

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

### **Definition:**

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

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

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

*The World Health Organisation defines a person with moderate general learning disability<sup>2</sup> as being within the IQ range 35 – 50, insofar as an Intelligence Quotient may be used as an indicator of mental disability... Pupils with moderate general learning disability form a heterogeneous population. Many will have accompanying disabilities such as physical, hearing or visual impairment, autistic tendencies and emotional or communication disorders.*

**Note:** The term ‘**moderate general learning disability**’ as used in the Republic of Ireland, equates approximately with the term ‘**severe learning difficulty**’ as used in the United Kingdom. The UK definition of severe learning difficulty is as follows<sup>3</sup>:

**Severe Learning Difficulty (SLD):** *Pupils with severe learning difficulties have significant intellectual or cognitive impairments. This has a major effect on their ability to participate in the school curriculum without support. They may also have difficulties in mobility and co-ordination, communication and perception and the acquisition of self-help skills. Pupils with severe learning difficulties will need support in all areas of the curriculum. They may also require teaching of self-help, independence and social skills. Some pupils may use sign and symbols but most will be able to hold simple conversations. Their attainments may be within the upper P scale range (P4-P8) for much of their school careers (that is below level 1 of the National Curriculum).*

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) note in the Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities<sup>4</sup> that students with moderate general learning disabilities have varied learning needs unique to each individual and as with all students, their learning potential should be recognised and developed as fully as possible. While some students with moderate general learning disabilities may follow the same developmental path as others in various aspects of human development, the rate may be slower and the level reached is generally lower than that attained by their peers. They are not a homogeneous group, and even those of the same apparent developmental age will not progress through the stages of development at the same rate

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

<sup>3</sup> Taken from <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/sen/senglossary/> March 31<sup>st</sup> 2004

<sup>4</sup> From the overview booklet to Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2007

### **Common Characteristics:**

The SERC Report notes that a person with a moderate general learning disability is likely to display:

- (a) Significant delay in reaching developmental milestones;
- (b) Serious deficits in language development;
- (c) A severe degree of apathy rather than a curiosity in relation to his / her surroundings;
- (d) As an adult, an inability to live an independent life.

It also notes “such persons usually can learn self-help, communication, social and simple occupational skills but only limited academic or vocational skills<sup>5</sup>”.

Other characteristics noted by the SERC Report include impaired development and learning ability in:

- Language and communication;
- Social and personal development;
- Motor co-ordination;
- Basic literacy and numeracy;
- Mobility and leisure and aesthetic pursuits.

The Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities<sup>6</sup> observe that many students with moderate general learning disabilities may have:

- *Speech production difficulties.* A student’s cognitive ability can thus be underestimated because his/her ability to understand is greater than the ability to communicate (*Low muscle tone and a tendency to breathe through the mouth which can affect articulation and resonance of Speech*)
- *Language delay.* The student may have a limited vocabulary and may have difficulty mastering the rules of grammar and syntax.
- *Smaller short-term auditory memory spans.* This results in the student having difficulties in following spoken instructions, especially if they involve several consecutive tasks. The student may fare much better if he/she is able to copy other students, is given written or picture prompts or if the task is broken down into smaller, more manageable, elements
- Sensory, perceptual and/or cognitive difficulties
- Limited concentration
- Passivity
- Difficulty in adapting to their environment
- Limited ability to generalise

*However, one must bear in mind that these are characteristics of a group of students who differ from one another in many important respects. Each student is different, and the range of individual differences within each age group will be extremely wide.*

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<sup>5</sup> From “Terminology of Special Education”, UNESCO (1983)

<sup>6</sup> From Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities, NCCA, 2007

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

The NCCA Guidelines (2007)<sup>7</sup> note the following in relation to the learning and teaching of students with Moderate General Learning Disability:

- Some students may require teaching supported, whenever possible, by visually presented information. This builds on visual processing and visual memory strengths rather than relying solely on auditory processing.
- Students with moderate general learning disabilities also need to be given every opportunity to show that they understand, by being enabled to use motor responses such as pointing or selecting.
- For students with general learning disabilities, communication takes place in a number of ways and involves all the senses. Preferred methods of communication may include the use of:
  - Body language, for example, turning towards or away, stiffening, relaxing
  - facial expression, for example, smiling or grimacing
  - Eye-pointing
  - Objects of reference to signal events or to indicate choices
  - Communication aids
  - Photographs, pictures and symbols, for example in a communication book
  - print
  - signing
  - Information and communication technology (ICT)
- Opportunities need to be provided for students to make their own choices and have as much control as possible over their daily lives( foster independence)

Subject specific advice, suggestions and strategies for use with students with moderate general learning disabilities in the areas of communication and language ,drama, mathematics, music, physical education, SESE: (history, geography and science), social, personal and health education and visual arts are available from the NCCA website at <http://www.ncca.ie/eng/index.asp?docID=293>

### **Critical factors in facilitating learning are:**

- Quality of presentation and instruction
- Simple, clear verbal instruction backed up by demonstration or pictorial representation
- avoiding complex or ambiguous language when giving instruction
- Use of relevant language
- Pacing and timing of lessons
- Relevance of tasks
- Tasks matched to the ability of the student
- Level of difficulty of the task, neither too easy nor too difficult
- Prior knowledge and understanding of the student
- Appropriate level of support, avoiding over-support which creates learned helplessness

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

- promoting independent learning skills
- Building self-esteem and self-motivation.

### Individual Education Plans

Under the Education for Persons with Disabilities Act (EPSEN), all students assessed as having a moderate general learning disability will have an entitlement to an Education Plan, and when that aspect of legislation is rolled out it will be the duty of the school to ensure that this is done. Guidelines on the IEP process were issued by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) to all schools in 2006. The following seven elements have been mentioned in the Act as the component parts of an Education Plan:

- (a) The nature and degree of the child's abilities, skills and talents;
- (b) The nature and degree of the child's educational disability and how that disability affects his or her educational progress, or, in the case of a child who is not yet attending school, how the disability affects his or her development;
- (c) Except in the case of a pre-school child, the present level of educational performance of the child;
- (d) The special educational needs of the child;
- (e) The special education and related support services to be provided to the child to enable the child to benefit from education and to participate in the life of the school;
- (f) Where appropriate, the special education and related support services to be provided to the child to enable the child to effectively make the transition from primary school education to post-primary school education, and
- (g) The goals which the child is to achieve over a period not exceeding 12 months.

### Skill Development

The NCCA Guidelines<sup>8</sup> place an emphasis on the development of the following life skills:

- **Enabling skills** include attending, responding, and initiating, taking part in group activities;
- **Communication skills** range from an awareness of people and the environment, making eye contact, using gesture, signs and symbols to listening, speaking, reading, and writing;
- **Personal and social skills** range from basic personal hygiene and self-help skills, feeding / dressing, to a recognition of being part of a social group and the implications of being involved in a group;
- **Aesthetic and creative skills** involve broadening of experience and the raising of levels of awareness to expression of ideas and thoughts through the visual arts, music and drama;
- **Physical skills** range from basic mobility through an understanding of spatial awareness and fine and gross motor skills to specific skills required for a purpose, for example writing, sports or leisure skills.
- **Mathematical skills** develop sensory awareness, perception of colour, pattern, shape, and position, sorting, grouping, classifying and practical problem-solving involving a variety of mathematical skills and social mathematics, including time and money.

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

- **Information and communication technologies skills** enable the development of communication skills and develop independence. Technology can help in overcoming sensory and physical barriers to learning and should be incorporated in the student's learning programme as the need arises.

### **General Teaching Principles for Students with Moderate General Learning Disabilities**

The following are some fundamental principles advocated in the General Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities<sup>9</sup> that can be applied to support the student's learning.

- Present a range of activities, which will interest and motivate the students.
- Make the beginning and end points of tasks clear and avoid ambiguity, using visual clues to highlight meaning—present tasks using symbols or give instructions with a written/pictorial list or prompt cards.
- Present tasks in small manageable clearly identifiable steps.
- Do not introduce more than one skill at a time.
- Develop a hierarchy of sub-goals and sequence activities towards the learning goals.
- Modify tasks to harness and build on the student's strengths; tasks can be graded so that they make gradually increasing demands on the student.
- Be explicit when giving instructions; don't assume that the context will help to make the meaning clear.
- Consider using a model or picture of the final goal or end product, so that the student knows what is expected.
- Make the connections with previous skills or knowledge explicit.
- Build in opportunities for the student to generalise knowledge and skills. Students moving into a different environment can lose some previously acquired skills and may need to relearn skills in a new environment, for example when moving class or moving to another school.
- Introduce choice gradually, encouraging decision-making
- Teach routines through a structured approach.
- Be positive and patient and aware of how and what you communicate to the student.

### **Developing social skills**

When working with students with moderate general learning disabilities there will be a need to specifically teach the basic social skills of listening and not interrupting; pausing to allow others a turn; sharing equipment; waiting in lines; working in small groups. It will be important also to:

- Acknowledge good work with tangible rewards and praise;
- Encourage interaction through activities the students enjoy;
- Acknowledge the student's need for personal space;
- Understand that a student may feel threatened by the close proximity of others;
- Use the student's own interest as a way of involving him / her in a social activity;
- Be aware that students will need help to recognise the effects of their actions on others;

<sup>9</sup> Guidelines for Teachers of **Pupils** with General Learning Disabilities, 2007, NCCA

- Value the student's personality and accept that they will derive their own meanings from events, which may differ from what is expected; (Having poor social awareness, the student may often behave in inappropriate ways and this can influence how others respond to him/her and reinforce poor self-image.)
- Help the student understand what is expected of him by having clear, predictable routines;
- Introduce any changes gradually;
- Provide clear and explicit boundaries for behaviour;
- Recognise situations that might cause distress or a behaviour problem;
- Be consistent in responding to behaviour;
- Be aware of sensitivity to advice and criticism;
- Remember that each student is different — what works for one may not work for another.

### **Other factors to consider**

Also remember the following:

- These students need an **age-appropriate curriculum**; as the student progresses through school, learning will take on a functional, life-skills orientation.
- **Older students** with a moderate general learning disability need to be enabled to:
  - Communicate his/her needs, desires and preferences to those around him/her;
  - Interact and communicate as fully as possible with peers and adults;
  - Interact as fully as possible with materials and equipment in his/her environment;
  - Become as independent as possible in managing his/her personal care needs;
  - Become as active as possible in controlling his/her environment;
  - Develop leisure skills and interests;
  - Develop skills that can be used in a work environment;
  - Prepare for an adult life in which he/she has the greatest possible degree of autonomy.
- It is the **quality of teaching** more than anything else that determines the success of the student's learning and development in school. The quality of the relationship that the teacher establishes with the student is of paramount importance in the learning process. The teacher's concern for the student's well-being and successful development is the basis for creating a supportive environment that can facilitate learning.

### **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 2*, referred to above, is available at <http://82.195.132.36:5050/j/sen/Book2.htm>
3. National Council for Special Education (2006) *Guidelines on the Individual Education Plan Process* available at [http://www.ncse.ie/publications/final\\_report.pdf](http://www.ncse.ie/publications/final_report.pdf)

4. Tilstone, C. (ed.) (1991) *Teaching Children with Severe Learning Difficulties: Practical Approaches*  
London: David Fulton  
ISBN: 1853461717      Cost: £18.00
5. Westwood, P. (2003) *Commonsense Methods for Children with Special Needs (4<sup>th</sup> edition)*  
London: Routledge Falmer      ISBN: 0415298490      Cost: €25.00

## 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. For further information on the use of ICT to support students with general learning disability, the link to use on the SESS website is: [http://www.sess.ie/sess/Main/Resources\\_ICT.htm](http://www.sess.ie/sess/Main/Resources_ICT.htm)
4. NCCA Draft Guidelines Book 2  
*Volume 1: Teacher Guidelines*      <http://82.195.132.36:5050/j/sen/PDFS/B2vol1.pdf>  
*Volume 2: Communication and Language, Mathematics  
Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE)* <http://82.195.132.36:5050/j/sen/PDFS/B2vol2.pdf>  
*Volume 3: Arts Education*      <http://82.195.132.36:5050/j/sen/PDFS/B2vol3.pdf>  
*Physical Education  
Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)*
5. NCCA Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities, 2007, available at <http://www.ncca.ie/eng/index.asp?docID=293>
6. For information on Special Educational Needs & Disability as it applies to the UK education system, the link is: <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/sen/>