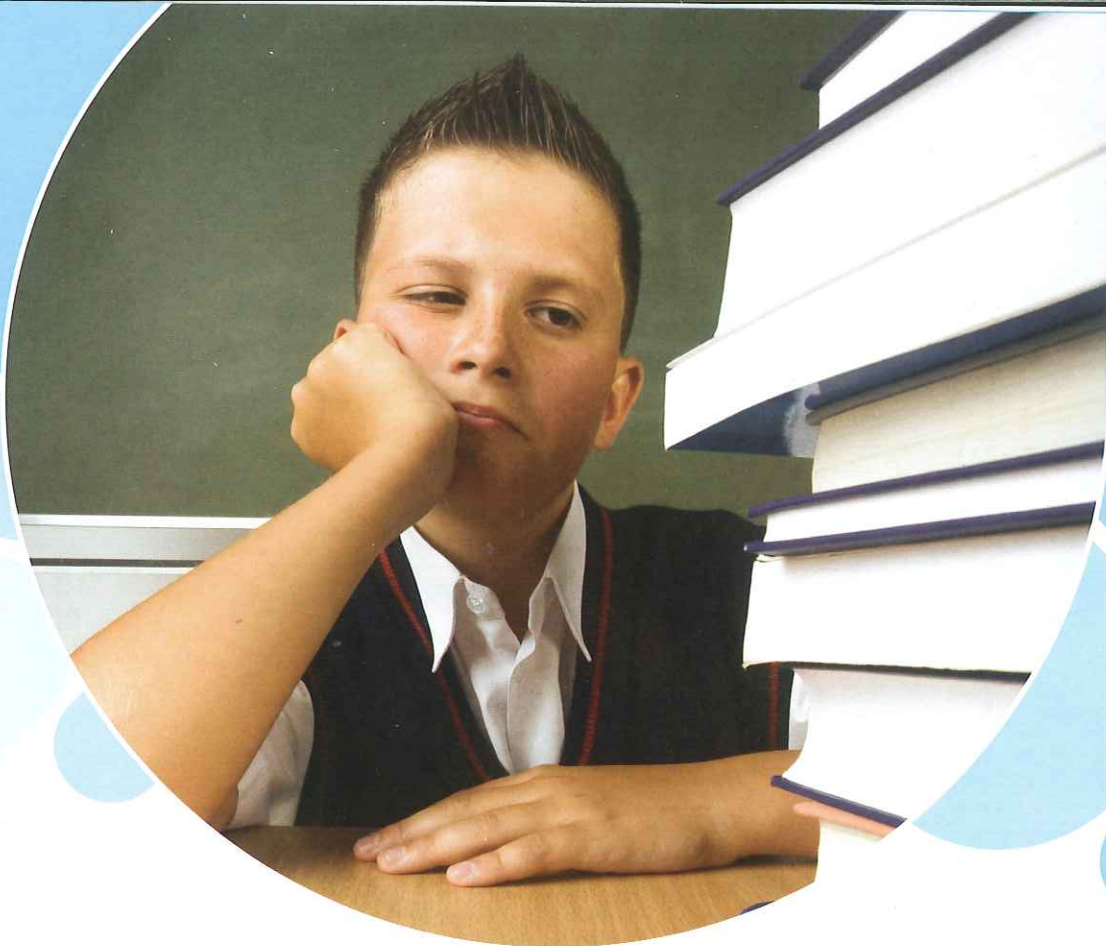
The process of engagement is a journey that connects a child and their environment (including people, ideas, materials and concepts) to enable learning and achievement. Engagement is multi-dimensional, and encompasses awareness, curiosity, investigation, discovery, anticipation, persistence and initiation. By focusing on these seven indicators of engagement, teachers can ask themselves questions such as: 'How can I change the learning activity to stimulate Robert's curiosity?' 'What can I change about this experience to encourage Nina to persist?'

## One child's journey

The following is a case study of a young man involved in the CLDD research project. It describes the intervention, structured and monitored using the Engagement Profile and Scale, which resulted in his re-engagement with learning.

Ivan is a 12-year-old boy who has a range of needs arising from his complex diagnoses of behavioural, emotional





and social difficulties (BESD), attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), receptive language delay and dyslexic profile. He attends a day school for children with BESD. He has experienced a stressful home life, which significantly impacts upon his ability to engage and learn. Getting Ivan to stay in class is a problem, and he has been regularly excluded from school. He has support from teaching assistants in literacy and numeracy, and also from a psychotherapist and school-based mentor.

Ivan has an uneven learning attainment profile. His numeracy skills (national curriculum Level 3) are more advanced than his literacy skills (national curriculum Level 2), although his reading is improving. He also has an auditory processing disorder and struggles to cope with receiving auditory instructions at the beginning of the lesson. Ivan's teaching assistant feels that this aggravates him at the beginning of lessons, with the result that he disengages from learning even before lessons commence. Consequently the aim of the CLDD Research Project intervention was to re-engage him in his lessons.

### Intervention

During a reflective discussion with teaching colleagues about Ivan's strengths and difficulties, his Spanish

teacher described the success of a computer-based task for the class, recalling that, in contrast with other lessons, Ivan 'was not stressed' and 'was not looking to leave the lesson' and remained engaged 'for most of the lesson'. Based on this discovery, Ivan's English teacher realised that starting lessons with a computer-based task that did not require oral explanation might be effective (intervention 1). This would initially by-pass Ivan's auditory difficulties, enabling him to stay in class, and to remain calm and ready to engage in learning. He would then be supported to rejoin the class group activity at a suitable stage during the lesson. A second strategy identified through discussion was to take Ivan aside during a break time before the lesson to explain what he would be doing in class (intervention 2). It was anticipated that this would further lower his anxiety.

### Engagement profile

Using the Engagement Profile and Scale, a high-engagement profile was drawn up for Ivan by observing a favourite lesson. This allowed all teaching staff to recognise the level of engagement that Ivan was capable of in lessons and the behaviours they were aiming for in their own lessons. It helped them to develop high expectations for Ivan's engagement in learning. It

also helped them to analyse what it was about the high interest task that drew Ivan in, so that these aspects could later be applied to his low-interest activities to increase his motivation to engage.

### Engagement scale

Ivan's English teacher then put the intervention described above in place for lessons in which he had poor engagement. An Engagement Scale was completed at least once during the lessons. The table overleaf describes Ivan's engagement outcomes across pre- and post-intervention periods.

### Explanation

In the Spanish lessons, as a result of the implementations being put in place, Ivan's engagement score had jumped from two to 24 as a result of introducing the two interventions described above. He began to show enjoyment and confidence in his ability. He was animated, engaged in the task, able to complete new tasks with new challenges, and persisted until the end.

Intervention 1, when applied in the English lessons, showed a similar level of improvement. Ivan fully engaged in the initial computer task but, on request, willingly stopped the computer task, and followed the teacher's instructions to join the main lesson. In each case, after doing so, he was focused, participated in



## Engagement data

Baseline Engagement Scale data for Ivan H			
Session No.	Date	Score	Observation Summary
1	X.12.09	1	Retrospective analysis of a less successful maths lesson. Ivan was observed to 'climb windows and furniture' and to 'refuse to complete the task.'
2	X.12.09	9	Retrospective analysis of a more successful maths lesson: Ivan had some awareness of the task and completed some of it.
3	X.4.10	2	Retrospective analysis of typical Spanish lesson: Ivan 'would not engage', 'did not expect to learn anything that interested him' and 'would look for a way to get out of the lesson.'

Post-intervention Engagement Scale data for Ivan H			
Session No.	Date	Score	Observation Summary
1	X.4.10	18	Retrospective analysis of Spanish lesson – initial intervention: a computer-based task for the class. The teacher observed that Ivan 'was not stressed' and 'was not looking to leave the lesson' and remained engaged 'for most of the lesson'.
2	X.4.10	24	Retrospective analysis of next Spanish lesson – interventions 1 & 2: Ivan had a computer-based task to begin the lesson; explanation given to Ivan prior to the lesson.
3	X.5.10	22	Retrospective analysis of next Spanish lesson – interventions 1 & 2.
4	25.5.10	28	English lesson (part A) – intervention 1: Ivan's initial computer task.
5	25.5.10	23	English lesson (part B): Ivan asked to rejoin the class activity (role play and discussion) after initial computer task intervention.
6	28.5.10	20	Maths lesson – interventions 1 & 2: Ivan was observed to remain calm and 'focused' for the majority of the lesson.

the activities, and asked and answered questions relevantly, even when others in the class were disruptive. In one lesson he agreed to read a passage of the class book, surprising the teacher, as he usually refused to read out loud in class; in other lessons, he joined the class in hot-seating book characters and in written work relating to the book. In post-intervention sessions, although Ivan was doubtful of his ability to complete this task, he remained calm, and went on to do so. Ivan's teacher attributed this to his calm and confident frame of mind following his completion of the computer-based task.

In maths lessons, both interventions were used, and were equally effective, even when Ivan's attendance in the whole-class maths lesson was unscheduled.

### Feedback

In summarising her experience of using the Engagement Profile and Scale, a teacher who had worked with Ivan throughout the project concluded:

'The Engagement Profile and Scale is good because it makes you think back over stuff which happens/is done automatically. This led to an acute awareness of Ivan's needs. It became clear that it was not about getting Ivan to listen like the other students and that we needed to do things differently.'

Ivan's teaching assistant also commented that 'personalising learning is very important. The more personalised it is, the more effective it is.'

Ivan showed tremendous progress in his potential to engage in a variety of class lessons. He clearly benefited from the strategies in place: having an explanation of the lesson beforehand, and completing a computer-based task that did not require verbal explanations at the start of the lesson. Following the implementation of these strategies Ivan was able to remain calm, reintegrate with the class activity and engage in this appropriately for the duration of the lesson. Through this intervention it became clear that Ivan became stressed by verbal instructions and had a lack of confidence in his ability to complete class activities. Through the strategies implemented Ivan was supported to overcome these difficulties and successfully re-engaged with his lessons.

### Unlocking potential

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.

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 systematically address issues of engagement in learning for the child or young person with CLDD. Teachers in the project have said that, because of this, the Engagement Profile and Scale has given them 'permission' to focus on the child or young person's engagement in learning. It shows how children or young people can engage in learning, rather than how they can't. It enables teachers to work the way that they want to work – with the child/young person at the heart of education.

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