

APD AND WRITTEN WORK – © Alyson Mountjoy 2016.

Children with additional needs often have problems in producing written work and these should be investigated - but they also need strategies to help them. These issues can also apply to adults.

If a child/teenager has problems getting their thoughts onto paper there can be several barriers to overcome. It could be a physical writing problem, an unusual grip, pain on writing etc. for which typing might help, as can provision of a scribe. Recording their work onto a tape recorder and typing it up (if APD allows) might help, or the use of speech to text software. Speaking their responses uses different parts of the brain to writing and is easier for a lot of people with such difficulties – especially useful once a child is used to working with a scribe or useful software - giving the brain easier access to information they want to use and have stored in a different way. Using a scribe or such software is a skill not easily developed, but if they can do so it can remove blockages to producing work for them, and it is still their own work. There is no law that a child has to produce work just in their exercise book in their own handwriting! It is a school's choice to impose such a regulation and it does a lot of young people a disservice. When I worked with severely dyslexic teenagers, they always produced their work by dictating it to me and I wrote it in their book, and sometimes they would later type it up add clipart and hand it in, to be stapled into their book. If a child can work well with a scribe and needs/gets a scribe in exams, then they need one in class, all the time. Push for it – get it added to their IEP or better still, their EHC plan. It is all about accessing an appropriate education in the way each child needs and has a right to.

If the problem is around writing long replies to questions, it may be an organisational issue - the child/teenager may have problem organising their thoughts due to APD memory issues, word retrieval, or simply because APD has meant that their notes are incorrect or incomplete - which is unfortunately often the case, and the learner might not even be aware of it. If the teacher finds it is wrong, they make them copy it out again, maybe from another more capable child's book or their own notes or a textbook – adding more work and putting more pressure on an already exhausted pupil. And just because they have written correct information doesn't mean they understand the topic. They may have been so focused on writing it down that their processing of the meaning is lost.

Taking notes is a specific set of skills, all of which take up memory and processing ability. It is not easy. Copying from the board involves looking, reading, retaining that visual information by transferring it to their working memory then looking away from the board and writing it down. The teacher may be talking at the same time, or classmates are making a noise or there may be other distractions. The mechanics of writing may cause added problems. Focusing on spelling, grammar and spacing are needed as well as the demands for neat writing. The learner may take longer to copy things down than other children, so they may not have time to copy the end. With VPD or dyslexia, they can miss words out. If there is a problem at any one of those stages – the notes will be incomplete or incorrect, and the child may well not even realise it. Now apply that process to taking dictated notes, and replace the VPD with APD. The same skills apply, the same complex process with the added difficulties of APD - taking mis-processed information from what they hear, having auditory memory issues and not remembering all of it or having some sections remembered incorrectly, having problems with auditory sequencing so it may be processed and remembered in the wrong order, transferring what they have processed to the working memory with its own issues and adding in word retrieval problems etc. Then comes the writing part, as above. Imagine all that

and then try to make sense of the topic, follow the lesson, make sense of what is being said through the background noise and answer a sudden question fired at them. It is a nightmare scenario. All of that may take place in just a quarter to half of an hour out of a long, exhausting day. And repeated, again and again...

Nobody can produce good responses based on information that is wrong. That is another reason why pre-teaching and provision of notes in written format without dictation or copying from the board is essential. The focus should be on the child understanding the lesson, learning, getting to grips with the topic itself, and not just producing nice, neat notes on something that makes no sense. Schools should not be just teaching dictation or copying skills – which they will most likely never use again in the real world unless they wish to be a professional minute-taker or stenographer- not recommended professions with APD! The meaning of the lesson is what is important, access to learning, not the method or format of recording it. It is not efficient teaching of the child is not learning.

So assuming the child has correct notes and still can't provide a good response, what else could be the issue? Sometimes people with APD and other difficulties have a problem in knowing how much to write or how to pick out the relevant details from the text. That is another skill that needs to be taught- we are not born as fully fledged researchers. With VPD for example they can miss the little words that give meaning to what they are asked to do and for dyslexic children faced with a wall of text to pick out answers from, it can be terrifying. Sometimes any learner- even without any difficulties or additional needs - will not be able to tell the difference from the question as to whether they need to produce a short answer in a sentence or just a long list, a simple response or an explanation, a few words or a paragraph. These things are often covered at GCSE level- late on in the year usually after the curriculum is finished, if there is time - as exam skills. But for a lot of children, this comes too late. They need it early on in their academic career, especially those children who are whole picture learners. Some children will automatically always produce a response of a few words - maybe a correct but too succinct answer without explanation, and not understand why it was criticised when the answer was right; others will waffle on for pages and still miss the point. Children need to be taught how to find the answers they are asked for, how to respond appropriately, using cue words to lead the way to what is asked of them (such as find, list, describe, explain) and for some children those words make no sense or are seen as the same thing.

In creative writing children can also have a confidence issue about 'doing it wrong'? A teenager I once worked with told me he had no imagination and nobody would want to read what he wrote. He thought that every story he wrote had to be original, until I told him that most works of fiction had common themes and there is no copyright on ideas (although I did explain the problem with plagiarism!) I asked him to think about a recent game he had played, (he was an avid gamer), and tell it as a story with him as the main character and soon he had dictated a page of work where before he had produced a few sentences. I will never forget the smile on his face after he typed it out and added clipart and we put a copy up on the resource base wall! He soon went on to develop his own stories, and his confidence.

Planning can be another problem for some learners when producing a piece of free writing. Where they should start, what form it should take, how to end it, how to pad out the story, grammar issues, using similes, metaphors, adjectives etc. Mind maps can help some people, others don't find them

useful. Using templates is another method - starting with 3 boxes for beginning middle and end. Some learners haven't even grasped that a story has this format – even by secondary school, they may never have been shown it. Then comes more boxes, splitting it further into paragraphs. How to describe a person, develop a character, set a scene, plan a plot – holding all these ideas in your head is difficult and can seem insurmountable – what if nobody tells them they don't have to, that it's OK to make notes? Again for most people, these are all skills that need to be learned – and someone should be teaching them.

As you can see there are many barriers to writing in different formats and any learner may have more than one. The way forward for all of them is in finding how each individual is affected and finding ways around the difficulties by whichever methods they need - developing the skills they lack, using assistive technology, accessing scribes, provision of pre-teaching and written notes, and building their confidence.

Schools have to play their part in all this. Since when did the burden of responsibility for education come to rest with the child? It should lie with the teacher, in making sure that every child has full access to learning in whichever way works best for them. That surely is the purpose of education.