

One special school in Scotland has used technology to give its pupils their own voice. Georgia Laird finds out just how much it has enriched their lives



Giving the gift of language

Today I went to occupational therapy, where I painted fireworks and baked cakes." To most people this seems an easy enough sentence. But for the pupils at Corseford School in Renfrewshire, it's a whole new language. Corseford is a grant-maintained special school, part of Capability Scotland, one of Scotland's leading disability organisations. The school is involved in an ICT project that scientists claim to be the first of its kind and which won it a TES Schools Award last summer.

'How Was School Today?' enables pupils with complex and physical difficulties to communicate through a computer system equipped with sensors and recording devices made by DynaVox, a leading

provider of alternative communication products. Pupils have a computer screen attached to their wheelchair, which they use to record their activities throughout the day. Before the project, teachers and therapists at the school would have to record the daily events in a book to be sent home to parents, but now, with the use of communication aids, symbols for words or sentences can be found on the child's personal computer and children can create a story of their day.

"It gives the students confidence. They have the opportunity to go home and select what to, and what not to, tell their parents," says Anne Braekken, head of speech and language therapy at Corseford School. "It gives them an element of control."

Fiona Catterson, depute head, says staff, parents and children have gained plenty from the project and recalls her proudest moment. "I once asked Daniel, one of our pupils, 'what colour is your dog?'. He went into his French pages and chose 'noir' because he knew the computer wasn't working in English that day.

"The technology lets people find out how clever our pupils are. Just because they have no speech doesn't mean they can't think for themselves."

Rolf Black, from Dundee University's school of computing, first explored the idea three years ago. He attended a lecture given by Aberdeen University about a texting service for new parents with babies in intensive care. "It was based on texting

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parents the update on their babies' progress throughout the day," he recalls. "At the time, my twin boys were in intensive care and I thought, you can't do that, that's not very nice."

After the talk, Mr Black approached Aberdeen University and they explored the idea of using the concept for children with no speech. "We looked at the issue of improving chat over dinner. It's an important part of the day for kids to talk about their experiences."

Supported by occupational, speech and physiotherapists, the project has been a great success and won the category for Outstanding ICT Learning Initiative of the Year at the TES Schools Awards last summer. The judging panel was impressed with the use of technology to solve a problem. They said: "It's refreshing to see a research project that has significantly altered the lives of parents, too."

Researchers at Dundee University also found most children just wanted to record gossip – who did what and what happened when – but the computers did not have the vocabulary to record this information. "When the project first started, I thought the children would be able to use the sensors for everything," says Mr Black. "But we found early on that the technology didn't give you the interesting bits."

Ms Braekken soon picked up on this. To record these parts of the day, staff speak into the recording devices for the child to replay at home. "The kids love to record anything that's funny, like someone falling

over or a disaster that happens," she says. "I often find myself recording something starting with: 'You'll never guess what happened today...'"

The technology also gives staff the satisfaction of watching the children grasp the concept of sequencing – understanding time and the order of events occurring today, tomorrow and yesterday. "The technology helps children think about their sequencing skills," says Ms Braekken. "Did this happen today or yesterday? It also helps with their tenses and verbs."

Ms Cochrane says that since using the technology, she has noticed more self-expression from the pupils. They are more

independent and can perform tasks with the help of the technology that otherwise they would not physically be able to do. For example, one pupil with muscular dystrophy can no longer do jigsaw puzzles. But the new technology gives him the ability to complete a puzzle online.

"Our children can be autonomous," says Ms Catterson. "They are now very skilled at going to find other ways to do things rather than having others do it for them."

Corseford School has 39 pupils with disabilities from 15 local authorities in Scotland. Although it is a grant-maintained school, budgeting would have been hard to work on a project of this scale. As a university research project, the funding was secured by Digital Economy Programme, which Mr Black deems to be the most prestigious funder in digital research. But staff at the school have the same worries as any other school in the current economic climate.

"Many communication aids are vital for the children," says Ms Catterson, "but I'm not sure it's viewed as such [by the local authorities]. All we can do is recommend."

The good news is this technology system has been presented internationally by Dundee University, receiving positive feedback. "We are proud to be involved in these projects," says Mr Black. "The UK councils have offered a lot of support to digital projects that support communities. Our research is not just research for research; it's research to support the community."

TES Schools Awards



Entries are now open for the 2011 TES Schools Awards (TESSAs), which celebrate and recognise outstanding teams in the UK state and independent sector. In addition to entries directly from schools, submissions from associated organisations and partners are encouraged.

The TESSAs encompass innovation in teaching, leadership and community involvement. There are three new awards this year: the best school business teams; the best financial partner or school funding initiative; and the best school website.

The entry deadline is 5pm on 11 March 2011. The shortlist will be announced in April and the winners revealed at a gala luncheon in June. www.tes.co.uk/awards