

Mencap response to Salt Review

Mencap is the leading charity working with children and adults with a learning disability, their parents and carers. We are fighting for a world where everyone with a learning disability has an equal right to choice, opportunity and respect, with the support they need.

Every child should have access to education appropriate to their needs and potential. Access requires respect for the individual's way of learning and requires suitable curricula, methodologies, teaching materials and teaching skills.

Mencap welcomes this independent review of teacher supply for pupils with severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties (SLD and PMLD). In this response we will particularly focus on support for those with PMLD as this is a neglected area. An academic in the field recently said, 'The situation for training staff to work with pupils with PMLD is generally at crisis point. The development of a strategy is long overdue.'

Mencap sees a key barrier to addressing the issue of supply of teachers for pupils with severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties (SLD and PMLD) as being lack of suitable training. Other important issues, related to this are pay, status and a lack of commitment to this group of children and young people.

While the focus of this review is on the supply of teachers, we think that it is crucial that the whole staff team, for example, teachers, teaching assistants and other school staff, have the right skills to meet the needs of pupils with profound and multiple learning disabilities.

Training for staff working with pupils with PMLD

Training needs

As well as understanding the learning needs of children with profound and multiple learning disabilities, all teaching staff need to have the skills and knowledge to meet their specific communication needs and complex health needs, which many children and young people with PMLD will have. Complex health needs include conditions such as complex epilepsy or being 'technology dependent' – for example needing oxygen, tube feeding or suctioning equipment. See Appendix 1 for more information about complex health needs.

Training - current situation

- SEN qualifications often do not require a full understanding of the needs of pupils with PMLD
- There is very little formal training for education staff working with pupils with PMLD. There are 2 distance learning courses in the country – one at

Birmingham University and one at Manchester University. They both lead to Master's degrees but also have qualifications for those who do not have degrees.

- The University of Birmingham has produced an induction pack, a 30 hour non-certificated course for all staff working with pupils with PMLD. Apart from this there is almost no training available for inducting staff into working with children with PMLD.
- There are one-day courses on non-formal communication methods, for example Intensive Interaction, which are run by external providers. School staff can pay to attend, but they are not certificated.
- Many special schools do have opportunities to learn about non-formal communication techniques via INSET days run by staff in school. However, as the supply of teachers with appropriate qualifications reduces the quality of this INSET is threatened.

Problems with current situation

- With an estimated 9,000 children aged 5-18 with PMLD in school (7,000 in special, 2,000 in mainstream), there is clearly insufficient training available.
- Recent research showed that only 6 out of 10 teachers in special schools in the West Midlands had a SEN qualification¹.
- Within a special school in the East Midlands only 11% of teaching staff had covered non-formal communication techniques within their SEN qualification. Staff trained on mainstream courses said that there had been very little emphasis on SEN.
- There is a lack of emphasis on pupils with PMLD in mainstream and SEN teaching qualifications and in Speech and language therapy training.
- Certificated training in this area is not mandatory and few schools have sufficient professional development funding to sponsor staff doing certificate or masters courses.
- Due to lack of funding, staff often pay to do certificated courses themselves and this leads to a 'scattergun' effect of trained staff across the country
- Although there are day courses in non-formal communication techniques, these are currently insufficient to ensure a well-trained workforce.

How could training of staff be improved?

We have listed some suggestions for how training for staff working with pupils with PMLD could be improved below.

- Due to the vital role played by teaching assistants in the education of pupils with PMLD any recommendations of this review need to cover this group of staff.
- Mainstream teaching qualifications should have more emphasis on SEN and within this, emphasis on the communication needs of students with PMLD and non-formal communication methods
- Qualifications in SEN need to have an increased emphasis on the communication needs of students with PMLD and non-formal communication methods

¹ Lacey, P et al. 2010 In Press

- Teacher training days, for example INSET days should cover non-formal communication techniques. It is important that these days are embedded into a school communication strategy. The staff should be required to go away and practice techniques and report back at a later date. In this way the INSET days can be monitored and evaluated.
- Teaching staff should be encouraged to learn non-formal communication techniques as part of their continuing professional development. We know there is currently emphasis on increasing the skills of the children's workforce in relation to children with SEN and communication needs – this needs to include children with PMLD.

Pay, Status and Commitment

Staff pay and status should reflect the additional skills and training that staff working with pupils with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD) need to provide good quality support.

Mencap's 'On a Wing and a prayer' (1999) found that lack of appropriate training and pay of teaching assistants was a barrier to children with PMLD getting the education they needed. And there is no evidence to suggest the situation has really changed since then.

Conclusion

There is a danger that due to the complexity of children with PMLD's needs, the intensive support they require and the fact they make up a relatively small percentage of school children – they can get missed out.. There needs to be an increased focus on and commitment to meeting the needs of this group of pupils.

That this review is focusing on children with severe and profound learning disabilities is a welcome step forward. The next important step is making this group of children a priority in workforce planning.

We hope that this information is helpful to your review. Please don't hesitate to contact us if you need any further clarification or information with regard to the details above.

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Appendix 1

Understanding profound and multiple learning disabilities

Learning needs. Like all of us, people with profound learning disability will continue to learn throughout their lives if offered appropriate opportunities. Such opportunities must take account of the fact that most people are likely to be learning skills that generally appear at a very early stage of development. For example, cause and effect, such as pressing a switch to make something happen, or turn-taking, such as rolling a ball between two people. Learning is also likely to take place very slowly. For example, some people may have a very small short-term memory and so will need the opportunity to encounter events many times before they become familiar. Constant repetition and a great deal of support will be needed to generalise learning into new situations. Supporting the learning needs of a child or adult with profound and multiple learning disabilities also needs to take account of any additional needs, such as sensory needs (see sensory needs section), so that the best approach to learning can be established.

Communication needs. Many people with profound and multiple learning disabilities rely on facial expressions, vocal sounds, body language and behaviour to communicate. Some people may use a small range of formal communication, such as speech, symbols or signs. However, some people with profound and multiple learning disabilities may not have reached the stage of using intentional communication, and they may rely on others to interpret their reactions to events and people. Most people are also likely to find it difficult to understand the verbal communication of others. Some people will rely heavily on the context in which the communication takes place, such as the clues given by a routine event. It is important that those who support people with profound and multiple learning disabilities spend time getting to know their means of communication and finding effective ways to interact with them.

Physical needs. Some people described as having profound and multiple learning disabilities are fully mobile. Many may use a wheelchair. Others have difficulty with movement and are unable to control or vary their posture efficiently. These individuals will need specialised equipment to aid their mobility, to support their posture and to protect and restore their body shape, muscle tone and quality of life. It is vital that people with physical needs have access to physiotherapy, occupational therapy and hydrotherapy, and that their carers receive training to enable them to manage their physical needs confidently on a day-to-day basis.

Complex health needs. There is a wide range of conditions that children and adults with profound and multiple learning disabilities may have, such as complex epilepsy. An increasing number of people are described as being 'technology dependent', which may mean they need oxygen, tube feeding or suctioning equipment. Some people have conditions that are described as 'life-limiting'. Others have fragile health and may be susceptible to conditions like chest infections and gastro-intestinal conditions. Skilled support may be needed for feeding and swallowing, as good nutrition is a vital part of achieving good health.

Many people may experience a combination of medical needs and need access to specialised health support to ensure the holistic management of these conditions.

People with profound and multiple learning disabilities experience the same health conditions as the rest of the population. The challenge is about how these conditions are identified in people who may not be able to communicate their symptoms easily. For example, it is very important to develop effective ways to recognise and manage pain. It is crucial that a proactive approach is taken to ensure that each person is able to achieve the best possible health they can, for example, by arranging annual health checks and support to access general health care.

Sensory needs. Special attention needs to be given to the sensory needs of people with profound and multiple learning disabilities. Many people have some degree of visual and or hearing disability or a combination of both. Some people's sense of taste or smell may be affected by the drugs they are prescribed. Other people may be hypersensitive to touch. It is essential to know as much as possible about a person's vision, hearing and other senses in order to develop the most effective way to approach their learning and communication needs.

Understanding behaviour. Some behaviour that is seen as challenging may arise because little attention has been given to other needs. It should never be assumed that certain behaviours are just part and parcel of having profound and multiple learning disabilities. For example, a behaviour that services may see as challenging, such as pushing people, may be an attempt to communicate a need. Other changes in behaviour may be due to undetected health needs, such as scratching the face because of a toothache. However, some behaviour will be because people are simply doing things that they enjoy, for example putting a hand under the tap to enjoy the feeling of running water. The important thing is to understand what the behaviour may mean and to respond accordingly, such as checking out any possible health causes or making changes in the environment.

Mental health needs. The mental health needs of individuals with profound and multiple learning disabilities are often not considered. For example, someone who becomes very quiet and passive may be seen as having improved their behaviour when in fact they are depressed. Research suggests that people with profound and multiple learning disabilities may be more susceptible to mental health conditions than the rest of the population. It is important that careful attention is given to these needs and that the right treatment and support is found to meet them.

Profound and multiple learning disabilities and other syndromes or conditions. There are many other conditions and syndromes used to describe people, some of whom could also be described as having profound and multiple learning disabilities. Conditions and syndromes that are more usually associated with profound and multiple learning disabilities include Rett syndrome, Tuberous Sclerosis, Batten's Disease and some other rare disorders. However, some people who are described as having autism and Down's syndrome may also have the combination of profound learning disability and one or more of the needs we have discussed – therefore, they could equally be described as having profound and

multiple learning disabilities.

Support needs. All children and adults with profound and multiple learning disabilities will need high levels of support from families, carers and paid supporters. This will include help with all aspects of personal care, such as washing, dressing and eating, as well as ensuring that each individual has access to high quality and meaningful activity throughout their lives. Those who offer this support will need access to good quality and appropriate training, especially around particular skills. For example, on particular feeding needs and communication approaches. Good support is person-centred, flexible and creative to enable the person with profound and multiple learning disabilities to learn and to achieve their full potential.