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## **APOL-LLO: a purposeful learning strategy for learners with severe learning difficulties**

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## APOL-LLO: A purposeful learning strategy for learners with severe learning difficulties

### What's the BIG Idea for SEND?

## Project Focus

Tor View's project, originally titled T.A.I.L.S. and later renamed APOL-LLO (Accelerated Purposeful Organised Life-Long Learning Opportunities), was developed to support learners with Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD) in acquiring new skills through a structured, ethical, and motivating approach. Rooted in the principles of Education for the Developmentally Young (EDY), the strategy combines task analysis, backwards chaining, and the use of appropriate reinforcers to enhance engagement and accelerate progress.

The project aimed to modernise and reframe traditional behaviourist approaches, ensuring they are relevant, respectful, and effective in today's educational landscape. It was designed to be used both as a teaching strategy and as a targeted intervention for learners not making expected progress.

## Introduction

Tor View is a large special school within a multi-academy trust, catering to learners aged 4–19 with a wide range of needs, including MLD, SLD, PMLD, and Autism. The school is committed to providing a broad, balanced, and differentiated curriculum that maximises progression and reflects the diverse needs of its learners.

The APOL-LLO strategy emerged from a recognition that learners with SLD often require highly specialised teaching approaches. These learners may experience significant cognitive impairments, communication challenges, and difficulties with self-help and independence. The school sought to revisit and refine older pedagogical models, bringing them in line with current research and ethical standards, while maintaining their core strengths—particularly the structured use of task analysis and reinforcement.

## Implementation

The project followed the EEF's four-phase model of change: Explore, Prepare, Deliver, and Sustain.

During the **Explore** phase, the team reviewed existing teaching strategies for learners with SLD and identified the need for a more structured and measurable approach. They revisited the EDY model and recognised the potential of task analysis and reinforcement, but also saw the need to modernise the language, materials, and ethical considerations.

## Implementation (continued)

In the **Prepare** phase, the team rewrote the programme materials, developed training resources, and identified a small group of learners who would benefit from the intervention. Staff training was a non-negotiable element of the model, ensuring that all involved understood the principles of task analysis, chaining, and ethical reinforcement. Teachers and teaching assistants were trained to deliver the intervention consistently and to record progress using a bespoke documentation system.



The **Deliver** phase involved implementing the strategy with identified learners across Key Stages 2 and 3. Sessions were short (5–10 minutes daily) and took place in familiar environments when learners were calm and ready to engage. The intervention was used to support learning in English, Maths, and Personal and Social Development (PSD), including practical life skills such as brushing teeth or zipping a coat.

Finally, in the **Sustain** phase, the school began to scale the model across more learners and subject areas. Ongoing training, moderation, and data analysis were built into the process to ensure fidelity and impact.

## Impact and Outcomes

The results of the initial trial were highly encouraging. All four learners in the pilot group moved from achieving 'expected' progress to 'above average' progress between the spring and autumn data drops. In English, 83% of learners achieved their targets; in Maths, 100%; and in PSD, 78%.

Qualitative feedback from staff highlighted increased engagement, persistence, anticipation, and willingness to participate among learners. Thematic analysis of staff conversations revealed that learners were more motivated, more confident, and more independent when engaging with tasks that had been carefully analysed and broken down into manageable steps.

The intervention also had a positive impact on staff confidence. Teachers and teaching assistants reported feeling more equipped to support learners with complex needs, particularly when using pre-analysed task sheets that provided clear guidance and measurable outcomes.

## How it Works

APOL-LLLO is designed to be flexible and adaptable. It can be used as a standard teaching strategy or as a targeted intervention for learners not making expected progress. The core of the model is the task analysis process, which breaks down a skill into smaller, teachable components. Each step is taught using chaining techniques, and progress is recorded in real time.

The strategy is reward-based, with a strong emphasis on using social reinforcers where possible. Tangible rewards, such as toys or food, are used only when appropriate and always aligned with the learner's interests and needs. The intervention is delivered by familiar staff in short, focused sessions, ideally in the morning when learners are most alert and regulated.

Staff training is essential. Teachers and support staff attend a two-hour session to learn the principles of the strategy, practise task analysis, and explore practical examples. The training ensures consistency and helps staff feel confident in delivering the intervention.

## Sustainability and Scalability

Following the success of the initial trial, Tor View plans to roll out APOL-LLO across the whole school. Training will be extended to all teaching staff, and the strategy will be embedded into the school's wider curriculum and assessment systems. Progress will be monitored through termly data drops, overseen by the Deputy for Quality and Curriculum and the Data Manager.

The model is already being used in English, Maths, and PSD, and there are plans to expand it into other subject areas. Staff have recognised the value of task analysis not just for learners with SLD, but also for those with MLD and PMLD. The strategy is seen as a universal tool that can support a wide range of learners across different contexts.

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## Conclusion

APOL-LLO is a thoughtful, ethical, and effective strategy for supporting learners with severe learning difficulties. By combining structured task analysis with appropriate reinforcement and robust progress tracking, the model empowers both learners and staff. It promotes independence, engagement, and measurable progress, and it has the potential to transform teaching and learning across a wide range of settings.

The project demonstrates that with the right tools, training, and mindset, schools can create inclusive, purposeful, and impactful learning experiences for all learners—one small step at a time.