

THE ALPHASMART THAT PROVED A 'MAGIC WAND'

For one hour a day Rachel Wood, nurture teacher at Heath Primary School in Chesterfield, enjoys some "blessed relief" from a particularly disruptive special needs pupil.

Attempts to teach the 10-year-old boy, who though in many ways able is thought to be suffering from a form of autism and has complex learning problems, are interrupted by severe misbehaviour including shouting, throwing, and leaving his desk to upset other children in the class.

Rachel says: "He typically tries to avoid any demanding task or work that requires any degree of concentration, and until we came up with an answer especially hated the one-hour literacy lessons and the writing tasks involved.

"He would get something down, perhaps, but if he made a mistake or just didn't like what he'd done he'd try to obliterate it by scribbling all over it."

But then the school's ICT co-ordinator, Elaine Brent, suggested a solution – taking advantage of the child's love of computers by encouraging him to use the school's AlphaSmart Neo word processor.

"It worked like a dream", says Rachel. "Suddenly, for that one hour at least, peace descended. From hating writing, from doing his utmost to avoid work, he was applying himself to comprehension tests and grammatical tests and other quite involving literary work.

"The AlphaSmart Neo proved the perfect motivator, keeping him to task and creating incentive where very little existed before. It was like waving a magic wand.

"He sits there quietly now like everyone else in the class and like everyone else gets on with it, and what he especially loves is printing out what he's done and sticking it into his book.

"It's not all plain sailing. If for some reason he's not happy with what he's done he'll delete it before I can get to him – with AlphaSmart, who have been enormously helpful, we have been looking at a way in which only the teacher can delete, not the pupil."

Rachel, "an eternal optimist", became so doubtful of finding a way to help the boy progress that when he began using the AlphaSmart towards the end of the 2005 summer term she was unsure about how long its favourable effect would last.

"I was a bit sceptical", she admits. "It is a wonderful piece of electronics – I could play with it myself all day – but the boy has such a short attention span I doubted the novelty would last for long.

"But four months later he's still absorbed by it, still motivated, even though it is purely a word processor and, unlike a PC or a laptop, does not allow him to go off surfing the net or playing computer games."

To keep his interest alive Rachel initially allowed her pupil to take the AlphaSmart – a robust piece of equipment that is lightweight, battery-powered and portable – home so he could use it at week-ends.

But that soon became unnecessary, because his "highly supportive mum" became so delighted with his progress she bought him a laptop so that, with her help, he could practise his typing skills.

Currently the school, which has 240 mainstream pupils with a small proportion of special needs, possesses only one AlphaSmart.

"There are obviously many demands on the budget and various areas involving IT have to be examined and catered for", Rachel says. "But I'd like to have more so as to be able to extend the AlphaSmart's virtues to the rest of the group, which is mainly learning affected because of social, emotional and behavioural problems.

"I just can't speak too highly about the value of the one we have. It's proved an excellent teaching aid, providing a spur to learning and keeping a child on task whose concentration level is usually extremely low.

“From not wanting to work, he has actually been inspired to work. AlphaSmart has proved a boon, a terrific asset, and yes, if the money became available I’d definitely recommend that we built up our stock.”

So would Elaine. “The difference using the AlphaSmart has made to this child is tremendous”, she says. “He is a capable Year 5 who, it is suspected, has some form of autism – possibly Pathological Demand Avoidance Syndrome – that is being investigated by the education psychologist.

“But whatever his condition, and it is a severe one, he produced more work in a fortnight using the AlphaSmart than he had probably turned out in the previous year.

“He’s still happy with it, too, which shows that even to a child with extreme problems in focusing attention AlphaSmart isn’t just a passing diversion – it’s benefits are lasting.”