

Motivating Students with Mild Learning Disability to Stay in School

Providing an appropriate curriculum to match the requirements of post-primary age pupils with mild general learning disabilities is no easy task for the teacher. To date, curricular provision leaves much to be desired -- many pupils are not benefiting fully or are simply opting out. The author voices the concerns of many teachers and outlines a number of initiatives which go some way towards appropriate provision.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the introduction of some improved programmes, school based resources and materials, despite capital expenditure on teacher training and intervention strategies, a large number of pupils with mild learning disability do not benefit fully from the educational options available to them. All pupils with mild learning disability have the possibility of full time educational provision available to them until their eighteenth birthday. There is then a selection of options from “Top-Up Skills” programmes to Vocational Programmes of one to four years’ duration. Yet many pupils with mild learning disability have a record of poor school attendance and eventual early dropout. It is also a source of grave concern that although many of the students in special classes and special schools achieve a great deal academically, their learning is seldom accredited or certified.

These concerns need to be examined. It is necessary to look at some of the reasons why pupils with mild learning disability are not availing of present educational opportunities and to examine some of the programmes that may prevent early school leaving within this group. In some cases “alternative” programmes may offer the disillusioned student a new approach. Some local communities have area-developed programmes, some of which are operating on a pilot basis. This article will address a selection of new initiatives in both special schools and mainstream

settings with particular reference to students in the North County Dublin region.

INITIATION, PREVALENCE & PROVISION

In Ireland the term “mild mental handicap” is still used officially in recommending placement in a special class or special school. The Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC Report) (Ireland, 1993) describes this cohort “...in so far as an intelligence quotient may be used as an indicator of mild mental handicap, such pupils would be within the IQ range 50-70” (p. 118). The 1965 Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Mental Handicap is quoted in the SERC Report as estimating that “...only 1 to 1.5 per cent of the school population are sufficiently retarded to be included by us as mildly mentally handicapped” (p. 119). The SERC Report recommended that as a short-term target, provision should be made for one per-cent of children aged 7-16 years, i.e. 5,000 out of 500,000. In Ireland the total number of pupils attending primary and post-primary special classes and special schools for pupils with mild learning disability in the school year 1990-1991 was about 5,500.

If a pupil is found to have significantly below average general intellectual functioning associated with impairment of adaptive behaviour, such a pupil will be considered to be in need of special educational provision. The 31 special schools in Ireland for pupils with mild learning disability are designated as special national schools and they cater on a full-time basis for pupils from four to eighteen years of age. Special schools were the preferred form of provision for the pupils with mild learning disability in the 1960s and 1970s, but since then significant expansion of special classes and resource teachers in mainstream schools have seen a reduction in enrolments in many special schools.

The present system provides for a variety of support teachers for pupils with mild learning disability in primary mainstream schooling. The special class teacher may have responsibility for a group of pupils for the full school day, a substantial part or only short periods of the day depending on the degree of integration that operates in individual schools. The resource teacher provides support for individual pupils in different classes, usually in a regional cluster of schools.

Pupils are also catered for at post-primary level in both the mainstream setting and in the special school setting. At post-primary level in mainstream schools, pupils with mild learning disability may or may not be catered for in special classes. Forty-eight special classes were registered in 1993, catering for six hundred pupils. This figure has grown to 106 classes in the year 1998/1999, catering for approximately 1,214 pupils (DES Spokesperson, February, 1999).

These pupils are also catered for in the post-primary section of special schools. Pupils availing of the above post-primary facilities span a wide range of ability. Some pupils may experience difficulty in mastering even the most rudimentary skills while other pupils will be capable of taking, for example, the Junior Certificate Schools Programme in a number of subjects. In the mainstream setting courses are frequently found to be too academically biased and unsuited to the abilities and interests of weaker pupils.

There is a trend nowadays to refer to special schools only pupils with serious learning difficulties. Many of these will be considered to have additional special needs e.g., emotional and behavioural problems or particular speech and language needs

PUPIL CHARACTERISTICS

The characteristics of pupils with mild learning disabilities are described elsewhere (Brennan, 1979; Gearheart, DeRuiter, & Sileo, 1986; Henley, Roberta, Ramsey & Algozzine, 1993; Lewis & Doorlag, 1995) but can be summarised briefly as follows:

PUPIL CHARACTERISTICS & COMMON DIFFICULTIES

Personal	Social
Poor attention	Difficulty relating to peers
Poor communication	Lack of peer affirmation
Weak memory	Fear of failure
Passive learning	Disruptive behaviour
Poor social skills	Withdrawn behaviour

Poor motivation

Inappropriate social manner

Low self-esteem

Lack of sensitivity to others

Cognitive

Basic skills acquisition

Maintaining skills

Generalising skills

Incidental learning

DEMANDS OF POST PRIMARY SCHOOLING

The demands of the post-primary school differ significantly from those of the primary school. Pupils move from a pupil orientated primary school environment to a content driven post-primary school setting. Often nobody knows the up-to-date position on how many children are slipping out of the school system in the early years of second level education. About 1,000 children fail to make the transition from primary to second level. According to a Department of Education and Science spokesperson, those closest to the problem believe that the figure for later dropouts must be “a lot higher - several thousand”. The Minister for Education and Science, Micheal Martin, says that he is targeting those children. He has earmarked almost £3,000,000 for 1998-2000, to fund an initiative to focus on “structured pilot projects in urban and rural disadvantaged areas which will cater for young people aged eight to 15 years who are at risk of early school leaving” (.E&L, Irish Times, November, 1998).

In very many cases, these youngsters have very poor primary school attendance records. Indeed many of them are already part-time students by the age of 12. Language and mathematical developments are key determinants of success at second level. However many early school leavers are pupils with mild learning disability and have reading and mathematical ages which are between two and six years below the national average by the time they are 12 years of age. For such youngsters, entry into a text-based second level system can be a humiliating nightmare, which fuels their desire to leave school early.

Many academic secondary schools are reluctant to take these pupils, and few offer special classes for them. Many of these pupils will go into the lower academic classes at second level schools, where there is little or no special provision for them, and will very quickly swell the ranks of those who drop out at 15, if not before. Although statistics are non-existent, there is considerable anecdotal evidence of problems with the transfer to second level, of children with even less serious learning or behavioural difficulties, and significant numbers are known to drop out.

It is important to remember that while over half of the pupils in special schools for pupils with mild learning disability are of post-primary age, the special schools they attend are not even recognised as post-primary schools. The programme followed in the senior sections of most special schools is not a post-primary programme in the conventional sense of that term. Over the years teachers in special schools have developed programmes that cater specifically for the particular needs of their post-primary pupils. With little help or guidance from outside professionals, many of these teachers have designed curricula based on their pupils' special educational needs, their anticipated post-school placements and their future participation in community affairs.

In 1998, the Minister for Education and Science requested that guidelines be put in place to assist teachers in this sector and these are presently being compiled by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). We owe it to these pupils to do all we can to help them engage in the educational system for as long as possible in order to give them the best start in the difficult adult world of work.

SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMMES THAT MAY MEET NEEDS

The Junior Certificate Schools Programme

The Junior Certificate Schools Programme was given official recognition in August 1996 when launched by the Minister for Education. The programme is specifically aimed at students around 15 years of age who are at risk of leaving school without formal qualifications. Schools offering

the programme get an allocation of extra teaching time for its implementation. Students taking this programme study at least two subjects for the Junior Certificate examination – usually English and Mathematics -- and may take other subjects as appropriate. School-based assessment is also part of the programme. On completion, students receive state certification for subjects successfully taken in the Junior Certificate examination as well as a school-assessed student profile of their other achievements (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 1999).

Now in its third year of implementation, it is presently operating in 85 schools and centres around the country -- in secondary, vocational, community and special schools as well as in youth encounter projects, junior education centres, a juvenile remand centre and a community training workshop.

Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA)

The Leaving Certificate Applied Programme has much in common with the Junior Certificate Schools Programme. It is again involved with the process rather than the product of education. The Leaving Certificate Applied is a different and distinct form of Leaving Certificate. It is a programme that is modularised and semesterised with on-going assessments and it is cross-curricular in its approach.. Credits are awarded for successful completion of the modules, for student tasks and for the final examination. The terminal examination at the end of each year accounts for one-third of the overall marks.

The first batch of students to complete the LCA was in 1997. According to a preliminary study carried out by The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) more than 90 per cent of the 1998 LCA graduates have found work or have gone on to further education. The number of students completing the LCA increased from 750 in its first year to 1,700 last year. A spokesperson for the Department of Education stated that 2,500 students were expected to sit the terminal examinations in 1999.

National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA)

In 1991, the Minister for Education set up a task force to devise an alternative system of national certification that was more inclusive than the traditional Junior and Leaving Certificate

programmes, for a wide category of learners. All courses are vocationally directed. The levels of the NCVA can be very closely equated to the following levels: In 1991, the Minister for Education set up a task force to devise an alternative system of national

Foundation level - Junior Certificate

Level 1 - Leaving Certificate

Level 2 - Post Leaving Certificate course

Level 3 - Higher level Post Leaving Certificate course

NCVA foundation level has now been implemented nationally. Level One Certification will be available nationally in 1999/2000. The implementation of Level One Certificate will ensure that, for the first time there is a continuous progressive route for adults and young people who have left school early which enables them to progress to Post Leaving Certificate courses (PLCs) and from there to third level.

Candidates completing one or more individual modules will receive a record of achievement award. A great variety of subject areas is covered in the elective modules. Many of these are the actual areas of work already being covered in curricular programmes in special schools, and therefore have the advantage of certifying pupils for their existing course-work.

The Bridge Project

This is a transition curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities. One of the central aims of the Bridge Project was to outline, pilot and evaluate a transition curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities who were undergoing their last few years of education in special schools. In 1995 four service providing agencies--KARE, St. Michael's House, the St. John of God Order and the Brothers of Charity--came together and made an appeal for funding to the European Social Fund to pilot this transition programme in six schools. Four of these schools are for people with moderate learning disability and two schools are for people with mild learning disability. Unfortunately the EU funding has not been continued and the future of the Bridge Transition Programme is uncertain.

COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMMES WITH POTENTIAL TO MEET NEEDS

Around the state, at least two hundred projects and initiatives are working with schools and young people on the early leaving problem. A new national umbrella group has been set up to push for the co-ordination of efforts. The National Early School-Leaving Network (NESLN) aims to raise awareness, lobby decision-makers, promote models of good practice and share good practice. One of these local initiatives in the North County Dublin area is known as The Fingal Educational Resource Group.

Fingal Educational Resource Group (FERG)

The Fingal Educational Resource Group is a group of concerned educationalists in the Fingal region of North County Dublin. The aim of this group is “to co-ordinate the provision of access, to pupils, in integrated learning, who have learning difficulties and those who are at risk as well as those who drop out early from school and therefore do not avail of further education and training” (F.E.R.G. Submission to Department of Education and Science, 1996).

The geographical catchment area of the group stretches from Balbriggan to Skerries, and Lusk to Rush. The group met to establish a strategy for piloting the project and providing a programme for these students. To this end it planned to draft a programme for the pilot group. The schools involved identified the students who might benefit from this programme. Looking at programmes, investigating locations and looking at resources and other related matters are major aspects of the work of the group to date. The programme is presently operating on a pilot basis, and is based in The Community School in Skerries, Co Dublin. It also uses some other second level schools in the area, for example, St. Joseph’s Secondary School, Rush, and The Community School, Balbriggan, as a base for some social and practical subjects. Its future is still uncertain.

Youthreach Programme

The Youthreach Programme was introduced in 1989 to provide two years integrated education, training and work experience for young people in the 15 to 18 year age group, who were in the labour market for at least six months and who had left school early without formal qualifications

or training.

It is now offered in over 100 locations through special out of school centres provided by Vocational Education Committees (VECs) and the network of FAS-funded community training workshops. At present there are approximately 6,500 places nationally. In 1998 the Department of Education and Science expended £15.6m in support of the VEC based participants.

Youthreach is structured around two distinct phases. Phase One is a foundation phase, which seeks to enable the participant to overcome learning difficulties, develop self confidence and gain a range of competencies essential for further learning. Phase Two is a progression phase, which provides for more specific development through a range of educational, learning and work experience options. Basic skills training, practical work training and general education are features of the programme. The range of progressive options on the education side enable young people to follow for example NCVA foundation level in a wide variety of optional modules. Youthreach courses are full time, 35 hours a week, and are available on a year round basis. A training allowance is paid to participants ranging from £28.00-£70.00 per week, depending on age.

POST-SCHOOL OPPORTUNITIES

All pupils with mild learning disability have the on-going services of the National Training and Development Institute (NTDI), formerly known as The National Rehabilitation Board (NRB), available to them. Founded in 1949, The Rehabilitation Institute, as it was then known, attempted to provide the necessary skills and training to enable people with special needs to lead productive and independent lives. The NTDI helps and assists in the compilation of a great variety of after school training courses.

The European Social Fund and The Department of Education and Science usually support these projects. The courses are designed to provide training at a variety of levels and to include both vocational and personal development programme units. Many of these programmes are open to trainees from the age of sixteen years. Young people may access a selection of training courses,

at skill-base, level one, or level two standards.

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CONCLUSION

Considering the characteristics and the developmental needs of pupils with mild learning disability, it is clear that these pupils frequently have comprehensive difficulties with the educational programmes currently on offer. For many, educational experiences are too often fraught with failure. Poor personal and social skills often result in uneasy relationships with parents, siblings, teachers and peers. In a world where educational achievement and academic success is highly regarded, these pupils have been poorly catered for in terms of their particular needs. The road is often bumpy for young people between the ages of 16 and 22, but it is particularly difficult for those with disability.

Intervention programmes which maximise students' potential for achievement within the school system are urgently required to help counter the often inevitable chain of poor school success, leading to poor school attendance, leading to early school drop-out. This leads too often to poor or no training, leading to poor or no job opportunities. This cycle of failure and disadvantage can best be addressed through appropriate educational intervention.

Increased awareness of the educational needs of this group and an awareness of the valuable contribution that they can make to society have encouraged educationalists to design, adapt and modify educationally suitable programmes to cater for their needs. However, the required support of specialist teachers, materials and equipment necessary to properly implement such programmes, particularly in the special schools, has not yet been forthcoming. In the meantime many special schools are providing curricula that include elements of some or all of the aforementioned programmes for those pupils capable of benefiting from them. The school role is therefore not just crucial but critical in helping to break this cycle for the adult lives of those with mild general learning disabilities.

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