

PROFOUND AND MULTIPLE LEARNING DIFFICULTIES: ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION

It is extremely difficult to attempt to define the term 'Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties' (PMLD). Within the arena of learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) and Special Educational Needs (SEN) is an extremely wide spectrum or continuum of disorders, difficulties, syndromes and needs. Christine deGraft-Hanson, SEN & ICT Consultant for SEMERC/GL discusses the importance of identifying a learner's sensory preference or preferences and some possible interventions that teachers, therapists and carers could use.

What are profound and multiple learning difficulties?

Prior to 1978, the term 'handicapped' was used to describe most learners with SEN. In the UK, the Warnock Report (DES 1978) recommended that the use of this terminology be discontinued and alternatives introduced. Learners with LDDs soon became categorised as having MLD (moderate learning difficulties), EBD (emotional and behavioural difficulties), etc. Whilst no category was universally agreed and accepted for those learners whose needs were at the extreme end of the spectrum, the term PMLD quickly became established. It appeared to 'describe' totally, what these needs were and became accepted amongst teachers and practitioners. In essence, PMLD is an 'umbrella' under which learners with the severest of learning difficulties and disabilities may be grouped. Some attempts to define PMLD have suggested that a learner may be said to have PMLD when they have "two or more severe impairments, one of which is profound learning difficulties" (Ware and Healey, 1994)

Educating the learner with PMLD

The Education (Handicapped Children) Act of 1970 (in the UK) recognised the rights of learners with the severest of learning difficulties and disabilities to be educated, putting an end to the practice of 'classifying children suffering from a disability of mind as children unsuitable for education at school'.

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Worldwide support for educating the learner with disabilities came in 1989 with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This promoted the rights of inclusive education for all, irrespective of the nature of the disability.

A Sensory Curriculum

This right to education led to issues with resources, teacher training, and access to the curriculum. Previously it had been considered almost impossible to educate learners with needs falling under the 'umbrella' of PMLD and there had been no need for anything other than basic care (feeding, toileting, etc). These learners had not needed teachers or schools and even more daunting, they had not needed a curriculum. Now they most certainly needed, schools, teachers and a curriculum.

The new legislation led to discussions of separate curricula, differentiation of the current curricula and devising a whole new curriculum. In the UK, P Scales and EQUALS became part of the language of teachers of learners with LDD and SEN.

With the 'conventional' routes to learning somewhat outside the scope of these learners, teachers and therapists worked together to devise the Sensory Curriculum where the emphasis was on acquiring learning through the different senses. Lessons, resources and training were all planned with this curriculum in mind and this curriculum has become accepted as an integral part of school life for learners with PMLD/SLD. Working from a Sensory Curriculum does not exclude the learners from having access to broad and balanced curriculum. As far as possible, all learners should be accessing the same overall curriculum through the medium (if necessary) of assistive technology or other forms of ICT.

Issues to consider before planning and delivering a Sensory Curriculum

It is imperative that the skills of the adults within the school/learning environment are assessed and established prior to attempting to plan, resource and deliver such a curriculum. Where teaching and support staff have deficiencies within their knowledge or skills base in this area, training must be carried out. The physical resources available within the school must also be taken into consideration.

Within the wider arena of learning disabilities and difficulties the most difficult for teachers and practitioners to work with are the 'hidden' difficulties. One such LDD is a Sensory Processing Disorder. It is therefore even more imperative that the teacher/practitioner investigates and assesses as much as possible the learner's needs, preferences and abilities in order to best plan for meeting their needs.

Sensory Rooms and Multisensory Environments (MSEs)

The majority of schools and learning environments catering for learners with PMLDs/SLDs have 'Sensory rooms', a version of the multisensory environments (MSEs), which may be found in some hospitals or other specialist settings. MSEs are based on the original concept of 'Snoezelen', a Dutch 'Sensory' room.

Where members of staff are not sufficiently trained in the use of such facilities, the Sensory rooms or MSEs are either underused or used incorrectly. For example, learners may be taken into these rooms and left sitting in there whilst a couple of supporting adults take the opportunity to discuss an incident that occurred in the playground. Enough consideration may not be given to the learning preferences of said learner, nor may the members of staff even know about, let alone have considered the possibility of the learner having a sensory processing disorder and the difficulties which may arise as a consequence of over stimulation. The learner may or may not be stimulated by the sounds they hear or the sights they see, etc. These rooms and environments were originally designed to provide leisure and relaxation in a stimulating and interactive environment. If the learner isn't relaxed, or stimulated or interacting, the aims aren't met.

Assessing the learner with PMLD/SLD

Using a resource such as the SNOEZELEN® Sensory Assessment and Profiling Tool (developed by SEMERC in association with the originators of the Snoezelen concept - ROMPA), the teacher or supporting adult can quickly and systematically build up a profile on the learner. This profile would enable them to see which sensory areas were preferred or not preferred by the learner, both very important factors when planning any

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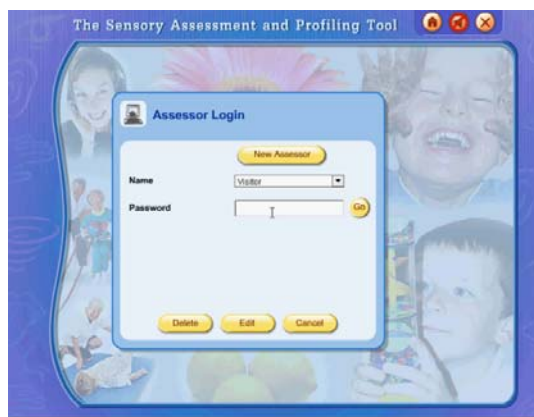
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form of intervention. The profiling tool is a time effective assessment method with clear results causing very little additional workload for the teacher or supporting adult and eliminating the need for paper based assessments and records. It allows for an assessment of six different areas (taste, touch, sight, smell, sound and movement) and is designed to support the work of the teacher, the therapist, the carer, the parent, etc, etc as they work with the learner to provide them with the best possible education and care. The profiling tool returns results either graphically or in a linear (text) format allowing the 'assessor' to see which senses are the preferred or non-preferred ones.

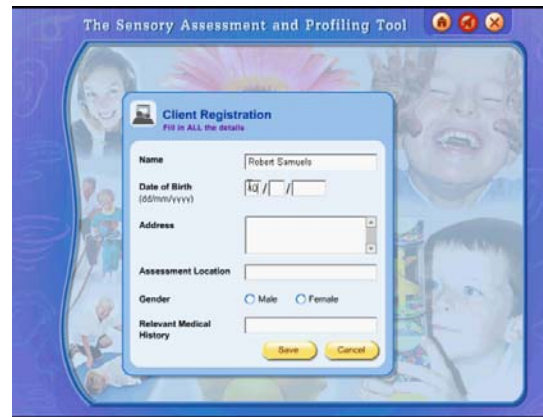
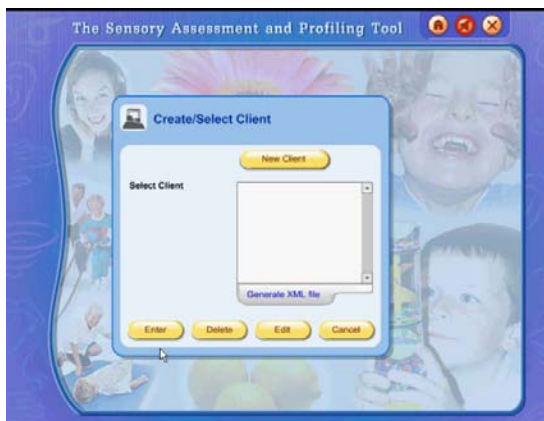


Fig 1 - the six areas covered by the profiling tool



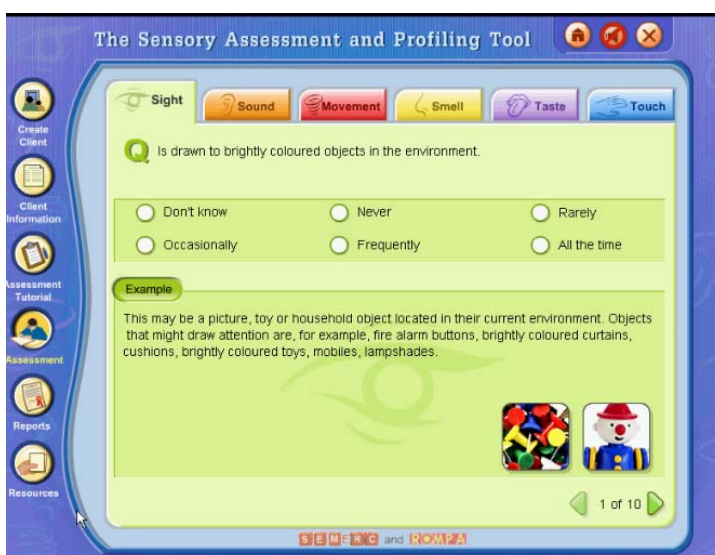
Figs 2 & 3 - the assessor login and registration screens

The program has a password protection function, protecting learners/clients' details and records. Assessors register own details prior to setting up their learner's (or client's) details and conducting the assessment.



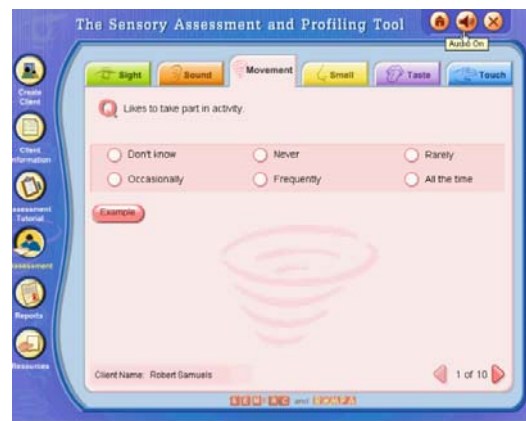
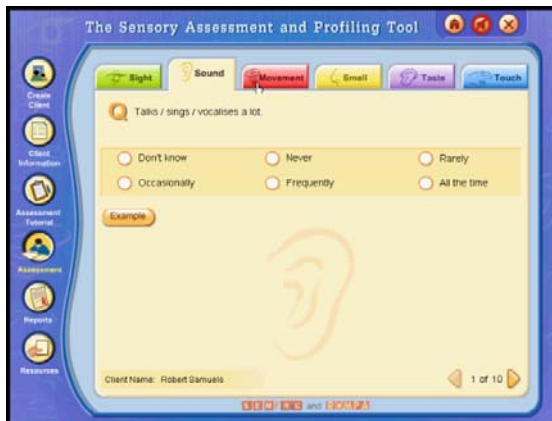
When the learner's details have been entered, the profiling tool is ready for use.

Figs 4, 5 & 6 - setting up the learner or client's details



For each area under assessment, there are ten questions to be considered. It is intended that these questions be completed after detailed observation of the learner either in a MSE, or the questions used as 'suggestions' for investigation. For example, if the teacher

or practitioner does not know whether the learner is 'drawn to brightly coloured objects in the environment' they could actively plan for and conduct an investigation to enable them to answer this question.



Figs 7, 8 & 9 show some of the questions used in the profiling tool

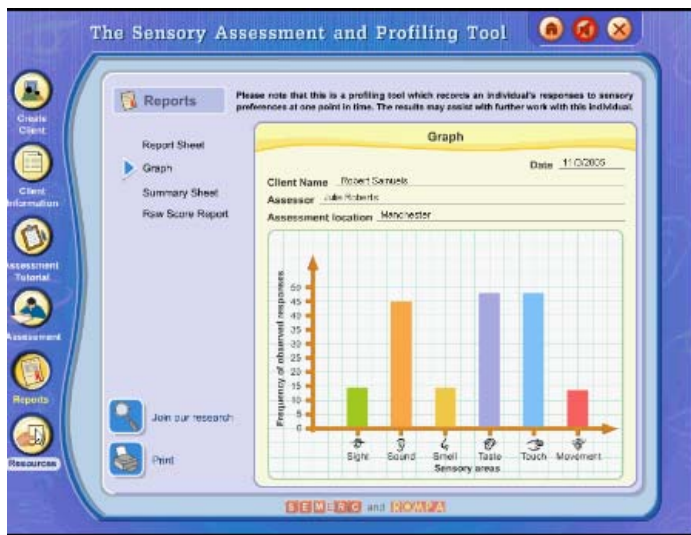


Fig 10 - an example graph

On completion of the assessment, a report is compiled which the assessor may access through the reports button. This may be viewed as a report sheet, a graph, a summary sheet or a raw score report. The graphical representation is shown in the adjacent image.

When the assessment is complete and the learner's profile has been compiled, the teacher, therapist or supporting adult is ready to move towards intervention either through a sensory curriculum, informed use of a multisensory environment or some other well structured approach and may refer to the Resources section of the program for support and ideas in planning such a curriculum.

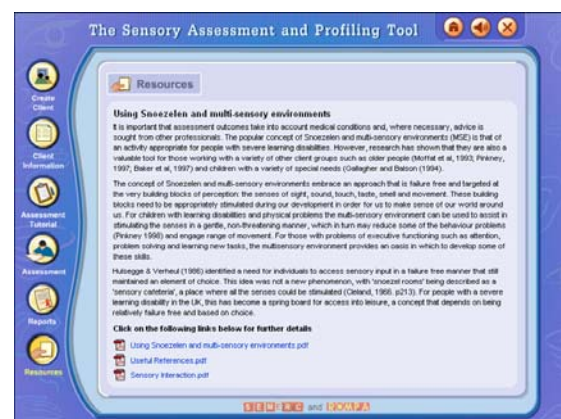


Fig 11 - the Resources section contains pdfs with further information and suggestions

Sample lesson plans that could form part of a Sensory Curriculum

These are two very basic examples, which may be used as they stand or adapted to better suit time spent in a MSE. They may also be used as building blocks (starting from bottom up instead of the more familiar top down approach) for developing a Sensory Curriculum. Whilst each of the two examples deals with an individual sense on its own, there is no reason why learners should not experience a 'multisensory' lesson. Any combination of the senses may be planned for and worked on in any lesson provided adequate care is taken to ensure learners' senses are not over stimulated or overloaded.

The resources suggested for the lessons are easily available to all teachers and supporting adults but more specialised resources may be found through dedicated suppliers of multi sensory solutions and products.

A Sensory Toolkit

The peripatetic teacher or therapist may want to have a simple toolkit which could be kept at hand for visits to residential settings or schools. Such a toolkit could consist of resources for all five senses (sight, sound, smell, taste and touch).

The following lists are intended as a suggestion towards 'filling' own toolkits. Two or three items from each list should be enough for a 'homemade portable' toolkit. Manufacturers or suppliers to schools and settings may also provide a portable kit, for example a case full of resources for each of the different areas. Where 'space' permits, resources could be included to cater for the 'movement' aspect of the experience with soft play resources or vibrating cushions, etc, etc.

Sight	Sound	Smell	Taste	Touch
Lights	Rattle	Spices	Salt	Bubble wrap
Wheels	Bean bag	Perfume	Sugar	Sandpaper
Lava lamp	Big Macks	Smelly sock?	Chocolate	Tree bark
'Rainbows'	Music	Pot pourri	Cheese	Metal cans

- Lesson Plan** **Title: A 'touchy feely time'**
- Objective:** All learners/clients will explore (or experience) different tactile resources
- Organisation:** Whole class or individual as appropriate
- Resources:** Tree bark/Sand/Sandpaper/ Bubble wrap/Felt
Hair gel/Bubble bath (liquid)
Bubbles (foamy stuff) from bubble bath
Metals (aluminium can, sheet, etc)
Cold cooked pasta in a 'feely bag'
Cold stuff (e.g. something from fridge/freezer)
Warm stuff (e.g. nice warm hand towel)
Liquid sprays/Feather boas/dusters, etc
- Differentiation:** Some pupils may be able to reach out and touch items themselves, others may need items bringing into contact with their skin. Each learner must be catered for accordingly.
- Introduction:** Teacher/TA to talk about something cold (e.g. standing at the bus-stop with the snow falling or holding a very cold item in one's hand, etc, etc) or hot, or hard, or rough, etc, etc.
- Development:** Work from 'slightly uncomfortable'/not so nice/rough through to nice and pleasant, for example, sandpaper against skin to velvet or felt or from very cold (frost from freezer) to nice and warm (towels or warm air blowing from hair dryer) or go on a tactile trail around the classroom/learning environment.
Using a digital camera (video or stills) capture learners' reactions for 'assessment' and information.
- Conclusion:** Help learners indicate a preference of tactile medium
- Caution:** Be aware that some individuals may have a Sensory Processing Disorder (maybe a hypersensitivity to touch) and always investigate for allergic reactions when touching 'foreign materials'.

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Lesson Plan	Title: A 'smelly time'
Objective:	All learners/clients will explore (or experience) different olfactory resources
Organisation:	Whole class or individual as appropriate
Resources:	Crushed basil or mint leaves Freshly mown grass Strawberries or strawberry flavoured bubble gum Lemon/Orange rind Rose petals Wet/damp earth or soil Perfume/aftershave
Differentiation:	Some pupils may be able to 'crush' leaves themselves, others may need these crushed and the 'smells' offered to them
Introduction:	Teacher/TA to talk about smells (lovely smells, nasty smells, food smells, perfume/deodorant/aftershave smells. Try spraying some perfume or crushing mint or basil leaves in hands and offering hands to learners' to smell.
Development:	Build into a 'smells' trail that is brought to the learners. Progress from not nice smells through the earthy smell to the nicer smells. Using a digital camera (video or stills) capture learners' reactions for 'assessment' and information.
Conclusion:	Give learners a choice of nice or not so nice smell.
Caution:	When working with leaves and even smells bear in mind some individuals may be allergic to certain items, e.g. the smell of strawberries. Consider also the possibility that a learner may have SPD (Sensory Processing Disorder)

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Useful websites and web links

<http://www.semerc.com>

<http://www.rompa.com>

<http://www.toolfactory.com>

http://www.becta.org.uk/teachers/display.cfm?section=1_6_3

http://www.ictadvice.org.uk/index.php?section=tl&catcode=as_in_acc_03&rid=32

<http://www.tfhusa.com/multi-sensory.asp?title=Should>

http://www.spacekraft.co.uk/sensory_environments/index.asp

http://www.flaghouse.com/northamerica_AL.asp

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Further information:

Visit ToolFactory on Stand 308 at Closing the Gap 2005

Visit Tool Factory at <http://www.toolfactory.com>

Visit SEMERC at <http://www.semerc.com>

Visit Rompa at <http://www.rompa.com>

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