

SMALL AND STURDY SAVES THE DAY

Bournville Infant School, a voluntary-aided 269-pupil school in a leafy Birmingham suburb, is in what could be considered the enviable position of being a Grade II listed building in an area of historic Victorian interest.

However, this brings it with it problems over how to develop ICT skills in a school of nine small classrooms that was simply running out of space and lacked a dedicated ICT suite.

Headteacher Pam Dexter has found that AlphaSmarts, the portable computer companions, are the answer to this problem.

"I came across AlphaSmarts almost by accident while visiting the Education Show a few years ago," explained Pam. "I could immediately see they would serve their purpose, and the staff were enthralled. They are a good size if, like at our school, you are short on space."

There are now nine AlphaSmarts in each classroom, used across all subject areas. Pam explained that this means a group of pupils can sit round one table and use them while the rest of the class continue with other work around the room. The teachers also conduct lessons where all the pupils use AlphaSmarts together and work on the same topic, particularly in year 2.

"We find that they help pupils develop solid word processing skills in terms of editing, retrieving and saving text. These are transferable skills they can use when they work on our mainframe ICT," said Pam.

"By the end of year 2 we see that pupils are independently able to edit their work and transfer it to the mainframe. I can't pretend that children don't mess about occasionally, but at least on an AlphaSmart their work is saved if they happen to turn the machine off!"

One particular positive factor in using AlphaSmarts is their robustness. "We have used them with our Reception pupils who have taken them outside and dropped them while doing nature work, but they have always bounced back," explained Pam.

Pam has also found them particularly good for boys to use. The school has an unusually high boy to girl ratio in year 2, but the school catches boys' attention with the opportunity to work on technology, allowing them to play freely to get to know the machines.

AlphaSmarts are good for group work and paired work. "We use them in shared writing exercises when we put together composite stories. Pupils take it in turns to write sentences and pass the AlphaSmart on to their classmates to continue the story. This would not be quite so straightforward on a laptop," said Pam.

Additionally, AlphaSmarts provide Bournville with a teaching facility that links in to their mainframe laptops and interactive whiteboards.

Sixteen per cent of pupils at Bournville are special needs, one example being a boy with ADHD who was allowed to have his own AlphaSmart, thereby reducing the potentially stressful situation of sharing. Pam explained, "He really benefited, and became an example to his classmates of how to use the equipment."

AlphaSmarts have become very much part of the daily norm at Bournville, with work regularly printed-off and stuck into pupils' books. Year 2 pupils used them to write thank-you letters after visiting a war memorial in connection with history work. These have been reproduced in one of the school's regular newsletters to parents, who feed back positively about the school's use of ICT.

Summing up Bournville's experience Pam said, "We have found the AlphaSmarts good value for money and easy to manage, and they count towards the DFES ICT per pupil ratio. Without them, our ICT would be unsatisfactory."

"They simplify ICT and make it efficient – something we have shared with local schools who have come to have a look. On a tight school budget, their longevity is also something we appreciate."