

Meeting the Special Educational Needs of Children with
General Learning Disabilities in Primary Schools



strands

Strategies for
Teachers to
Respond
Actively to the
Needs of children with
Down
Syndrome

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FOREWORD

At a time when we have witnessed major changes in the organisation and delivery of special education in Ireland, it gives me great pleasure to welcome the publication of STRANDS. In line with international trends, an increasing number of children with special educational needs are attending mainstream schools. While the presence of children with diverse abilities, interests and experiences in general education classrooms represents a considerable challenge, it also provides the impetus for teachers to develop their expertise and skills. It is the intention of this book to equip primary teachers and special education teachers with a wide range of instructional strategies that can be used to facilitate participation and learning among children with Down syndrome and general learning disabilities.

STRANDS starts from the premise that the quality of teaching is the single most important factor in the learning process for children with special educational needs. Learning is most successful when teachers hold high expectations of themselves and their pupils and provide instruction that builds on each child's talents and abilities while taking account of individual needs. The strategies presented in STRANDS are validated by research and have been used effectively by teachers working in mainstream and special schools in Ireland. As the book is designed to be a practical resource for teachers, it is written in a style that is readily accessible to the reader. Specific examples of classroom practice are included to help teachers apply the suggested approaches. Although the focus is on teaching children with Down syndrome and general learning disabilities, the instructional practices described in STRANDS are applicable to a much broader pupil population. The information in this book will also be of value to teachers working in mainstream post-primary schools and in special schools.

The publication of STRANDS is a testament to the work of the Department of Special Education and the Curriculum Development Unit at Mary Immaculate College and the Special Education Support Service. I would like to congratulate all those associated with its publication. I have no doubt that this excellent resource book will greatly assist teachers in their endeavours to meet the challenge of providing effective learning opportunities for children with Down syndrome and general learning disabilities.



Mr. Ruairí Quinn, T.D.,
Minister for Education and Skills.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A key finding in a report on educational provision for pupils with Down syndrome in primary schools in Limerick city and county (Doherty and Egan 2009), provided the impetus for writing and publishing this resource. This finding documented the urgent need for professional development for teachers in the area of General Learning Disability and Down syndrome in particular. Teachers wanted more specialist knowledge and skills to work well with children who presented with the unique profile of Down syndrome in primary schools. In response to this need, the members of the Department of Special Education at Mary Immaculate College in collaboration with a member of the Special Education Support Service wrote the various STRANDS that comprise the current text. However, we could not have produced the book without the assistance, advice and support of several people and agencies.

Therefore, we wish to acknowledge and thank the following for their contributions:

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**Introduction
and Contents**

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INTRODUCTION

This comprehensive and informative book has been developed by the Department of Special Education, Mary Immaculate College in collaboration with the Special Education Support Service. Drawing on current research and on the experiences of teachers working in both mainstream and special schools, it provides a wealth of practical strategies and suggestions that can be used to enhance teaching and learning for children with Down syndrome in primary schools. While the book was developed in the context of the organisation and structure of the mainstream school, the teaching approaches and strategies advocated here have equal applicability in special schools. As the emphasis is on instructional practices that are responsive to the needs of visual learners, this book will be of interest to primary teachers – already familiar with the primary curriculum – who are teaching a wide range of children with general learning disabilities.

The principles underpinning this work ensure it is research supported, practical and applied, and easily accessible to teachers. The first principle assumes effective instruction acknowledges the uniqueness of the child with Down syndrome as expressed in each child's individual personality, interests, and potential for development. Effective instruction also recognises that children with Down syndrome have characteristics and a learning profile distinct enough from those of other children with general learning disabilities to merit the development of the kind of targeted resources that are presented here. In this book we provide a detailed developmental profile of children with Down syndrome (STRAND 3) including careful attention to educationally relevant characteristics. All the interventions, teaching methods, and accommodations presented in the book are connected to the strengths and needs identified in this STRAND. Using a case study approach, STRAND 13 illustrates the process of developing and writing an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for a child with Down syndrome and a model IEP is provided as an appendix.

The second principle supports the notion that many children with Down syndrome are, for the most part, capable of learning in, and contributing to, the mainstream setting with supports. We recognise that children with special educational needs may attend mainstream or special schools and that the Department of Education and Skills continues to support a continuum of educational provision. STRAND 2 provides an overview of educational provision in Ireland and outlines several benefits of inclusive practices. The book also presents detailed information and strategies for including children with Down syndrome in Early Years classrooms (STRAND 6) with particular attention to building home-school partnerships. STRAND 5 identifies the principles and presents clear and useful methods of differentiating the curriculum for children with Down syndrome, thus enabling them to benefit from instruction in inclusive settings.

The third principle underpinning this work states that children with Down syndrome tend to benefit from an instructional emphasis on visual approaches to learning. Other children benefit from these approaches too, hence the usefulness of this book to teachers of all children who learn well visually. STRAND 10 specifically presents ways to incorporate ICT to support the instruction of children with Down syndrome and a general learning disability. Numerous ways in which technology can be used to meet the needs of children with learning disabilities are described, ranging from simple teacher applications to more sophisticated technology. All the content of STRANDS includes examples of visual supports to enrich the learning experiences of children across the curriculum.

The fourth principle focuses on the need for careful attention to instructional sequences in all areas of the curriculum in order to work well with children who have Down syndrome and a general learning disability. This book provides numerous examples of analytic approaches to curriculum in language, reading, spelling, writing, and mathematics, as well as managing behaviour. Throughout the book, the various STRANDS present clear and detailed examples of an analytic approach where skills are broken down into meaningful sequenced components for teaching. STRAND 4 specifically focuses on ways to teach new skills to children who need carefully developed instructional methods. This STRAND outlines the principles of effective teaching and provides detailed examples through mini cases of the application of these principles to teaching new skills across the curriculum. The curriculum content STRANDS in turn present concrete examples of sequenced curricula with details on how to teach skills in each area. STRAND 7 focuses on teaching speech, language and communication skills. STRAND 8 presents ways to teach literacy including reading, spelling and writing. STRAND 9 examines the Mathematics curriculum and identifies approaches to teaching number concepts and social mathematics. Finally, STRAND 11 provides an analytic framework for positively managing children's behaviour in the classroom.

Principle five argues that children with Down syndrome need extensive trans-environmental planning to ensure their successful transitions from early learning environments to primary school, and from primary school to post-primary school. Attention is paid to this process in three STRANDS in the book. STRAND 6 identifies ways for parents, pre-school providers and primary school teachers to support successful transition of children with general learning disabilities to primary schools. STRAND 14 provides a detailed case study to illustrate the steps that support successful transition from primary to post-primary school. Finally, STRAND 12 presents collaborative models of working as a team to meet the needs of children with Down syndrome in any educational environment.

Overall, a glance through the book shows the practical and applied nature of each STRAND. Teachers of children with Down syndrome and general learning disabilities can dip in and out of different STRANDS to meet their specific needs easily and efficiently. It is our hope that the value of this resource will be evident in its use by teachers and in the happy and productive learning by children with Down syndrome in Irish schools.

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