

## Special Education Support Service: Information on Mild General Learning Disability

### **Definition:**

#### **1. From Circular 08/02:**

Such children have been assessed by a psychologist as having a mild general learning disability.

#### **2. From Report of the Special Education Review Committee<sup>1</sup> (1993):**

*Pupils with mild general learning disability<sup>2</sup> have significantly below-average general intellectual functioning, associated with impairment in adaptive behaviour. This may be reflected in a slow rate of maturation, reduced learning capacity and inadequate social adjustment ... Insofar as an Intelligence Quotient may be used as an indicator of mild general learning disability, such pupils would lie within the IQ range 50 to 70.*

### **Common Characteristics:**

The SERC Report notes that a person with a mild general learning disability may display some of the following characteristics:

- Delayed conceptual development;
- Slow speech and language development;
- Limited ability to abstract and generalise;
- Limited attention-span;
- Poor retention ability;
- Poor adaptive behaviour;
- Inappropriate or immature personal behaviour;
- Low self-esteem;
- Emotional disturbance;
- General clumsiness and lack of co-ordination and of gross and fine motor skills.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in their Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities<sup>3</sup> also refer to:

- Limited retention
- Difficulties in expressing ideas and feelings in words
- Difficulties adapting to new situations

These all appear to be negative traits, however, the SERC Report also notes “that they are capable of achieving vocational and social adequacy with proper education and training but will need support and

<sup>1</sup> The Special Education Review Committee was established by the Minister for Education in August 1991 and was chaired by Mr. Declan Brennan.

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘mild mental handicap’, in use throughout the SERC Report, has now been replaced by the term ‘mild general learning disability’. The new term is used here.

<sup>3</sup> Overview Booklet accompanying the Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities produced by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment(NCCA) , 2007

guidance when under serious social or economic stress<sup>4</sup>, and that many functioning at this level may maintain themselves independently or semi-independently in the community.

### **What can I do as a teacher?**

The SERC Report sees the learning needs of the student with mild learning disability as requiring:

- A curriculum adapted to their learning need and capacities;
- A variety of appropriate teaching approaches and methods;
- Specialist assistance and teaching equipment;
- Individual or small-group instruction;
- Concrete materials and aids to assist in learning;
- Special attention paid to the development of language and communication skills;
- Specific programmes for social and personal development;
- An emphasis on functional literacy and social mathematics;
- An emphasis on pre-vocational skills and life-skills’;
- Regular diagnostic assessment and review of progress.

The Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities<sup>5</sup> note that students with mild general learning disabilities are not easily distinguishable from their peers. Their learning needs are often difficult to define, due to the multiplicity of factors that can contribute to their leaning disability. Their difficulties are often only identified after starting school, when they show a slower pace of learning progress than others of their age group. Like their peers who do not have learning disabilities, they have a wide range of learning styles, varied interests and the same need for affirmation and success.

Practical suggestions from the Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities in reference to students with mild general learning disability include:

- Using objectives that are realistic for the students ensuring that the learning task is compatible with prior learning
- Providing opportunities for interacting and working with other students in small groups
- Spending more time on tasks
- Organising the learning task into small stages
- Ensuring that language used is pitched at the students’ level of understanding and does not hinder understanding the activity
- Using task analysis outlining the steps to be learned/completed in any given task
- Posing key questions to guide students through the stages/processes and to assist in self-direction and correction
- Using graphic symbols as reminders to assist in understanding the sequence/steps in any given task/problem

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<sup>4</sup> From the Report on the Crisis of Unemployment: NAMHI, 1986

<sup>5</sup> The Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities, NCCA, 2007

- Modelling task analysis by talking through the steps of a task as it is being done
- Having short and varied tasks
- Creating a congenial learning environment by using concrete and, where possible, everyday materials, and by displaying word lists and laminated charts with pictures.

To attain success, learning experiences, as noted in the Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities need to be characterised by:

- A range of activities that will interest and motivate the student
- Differentiated teaching approaches, methods, materials, resources and learning tasks
- Clarity in relation to the beginning and end points of tasks, ambiguity to be avoided
- consider using a model or picture of the final goal or end product, so that the student knows what is expected
- The use of visual cues to highlight meaning; present tasks using symbols, or give instructions with a written/pictorial list or prompt cards
- Tasks that are presented in small, manageable, clearly identifiable steps
- Skills that are introduced one at a time
- A hierarchy of sub-goals and sequence activities that are developed towards the learning goal
- Modification of tasks that harness and build on the student's strengths; tasks can be graded so that they make increasing demands on the student
- Instructions that are explicit; do not assume that the context will help to make the meaning clear
- Explicit connections to previous skills or knowledge
- Opportunities for the student to generalise knowledge and skills
- The gradual introduction of choice, thereby encouraging decision-making
- Routines that are taught through a structured approach
- Teacher attitudes - be positive, patient and aware of how and what you communicate to the student

## **Differentiation**

This is the concept of varying the pace, content, level and amount of material presented to students so that each student receives the appropriate learning experiences. Westwood<sup>6</sup> defines differentiation as 'learning things differently according to observed differences among learners'. All effective teaching requires a degree of differentiation, but it is particularly important in supporting students with general learning disabilities. How can this be incorporated successfully into teaching?

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<sup>6</sup> Westwood, P. (2001) 'Differentiation as a strategy for inclusive classroom practice' *Australian Journal of Learning Disabilities* 6, 1: 5-11.

Differentiation can occur:

- **By level and pace:** students work on a similar topic, at a level and pace appropriate to their ability;  
e.g. Topic – Money: some students work on coin recognition, others on shopping / change activity, etc.
- **By interest:** students select a topic of interest to themselves, learning can be enhanced;  
e.g. Topic – Bar Charts: groups / students select from: favourite singer, TV programme, football team,
- **By access and response:** students respond in different ways to the material presented to them;  
e.g. Topic – Bar Charts: some draw, some use ICT, some use different formats for presenting data.
- **By structure:** students guided step-by-step or in whole blocks of integrated curricular content;  
e.g. Topic – Regrouping in subtraction: some practice skill independently, others monitored / supported.
- **By sequence:** different students access different parts of a subject at different times;  
e.g. Subject – LCA Leisure & Recreation: modular course, students select the elements they wish to do;
- **By teaching style:** teacher varies approach / methodology in the classroom;  
e.g. 'chalk and talk', using ICT or video, research using the Internet, class discussion, small group work.
- **By time:** teacher adapts use of time with class to meet the needs of all children;  
e.g. Topic – Bar Charts: some students work independently, others closely monitored by teacher / SNA.
- **By classroom structure:** teacher structures groups in class to maximise learning  
e.g. some students work in pairs, others in groups, others individually, each with a purpose and role.

The NCCA in the Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities <sup>7</sup>note that effective planning for differentiation depends on an accurate assessment of the student's previous level of achievement in order to plan learning objectives appropriate to future learning needs. The teacher begins by establishing the student's prior learning experiences (what he/she already knows or can do); his/her interests (what the student likes, what the student is good at) and his/her learning profile (more personal information about the student and the factors that affect how the student learns). The NCCA observe that in planning for differentiation teachers need to be guided by three key considerations:

1. What the student **could** know and do
2. What the student **should** know and do
3. What the student **must** know and do

Remember the needs of individual students may be different even if their learning disability, in this instance mild general learning disability, is the same.

### **Use of ICT to support learning for students with Mild General Learning Disabilities**

The effective use of ICT has benefits for all learners, including students with mild learning disabilities. For the teacher, it offers a different way of presenting material; for the learner, it offers a different way of interacting with the curriculum. Both software and hardware can be utilised to support students with mild general learning disabilities.

**Software:** A range of software is now available for a variety of different settings, needs and subject areas. This can be either content-rich or content-free software. While some is specifically categorised as 'Special

<sup>7</sup> Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities, NCCA, 2007.

Needs' Software, many of the regular software packages are also suitable for use by students with mild learning disabilities, including office applications such as Word Processing, Spreadsheets and Desktop Publishing packages.

**Hardware:** Most students with mild general learning disabilities will not need high-tech assistive technology, such as touch monitors, switches, screen readers, etc. However, they may benefit from adaptations such as lower-case keyboards or keyboard overlays, optical mice, rollerballs, etc. Peripheral hardware items, in particular digital cameras and scanners, have proven to be of huge benefit in the classroom. Use of the digital camera allows the student to relate their work directly to their own experience, whether it is photos of family members or of a field trip in the local environment.

The Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities <sup>8</sup>state that ICT can benefit students with mild general learning disabilities in the following ways:

- ICT can provide a non-threatening environment in which the level and pace of instruction can be differentiated for individual students.
- Software programs can provide exciting and stimulating repetition that is often required for students to master skills.
- ICT can offer graphics, sound effects and immediate rewards to help encourage the learner.
- ICT may provide the needed support to effectively accomplish tasks in a variety of contexts and settings that the student may otherwise find difficult and stressful.
- ICT can provide a means for some students with general learning disabilities to accomplish tasks independently, and therefore not have to rely continually upon others.
- ICT promotes independence and communication, since for some students, technology may be the only method they have to communicate with the world around them.
- ICT provides a multi-sensory approach to the teaching of essential skills and concepts in a variety of contexts and settings.
- ICT reinforces the concept of 'cause-and-effect' and pre-reading and pre-number concepts.
- ICT can be used to introduce and reinforce simple concepts, such as matching and sorting, as well as basic literacy and numeracy skills.
- ICT facilitates the development of motor skills, eye tracking and hand-eye co-ordination.
- ICT facilitates communicative situations and language development.
- ICT facilitates social interaction and gives students an opportunity to experience turn taking and co-operative situations.
- ICT provides motivating and stimulating learning experiences and gives instant feedback to students' responses.
- ICT is non-judgmental and allows students to work at their own pace.

However, while ICT can be powerful as a tool for engaging the student, for motivation, and for self-directed learning it ought to be appropriate to the student's functional and cognitive abilities, temperament, attitudes

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<sup>8</sup> Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities, NCCA, 2007

and motivation and that the ICT used should be interesting and motivating to the student. In the Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities it is suggested that the following questions may help in selecting the most appropriate use(s) of ICT:

- Does the student have difficulty with social interaction?
- Does the student have a communication difficulty in speaking?
- Does the student have a communication difficulty in writing?
- Does the student have difficulty in planning, organising ideas, and formulating language?
- Does the student have sensory or physical needs?
- Does the student have social, behavioural and emotional needs?
- Does the student have more complex multiple support needs?

Resources provided by the National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) for Special Educational Needs and ICT include a set of critical factors to consider when matching technology. These are available on the NCTE website at

<http://www.ncte.ie/SpecialNeedsICT/ResourcesAdvice/MatchingTechnology/>

For more information on the benefits of ICT in Special Education, go to the relevant sections in the SESS website:

[http://www.sess.ie/sess/Main/Resources\\_ICT.htm](http://www.sess.ie/sess/Main/Resources_ICT.htm) or [http://www.sess.ie/sess/Main/Links\\_SEN&ICT.htm](http://www.sess.ie/sess/Main/Links_SEN&ICT.htm)

### **Adolescents with Mild General Learning Disabilities – Issues at Second Level<sup>9</sup>**

The challenges faced by students who have mild general learning disabilities may be significantly exacerbated by the onset of adolescence. The physical, social and emotional changes, which characterise the transition from childhood to adulthood, are significant for all young people. These changes can pose particular challenges for a young person with mild general learning disabilities. The emergence of the peer group as an important social context is one of the characteristics of adolescence. A student with a learning disability can easily become isolated from a peer group, which thinks, communicates and reacts at a quicker rate. The classroom and school can offer not simply a context for learning, but an important focus for the development of good peer relationships and a secure foundation for self-esteem. This is true, of course, for all young people in school, but particularly so for those with mild general learning disabilities.

The process of transfer from primary to post-primary school poses further challenges. For example, the difficulties students with mild general learning disabilities may have with retention can be highlighted when a student has to cope with more than one teacher, with different classrooms, and the variety of books, equipment and homework required for each lesson. The learning experiences and organisational support offered to students with mild general learning disabilities should not contribute to even further isolation by being 'different'. Rather, in a dynamic and differentiated learning environment, the variety of learning experiences available to **all** students should include activities designed to meet the particular needs of students with mild general learning disabilities.

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<sup>9</sup> Taken from NCCA Draft Guidelines (2002) Book 3 Introduction

## **Curricular Options for Second Level Students with Mild General Learning Disabilities**

Students with mild general learning disabilities, attending either mainstream second level schools or special schools, may need an adapted curriculum relative to their needs and abilities. There is now a range of options for these students. These include:

- **Junior Certificate School Programme / Selected Junior Certificate courses**

Within the Junior Certificate programme a range of subjects are available but the subjects most commonly taken by students with mild general learning disabilities tend to include: English, Mathematics and Gaeilge to Ordinary or Foundation Level; Art, Craft & Design, Materials Technology (Wood), Home Economics and History to Ordinary Level.

*Please note that at present the JCSP is only available to those schools included in the School Completion Programme; its target group is students at risk of early-school leaving.*

- **Leaving Certificate Applied Programme**

Many students with special educational needs are following this excellent programme - the modular and task-based nature of the work is very 'student-friendly', rewarding those who put in the effort. The final exams take place at the same time as the traditional Leaving Certificate, but 66% of the overall marks are available for satisfactory completion of Modules and Tasks prior to the terminal exams.

- **FETAC (NCVA) Foundation Level Courses**

The FETAC courses are suitable for many students over 15 who may not be in a position to follow either the Junior Cert or LCA course. Foundation Level courses may be suitable for students with mild general learning disabilities. There are a range of Foundation Level courses available.

- **School-designed programmes**

Schools are coming up with their own solutions to assist students whose needs are not being met by any of the traditional or alternative curriculum models. Taking the local environment, the resources of the school and the interests and abilities of the student(s) into consideration is a good starting point.

The NCCA Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning will also be of benefit to teachers delivering programmes to pupils with mild general learning disabilities at second level. Subject areas covered for teachers of pupils with mild general learning disabilities are English, geography, history, science, home economics, religious education, physical education, social personal health education, art craft and design, music, technology education and mathematics. It is intended that these guidelines be utilised in tandem with other post-primary curricular options. Copies of these subject guidelines (PDF format) are available on the NCCA website, the exact link is <http://www.ncca.ie/eng/index.asp?docID=293>

## References / Extra Resources

### Books

1. Department of Education and Science (1993) *Report of the Special Education Review Committee*  
Available from Government Publications 01-6476834 €12.70 Catalogue No. E/109
2. NCCA (2002) *Draft Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities*  
Book 3, referred to above, is available at <http://82.195.132.36:5050/j/sen/PDFS/tguide.pdf>
3. Reason, R. & Boote, R. (1994) *Helping Children with Reading and Spelling – A Special Needs Manual*  
London: Routledge Falmer ISBN: 0415107334 Cost: £22.50
4. Westwood, P. (2003) *Commonsense Methods for Children with Special Needs (4<sup>th</sup> edition)*  
London: Routledge Falmer ISBN: 0415298490 Cost: €25.00
5. Winebrenner, S. (1996) *Teaching Kids with Learning Difficulties in the Regular Classroom*  
Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing ISBN: 157542004X Cost: \$30.00

### Websites

1. The Special Education Support Service website [www.sess.ie](http://www.sess.ie) has listed a number of **sites** related to general learning disabilities. The link is: [http://www.sess.ie/sess/Main/Categories\\_GLD\\_links.htm](http://www.sess.ie/sess/Main/Categories_GLD_links.htm)
2. It also has a comprehensive list of sites for teachers where **classroom resources and tips** can be accessed. The link here is: [http://www.sess.ie/sess/Main/Links\\_Teacher\\_Resources.htm](http://www.sess.ie/sess/Main/Links_Teacher_Resources.htm)
3. Further information on:  
*Junior Certificate School Programme* [www.jcsp.ie](http://www.jcsp.ie)  
*Leaving Certificate Applied* [www.lca.ie](http://www.lca.ie)  
*FETAC / NCVA Foundation Level* [http://www.fetac.ie/guide/foundation\\_index\\_mod.htm](http://www.fetac.ie/guide/foundation_index_mod.htm)
4. The NCCA Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities can be downloaded from the link <http://www.ncca.ie/eng/index.asp?docID=293>