

The CATHS Curriculum

Evidence Base

(August 2026)

Sadly, there is very little evidence into the learning of people with complex learning disabilities and there are a number of reasons for this, one of which is the lack of educational research funding for children with complex needs.

In “Inclusion is Dead, Long Live Inclusion” Imray and Colley state that as authors,

“They recognise that there is very little research into the learning of those with SLD and PMLD which might uphold their views, but that is because there is very little research into the learning of those with SLD and PMLD to uphold any views about anything. The authors have therefore (with a combined 50 years of experience in the classroom) taken their experience of practice first and worked outwards from there.” (Imray and Colley 2017).

The position for speech and language therapy is much the same. The Learning Disability position paper by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) also suggests that professional opinion rather than research evidence continues to shape service delivery. The reasons for this are clearly listed in the paper. (RCSLT Position Paper 2023).

- *“people with learning disabilities are a relatively small and heterogeneous population*
- *that there are ethical and quality challenges about involving individuals who may lack the capacity to provide consent*
- *people with learning disabilities have historically received less funding or been excluded from research designs when research has focussed on common co-occurring conditions (Russell et al, 2019)*
- *outcomes for speech and language therapy interventions are not clearly defined and understood*
- *when speech and language therapy research is child-focused, it is predominantly preschool and primary age making it difficult to draw conclusions across the lifespan for young people and adults*
- *research is focussed on specific conditions (e.g. cerebral palsy or Down’s syndrome), where not all participants may have a learning disability, and although relevant to that diagnostic group, may not be applicable to others within the learning disability population*
- *research is focussed on specific interventions or approaches, and these interventions frequently lack clearly agreed parameters (such as timeliness, dosage, intensity, and frequency) or defined roles for SLTs, posing challenges for selecting appropriate research study design*
- *communication difficulties are multifactorial, present for individuals in multiple ways, and are further impacted by the physical and social environment. Speech and language therapy is a core part of a collaborative multidisciplinary approach to supporting people with learning disabilities, and communication interventions may be designed and/or delivered by a range of professionals*

- *research is targeted at direct individualised approaches, rather than interventions that are either an indirect individualised approach or outside of individualised work*
- *the attitudes and beliefs of communication partners vary and need to be addressed to maximise speech and language therapy recommendations being implemented in practice*
- *randomised controlled trials (RCTs) continue to be considered the optimal way of evaluating treatments across healthcare, despite difficulties in their use due to the complexity of human communication alongside exclusion criteria for multi-morbidities or specific clinical attributes that co-exist for the majority of people with communication needs (Moyse et al, 2020)."*

The lack of evidence doesn't mean a curriculum for children with complex needs isn't needed. The pressures to teach the National Curriculum have dominated curriculum development for 38 years. However, numerous professionals have found this to fail to educate children with complex learning needs.

We believe that a curriculum for children with complex needs, should be flexible, engaging and realistic.

- Flexible means encouraging teachers to start from where the child is, not from their chronological age. Every child with complex needs has different strengths and needs. The curriculum needs to cater for variations in developmental needs, learning styles and additional barriers to learning.
- Engagement is recognised as key for learning. Creating engaging experiences involves teachers knowing the child well and using their creativity to craft inviting activities.
- Realistic about the impact of the barriers to learning faced by children with complex needs.

Children with complex learning disabilities deserve a curriculum that is tailored to meet their needs to learn to communicate and understand the world they live in.

Evidence supporting CATHS comes from years of working as reflective practitioners in the field, trialling new approaches, keeping abreast of current movements and working alongside colleagues in numerous settings. The biggest learning curve has been accepting the wide variety of learning challenges that children with complex learning needs face and accepting that a narrow, linear approach is not right.

Key principles of CATHS

CATHS recognises the importance of a joint approach

A joint approach allows us to look at the child holistically. A successful approach involves working closely with those who know the child best and who spend most time with the children. We should see the child as part of their social world - as a family member first and also as a class group member. The RCLST Position Paper (2023) states,

"Communication does not occur in a vacuum. In addition to individual communication factors, social and environmental factors also influence the success of communication for people with learning disabilities."

CATHS recognises the importance of engagement

When children are engaged, they are learning. They may not be learning what you think you are teaching, however they will be learning what interests them at that moment. A key principle of the CATHS curriculum is engagement, but that engagement has to relate to the child's learning needs. The CATHS assessment helps to place the child in a broad developmental band. With knowledge of that developmental band, we can begin to make assumptions of the type of activities which will engage the child. As we watch the child play we can refine our ideas about what is engaging to them and ensure that the experience of school is a positive one.

Because true engagement is driven by the child's own motivation it is important to recognise what the child is actually learning. Several scenarios present themselves. A child at an early developmental level watching the teacher lead a phonics session may be learning that sitting still will deliver a social reward of approval from the teacher. A child carrying sand across the floor and dropping it in the water tray is exploring their understanding of the schema of transporting. One child is developing their knowledge and understanding which will lead to further learning, the other child is learning to be compliant.

In the "Nip in the bud" podcast: Why is engagement of children key in effective teaching" Barry Carpenter said,

"Because without engaging that child, there will be no deep learning, there will be no meaningful progress, there will be no significant attainment and achievement. Engagement is the key." (Rocker 2024).

And

"And what we discovered from an international literature review and then some trials that we did was that engagement was the key indicator for successful learning. The literature tells us that engagement is the liberation of intrinsic motivation. And again, you will know from your extensive experience, if you can motivate a child, you can conquer the learning world for and with them. And so engagement became the key platform. With other things such as differentiation and personalisation." (Rocker 2024).

Barry Carpenter's work on engagement led to the engagement model used for the assessment of children with PMLD. (Standards and Testing Agency (2024, April). However, CATHS recognises true engagement is key for learning for all children assessed to be working within the CATHS framework.

CATHS recognises the importance of broad objectives

CATHS-C identifies learning objectives which are developmental milestones. These need to be firmly established before children can move to the next level of understanding in the key areas of communication and cognition.

"CATHS firmly believes that children learn holistically, acquiring a number of skills within the same time period while progressing towards key milestones, therefore CATHS has made a conscious decision to use broad objectives based on key milestones. These broad

objectives do not specify the many small pieces of learning which take place on the way. This may include developing associated skills or using knowledge in surprising and unexpected ways.” (Sawford and Miles 2026).

Jean Ware’s work leading to Routes for Learning, identified key milestones that need to be achieved before being able to move forward. The way in which children reach these milestones can be a very different route for each child. This flexible approach works to maximise an individual’s learning opportunities preventing a focus on narrow target driven teaching. (Government Education Wales 2020).

Broad objectives are part of process based learning. South Lanarkshire Council, Imray and Colley and Penny Lacey all describe the difference between process based learning and learning which can be described as *target driven, task based or product based*.

“Task-based targets can be broken down into small, achievable steps and encourage the development of skills-based learning such as eating and drinking, object permanence and carrying out daily routines.” (South Lanarkshire Council 2015).

“Process-based learning (e.g. where the process of teaching becomes the objective and where staff respond to a pupil’s communicative attempts) enables the creation of broader targets or learning intentions. Process-based targets are based on a pupil’s motivators and engagement in an activity and ensure that progress is monitored in all areas, rather than being based purely on a short number of SMART targets. Process-based targets may be more loosely worded than task based targets and may be adapted after several weeks of monitoring.” (South Lanarkshire Council 2015).

“The focus on product is likely to lead to a lowering of expectation, since the focus on the target risks all sorts of accidental and incidental learning being missed.” (Imray and Colley 2017).

“In practice learning will take place at the learner’s pace, not the teacher’s rather like play with very young babies. We cannot instruct a baby to play but we can facilitate opportunities for doing so. We cannot predict when a baby will reach a particular milestone, we can merely watch out for it and record it, if and when it happens. That is the nature of play as a process.” (Imray and Colley 2017).

For a detailed analysis of process-based learning and its impact on learning, we highly recommend reading chapter 6 “The Curriculum Imperative” in *Inclusion is Dead: Long Live Inclusion*. (Imray and Colley 2017).

Penny Lacey introduces the term interactive approaches to teaching. Interactive approaches follow broad objectives by their nature, since they incorporate active learning and children being in control of their own learning. The emphasis is on a responsive environment and not on adult specified tasks.

“Interactive approaches have their routes in cognitive psychology and a desire to understand the development of such processes as “thinking, perceiving, reasoning, judging, problem solving as well as the development of language and communication”. (Lacey 2012).

Two fundamentals of interactive approaches are:

1. Active learning.

“This means engaging with the information they receive not always by being physically active but by actively engaging their mind.”

“Actively engaging the mind is vital for the understanding and lifts learners from learned responses to intelligent behaviour”. (Lacey 2012).

2. Being in control of learning.

This is reliant on a responsive environment where learners can experiment with affecting their surroundings. Lacey quotes evidence that when this is not allowed to happen then learned helplessness may occur.

Interactive approaches and process based learning are dependent on the use of broad objectives to guide flexible planning and teaching.

The advantages of broad objectives can be summarised as:

- *“Help us to recognise incidental achievements.*
- *Recognise lateral progress.*
- *Create many opportunities for practicing and rehearsing skills.*
- *Prevent teaching of splinter skills.*
- *Skills are more likely to be learnt in context.*
- *Children have some agency in choosing what materials are engaging.*
- *Help to create learning and communication friendly environments.*
- *Require less intensive individual teaching.*
- *Mean observations are not focussed on narrow skills but on observing everything.”* (Sawford and Miles 2026).

CATHS recognises the importance of lateral progress

Imray and Colley describe the challenges of a neurotypical conventionally developing model of a curriculum such as the UK National Curriculum are based on a linear model of learning.

“Children are taught one concept, the learning of which is established with time and repetition, before moving on to the next step, the understanding of which usually depends on the firm establishment of the previous block. Numeracy is a classic example of this approach, where number moves to addition and then through subtraction, multiplication, division, fractions, etc. It is not possible to move onto addition, the second block, if number, the first block has not been established.” (Imray and Colley 2017).

Imray and Colley found research by Porter (2000) showing that at least 80% of children in SLD (Severe Learning Disability) schools are not secure in number and therefore not able to move on to addition. Being numerate is an important life skill and extensive practice at basic numeracy would ensure children had secure basic numeracy skills where possible.

It is widely recognised that children with complex needs will not necessarily follow a linear path to learning. Lateral progress should be given equal recognition with linear progress. Lateral progress is:

- An increase in the number of occasions when the skill is used
- The skill is used in more situations and with more people
- The child uses the skill with fewer prompts
- The skill becomes embedded in the child's repertoire of behaviours.

The Rochford Review states,

“Ensuring greater depth of understanding and practical application of new knowledge can sometimes be more beneficial to a pupil's longer term progress than moving on to new things. Approaches which recognise lateral progress, improvements in pupils' depth of understanding or in the range of contexts to which they apply new concepts and skills would be particularly beneficial for pupils with more severe or profound special needs, who can have greater difficulty retaining and building on new milestones.

Pupils with the most severe or profound and multiple difficulties frequently do not make progress in a linear way. That is not to say that they cannot make linear progress, but that linear progress is not typical. There may be a period of lateral progress, in which, for example, a pupil does not gain new concepts or skills, but learns to apply existing concepts or skills to a broader range of contexts.” (Rochford Review 2016).

The following quotation is from “Building a Curriculum” by Sawford and Miles (2026),

“CATHS provides a linear thread to follow e.g. Band 1 moves to Band 2 to Band 3 to Band 4. In reality, many children develop within a band and CATHS recognises and celebrates this progress.

It is important to acknowledge that children who have significant learning disabilities take a long time to learn new skills.

Sawford and Miles describe a commonly seen learning pattern

“Initially the child may use the new skill on one or two occasions with familiar adults. As they become more confident the skill appears in more situations and with a greater range of people. Only then can it be said that it is truly established. In the early stages, this fragile skill can be lost if the circumstances change or if the child no longer has a use for it. Continuing successful strategies will give the child more opportunities to consolidate their successful communications.” in McCool, S.edit (2025)

Lateral learning involves broadening, refining and developing a fragile skill. Fragile skills require practice, experimentation and rehearsal to become part of the child's established working memory. This means giving ourselves permission to work on the same group of foundation objectives for as long as needed. It makes no sense to move on without a solid base of prior learning.

Recognising the importance of lateral learning also means avoiding the teaching of splinter skills. CATHS views “splinter skills” as isolated skills that do not link to prior learning, are not functional, are not generalised to other situations and do not link to deep understanding of the concepts involved. These are different to both savant skills and children who have interests that they passionately follow.” (Sawford and Miles 2026).

CATHS recognises the importance of repetition and rehearsal

In order to support lateral learning, repetition and rehearsal are essential.

“Pupils may find it very difficult to generalise a newly acquired skill to new contexts. For that reason, the new skill should be practiced in a number of situations and conditions such as with different people, in different classrooms, with new stimuli and with different reinforcers.” (South Lanarkshire 2015).

In conclusion

We are not alone in our views on how to support children with complex needs in school. Well respected experts in the field of special education, Peter Imray, Andrew Colley, Penny Lacey and Barry Carpenter have written extensively on how to support children with complex needs.

The consensus is for a different curriculum for children with complex needs. The CATHS curriculum recognises the importance of:

- a joint approach
- meaningful engagement
- broad objectives which enable flexibility and personalisation of teaching and learning
- recognising the value of lateral progress
- repetition and rehearsal to ensure learning is embedded.

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