

ALPHASMART CASE STUDY

MEETING SPECIAL NEEDS IN MAINSTREAM EDUCATION

Teaching special needs pupils in mainstream education and helping them keep up with the rest of their class is an ongoing challenge in schools across the UK.

At William Brookes School, a comprehensive of 937 students in Much Wenlock, near Telford, special educational needs co-ordinator Lesley Ravenscroft is always on the look-out for new teaching methods and tools to help her develop and motivate her students.

"Years 7 to 9 are particularly challenging," says Lesley. "They still have to take all subjects, even those that don't particularly interest them. At the same time their hormones are peaking, and we all know how that can affect their moods and distract them from things like schoolwork!"

"I read about AlphaSmart computer companions in a magazine, and thought they might be useful for some of our students, particularly those with dyslexia and dyspraxia.

"I decided on the AlphaSmart Neo as there is less opportunity for the students to fiddle with it. They can use it for writing but they can't access the Internet or spend time changing the document's appearance with different fonts and graphics."

Lesley had a £1,000 grant from the Princes Trust, which she used to buy seven Neos from reseller Portable Technologies. The first children to use them were those who had been assessed by the LEA special needs team and recommended to use ICT in lessons – children with dyspraxia, dyslexia, Aspergers syndrome and moderate learning disabilities.

This has now been extended to children with other special needs, including ADHD and visual impairment.

When you ask Lesley about the results she's achieved since introducing the new equipment to her students, she doesn't hesitate. "They are the best piece of technology we've bought for years!" she says.

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One of the major benefits is improved student motivation. Boys in particular are well-known for being reluctant writers, but Lesley has found introducing ICT has encouraged them – particularly some more challenging Year 9 boys. “They now get on with their work, and they certainly prefer it to writing,” she says.

“Instead of producing baby scrawl with lots of spelling mistakes, their work is now of the same quality as everyone else’s, which is a huge encouragement. For students with dyslexia, we’ve found that it helps to increase the font size, as that makes it easier for them to see their mistakes and correct them.

“Now they can stop worrying about the physical process of writing and making mistakes and concentrate on what they want to say.”

The Neos are spread throughout the school, from Year 7 to Year 11. They slot smoothly into the normal teaching routine, aided by the fact that they are battery powered.

The special needs students all have an Individual Education Plan, so their teachers know they use a Neo. The student can sit anywhere in the classroom and the teacher tells them to take out their Neo at the appropriate time.

The school is fully networked, so students simply plug in a USB cable to save or print out their work. Teachers keep an eye out for what Lesley terms ‘slippery customers’ who try to get away without handing in anything.

If students are working on a project, they use the USB connection to transfer their writing to a PC, where they can add pictures and graphics before saving it to their area of the network.

The school has also found the Neos useful for helping students in Year 10 and 11 organise and complete their coursework. They set up a separate file for each subject and physically label it on the keyboard so there is no possibility of confusion.

Lesley has numerous examples of how individual students have benefited from the new equipment. For example, it has been a great success with two Year 7 students

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who previously used laptops. "There is less for them to fiddle with, the Neo is much lighter and there is no need to allow for charging time," she says.

Another visually impaired boy found his laptop too heavy to carry around, so Lesley has given him a Neo with its own backpack. "It's excellent - he can fit his PE kit, books and sandwiches into the pack as well, and it's much lighter to carry."

"Sometimes parents want to buy laptops for their children, but I suggest that they buy a Neo instead. They can see the convenience and how easy it is to carry.

"One of our boys has ADHD and was an extremely reluctant writer, so his parents decided to buy him his own Neo. He now feels in control of his work, which looks the same as everyone else's, and is much more motivated.

"I am really happy with the Neos - they've been very successful with our students. And they are getting better with the test of time."

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For further information please contact:

Debbie Smith

Gravitas PR

Tel: 01242 211000

Email: debbie@gravitaspr.co.uk