

NEOS AT LARGE AMONG TUDORS AND VICTORIANS

St Paul's C of E Primary School in Tipton urgently needed to address its lack of ICT resources in order to teach pupils keyboard skills and help them develop their writing abilities. However, budgets were limited and staff were concerned about potential vandalism.

Both problems were solved by the purchase of a classroom set of AlphaSmart Neos, a low cost digital notebook which helps students develop their writing and keyboard skills without the distraction of the internet or graphics packages.

St Paul's has a higher percentage of pupils with special needs than the national average. The speech, language and physical disabilities include autism, Aspergers, cerebral palsy and dyspraxia.

"Many of the children are not too articulate and have only a limited vocabulary when they come to us, but need to be at reading level 4 by the time they leave. Their basic command of English also makes it difficult for many of them to construct quality writing," explained head teacher Patricia Hall. "We knew that using appropriate ICT would help them develop their skills."

St Paul's chose the Neos after looking into setting up an ICT suite. "The school is in quite an isolated area and the amount of vandalism meant there was no way we could risk having an ICT suite as it would be an obvious target.

"By having Neos on trolleys we were able to get round this issue as we can lock them away very easily. We previously had Acorn pocketbooks but Neos take us one stage further," Patricia added.

"When we bought them we rolled them out across the whole school in one go, immediately fulfilling the DfES's computers per child ratio statistics and the requirement to teach keyboard skills. We have ten teachers and six learning supports using the Neos," said deputy head Ann Barratt.

“During the 18 months of having the Neos we have noticed how much the children like being able to correct their work, save it, come back to it and redraft it. We’re also seeing improvements in pupils’ ability to work in pairs and teams, gathered round a Neo working on projects together and generating creative ideas.

“In particular we can see how much the Neos help them with their keyboard skills, and are hearing positive feedback from the parents on their children’s enthusiasm,” she added.

St Paul’s is also seeing noticeable improvements in writing skills in year 5 and enjoying the fact that pupils are more exposed to keyboard work than ever before. Previously there were so few resources that the pupils had a rota for using ICT.

“Now they’re used to using keyboards, they’re finding it much easier to put into words what they want to,” explained Patricia.

“One child in year 6 has difficulty with handwriting due to Aspergers. He has wonderful creativity but his methodical approach to handwriting means that he doesn’t allow for spaces between words or for punctuation. However, by using a Neo he is now demonstrating the ability to space his words, and he did his SAT tests very successfully on a Neo.”

The Neos have been used extensively in a ‘triad project’ where St Paul’s teamed up with two other schools in the borough, using specific money set aside by the Government.

The three schools concentrated on a project to raise standards of writing. All pupils in year 4 and some in year 5 spent three years looking at the Tudors and Victorians through creative story-telling and plays. In the third year of the project the schools concentrated on creative writing skills, and pupils enjoyed using the Neos to create books about the project.

Patricia said, “The long battery life has certainly helped pupils use the Neos in all aspects of their work – for example, they have taken them out onto the school grounds to work in the sunshine! Overall, a Neo is a very versatile tool that helps our pupils learn independently.”

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