Section 6
General Learning Disabilities
Deep down, John is a sensitive and caring young man. ... I think that John is tired of being different. I also believe that the labels that have been placed on John have made it difficult for him to succeed. John has learned to see himself as different. He is not different, he just has his own abilities and needs.

Taken from ‘My Brother’s Learning Disability: My Family’s Struggle’ by Kristen Harkness in *Journal of Leisurability*, vol. 22, no. 3, Summer 1995

The Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) (1993) referred to 'general learning disabilities' as 'mental handicap' and adopted the classification system used by The World Health Organisation to indicate specific levels of disability. The Department of Education and Science (DES) continues to adopt The World Health Organisation classification system, but uses the term 'general learning disability' to refer to the special educational needs of students.

It is important to be aware of the significance of the differences internationally in definitions of learning disabilities. Moderate learning difficulties in the UK are broadly comparable with moderate to mild intellectual disabilities (Australia/New Zealand), mild mental retardation or educable mentally retarded (US/Canada) and mild general learning disabilities in Ireland. In the UK, severe learning difficulties are broadly comparable with moderate intellectual disabilities (Australia/New Zealand), moderate to severe mental retardation or trainable mentally retarded (US/Canada) and moderate to severe general learning disabilities in Ireland. Profound and multiple learning difficulties in the UK are broadly comparable to severe intellectual disabilities (Australia/New Zealand), severe to profound mental retardation (US/Canada) and profound general learning disabilities in Ireland.

Students with mild general learning disabilities have significantly below-average general intellectual functioning. This is reflected in a slow rate of maturation, reduced learning capacity and inadequate social adjustment. Mild general learning disability may also manifest itself in delayed conceptual development, difficulties in expressing ideas and feelings in words, a limited ability to abstract and generalise what they learn, limited attention-span and poor retention ability, slow speech and language development, and an underdeveloped sense of spatial awareness. Students may experience difficulty with reading, writing and comprehension and have poor understanding of mathematical concepts. A student with a mild general learning disability is likely to struggle with both the content and presentation of his/her work.

Some students may display poor adaptive behaviour, inappropriate or immature personal behaviour, low self-esteem, emotional disturbance, general clumsiness and lack of co-ordination of fine- and gross-motor skills. Students’ self-esteem can be affected, particularly when they enter post-primary provision, which may result in unacceptable behaviour as a way of avoiding failure. Insofar as IQ (Intelligence Quotient) may be used as an indicator of mild general learning disability, such students’ cognitive functionings range from IQ 50 to 70 on standardised IQ tests. Remember that each student is different – what works for one may not work for another.
Tips for Learning and Teaching

- Establish a supportive relationship with the student.
- Focus on what the student can do rather than what he/she cannot do and build on his/her strengths.
- Include lots of praise and encouragement as part of the student’s learning and teaching experience.
- Simplify language, repeat words and clarify meanings.
- Observe the student’s learning style and differentiate learning and teaching accordingly.
- Provide the student with tasks that are within his/her capacity.
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- Enable the student to experience success through identifying realistic learning objectives for each lesson.
- Ensure tasks have a clear meaning and purpose.
- Consider a multi-sensory approach to spelling that provides opportunities for the student to follow the look, copy, trace, picture, cover, write and check sequence technique.
- Utilise semantic/concept mapping to build on the student’s existing knowledge.
- Use short sequential steps when teaching.
- Build opportunities for over-learning and repetition into lessons.
- Differentiate questioning as well as teaching.
- Give the student opportunities to generalise knowledge and skills.
- Help students to realise that making mistakes is part of the learning process.
- Incorporate the students’ interests, aptitudes, experiences and skills into learning and teaching.
- Utilise active learning, participation and collaboration with peers.
- Encourage the development of personal and social skills through all aspects of the curriculum and allow for the fact that social skills may also have to be taught explicitly.
- Pay particular attention to language and communication in all areas of the curriculum.
- Useful techniques to use include picking out and highlighting key words/key facts in written pieces of information, using subject dictionaries, sequencing activities and mind mapping.
- Use a wide range of learning resources (e.g. visual aids (charts/artefacts), concrete objects, computer software and accessible texts).
- Provide worksheets that minimise the amount of writing required.
- Offer students curricular programmes with an emphasis on pre-vocational skills.
- Provide immediate feedback and opportunities for self-assessment.
- If using computer equipment, students may derive benefit from assistive technology (e.g. lowercase keyboards, keyboard overlays, optical mice or roller balls).
- Peripheral hardware items such as digital cameras and scanners allow the student to relate their work directly to their own experience and assist in the implementation of a language-experience approach to learning.
Additional Resources/References


3. National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) offers advice on how Information and Communication Technology can be used with students with mild general learning disabilities, website: http://www.ncte.ie/


6. Special Education Support Service (SESS): the SESS website lists a number of sites related to general learning disabilities and also has a comprehensive list of sites for teachers where classroom resources and tips can be accessed, website: http://www.sess.ie/


A student with a moderate general learning disability is likely to display significant delay in reaching developmental milestones. These students may have impaired development and learning ability in respect of basic literacy and numeracy, language and communication, mobility and leisure skills, motor co-ordination and social and personal development. Many students with moderate general learning disabilities may have difficulties with the length of time for which they can concentrate on activities, with generalising and transferring knowledge across situations and with processing input from more than one sense at a time. Insofar as IQ (Intelligence Quotient) may be used as an indicator of moderate general learning disability, such students’ cognitive functionings range from IQ 35 to 50 on standardised IQ tests. Many students may have accompanying impairments such as physical, hearing or visual impairment, autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs) and emotional disturbance or impairment in communication skills. Remember that each student is different – what works for one may not work for another.

**Moderate General Learning Disability**

- Allow access to a learning programme that students can follow at an appropriate pace and in a learning style appropriate to their particular abilities and potential.
- Encourage students to move from a passive to a responsive and interactive role where they initiate activities and where communication is incorporated into the learning activity.
- Focus throughout the learning and teaching process on the student’s strengths as well as needs.
- Provide the student with tasks that are within his/her capacity and which have clear manageable steps.
- Be explicit when giving instructions and use clear and unambiguous language. Consider using a model or picture of the final goal or end product so that the student knows what is expected.
- 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.
- Do not introduce more than one new skill at a time.
- Encourage students to become independent learners.
- Utilise semantic/concept mapping to build on students’ existing knowledge.
- Include lots of repetition, praise and encouragement.
- Provide students with access to an age-appropriate differentiated curriculum.
- Use a wide range of learning resources (e.g. visual aids (charts/artefacts), concrete objects, computer software and accessible texts).
- Use practical activities (e.g. games, simulations, role play and field trips).
- Provide access to the computer for drill, skill building, word processing and enhancing access to the curriculum.
- Use self-esteem/confidence-building exercises.
- Employ peer-tutoring and co-operative-learning groups, which facilitate interaction and communication.
- Give the student opportunities 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 (e.g. when moving class or moving to another school).
- Be aware that social skills may have to be explicitly taught. Place particular emphasis on ensuring that the student understands the listener-speaker relationship, turn taking, waiting in line and working in groups with other students.
- Provide clear and explicit boundaries for behaviour.
- Link curricular programmes to the development of pre-vocational skills.
- Purposefully include opportunities to exercise choice and control in students’ timetables.
- Try to ensure consistency of approach is adopted by all who are involved in the student’s learning.
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Additional Resources/References


2. National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) has useful information on how Information and Communication Technology can be used to support students with moderate general learning disability, website: http://www.ncte.ie/


4. Special Education Support Service (SESS) lists a number of sites related to general learning disabilities, website: http://www.sess.ie/

5. Teachernet: for information on special educational needs and disability as it applies to the UK education system, website: http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/sen/


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Severe/Profound General Learning Disability

Students with severe to profound general learning disabilities are likely to be severely impaired in their functioning in respect of a basic awareness and understanding of themselves, of the people around them and of the world they live in.

Many of these students will have additional disabilities such as autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs), challenging and/or self-injurious behaviour, emotional disturbance, epilepsy, hearing impairment, physical impairment, severe impairment in communication skills and visual impairment. Insofar as IQ (Intelligence Quotient) may be used as an indicator of general learning disability, a student with a severe general learning disability is described as having an IQ in the range 20 to 35 on standardised IQ tests, and a student with a profound general learning disability is described as having an IQ under 20.

Students with severe to profound general learning disabilities exhibit a wide and diverse range of characteristics, including a dependence on others to satisfy basic needs such as feeding and toileting, difficulties in mobility, problems with generalising skills from one situation to another, significant delays in reaching developmental milestones and significant speech and/or communication difficulties. Some students may have associated behavioural problems. Students may have limited communication skills and will therefore not have control of the multiple means by which other students communicate such as speech, body language, facial expressions and print. (It should be remembered that the students’ difficulties in expressing themselves does not diminish their communicative intent. Opportunities to enable the student to communicate should underpin learning and teaching.) Remember that each student is different – what works for one may not work for another.
There should be detailed individual assessment of all areas of functioning and an individualised, structured, step by step programme of instruction with regular and detailed reviews, to be implemented with the assistance of a multi-disciplinary team.

Students will need a high degree of guided learning and the students’ own experiences, strengths, interests and preferences should be integrated into learning and teaching activities.

A responsive classroom environment should be created in which students’ actions are always acknowledged, where students are provided with a wide range of opportunities to respond to their environment and where students are encouraged to initiate interactions.

Objects of reference representing activities, places, people, etc should be used to mitigate the difficulties experienced by students in understanding the symbolic nature of communication (e.g. a spoon can be used to signal meal-time). Objects should be meaningful and individualised for each learner.

Alternative communication systems that employ objects of reference – the manual Lámh signing system, the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) and electronic communication devices – may be used as alternative/augmentative communication systems.

When giving oral instructions consider also using alternatives such as using objects of reference, picture cards or signs.
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- Every effort should be made to allow the student to have the greatest possible control over their work and to enable them to make choices (this may involve waiting for a prolonged period of time to allow the student to demonstrate a response).

- Students generally require the stimulation of their basic sensory, perceptual and cognitive abilities. Consider intensively teaching for as long as they can address themselves to a stimulus and concentrate on a task.

- The provision of a flexible timetable should be considered that takes account of students’ periods of non-attention, sleeping and rest-patterns.

- Particular attention should be directed to the development of perceptual and cognitive skills, language and communication, self-care, fine- and gross-motor abilities, and social and personal development.

- Students should be enabled to develop self-esteem and increased independence. They should be encouraged to make choices, express preferences and be active participants in their learning; to gain communication skills and to access a wide variety of resources (e.g. information and communication technology and multimedia); to develop awareness of themselves and others; and to have opportunities for socialising and socialisation.

- Classroom layout should reflect a consideration of the student’s identified need for medication, special diets and/or specialist equipment.

- Cognisance of student’s medical and physical needs must inform curriculum planning.

- Communication between home and school is vital to ensure that curriculum access is appropriate, reflects the student’s interests and needs, and enables the student’s meaningful engagement.

Additional Resources/References


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7. Inclusion Ireland, National Association for People with an Intellectual Disability in Ireland (formerly NAMHI), website: [http://www.inclusionireland.ie/](http://www.inclusionireland.ie/)

8. National Centre for Technology in Education (NCTE) offers advice on how Information and Communication Technology can be used with students with severe/profound general learning disabilities, website: [http://www.ncte.ie/](http://www.ncte.ie/)


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