

The Effective Teacher's Guide to Moderate, Severe and Profound Learning Difficulties (Cognitive Impairments): Practical Strategies (Second Edition)

By Michael Farrell

**Reviewed by PATRICIA MEHIGAN, a teacher at Stewarts School,
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Michael Farrell has worked for many years in the field of education in England, as a teacher, school principal, lecturer and inspector and is now a consultant on special education. He has published several books on special education, including a series of books on effective teaching of students with special educational needs, each book concentrating on a different area of need. This particular book concerns students with general learning difficulties. It sets out to give practical strategies for teachers to use in teaching students with general learning difficulties. As such you might expect it to be a book that you just dip in and out of and pick strategies from a clearly laid out list depending on what problem you are encountering at the time. Well, it's not that. The book gives a lot of very useful information on students with general learning difficulties, including discussion on how they are diagnosed, how their cognitive impairment affects their learning, appropriate curriculum and strategies to enable them to access the curriculum.

Farrell dedicates a chapter each to discussing different levels of cognitive impairment and a chapter to outlining associated disorders. Each of these chapters is highly informative. The three levels of cognitive impairment discussed are mild, moderate to severe, and profound. In terms of how we classify students in Ireland for provision, the chapters correlate reasonably closely with what we consider mild, moderate, and severe and profound general learning difficulties. Similarly, while he generally refers to practices in England and the United States, the information is clear enough to transfer to the situation in Ireland.

Farrell discusses each level of disability in terms of definition, causes, prevalence and how it is diagnosed before he goes on to discuss educational provision. Although I expected the book to concentrate on classroom strategies I liked this

more comprehensive aspect of the book as by the time Michael Farrell begins to discuss educational provision, the reader has been given a clear picture of the needs of the students he is referring to. He then goes on to discuss what he considers the most appropriate curriculum for this cohort of students and suggests some strategies for implementing it, he also suggests some resources and gives ideas for classroom organisation.

Throughout the book it is very clear that Michael Farrell has a lot of experience of working in the area of special education and this adds to the relevance and practicality of what he discusses and the suggestions he makes. For example, he talks about issues that any of us working on the ground in this area have clearly found problematic, such as carrying out accurate assessment of skills and knowledge, ensuring that the sensory curriculum for students with profound learning difficulties is educational, having a seamless delivery of service from all professionals working with our students etc. He refers to research projects where some of the suggestions he makes worked successfully, which adds to the credibility of the suggestions given. He gives references for further reading and this is very helpful as he doesn't always describe strategies in the detail required to implement them. However, in reading the many strategies he suggests, you come away with a clear idea as to why these strategies would be effective in enabling the students to learn. Farrell puts huge emphasis on the use of concrete materials to enable these students to internalise concepts and on real life experiences to enable them to learn and to generalize learning that has taken place in the classroom. In terms of curriculum Farrell puts a lot of emphasis on language and communication and developing functional living skills. Throughout the book he gives practical suggestions for developing both.

In the final chapter Farrell discusses what he calls "conditions and factors" associated with general learning difficulties, outlining the most common syndromes associated with general learning difficulties and the implications that the symptoms of these conditions could have for educational provision. He also briefly discusses challenging behaviour and the kind of support that students presenting with challenging behaviour might need. This chapter adds to the overall picture that the book gives of the nature of general learning difficulties and how the needs arising from these difficulties can most effectively be answered.

In terms of reading this book to explore how to become more effective in teaching students with general learning difficulties I felt that this could be best achieved by reading the book as a whole, highlighting teaching strategies and then referring to the book when planning to implement any of the strategies. The sections on

pedagogy in Chapters Two, Three and Four outline a number of very practical strategies. Strategies also appear in other sections. However, it is in the overall picture that you get from reading the full book that you get a feel for the best way to implement an educational programme for these students.

Whereas I didn't find that there was anything new in this book in terms of teaching students with general learning difficulties I felt that it gave a very good overview of this area of special education. I felt that Michael Farrell touched on all of the key issues in teaching these students and suggested some key strategies for resolving these issues. It could therefore be an excellent springboard for exploring how to effectively teach this cohort of students. I would certainly recommend it to anyone working in the area of general learning difficulties and I think it would be particularly useful to new teachers.

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