



# Chapter 4

## Developing Effective Approaches to Learning and Teaching

### **Curriculum Guide for Special Schools**

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## Developing Effective Approaches to Learning and Teaching

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# Developing Effective Approaches to Learning and Teaching

## 4.1 Active Learning, Self-directed Learning and Learning to Learn

All teachers should consider the kinds of learning they wish to promote for their students and the kinds of learners they intend their students to become. These considerations are particularly important when students have special educational needs and significant learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Staff should think about learning from the students' point of view and how they want students to learn. This will help them develop the most appropriate kinds of teaching.

Many teachers around the world, in ordinary primary and secondary schools, as well as in special schools, have committed themselves to promoting active and deeper learning for their students. This means to move students beyond surface learning which can be achieved by repetition, learning by rote and working under adult direction or with heavy prompting. Surface learning might help students develop some skills and enable them to pass certain kinds of tests. However, it is unlikely that it can engage students in thorough understanding, critical engagement or independence in learning.

### Enabling Students to be Active Learners

Active learning lays the foundation for deep learning<sup>21</sup> and self-directed learning. Students who are active learners are motivated to learn, to participate actively and to quest for knowledge. They also develop greater sense of ownership in learning and become more responsible for their own learning. Teachers in an ordinary secondary school, defined this kind of learning for their students as:

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<sup>21</sup> For the definition and details of “deep learning”, please refer to the “Glossary” part of the Introduction and Booklet 3 of the SECG (2017).

*“ . . . a dynamic process based on collaboration, trust, support and encouragement among teachers and students. It involves continuous involvement of students taking account of their needs and interests in the educational process by creating a positive learning environment facilitating active discovery (through, for example, research, theory-practice connection and problem solving applied tasks). Within this process the student becomes independent, critically thinking, reflective and communicative.”*

Staff working in a school with students with learning difficulties committed themselves to promoting:

*“learning that is active, experiential, exploratory, student-led, interactive, dialogic, intrinsically motivating, practical, multimodal, multi-sensory, holistic, coherent, connected to prior learning, challenging, meaningful, relevant and that engages the whole student.”*

These definitions and descriptions are only examples. Each school should explore the meanings of active learning and deep learning for their own context and for their own students. Building the shared definitions of active learning and deep learning with commitment to promoting these kinds of learning by all the staff is a valuable exercise that helps enhance student’s learning effectiveness. Staff members and other stakeholders, including family members and students, are encouraged to work in collaboration. It is helpful for students themselves, for example, to understand the kinds of learning and the characteristics among learners that are valued in their school, so as to reflect on and enhance their own learning.



### For reflection and action

- How do you and your colleagues define active learning and deep learning for your students? Try working together to develop and refine the definitions for your school to suit your students’ abilities and needs.

## Preparing Teachers for Promoting Active Learning

Deeper learning can be promoted through pedagogies that involve students as active learners. Staff need to ensure that learning targets and objectives as well as challenges are clearly identified for students and relevant to the context in which they occur. This means that students will be encouraged to recognise the purpose of learning and teaching



activities. Effective learning and teaching strategies should also be used to engage them actively and meaningfully in the learning activities.

To achieve deeper learning, students should be encouraged to initiate interactions and explorations and to stretch their potential within the learning context. Students may be encouraged to:

- solve problems
- express choices, preferences and personal views
- work with and support one another
- make discoveries

In order to promote active learning for students in special schools, teachers need to take account of individual students' prior skills, achievements and experiences in their planning. Where assessment is to take place, teachers can share performance criteria or targets with students. When learners have meaningful access to the aims and purposes of an activity, they can then be involved in self-evaluation and self-review as learning proceeds. This means in turn that learners can direct and regulate their own learning, becoming increasingly aware of and responsible for their own progress and attainment. For instance, students can learn how to set goals, and during the learning process, they can monitor and reflect on their learning experiences. After evaluating their learning progress, students can identify ways to improve their learning. These kinds of capabilities are crucial to learning to learn and effective self-directed learning, equipping students for learning and applying what they have learned in a range of contexts rather than just completing one specific task.

Promoting active learning involves the engagement of the whole learner. This means working with many aspects of the student as a person, including their interests, their feelings and their preferences. Staff in special schools shall recognise that serious learning can often be achieved through activities that are fun. Effective learning can often be best achieved through activities that stimulate genuine interest in students and generate excitement and enthusiasm through entertainment.

Learning also needs to be challenging for students. There are occasions when it is necessary to revisit prior learning and to repeat activities to make sure that students have retained or generalised their achievements. However, repetition needs to be used judiciously. Teachers shall aim to stimulate and challenge students by providing activities that are fresh, new, exciting and surprising. These activities are likely to be able to stretch students, promote new learning, or at least extend students' experiences into new areas.



## For reflection and action

- How can active learning be promoted in classrooms for deeper learning for students? What are the differences between traditional learning and these kinds of learning?

This chapter has deliberately started with the perspectives of learners. It is suggested that staff perceive learning from the learner's perspective to enhance their teaching effectiveness. Indeed, understanding the learner's point of view is arguably essential to the planning of effective teaching and appropriate pedagogies. The following sections will examine some of the teaching approaches that may be considered important in special schools. These approaches are predicated on the realisation that much traditional teaching depends too heavily upon language, literacy and number skills. Some students in special schools tend to be equipped to listen to long expositions of teacher talk and then to express their understanding in verbal responses, writing or computation – but many will find these approaches inappropriate. Teachers therefore need to develop a repertoire of teaching strategies and diversify their pedagogical approaches to capitalise on students' strengths and preferences and provide them with varied, meaningful and engaging learning experiences.



## For reflection and action

- What measures has your school adopted to help students improve their own learning?
- How can teachers work to perceive learning from the learner's perspective? What are the challenges and how can those challenges be overcome?
- How can students in your school be guided to engage in self-directed learning more effectively?
- How do you deepen students' reflection and help them develop the habit of reflection?
- Can you suggest any key criteria that define and describe active learning and deep learning, and identify any particular aspects of teaching associated with these kinds of learning?

## 4.2 Multi-sensory Approaches

Multi-sensory approaches to learning provide opportunities to make activities exciting and stimulating for students in special schools. These elements are essential for students with sensory and physical impairments with particular regard to developing their perceptual and motor skills. Staff may incorporate a range of sensory inputs into lessons in order to maximise involvement for students who may experience barriers to learning in any single sensory domain (for example, vision or hearing).

Sensory inputs may include elements that emphasise:

- visual stimulation (using bright lights, shiny surfaces or moving objects)
- hearing (including loud and soft sounds, music and musical instruments, sound sources that move about the room or virtual space)
- touch and feeling (through objects that have different surface textures or hard or soft compositions)
- the sense of smell (using food items, drinks, different natural and man-made materials and substances that generate aromas)
- taste (using different foods and drinks to stimulate students and perhaps to establish preferences)
- movement, balance and positioning (so that shifts in the position of the whole body or of the limbs, for example, can provide stimulation; it could be facilitated by a member of staff or an assistant for all students, including those with impairments in other sensory domains)

Many special schools will invest in technologies to provide students with virtual realities, online learning opportunities and simulated environments. While technologies can be useful in targeting or amplifying sensory stimuli for learning, ensuring that there is a sensory dimension to lessons does not have to involve elaborate preparation or expensive equipment. Everyday items or pieces of household equipment can provide good sensory stimulus, e.g. a flashlight used in a darkened room or inside a tent can offer excellent opportunities for visual tracking. The natural environment outside the classroom can also provide endless forms of sensory stimulation – sights, sounds, smells, textures and so on. For many students, attending to the sound of the wind in the trees, feeling the texture of plants, or noticing the smell of newly-dug soil can provide fascinating sensory experiences. Many special schools thus invest in these kinds of experiences by maintaining outside environments with sensory dimensions – a sensory garden or a collection of herbs and

other fragrant plants in pots, for example – and this kind of learning can be extended into environments at home and in the community.



### **Myth: Does using as many sensory inputs as possible at a time facilitate student learning more effectively?**

“Multi-sensory” teaching is particularly useful in special schools. However, meticulous observations and thoughtfully planned teaching will avoid mere sensory bombardment in which all the senses of the student are stimulated dramatically and all at once. It is often preferable to introduce the stimulation of the senses singly, trying one source of stimulation and allowing time for a response (which may be significantly delayed for many students with severe intellectual disability) before introducing a different stimulus. Allowing time for responses and observing the different reactions that students give to different stimuli will help school staff identify the kinds of sensory interventions that catch students’ attention, enable them to respond, and thus to learn.

It is important to remember that some students in special schools (including those with autism spectrum conditions) will be highly sensitive to sensory stimuli and may even be defensive against certain kinds of sensory input. Some students, for example, may be startled and become distressed by loud sounds; others may be tactile defensive and resist touching unfamiliar objects or textures. In all cases, new forms of sensory stimulation need to be introduced carefully so that responses can be assessed and judgements made about appropriate levels of input. Also, school staff should closely attune to the learning preferences and the characteristics of individual students. In many cases, thoughtful use of relatively gentle forms of stimulation can promote student engagement and may boost their confidence in bolder forms of experimentation in future.

Students with dual or multi-sensory impairment (for example, students who have hearing as well as visual impairments) will be unable to make use of many common forms of classroom or virtual experience, and these impairments compound their difficulties in learning in very significant ways. Therefore, staff need to plan their interventions with immense care and devote time to highly focused observations of responses to alternative stimuli. It is worth noting that sensory impairments are often extremely difficult to identify and to assess in students with severe intellectual disability. It is important for staff not to make hasty assumptions about the senses that are available to students who may appear to be unresponsive. Once again, the systematic introduction of carefully graded stimuli using each of the senses in turn followed by meticulous observation and evaluation of responses is an effective approach to identify the learning characteristics and impairments of these students for enhancing teaching effectiveness.



Ensuring that there are sensory dimensions to classroom and home study activities can help secure access for all students (including those with multi-sensory impairments and severe intellectual disability) to productive learning opportunities, including those opportunities related to the subjects and other important aspects of learning. Moreover, all students (including those with higher prior attainments) will benefit from engaging in practical activities, working with real objects, exploring genuine situations and investigating authentic processes. Special schools should therefore provide tangible sensory dimensions to learning for all students.



### For reflection and action

- How do you use multi-sensory strategies in your teaching to help students build on their strengths and address their weaknesses?
- Think about the variety of learning and teaching strategies used in your school. How do these strategies provide multiple personalised opportunities to help students reach their full learning potential?

## 4.3 Modes of Communication

Language and literacy skills are core competencies for learning, whereas communication skills are the functional foundation for language and literacy skills development. Communication involves expressing and receiving messages. Students need to learn to understand the messages and feelings expressed by others through communication. They also need to learn to express themselves, including putting forward requests, giving responses, indicating choices and preferences, and expressing ideas and feelings, etc. Special schools should develop their own policies on communication in order to offer students opportunities to understand others and to express themselves.

### Different Modes of Communication

Students should be encouraged to use the modes of communication appropriate to their needs. These might include but are not limited to:

- **body language, gestures, physical activities and behaviours** – for example, pointing to a preferred toy, turning the head away or move away to say “no”, or waving goodbye

- **looking, eye pointing/attending, eye gazing and facial expressions** – for example, maintaining gaze on items of interest, looking towards a preferred object or grimacing at an unpleasant taste
- **using real objects to signal, give cues or indicate preferences** – for example, picking up a cup to request more drink or selecting a towel to indicate “I want to go swimming”
- **tactile cues and tactile tracking** – for example, learning to identify the smooth shiny texture as a signifier of “my photograph” or to follow naturally occurring tactile cues around the environment to locate specified resources or locating teaching areas around the school by finding tactile name plates outside each room
- conventional gestures using combinations of **manual signs and facial expressions, and/or formal sign language** – for example, smiling and nodding with hands reaching out to indicate “yes please” when offered preferred food items, or signing requests to go to the “toilet”
- **picture exchange communication systems** using photographs, pictures, line drawings and symbols – for example, picking out a photograph of the school bus to indicate “I’m going home” or carrying a small set of individual symbols or pictures to express essential needs
- **information and communication technologies** – for example, pressing a switch to indicate “yes” or “no”, pressing a switch-activated voice synthesiser/speech generator to express a response or creating connected sequences of meanings using a touch screen tablet
- **vocalisation and approximation** – for example, vocalising in response to questions, and making approximate sounds for the names of familiar people as greetings or making requests
- **spoken language** – for example, following verbal instructions, using single words or simple utterances or phrases to express ideas, engaging in daily conversations
- **written language** – for example, recognising written words in association with photographs, reading, writing on paper or typing on keyboards

## Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

The forms of communication are “multimodal” as various modalities are involved. Special schools should help students make use of different modalities, such as visual, oral, aural, tactile, etc. of communication by taking into account the sensory modalities that individual students can manage. These forms of communication can be “augmentative and alternative” to supplement, support or reinforce (augment) or to replace (provide alternatives to) dominant forms of communication, such as listening, speaking, reading or writing which the students could not manage. These modes of communication can also be used as alternative strategies in cases where conventional skills are affected by an impairment (e.g. sensory or physical impairments).

The augmentative and alternative functions of AAC are illustrated by the following examples respectively:

- **Augmentative function** – Students with severe intellectual disability could use pictures, photographs, objects, symbols or gestures to augment conventional speaking and writing skills where these skills are emerging or developing;
- **Alternative function** – Sign language could be used as an alternative to speech for students with profound hearing impairment who cannot develop speech and benefit from the hearing aids; or sequencing objects as an alternative to symbols or written words for students with visual impairment.

Special schools should establish communication systems for their students to allow indication of requests, responses, decisions, choices and preferences, ideas and feelings. This is to ensure that views of students are respected, acknowledged and acted upon. In order to enhance self-determination and provide improved levels of personal safety, it is also essential that students should be encouraged to develop a means of communicating “no” to give a negative response or as a form of refusal. These strategies may range from turning the head or moving the body away from objects, pushing objects away or off the table, to head shaking or using signs or symbols to indicate “no”.

Staff in special schools should establish appropriate communication systems and make adjustments for students according to their capacities, communication needs and development as well as the communication contexts.

## Early Forms of Communication

Communication is not only strongly represented in the Learning Progression Frameworks (LPFs)<sup>22</sup> for Chinese Language for students with intellectual disability, but also at the early levels (i.e. Initial Mastery Levels, “I Levels”) in the LPFs for other subjects, where Levels I1 to I6 are about development in communication. The level descriptions assume that communication is pre-intentional at Levels I1 to I3 and intentional communication emerges at I4 to I5. The examples of learning outcomes given in the I Levels show some of the communicative behaviours that might be observed, for example, looking, attending, eye pointing, gesture, body language and whole body responses, actions and facial expressions.

<sup>22</sup> The *Learning Progression Frameworks for Students with Intellectual Disabilities* were developed to complement the implementation of the curricula of different subjects. They can be part of school assessment mechanisms for assessing the learning progress and attainment levels of students in different subjects. For details, please refer to the “Special Educational Needs” webpage of the EDB (<https://www.edb.gov.hk/en/curriculum-development/curriculum-area/special-educational-needs/index.html>).

All these forms of communication can be used both expressively and receptively by staff and students to express ideas (for example, a student showing a picture to represent “I would like a biscuit, please”) and to comprehend messages (for example, a student responding appropriately to a teacher signing “time to put on your coat”).

These forms of communication can be used conventionally as whole-school communication systems or adapted for use by individual students. For example, a school making provision for students with intellectual disability and/or sensory impairments might decide, as a matter of whole school policy to:

- use a school-wide system of visual and tactile symbols to label, at child height, the door to every room in the school (e.g. “Class 3”, “Toilet”, “Library”, etc.)
- operate a system of pictorial schedules in each class as an accessible timetable of activities
- establish whole-school vocabularies of basic gestures and manual signs to augment routine spoken instructions (e.g. “please sit down”, “lunch time”, “Mathematics lesson”, etc.)

Schools might also establish communication systems for individual students according to their communication needs, for example, a picture exchange communication system for a student not yet mastering the use of symbols; use of objects in communication for a student with visual impairment; and a speech generating device for a student with physical disabilities that result in insufficient vocal control.

If students show communicative responses that are different from those set in the learning outcomes in the LPFs at Levels I1 to I6 but are cognitively equivalent (for example, using vocalisation rather than eye contact, gestures or actions to seek attention), these responses should be perceived as equivalent attainments. Schools might record such responses as the learning performance of the students.

Assessing early communication skills of students is not easy for teachers. Teachers could work in collaboration with speech therapists in identifying students’ communication intents and acts, and collect, analyse and record more comprehensive performance examples according to the LPFs so as to allow illustration of progress of the students at a particular level.



### For reflection and action

- As a teacher, how do you make decisions about applying your knowledge, understanding and experience of different approaches to communication to support student learning?

# 4

## 4.4 Group Work and Peer Interaction

Grouping is an important form of differentiation that can support the learning of students in special schools. Teachers should provide students with opportunities, according to the learning objectives and contexts, for whole class sessions, working in groups of various sizes and compositions, as well as for individual teaching.

There are many ways and forms of grouping. At times, for example, it is useful to create teaching groups of students with similar prior attainments – e.g. a group of students working at a similar level in Mathematics. Such teaching groups are referred to as “sets” or homogeneous groups. Other times, it will be helpful to teach using heterogeneous or mixed groups so that students can engage in activities using different prior knowledge and skills at different levels. In carefully planned activities for mixed groups of students, the potential for interdependent and collaborative learning can be explored and exploited.

Mixed groups can be seen as using a “jigsaw” approach, in which students with different capabilities can work together on different elements of a task to achieve a shared outcome. Working in this way allows students to benefit from observing their peers undertaking aspects of the activity, learning from modelling and peer coaching. Peer supported learning can often be more effective than direct teaching by an adult, as this way of learning can make good use of the talents and aptitudes of all the students in a group, and in turn help students build confidence and interest in learning.

In some special schools, in particular those admitting students with intellectual disability, there has been practice of teaching these students as individual learners by teaching them individually during lessons or after class to cater for their individual differences. However, this can result in:

- additional work for staff when teaching activities have to be planned for each student
- prolonged waiting time for students as members of staff work their way around a class providing one-to-one tuition
- missed opportunities for productive interactions between students and peer supported learning

Group work can reduce much of the waiting time and avoid isolation associated with one-to-one teaching. However, group work requires the adults in the classroom to be very clear about their roles and responsibilities. Different members of staff can be deployed to support groups of students within a lesson. Other groups may be encouraged to work



without staff support to achieve more student-led outcomes. Planning for group work is multi-dimensional and can be complex. Section 4.5 below discusses how planning shared between teachers and other professionals can be particularly productive for student learning.



### For reflection and action

- How do you develop a learning culture that promotes meaningful and collaborative learning in your lessons?
- What are the advantages, disadvantages, strengths and limitations of individualised teaching compared with group work? Consider this from the perspectives of both teachers and students.

## 4.5 Team Work in the Classroom

The importance of team work and collaboration is highlighted in Chapter 2 “Curriculum Planning in Special Schools”, and teachers in special schools are used to working in a variety of forms of partnership. Special school teachers will recognise, for example, that therapists and support staff have valuable insights to contribute to the planning process – either as a result of professional expertise, perhaps in the identification of sensory needs, or as a result of close observation – as well as to various forms of classroom activity. Planning, teaching, observing learning and making assessments in partnerships between staff working in a special school can capitalise on the varied forms of expertise of staff involved in facilitating student learning. Different forms of professional partnership in the special school setting can include:

- partnerships between teachers
- partnerships between teachers and support staff (including teacher assistants)
- partnerships between teachers and other adults
- partnerships between teachers and other professionals (including therapists and educational psychologists)

Professional collaboration can make a valuable contribution in all phases of the planning, learning and teaching, assessment and review cycle, as discussed below.

### Partnerships Between Teachers

Teachers working in special schools find that working together with other teachers can be deeply rewarding. Teachers acknowledge that planning their work in pairs or groups with other teachers can enhance the quality of the plans they produce. Colleagues bring new

perspectives and varied experiences to the planning task. Drawn on a range of experiences, the resulting curriculum plans are more likely to engage students in deeper learning, leading to new attainments for students. In collaborative planning, teachers can share insights into subjects, build deeper subject knowledge and improve their awareness of how to make subject learning accessible for students with difficulties in learning. These shared experiences can contribute greatly towards the development of genuine whole school approaches. Collaborative approaches to curriculum planning can lead to powerful and beneficial outcomes in special schools.

Teachers can also work closely to implement their plans. Co-teaching can take a number of forms. For example:

- teachers can share responsibility for the teaching of whole class lessons, working in close teaching partnerships and taking turns to deliver aspects of the planned session
- teachers can take responsibility for teaching different groups so that the class is divided, for parts of the lesson, into smaller clusters of students, in order that modes of access are appropriate for sub-sets of students who, for example, have similar prior attainments, who use signs to communicate or who need particular forms of sensory input
- on some occasions, one teacher might take lead responsibility for teaching while a colleague observes and records student responses

In all these forms of partnership, it is important to make sure that time is set aside, after the co-taught lesson, for review and de-briefing. In order to work effectively in teaching teams, teachers not only need to plan together but also to reflect together on the lessons they have taught; on the student responses they have seen; on the potential to make assessments on the basis of those observed responses; and on the need to review and refine future teaching in order that future lessons are more accurately focused on meeting the needs of students.

## Partnerships Between Teachers and Teacher Assistants

Teacher assistants can make positive contributions to student learning and team work between teachers and teacher assistants can take many forms. Collaboration does not necessarily mean that colleagues carry out similar roles in similar ways. Asymmetrical forms of partnership, where the teacher takes the lead in planning and implementing lessons and the teacher assistant is in support, can be very effective.

On the other hand, in some schools it is acknowledged that teacher assistants have good knowledge of the students' preferences and prior attainments and can help provide opportunities to embed personal priorities for learning into plans for subject-related

teaching. In these cases, teacher assistants can contribute meaningfully to planning, while the teacher takes the lead in designing lessons and in making strategic decisions about learning and teaching.

It is likely that teacher assistants will be closely involved in learning activity, even if in a supportive role while the teacher takes the lead, so it is crucially important that they understand and share the purposes and objectives of planned lessons. Adequate time is required to share those purposes and objectives with teacher assistants as well as to inform them their roles and duties in the activities prior to lessons.

It is important that teacher assistants in special schools work closely with teachers on the delivery of lessons. This form of team work can be very effective. Teacher assistants can enable teachers to carry out vital pedagogic roles within lessons – with the former, for example, sometimes supporting individual students in their learning or sometimes attending to small groups of students; and sometimes supporting the learning for the main part of the class for parts of the lesson to enable the teacher to focus on individual students or sub-groups of students.

At all times, teacher assistants should be deployed in ways that promote more effective teaching and more successful learning – and this can only be achieved where team work and collaboration are strong. Each school will develop their own approaches to collaboration – but it will remain the responsibility of teachers to adopt a leading role in creating and sustaining all forms of professional partnership.

Team work, involving any adults who can make a contribution to learning and teaching, can bring benefits to individual students, to groups and in some cases to the whole class. Many special schools deploy teacher assistants in support of learning and teaching, whether focusing on the needs of specific groups of students or as staff working in particular subject areas. In some classes in some special schools, lessons also benefit from the presence of adult volunteers or members of staff employed to support particular students. Where learning is extended into the home, family members and friends can also make their contributions to learning. The roles of these additional adults must, of course, be carefully negotiated and managed. In particular, teachers have a leading role in any learning and teaching team and should plan carefully for all forms of partnership to support student learning effectively.



### For reflection and action

- In what ways does your school encourage partnerships in the classroom between teachers and teacher assistants?

- How could these partnerships be developed in order to support the learning and attainment of students?

## Partnerships Between Teachers and Other Professionals

The partnerships between teachers and other professionals are among the most powerful forms of collaboration found in special schools. The contributions of a speech therapist to planning and implementing strategies to enhance communication can be hugely significant given that language and communication play such major roles in the curriculum in special schools. For example, speech therapists may collaborate with teachers to help students apply the communication skills and strategies in learning and other school activities so as to enhance the communicative responses for attaining learning outcomes. Further, educational psychologists with their expertise in cognitive development of students with special educational needs will be able to provide consultation on the process of establishing, reviewing and refining priorities and targets for learning for individual students.

Different professionals can make contributions in special schools in various ways. Senior staff and curriculum leaders in special schools should develop, foster and sustain ways of involving other professionals in planning activities in collaboration with teachers. These professionals can participate and contribute at levels of whole school policy with long, medium and short term planning. With detailed planning and clear delineation of work, they can also make valuable and direct contribution in terms of classroom learning. Transdisciplinary partnerships that synergise knowledge, skills and experience of teachers, support staff and other professionals, provide students with special educational needs with supportive and facilitating contexts and environments for effective communication and learning.



### For reflection and action

- In what ways are therapists and other professionals involved in learning and teaching in your school?
- How could your school encourage these professionals to make more direct contributions to learning and teaching in classrooms and beyond?

## Other Forms of Partnership

Other forms of partnership can also contribute to learning for students in special schools. For example, interaction with parents and carers (including family members at home or staff in boarding sections or residential provision) allows the collection or analysis of information regarding the training needs of students for setting appropriate personalised goals or targets for individual learning in priority areas. Staff who support students in making links with their communities or who provide respite care might also have essential information regarding the preferences of students in various circumstances. On the other hand, school staff will also be able to share information with home and residential staff, insights and developments made in relation to students' learning in school, for example, in terms of independence skills or crucial skills of various modes of communication. Students should be provided with a facilitating environment and opportunities for effective application of learned communication strategies to convey their needs, choices and preferences in various areas of their lives, including at home, in boarding sections/residential provision and in the community.

Students themselves can also provide important insights into their own learning and into the learning of their peers. Indeed, as students engage with deeper forms of learning and with self-regulation, it is important that they take greater responsibility for their own learning journey or trajectories. Staff in special schools can support these processes by sharing and negotiating targets for learning with students – objectives that students understand and own will be likely to be more engaging and motivating. Students can then be encouraged to monitor their own progress and performance in learning activities. Becoming aware of strategies that are successful compared with ways of working that generate barriers to learning can help students learn more effectively in future as well as develop important values and attitudes (for details of values and attitudes, see Chapter 3 “Addressing Specific Learning Elements of the Curriculum”). As students make progress towards their objectives, they will be enabled to take account of their own attainments and the attainments of their peers. These forms of involvement can provide valuable insights into student learning for staff as well as positive outcomes in terms of learning to learn for students.



### For reflection and action

- How does your school engage parents in the process of helping their children improve their learning? How can teachers, parents and students cooperate to enhance students' learning effectiveness?
- How does your school engage with students' family members in order to gain support for students' education and school activities?



## 4.6 Classroom Management and the Use of Resources and Equipment

Technology is evolving rapidly. The range of resources and equipment available to special schools in supporting student learning continues to expand exponentially. However, as this guide is centrally focused on curriculum and learning, the issues of classroom management and the use of resources and equipment will only be discussed briefly.

Special schools will already find themselves challenged to make most effective pedagogical use of new information and communication technologies and to make ever-increasing space available for the storage of equipment such as mobility aids, standing frames, benches, beds and chairs for students with physical and/or sensory impairments.

As stated in Chapter 2 “Curriculum Planning in Special Schools”, issues of resource allocation and positioning and mobility need to be taken into account in short term or lesson planning. School staff should help students be comfortably positioned and able to access and interact both with items of equipment and resources and with other people involved in the planned activities. For some students with specific disabilities, this will mean, for example, that large TV screens need to be provided at appropriate heights; that high-quality sound to be generated at appropriate volumes; that personal computer or tablet screens to be located in very close proximity; that tables and chairs to be adjustable; or that table or tray space is devoted to objects used for communication.

In view of the lack of certain resources and equipment in the commercial market that can fully address the special needs of their students, some special schools devote a great deal of time, expertise and energy to developing purpose-designed items of equipment and teaching resources. There is no doubt that these resources can be of greater relevance to the students they are designed for than many items purchased from commercial suppliers.

Regarding the class sessions, the durations of standard teaching periods are inappropriate for many students in special schools. They will find it difficult to focus consistently throughout a 40-minute lesson; some students may be unable to sustain their attention, their states of awareness or their physical positions and levels of comfort beyond periods of time measured in minutes or even seconds. Staff in special schools will therefore often find it useful to break timetabled lessons up into sub-sections. This might mean, for example:

- providing an introduction to the themes and objectives of the lesson at the start for the whole class

- breaking up the main part of the lesson into a series of mini-lessons and activities
- adjusting the pace of the lesson in response to students' reactions in order to move more quickly, or more slowly, and to provide suitable periods of wait time
- creating time and opportunity within lessons to enable staff to change positions for students (perhaps from desks and chairs to sitting on the floor or from chairs into standing frames) and to promote mobility (perhaps by creating motivations for supported movement around the teaching environment)
- introducing different equipment or different technologies for different phases of the lesson
- dividing and sub-dividing the class into different groups for different sections of the lesson (for example, sometimes in mixed groups and sometimes in groups with similar prior attainments or communication preferences)
- offering a review of learning and a celebration of individual responses and attainments at the end of the lesson



### For reflection and action

- How does your school ensure that the time available for learning is optimised for students?
- How does your school work to reduce or avoid prolonged waiting time for students?
- How does your school provide good quality time for students who need to engage in therapies and medical procedures, personal care activities and rest and recuperation?

## 4.7 Approaches to Life-wide Learning

Learning should go beyond the confines of the classroom, and the learning time<sup>23</sup> of students should refer to not only classroom periods as students can gain learning experiences anywhere and anytime for whole-person development. In light of this, life-wide learning is an effective strategy that moves student learning beyond the classroom and into other learning contexts. Through life-wide learning, teachers can extend the learning time and enable students to gain experiences that are difficult to acquire in ordinary classroom settings. Life-wide learning strategies can be integrated into the learning and teaching of KLAs, cross-curricular learning and co-curricular activities, so as to increase students' learning interests and engagement for self-directed learning and whole-person development.

<sup>23</sup> For further details of the notion of "learning time", please refer to the *Task Force on Review of School Curriculum Final Report* (2020) and the *PECG* (2024).

Life-wide learning emphasises experiential learning in real-life contexts and authentic settings. “Extending”, “enabling” and “enriching” learning in this way can help students develop the lifelong learning capabilities they will need in their future lives in society. Special schools can help students acquire the five essential learning experiences and enhance the learning under different KLAs by providing life-wide learning opportunities through different contexts<sup>24</sup>. Life-wide learning can also provide ideal conditions for students to “consolidate” and apply their generic skills as well as life skills.

Different organisations and locations may offer a range of relevant learning opportunities and life-wide learning can take place in a range of different contexts outside school. These contexts include:

- the natural environment
- workplaces and industrial and commercial organisations
- the Internet, online platforms and mass media
- friendship and peer groupings in the community
- social, cultural, spiritual and religious organisations
- home and the wider family



### For reflection and action

- Life-wide learning is a “learning-focused” strategy. In your school, how do you make use of different contexts for learning that extend well beyond formal lessons in the classroom?

Learning at home and in the family can help further extend and enrich the learning experiences of students in special schools. Where school staff and family members collaborate over agreed definition of priorities and targets for student learning (for example, in terms of personal targets set in the generic skills), progress made in school can be consolidated and extended at home. Family members may also be able to report to school staff significant new responses and behaviours they have witnessed at home and to suggest

<sup>24</sup> For details of different contexts for life-wide learning, please refer to Figure 7.2 in Booklet 7 of the SECG (2017) and Figure 8.2 in Chapter 8 of the PEGC (2024).

new or extended targets for further learning. School staff and family members should work in close partnerships and communicate regularly and effectively in order to maximise the effectiveness of learning at home.

School staff and family members also need to collaborate over priorities for learning in the community. As part of curriculum planning, teachers in special schools should provide students with regular opportunities to experience a range of community settings. Schools may have programmes designed to familiarise students with a variety of community contexts, such as shops, parks, leisure facilities and entertainment venues. Schools should also teach students how to make safe and increasingly independent use of transport and travel infrastructures, including pedestrian paths and walkways, road crossings, buses, taxis and trains. Family members may wish to nominate personalised priorities for particular students and to help, in partnership with schools, their sons and daughters learn how to function safely and independently, for example, in specific parts of the city, in particular places of work or occupation, or on specific bus or MTR routes.

Learning at home and learning in the community will contribute significantly to the process of learning for life. Life-wide learning can provide students with opportunities to extend learning time into real life contexts, activities and experiences. This will, in turn, ensure that learning remains relevant to life beyond school and to the opportunities that adult life will bring.

With careful planning and thoughtful implementation, life-wide learning can also provide numerous good opportunities for student self-reflection. Student self-reflection can, in turn, enhance deep learning and help students develop as self-directed learners. Reflection does not have to involve writing. Students can be encouraged to recall and reflect upon their experience, learning and achievements through use of real objects and artefacts, photographs, videos, simulation and role play and through discussion with staff and with peers whether online or back in the classroom (see also Chapter 5 “Assessing Progress and Attainment”).



### For reflection and action

- How does your school make use of the community and community-based resources in order to facilitate student learning?
- How does your school strengthen the provision of life-wide learning experiences in the face of limited resources and other constraints (e.g. constraints in real-life environments)?