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KIDSMART SNAPSHOTS



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AUSTRALIAN
NATIONAL SCHOOLS
NETWORK

KILCOY PREP & CABOOLTURE SPECIAL SCHOOL

Leanne Morris

Developing community awareness & valuing technology integration



IBM®



Leanne Morris

> School Context:

Leanne Morris, is an early childhood educator who participated in the IBM KidSmart program in 2002 at Kilcoy State School. Kilcoy is a rural town, in south east Queensland, where community employment opportunities exist mainly at a local meat works or in the timber and local service industries. As with most towns dependent on farming (beef and dairy) and the timber industry, it has suffered financially over recent years. Prior to this the community was already in a low socio-economic state, and this has been exacerbated by the crisis of drought and lack of job opportunity.

> Beliefs and practices prior to IBM KidSmart

Before the IBM KidSmart program, the preschool had an old, unreliable computer. Due to its limitations, the computer was never part of my planning or part of a structured learning experience. Instead I viewed the computer as essential to the future of our students, but not necessarily essential to young learners. I believed young children needed to learn mouse skills and general navigation of software, but the computer could not replace valuable “first hand” learning experiences. So for me, applying to be part of the IBM KidSmart program was more about obtaining a new computer for children to access, than examining and reflecting on my own values and beliefs around ICT integration.

> Investigation

Part of the program involved developing a research question to focus on throughout the year. My question soon became obvious to me after listening to parents in the first few days of the school year – “Why should we have computers in Early Childhood?” This was a question many parents asked me when the computer first arrived in the Prep classroom

Many of the parents saw the computer as an expensive toy that seemed to be a waste of money on children so young. They felt that the old computer was more than enough, and questioned the justification of having a computer that was worth so much, yet looked like a toy in a Prep setting. Many parents suggested that there was no need for preschoolers to be using computers at all. I was confused by the reaction of the parents until I realised these families struggled for every cent on a daily basis, having to justify the outlay of any expenditure; and in 2002 computers were much more expensive than they are now, and so were not common place in our community members’ homes. I also realised I had not given the parents any reason for having a computer for Prep, let alone for upgrading to a new computer. I had been caught up in the excitement of having a new computer and had assumed all other members of the Prep community would feel the same.

To help with my research I focused my attention on six children. The first was a boy who had been identified as developmentally delayed. Before using the computer his social and communication skills were very limited. He will be known as SM. The next a girl, SR, had very similar problems to SM. The third was a little boy – FW. He had minimal social skills and behavioural problems, and would rarely talk to the other children. The fourth is a boy – JM. JM had also been recognised as developmentally delayed and struggled in all of the foundation learning areas. The fifth child was SuM. She was very social and demonstrated strong leadership skills. The sixth was a boy known as BW. BW displayed emotional difficulties and was eventually prescribed medication for depression.



Neither SR nor SM had a computer at home and had no prior knowledge of a computer, using a mouse, recognising and linking. At first the teacher aide sat with both of them, talking about the activities and what she had to do to get to the point at which she had arrived.. It wasn't long before SR and SM were asking to have a go at the computer. At first SM would actually control the mouse, while SR sat quietly observing, but it wasn't long before SR was discussing with SM what he could or should be doing. Soon after this development SR wanted to take control of the mouse. Through discussion they were able to follow the instructions, and talked at length about how to use the computer. What I found to be the most impressive thing was the confidence they both had gained through their discussions while using the computer. The computer seemed to provide a non-threatening environment that allowed them to make mistakes, but self-correct without having to fear failure. The conversations they had around the computer continued on to the next activity, which gave both these students the confidence to initiate and make other friendships.

FW was considered very young for his age and did not have a computer at home. FW became very excited at the thought of using the computer and, when not on the computer, spent most of his time observing other children working with the computer. Through his actions, he seemed to develop language skills while interacting with other children on the computer. (He would ask questions and share his ideas and offer advice.) His social skills became more appropriate; he developed the concept of taking turns, of not interrupting and of not hitting someone when he wanted their attention. Socially appropriate behaviours could be readily observed, rewarded and reinforced. As a result preferred behaviours seemed to have emerged.

SuM, had very good leadership skills and was well liked by her peers. For these reasons I often put her with two other children when she was on the computer. She would ask the other students questions or their opinions about what they thought she should do. If she came across a problem she would discuss it with other students. Peer tutoring helped to build confidence, problem solving skills and appropriate behaviours when using the computer.

> Observations

Throughout the program the parents were given the opportunity each morning to participate with their children on the computer. The language (computer jargon) their child used and the confidence they displayed when using the computer surprised many of the parents. The parents started to make comments about how good the computer was and what a good idea it was. Many eventually made comments saying that they understood that computer use was about more than developing their child's computer skills, and that it was a great way to improve their child's confidence, as well as a tool to further enhance concepts taught in class.

The children loved using the computer, which meant they had to learn turn taking and working with other members of the Prep class, besides their friends. The physical appearance of the computer has been very appealing to the children, and the idea of having a chair that encouraged more than one child to be involved at a time promoted social interaction. Realising, the value of the shared discussions and the various perspectives expressed when the students interacted with the computer made me understand that a computer activity did not have to be an individual process. Now I often allow multiple children to observe and contribute and, as a result, the computer table often has a multitude of discussions and observations occurring.



The IBM KidSmart program has provided an opportunity for me to demonstrate to the school community the importance of a computer within the Early Childhood setting and why it should not only be included as another educational tool, but should also be integral to the planning process to support and reinforce key concepts.

I have been able to observe the development of not only cognitive skills, but also social skills. Computers offer children a unique sound and graphic system that other educational non-multimedia tools cannot. Children become interested, making them intrinsically motivated. Through computer software the children are engaged in creative play, mastery learning, problem solving, and conversation.

> Number of years on:

I now believe the computer, when used as an appropriate tool, has the capacity to help enhance the cognitive and social abilities of all children.

I have now moved to a new school, and play a lead role in delivering curriculum for students in a special school setting. With the aid of adaptive technologies, all of the initial programs we used in IBM KidSmart could be easily adapted and used with our students who have from mild to severe intellectual impairments.

Following the integration of technology into the curriculum, the classroom teachers and I have noticed students becoming motivated to become independent learners. We believe this is a result of the positive learning experiences technologies provide for all students, especially ones with disabilities, to develop and reinforce social skills, in particular, interpersonal skills. We have encouraged this through the following strategies

- More capable students have tutored less capable students,
- Class members have worked together, helping each other to achieve common goals

One noticeable student improvement we believe is due to the multimodal approach to learning experiences is that our students have been compelled to improve their communication skills. By using digital documentation and specific programs, ICT not only provides positive reinforcement, which increases student motivation, but also provides tools to support students' memories of events and actions; and provides cues as to how to behave and communicate.

> The future

Technologies are now integral components of all schools; and in the case of special schools, they provide the vital link for many students to communicate and participate in the world around them.

With technologies changing so rapidly and schools still not discovering the full potential of integrating these tools into the curriculum, we need to develop working partnerships with teachers, parents and communities. Professional dialogue between teachers and across schools, I believe, is the key to increasing and promoting awareness of how to effectively improve student motivation and learning through ICTs.

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