CONNECTING
the community

Headteacher **Christine Terrey** discusses her nursery's technological approach to raising attainment, reaching out to parents and empowering staff...

Grays Infant and Nursery School is located in the seaside town of Newhaven in East Sussex. Historically, parents at the school have been classed as 'hard-to-reach', reflecting the fact that we serve some disadvantaged communities, with a lot of parents who didn't take their own education very far. In the last few years, we've used ICT as a tool to help change things – it has been embedded throughout the school's curriculum and as a result, we've developed more open communication with parents, improved children's learning and helped teachers do their jobs more effectively. Our efforts were even recognised with an ICT Excellence Award.

ICT plays a major role in our nursery, which offers education and care for children from the age of three. With many homes now owning a PC, and with wider access to smartphones and games consoles, children are growing up in a digital age where ICT is a major part of everyone's social and work life. In recognition of this, our children can access computers with easy-to-use mini-mice and enjoy using 'big screens': interactive plasma screens that enable the children to edit photos and play games. One popular piece of software by 2simple allows them to role play everyday activities such as going to a garage. Children get the opportunity to film themselves with video cameras and make mini-movies which they can review on a screen.

Children are also able to enjoy technology outside, including a karaoke machine so they can get creative and engage in role-play (favourite tunes include *Twinkle twinkle* and *Baa baa black sheep*!), sturdy cameras, and wireless laptops, from which they can access some pre-school sites. This range of ICT gives us many more opportunities to engage children.

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>
> **CHRISTINE TERREY**

Supporting parents

With children at the nursery developing such great ICT literacy at an early age, we want to ensure that parents are able to support them at home, especially as we allow some of the older children to borrow laptops to take home. So, we offer parents a variety of courses to help.

Parents are also invited to use our 'Surf Room' and Nursery Internet Café, which is especially popular with those who don't have access to a computer at home. As well as providing parents with an opportunity to view their child's page on the learning platform, they can create a CV and e-mail it out to prospective employers. There is high unemployment in the area, so it's free for parents to use to encourage them to develop their ICT skills and look for work. The outcome of these initiatives is that parents are working better with their children and feel closer to the nursery.

Funding for the provision of ICT in the nursery and school has come from a number of sources, including the school development plan, the school's delegated funding share and the PTA. Although expensive, the Internet café formed an important part of our school improvement plan, and is a pivotal part of ensuring that parents are fully engaged in their child's learning.

Improving engagement

Much research has been done to show how important a parent's involvement in the education of their child is, and it has been proven that the earlier the interest, the better the outcomes. With many parents uncomfortable talking to teachers about their child's learning – often due to their own poor experiences at school – technology has helped us reach out to them and give them the opportunity to be part of their child's learning journey.

We text and e-mail parents regularly with information about their child, and our learning platform, introduced in 2008, is central to both the nursery and school. It holds an e-portfolio of every child's progress which can be accessed by parents at any time. Staff update the e-portfolios regularly, and we've made use of a number of multimedia tools to enable both staff and parents to upload video clips and photos on each child's page. This means that a clip of a child enjoying painting a flower or dancing can be looked at again at home.

Children are also able to access the page, with nursery school pupils logging in using a series of picture icons rather than words to overcome their limited vocabulary and keyboard skills. They're allowed to customise their own page by adding pictures, comments and changing the background colour.

Parents have commented through forums about how interesting they find it to be able to see what their child worked on during the day rather than waiting for a parents evening. It provides a vital link that allows them to ask about what went on in school or encourage learning. The learning platform has been so successful that it has been adopted by the local junior school. This ensures continuity so the children and parents can access their e-portfolios as they progress.

Benefiting staff

ICT is helping teachers do their job more effectively too. Staff at the nursery use digital cameras for observation and assessment. The photographs and short film clips they take have helped them to improve their observational skills as they review these as part of their assessment monitoring.

The video clips provide a more holistic picture of how a child is progressing and can reveal how certain behaviour was triggered or show a more colourful side to a quieter child. The clips are available on the learning platform, allowing parents to see what progress has been made. This is of particular importance for parents with children with special educational needs, as it may be 'an ability to share more' that is their target, rather than something that can be demonstrated by a piece of work sent home.

When the children move into Reception, staff also begin to monitor their performance on our SIMS management information system in addition to the learning platform. They assess pupils termly using a points system, entering the points into SIMS and tracking their performance to ensure that they're progressing from their initial level. Having the information in one place and colour-coded ensures it's easy to spot which children are not moving forward as expected so intervention can take place quickly.

The most important factor in our successful use of technology within the school has been providing staff with adequate time to familiarise themselves with it. Staff and parents work closely together too and this makes a difference. The outcome is that we have happy parents who are involved in their child's education and feel part of the school community. This leads to children with greater self-esteem who are happy to learn, and who collectively are achieving good results in reading, writing and numeracy.