Is there an app for that?

ICT SEND consultant Myles Pilling of AccessAbility Solutions talks to Annie Grant about using iPads to include and support pupils with additional needs

Research by Higgins et al (2012) found that, to be effective, new technology must be adopted for a particular reason – not merely because it is trendy or to impress parents – and that its use should be underpinned by sound pedagogy. The same research also points to its potential to include and support pupils with SEND.

In the last few years, the Apple iPad has been the latest 'cool' gadget to appear in a growing number of classrooms. So what can you do to make sure that this inviting technology results in improved teaching and learning? Myles Pilling suggests ten steps to iPad 'appiness'.

1. Check your WiFi

Schools' best efforts with iPads are often thwarted by patchy WiFi coverage, low signal strength and/or unreliable connectivity. Before you invest in mobile technology of any kind, make sure you have a strong, reliable internet connection throughout the school that is robust enough to support multiple devices connecting simultaneously.

2. Consider e-safety and security

Think about how pupils are going to use iPads. Will they have one each or will they be a shared, school-owned resource? Will iPads stay in school or can they go home? Can pupils bring their own devices? Mobile technology brings a new, but not insurmountable, set of organisational and safety issues for schools to address. Acceptable use agreements can help clarify responsibilities for home and school use.

Where pupils bring their own devices, schools may need to set up separate and/or filtered WiFi systems. With more cloud-based software, issues of connectivity and security will become increasingly important. Secure storage for iPads and arrangements for charging are also key.

3. Train your staff

Higgins' research reveals how important it is to extend training for teachers and teaching assistants (TAs) beyond merely explaining the technology. Of course, staff need to understand how the device works and how to source content. But an iPad is very different from a PC, and they need the opportunity to explore how its functionality can be used to support teaching and learning.

4. Know why you are using iPads

As with any learning tool, the use of iPads should be planned in relation to the lesson objectives and the abilities and needs of pupils. It has no place in the classroom if it is not improving pupils' learning experience.

The great thing about iPads is that they can integrate easily into classwork, eliminating the need to take everyone off to the ICT suite for a whole lesson. Children in one infant class used Sock Puppet Maker on their iPads to design puppets, then brought their virtual designs to life by creating them in reality. At the end of the process, they used their iPads again to record images of their handiwork, and the teacher used these as assessment evidence.

5. Make sure that teachers teach and TAs assist

Teachers, not TAs, are responsible for pupils' learning, so where TAs are using iPads to support pupils, it is the teacher who should decide how they are used, communicate that to TAs and evaluate impact. iPads should not be used as a babysitter for pupils with SEND. As in all educational contexts, they should be an integral part of teaching and learning.

6. Use generic apps to support inclusion

Although there are specialist apps for pupils with specific needs, creative use of generic iPad apps can enhance inclusion.

• Video calling through FaceTime allows teachers and pupils to provide academic and social support to students in hospital or recuperating at home.

• Apps such as Reflection and DisplayNote allow whatever is on the teacher's screen to be shown on an iPad and vice versa. This is useful for pupils who struggle to see the whiteboard or who have mobility issues that inhibit their ability to interact with it.

• Aurasma Lite, which uses the iPad camera to recognise real world images and then overlay text, animations or video, can be used to help pupils with autism to complete tasks in sequence or to aid memory.

A pupil at James Rennie School in Carlisle uses Proloquo2Go on his iPad as a communication aid

- The special effects in virtual reality games like Epic Citadel can help engage disaffected pupils.

These are just ideas. The important thing is to look for the potential.

7. Be selective when using specialist apps

Abundant apps claim to offer support to pupils with particular SEND. For example, Calm Counter uses social stories and audio-visual cues to help angry or anxious children to calm down while Hairy Letters is designed to support children with dyslexia. But beware, the quality of such apps is variable. Familiarise yourself with the app first – a cheaper lite version is often available. Keep the needs of the pupil in mind and what you want them to learn – good apps will be structured to promote and reward progress. Look out too for programs that you already use successfully. Popular programs like Clicker 6 are now available for iPad (Clicker Docs & Clicker Sentences).

It can be tricky to track down what you need, but there are several blogs and forums where apps are explained and reviewed by and for educationalists, teachers and parents. An excellent example is from Anthony Evans, assistant headteacher of Churchfields Junior School in Redbridge and the father of two sons with autism. His engaging blog offers a mixture of general advice, reflections on pedagogical issues and insightful reviews of new apps, based on his experiences with his own children and his work in the classroom.

The site includes a video demonstration of one of his favourite apps, Creative Bookbuilder, which allows children to make very professional-looking e-books. To promote inclusion, you could pair a child who finds writing difficult with a classmate who has good literacy skills. The more able child might compose the text, while the other illustrates it, then reads the story aloud for the voiceover. For more ideas on embedding ICT into the curriculum, he recommends Switched On ICT Primary iPad Units.

8. Explore accessibility

Unlike computers, iPads can be used anywhere: sitting on the floor, on a beanbag or in a wheelchair equipped with a clamping system. A waterproof cover from Lifedge means they can even be used in water. Stands are also available to suit the needs of children with motor difficulties and covers like the Belkin Grip 360 have a hand strap on the back. Griffin and other suppliers produce tough cases for pupils who might drop or throw their iPads.

Many accessibility features come as standard – screen magnification, voice recording, voiced navigation, intelligent assistance, mono sound, variable mouse speed and many more. Touch screens can enable pupils with muscle weakness or joint pain to access content more easily. Find out about them and if they can help your pupils, switch them on.

Accessibility can be further improved through various apps. Eye Reader uses the camera to enlarge text for visually impaired pupils and voice-to-text apps such as Voice Dictation help those who struggle to write. The availability of communication aids on the iPad through

A word bank in Clicker Docs provides topic-specific writing support

apps such as Proloquo2Go or Scene & Heard provides a 'cool' option for pupils who struggle to speak.

9. Consider limitations

iPads don't suit everyone. Pupils with dyspraxia or who make involuntary movements may find them too fiddly, while some pupils with autism may become obsessed with certain apps if no one intervenes to restrain them.

However, with a little thought and research, most difficulties can be overcome. For example, the absence of arrow keys – which makes it hard to move the cursor without deleting text – can be fixed with iAWriter, which expands the keyboard and provides the missing keys.

10. Take the plunge

Don't be afraid to experiment. Make use of the advice and information available online and perhaps from your local authority. Share your experiences with your colleagues. By using iPads creatively and thoughtfully, you can empower and include pupils with SEND.

Annie Grant is a freelance consultant, producer, writer and editor.

First published in Special Children magazine issue 214, republished with permission of Optimus Education. www.specialchildren-magazine.com/page/subscribe

Find out more
- *See Mobile learning in Special Children 207.*
- *AccessAbility Solutions with blog, resource lists and services: http://aas123.org/*
- *Myles Pilling's selection of apps for pupils with SEND: www.senapps.wordpress.com*
- *Anthony Evans' blog: http://antsict.wordpress.com*
- *Switched On ICT Primary iPad Units: http://bit.ly/sc214-23*
- *LinkedIn group – Apps For Special Education: http://bit.ly/sc214-24*
- *Social network presence for iPad and Apple Products. Soon to cover Windows and Android Apps: www.facebook.com/Senapps*
- *Lists of apps organised under appropriate headings: http://bit.ly/SC207-13*

References
Higgins, S, Xiao Z, Katsipateki M. (2012), *The Impact of Digital Technology on Learning: A Summary for the Education Endowment Foundation*, Durham University, EEF