

Contextual Learning and Teaching

Contextual learning and teaching play a vital role in Queensland special schools, especially when implementing **ACARA Version 9** and the **General Capabilities in Learning (GIL)** curriculum. The approach focuses on relevance, real-life application, and student empowerment—key to engaging learners with complex needs. Contextual teaching and learning are not just pedagogical preferences in Queensland special schools—they are foundational to meaningful curriculum access under ACARA v9 and GIL. By embedding skills in familiar, functional, and relevant settings, educators ensure that students develop knowledge and capabilities they can use now and in the future. This approach is a powerful enabler of equity, participation, and lifelong learning.

1. Understanding Contextual Learning in Special Education

Contextual learning refers to teaching strategies that connect curriculum content to meaningful, real-world experiences. It allows students to make sense of what they are learning by anchoring it in familiar environments, functional tasks, and social contexts. In the special school setting, this can include learning activities based in the home, community, or workplace—aligned with each student's Individual Curriculum Plan (ICP), strengths, needs, and communication modes.

In special schools, many students are operating well below their chronological age level—often at early years curriculum levels (e.g., Prep–Year 3). For them, abstract or decontextualised instruction can be especially challenging. Embedding learning in familiar, predictable, and purposeful routines helps scaffold understanding and promotes generalisation.

2. Alignment with ACARA Curriculum Version 9

ACARA v9 emphasises a more inclusive and flexible design, recognising diverse learner pathways:

- **Personalised learning** is central, with a stronger focus on adapting curriculum for students working at different stages.
- Learning Areas like English, Maths, and HASS encourage application in **real-life contexts**, particularly at Foundation levels.
- **Achievement standards** are clearer and more modular, making it easier to track functional skill development in naturalistic settings.

In practice, contextual learning helps translate v9 content descriptors into meaningful tasks. For example:

- A Maths descriptor about "counting objects in everyday contexts" becomes a shopping task in the community.
- An English focus on "listening to instructions" might occur during a cooking session or school excursion.

This approach aligns not only with curriculum intent but also with the Disability Standards for Education (2005), which mandate access and participation through adjustments.

3. Supporting the GIL (General Capabilities in Learning)

The GIL is specifically designed for students with disability who are not yet engaging with learning area content at Foundation level. It provides a **capability-based** rather than subject-based framework, structured across:

- **Personal and Social Capability**
- **Language and Communication**
- **Wellbeing**
- **Learning Capability**
- **Movement**

Contextual learning is essential for GIL implementation because:

- It **integrates capabilities into everyday routines**, such as turn-taking during group games, problem-solving during outings, or self-regulation during meal prep.
- It supports **repeated practice and generalisation**, a key need for students with intellectual disability.
- It fosters **student agency**, allowing them to make choices, communicate preferences, and engage in familiar roles.

For example, working on the GIL “interacting with others” capability might involve rehearsing greetings with shop staff, or practicing requesting items in a café—both rich, contextual experiences that develop communication, confidence, and functional independence.

4. Benefits for Learners and Teachers

For Students:

- Increases **engagement** and **motivation** by linking learning to their world.
- Enhances **transfer of skills** across settings.
- Builds **functional independence**, a central goal for many special school learners.
- Encourages **participation and self-determination**.

For Teachers:

- Provides a **flexible and authentic assessment context**.
- Enables **multi-domain integration**, such as combining literacy, numeracy, and personal capability in one activity.
- Allows better **collaboration with allied health and families**, aligning goals across home and school environments.

This image gives an example of contextual learning and teaching as applied to a Unit of Work at Prep, interesting English, HASS and Mathematics from the Australian Curriculum Version 9.

