Classroom Adjustments: Dysgraphia

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| 00:00:00:00 | MANDY NAYTON | Dysgraphia is a term that's not used as much as it used to be, but, essentially, it refers to a difficulty with writing. So, 'dis' meaning 'difficulty', 'graphia' meaning the 'written word'. And it refers to those students who have an unexpected level of underachievement taking their thoughts and actually putting them down on paper. So, we often talk about kids who have great ideas and have the ability to express themselves well and answer questions orally, but when it comes to putting them down on paper, they really struggle. And these are the students we tend to think of as being dysgraphic or having dysgraphia. |
| 00:00:55:09 | SERPIL SENELMIS | And it's a learning difficulty that is often experienced by students with dyslexia, so it's not uncommon for the two to be lumped in together. But students with dysgraphia actually benefit from classroom adjustments that are quite different to those for dyslexia.  Hi. I'm Serpil Senelmis. And this podcast is part of an NCCD portal series. In this episode, we'll explore the impact of dysgraphia on students and its relationship with dyslexia. We'll also identify some adjustments that can be made in the classroom to enable those with dysgraphia to access and participate in education on the same basis as their peers. |
| 00:01:56:08 | MANDY | So, my name is Mandy Nayton, and I am the CEO of the Dyslexia SPELD Foundation in Perth and the President of AUSPELD.  We do often separate dysgraphia into two areas - so language-based dysgraphia and motor-based dysgraphia. And motor-based dysgraphia is really what is now termed developmental coordination disorder by occupational therapists. And when we're talking about students who have what was termed motor dysgraphia in the past, these are students who have a great deal of difficulty with the actual physical act of handwriting. So for them, handwriting can be painful. It certainly can be laborious. It's very hard for them to hold a pen or pencil for an extended period, so it makes it very difficult for them writing in exams and so on. And these students have what is often referred to as a motor-based dysgraphia or a developmental coordination disorder, or DCD.  Language-based dysgraphia, which we now tend to simply refer to as a specific learning disorder with impairment in written expression, is where we talk about those students who do have a great deal of difficulty getting what they want to say down on paper in a logical, sequential, legible form. So, when we look at their writing, it sometimes doesn't make sense, it's repetitive, there are gaps, the punctuation is really poor. There's lots of issues with the way in which they're expressing themselves on paper. And these are the students that we would refer to as having dysgraphia. |
| 00:03:45:22 | SERPIL | So, the language-based dysgraphia, because it revolves around language, is there a relationship between that and dyslexia? |
| 00:03:53:16 | MANDY | So, lots of students have both dyslexia and dysgraphia. Probably about 40% of students will have what we call comorbid dyslexia and dysgraphia. And these are students who both have an unexpectedly high level of difficulty learning reading and they also have difficulty with written expression.  However, for a lot of students with language-based dysgraphia, they actually seem to read quite well. So, their reading is OK. They have developed quite accurate reading, quite fluent reading. In fact, many students will really enjoy reading. But when it comes to writing, that's when everything changes. And they're reluctant writers, they're unhappy about writing, they're frustrated with their writing, and so on. So although there is some comorbid dyslexia/dysgraphia, certainly there are some students who just have difficulties with writing.  It also seems to be tapping into slightly different areas of processing. So when we talk about dyslexia, we definitely talk about those areas of phonological awareness, how well students are able to get inside words and identify those individual phonemes, individual units of sound, how well they're able to pay attention to other aspects of phonological processing. Students with dysgraphia or written expression disorders don't necessarily have problems in those same areas. Some students may have a lot of difficulty with working memory, which, obviously, has a big impact when we're writing because you're having to hold a lot of information in mind. Which means that for students when they're writing, if they have poor working memory, we very often see major issues for these students. |
| 00:05:53:00 | SERPIL | I've never thought about the complexities involved in putting pen to paper, but just the process of organising words in your brain and being able to keep them there while you write them is a mammoth task!  Lynne Ivicevic is a high school learning support coordinator. She works with teachers and supports them in making adjustments in the classroom for students with dysgraphia and dyslexia. The school offers its students the opportunity to opt in to workshops with Lynne to receive more one-on-one assistance. While there are similarities between dysgraphia and dyslexia, Lynne points out that the adjustments for each are quite different. |
| 00:06:34:22 | LYNNE IVICEVIC | Well, some of my students have both. So for dyslexia, we'll put in extra working time. You're not entitled to a laptop for that, but if you have motor dysgraphia, I would put it in place the laptop because that's fine motor. If it's dysgraphia of written expression, that is extra working time as well. So, some parents think it's 10 minutes per hour for dyslexia and 10 minutes per hour for dysgraphia of written expression, but it's just 10 minutes and there will be reading time.  So I think we just need to be mindful where are we heading and what are those rules. For the little people, you can be much more flexible. If you don't give them much more extended time, you'll never know what they can do, but they all need structure and scaffolding and frameworks to write to. They need everything taught explicitly. |
| 00:07:28:05 | SERPIL | And so, maybe if you can give me some examples of adjustments in the classroom specific to dysgraphia, then, and have you got success stories in that regard too? |
| 00:07:38:12 | LYNNE | Well, dysgraphia of written expressions, so, when everyone else is writing, note taking, they're typing. So that's your biggest one. So teachers should be giving them copies of their notes. It's very difficult for them to copy down from the board, even for dyslexia. So we encourage that if the teachers have a PowerPoint that they actually give a copy of it to the child.  But for dysgraphia of written expression, it's a time factor. So I'll see someone, I suppose, once a week, but there'll be a few students that I'll see more. And I can tell that they're wanting to work and they're prepared to work. They just need a lot more guidance, and it's that point of need. So then I will let them come to me more. Sometimes it's because they need that immediate feedback, which you can't actually get in a class of 30. So it's not that the teacher's not doing a good job, it's just that they often need immediate feedback. Unless they get that they can't progress.  So, even with the topic sentence, they might have a go at that and they're getting close. So I do that explicit instruction - you know, I do, we do, you do. So I'm modelling what I want and then we're doing it together. And then I allow them, then, to have a go. And they might be nearly there. |
| 00:09:03:19 | SERPIL | While it's a quick fix to assist students with dysgraphia by eliminating pen and paper and simply using keyboards, Mandy cautions against eliminating handwriting altogether. |
| 00:09:15:21 | MANDY | So, there's some real advantages that we see in handwriting. So I think it's really important for us to be careful not to leap too quickly into new technology. Having said that, students who have a motor-based dysgraphia or a DCD, developmental coordination disorder, absolutely benefit from having access to technology because for those students, if they're experiencing pain while they're writing or they're really struggling physically to write, then that will interfere enormously with their ability to get down on paper a coherent response to a question or a beautifully written essay. |
| 00:09:58:03 | LYNNE | Motor dysgraphia, the handwriting is ill-formed. They write very slow. They have pain in their hand. So using a laptop, I find, is quite successful for them. They're actually quite good at that. I get a few who can't type, so that's a bit of a problem. But it's like having that remediation. It is that drip effect, that they need to have long-term remediation in the high school, be going to see someone who can work with them intensely one-on-one. So I see some students one-on-one, but I'd only see them, like, an hour a week. And sometimes they need more than that.  But really it's to do with ease of learning. If they can't listen and write at the same time, that's also a problem. That's quite difficult for them because while they're writing it down, then they can't take in actually what's being said.  So things that we can do possibly fairly easily, teachers need to be reminded that if they're giving a lecture-type class expecting the kids to be taking notes, they will not be able to do both of those at once. |
| 00:11:02:15 | SERPIL | So, should a teacher, in that instance, then, scrap that method of teaching style in their classroom, knowing that they do have even one student who won't be able to take notes? |
| 00:11:12:01 | LYNNE | It is very difficult, but we always have a PowerPoint and notes and readings, and we give that to the child. So I think it's good that they're actually getting something. They really need... Copying down notes from the board, you could just give them a copy. A lot of the kids now take pictures with their iPads. That's a good alternative. So the learning part isn't in really the note taking. It's having that information and then doing something with it in the long run. |
| 00:11:49:01 | SERPIL | So, dysgraphia has an impact on learning and it can have a very physical effect on a student's ability to write. So let's take a step back here. How can a teacher tell if a student might be experiencing dysgraphia? AUSPELD's Mandy Nayton says it depends on a number of factors. |
| 00:12:07:13 | MANDY | It's really important, as it is with any of the developmental learning disorders, to look at how well a student responds to intervention. So, what we look at is has the student been taught how to write well? Have they been taught explicitly how to hand write, how to write a simple sentence, how to move that sentence from a well-constructed simple sentence to a more complex sentence? Have they been taught about syntax, grammar, the conventions of written language? Has somebody looked carefully at what are the underlying weaknesses that the student has? Address those with good intervention for at least six months. And again, where we see that the student has not responded as well as we would expect to that intervention that we can see that this student continues to have persistent and enduring difficulties, then we would say that that is a student who potentially has a learning disorder such as dysgraphia or a written expression disorder.  So, the intervention is really important. It's about that explicit teaching of all of those strategies. And, again, remembering that written expression is a very complicated skill. It takes a lot of time to develop this to really sophisticated levels. |
| 00:13:48:20 | MANDY | Alongside that, though, again, for the student who has a lot of difficulty in getting their thoughts down on paper, as they move into the upper primary grades and into secondary school, to ensure that they are participating on the same basis as their peers, they're being given the same opportunities to demonstrate the knowledge and understanding that they have, we sometimes need to start looking at ways of offering them access to being able to do that. So we might be saying that for some students they absolutely need technology. They need voice-to-print technology. So for some students who can scribe well, and not all students can, they may benefit enormously from having a voice-to-text facility on their computer, on their iPad, even on their iPhone as, you know, there's all sorts of things that we can now use.  So, some students benefit from that. Other students, actually, have difficulty even forming the sentences in mind. They need a different type of support. They might need scaffolds when it comes to writing, so predeveloped structures that they can use as a way of forming up an essay or a narrative or a piece of persuasive text. So for those students, it's not about the voice to text, so the technology isn't as useful.  Some students simply need more time. They can get what they want to say out if they're given more of an opportunity to do it. And maybe that means that for those students we don't ask them to do a long essay of some sort. Perhaps what we're looking from those students to do is to demonstrate their knowledge and skills using a series of dot points or we're asking them to produce less writing, but to cover the content that we're wanting to cover. It depends again on the functional impact that that student is experiencing. If their difficulty is with actually physically writing, then we need to look at technology to replace the physical act of handwriting. If their difficulty is time, then we need to provide them with more time. If their difficulty is actually taking all of the great ideas they've got in mind and putting them on paper, then perhaps we need to give them the technology that will allow them to use voice to text. |
| 00:16:21:06 | SERPIL | Does it become crucial for the teacher to be mindful of this might exist with particular students in the classroom and to pinpoint it early, so that the student is on track with their educational progress? |
| 00:16:35:17 | MANDY | I think, with all learning disorders, the earlier that we can intervene, the earlier we can identify that a student might be at risk, the better. So it's better to identify a student as being possibly at risk and then finding out they're not than it is to leave a student until they're further and further behind their peers and it's starting to have a real impact on how they feel about the education experience that they're having. So the earlier that we can identify that a student is, perhaps, having a great deal of difficulty even forming their letters, that is an early sign of a student who may have a motor-based dysgraphia or a developmental coordination disorder. |
| 00:17:27:18 | SERPIL | At the high school level, Lynne Ivicevic agrees that early intervention leads to better outcomes in future education. When that's not possible, she recommends focusing on writing. |
| 00:17:39:07 | LYNNE | I find with dysgraphia of written expression, because writing is, you know, the most complex of skills, so reading's easy because the words are on the page, spelling, you're generating a word, I suppose, from your head, from your memory, but writing, that's a really complex task, so that can be quite debilitating. That's when I actually find working with a speech pathologist really helps because they need to look at grammar and sentence construction. But it's capturing your ideas and then holding that all in your head in order and thinking how you'll spell the words and what you want to express and then actually physically writing on the page. |
| 00:18:18:00 | SERPIL | And how do you take the stress out of it? I'm imagining as a student who has difficulty writing, it must be extremely stressful because you take writing to every single classroom that you do. It doesn't matter what the subject is. And the older you get, generally, the longer you're expected to write. You start venturing into essays and long form, sort of, writing. So, what kind of adjustments need to be made in the classroom to take the stress out of it? |
| 00:18:46:02 | LYNNE | I find that dysgraphia of written expression can be the most stressful because it is so complex and kids need a real lot of time to think things through. So, one big issue is that they work very slowly. And sometimes they just cannot produce a paragraph that has any depth or length. So that is a real problem.  I suppose it's just having that healthy attitude. And I do pitch it to my students that you don't necessarily have to do higher English. You can do non-ATAR English and still get to uni through alternate entry. Some are fantastic mathematicians, I find. So, look, it is stressful, but I find that kids do get stressed about that. But that is the hardest thing. Usually, it's just giving them extensions and more time and structures, that they have a paragraph structure, they know that it's a topic sentence, explain, expand. There's an example in the discussion. I even give them how many lines it should be. You know, a paragraph's 100 to 200 words. It's not four sentences. |
| 00:20:05:12 | SERPIL | It's important to remember that that stress and its emotional impacts can be felt throughout school life. Students rely on their ability to write in almost every class. Mandy emphasises that it can also create challenges in other areas where we use our hands. |
| 00:20:22:03 | MANDY | School, for students who have learning disorders, can be very challenging because of the emphasis that we place on reading and writing. Children are asked to do a lot of reading and writing every day. And even when we're talking about writing, it can actually be not just writing letters, but for some students, it's writing numbers. If they have a motor-based dysgraphia and they struggle with handwriting, they may struggle with writing numbers, they might struggle with art, they might struggle to throw balls in PhysEd. So this has a huge implication. And it's with that student from the time they, kind of, enter the playground to the time they head home at the end of the day.  So, there is no question that failing to react, failing to respond, failing to provide the necessary support for these students can absolutely have an impact on their emotional wellbeing and that we see this with students by about Year 3. So usually the first couple of years, where students are finding their way in the classroom, it's not so obvious to them that they are, perhaps, not doing as well as their peers. But usually by about Year 3, middle primary Year 4, when the expectations have increased and we're asking students to read a lot more, to write a lot more, to produce much more extended pieces of text that are more sophisticated and well structured, then for these students, this can become a hugely challenging time. |
| 00:22:05:22 | SERPIL | One of the key themes we've heard across this series of podcasts is the importance of communication with parents and, of course, dysgraphia is no different. Mandy points out the importance of finding a communication method that suits you as the teacher and the student's parents as well. |
| 00:22:24:10 | MANDY | I think this communication and consultation needs to continue whether the student is in upper primary or secondary, but it will, by necessity, change a little, perhaps, not as much face-to-face consultation, parent-teacher meetings, but absolutely the same level of communication. So, whether it's by email, whether it's by the occasional phone call, whether it's by having some way of continuing to ensure that everybody knows what the plan is, everyone's working towards the same end point on the plan, there has been agreement on the strategies they're going to put in place, both remediation and adjustments, and that any trials that are being put in place are being monitored and communication about their success or, perhaps, failure in some cases is being communicated. So communication is essential. It is likely to change a little in its nature and the way in which it is orchestrated as students move through the school system. |
| 00:23:30:07 | SERPIL | You mentioned failure. What would your advice be for teachers who have made an adjustment and failed? Would it just be to try something else because you'll figure it out? |
| 00:23:42:06 | MANDY | Well, I think it's important to know why it failed. And perhaps sometimes an adjustment won't work because it wasn't really addressing the underlying issues. So, for example, an adjustment that is very frequently given for students who have dysgraphia or written expression disorder is extra time. And this is not going to be helpful for a student just having extra time in many cases because what they actually need is to be able to develop the strategies that will allow them to write in the time that they have or, at least, closer to the time that they have. So, sometimes simply giving a student more time will not be addressing their underlying area of weakness. In fact, it might be a little bit of a form of torture for a student because you're just asking them to write for even longer when they really don't like it at all.  So I think where we see an adjustment not working, it is generally because it was not addressing the area of weakness that the student has. So I think where something hasn't worked, it's important to speak to the student about what it was about that adjustment that felt wrong to them and also to look at what are we trying to address, what are we trying to compensate for, what are we trying to ensure that the student has now access to. So it's about really revisiting what the underlying problem is. |
| 00:25:25:03 | SERPIL | And to avoid failure, Lynne recommends assisting students to do the things they can't do on their own and guide them towards their independence. |
| 00:25:34:11 | LYNNE | I'd make sure that the first thing that they do is to support them with structure and frameworks that are quite explicit for writing. They can't generate that. They need you to come in and take control and give them a structure that explicitly says what you want. And then that's the first step, is to get them to fill that in. And then you're working towards that independence, but you can't leave them to their own devices. |
| 00:26:11:17 | SERPIL | This podcast is part of a series that highlights adjustments that can be made in the classroom to enable students with disability to access and participate in education on the same basis as their peers. You can find all episodes on the NCCD portal. I'm Serpil Senelmis. Thanks for listening. |
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