

School use of learning platforms and associated technologies

Case study: Primary School 2

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Primary School 2

This case study is part of a suite of 12 case studies which inform the benefits identified in the main report and should therefore not be read as a stand-alone.

1. The school and the school community

The school opened in 1976 and reflects that period, with open spaces and few walls between classes. The school has areas that are used for hands-on learning (a clay machine room, a museum room with natural history materials, a woodlands area outside the school, an external auditorium, a Japanese garden in the creation of which learners were involved, and a bird cage with parrots and other birds). There is a Special Needs unit, and a Language unit for pupils with language disorders. Learners come mainly from a White British background and in the recent years more children of families of Travellers have joined the school.

The learners are in mixed-year departments (the lower juniors has six parallel classes of Years 3-4 and the upper juniors has six parallel classes of Years 5-6) and they spend two years in each department as this allows more time for teachers to get to know and understand each child.

The school has always been ICT-driven and has won the ICT Mark and QA Naace award; in addition it is an ICT consultant school.

“... We made the ICT very much part of the learning, so whatever we’re doing in topic... I’m supposed to be doing publisher booklets, producing information booklets. And I’ve linked that to my science and my art... So that’s what ICT is like at this school. It’s not ‘we’re off to the ICT suite for an ICT lesson’.” [ICT coordinator]

The previous headteacher had been in the school for a long time and she was involved in Becta’s leading leaders’ activities, which helped define the school’s ICT development. ICT has been used to improve practice, and teaching is videoed and evaluated, for example. The school is considered to be well equipped, with two computers in each class, and there are plans to increase class computers to four. Instead of having an IT suite, the school chose to buy laptops that are transportable; in this way independent learning, a focus for the school, was promoted. Teachers describe activities using the laptops around the school, which wouldn’t be possible if they had to use (desktops in the classroom or an IT suite. There are bays with computers in the library and other areas in the school and there are plans to buy 50 notebooks, which will enable children to use them in various areas in the school. Every teacher including cover teachers) has a laptop and there is a bank of laptops for LSAs. Connection to the network is well supported with many network ports in the school. The school doesn’t have any interactive whiteboards as the previous head

preferred to invest in laptops so all the children could be participants at the same time, rather than individuals presenting/learning on the whiteboard.

Independent learning is in focus and the learning platform has been used to promote this. Independent working is also applied to teachers, as they have a core plan, which they can use individually to adapt to their learners' needs.

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2. How the learning platform is used

General observations

ICT has been embedded in the school practice for a long time and the introduction of a learning platform was a natural step. Before the introduction of the learning platform, learners had already been using the internet and had their own space on the school network to save files.

A financial system and the Management Information System have been used by the county schools for many years for tracking data (attendance and progress such as SATs results) but the MIS and the learning platform are not able to 'talk' to each other.

The school website is a source for information for parents, and the parent email system (through which parents receive information and letters etc. but cannot reply to these emails) is the main way of communication between school and home outside the face-to-face meetings and phone communication. The website is also used for showcasing school work. Currently, parents use their children's log-in to access the learning platform.

Before launching the learning platform, the school was part of a pilot and the then headteacher was a member of the county ICT Committee that took the decision for all the county schools to use the same learning platform. Various providers demonstrated learning platforms during the tendering process. One of the reasons for choosing the eventual provider was the attractive initial training package they were offering, based on a cascade model where some people are taught, and they then teach others who in turn teach others.

The local council released time for teachers to be trained, and two teachers from this school attended and then enabled training within the school. The county also released a group of advanced skills teachers for 18 months to work on training and developing resources, and schools can seek help from them. Support for use of the learning platform at county level was free for pilot schools through a learning platform support helpline. The then headteacher and support assistants had training and the head acted as the ICT coordinator until the current coordinator was appointed two years ago, which coincided with the launch of the learning platform. Being involved with Becta and the leading leaders' group, the head teacher was informed about initiatives such as Home Access before these were taken to schools and this helped her to understand the potential of the technology, and to support the introduction of the learning platform in the school.

Management and administration

The learning platform is not currently used in the management of the school. The email system is that used by headteachers in all county schools and doesn't have for example a shared diary, which this head feels would be useful. A communication board in the staff room, email, text and memos are used instead of the learning platform for staff communication.

The learning platform was launched formally at the school two years ago, and was initially trialled by some classes before being launched in September 2008 at a whole-school level. The vision for development of the learning platform was part of the school improvement plan. This year the use of the learning platform has also been part of the performance management for staff.

The first step for using the learning platform was to introduce it to teachers who would populate the space on learning platform so that learners could find it useful. Staff members describe how the learning platform is an empty space that has to be filled in, which requires hard work by them. The design of the platform was developed by the provider and the school ICT coordinator has the opportunity to provide feedback during meetings with the provider. In addition, once every half term, the ICT coordinator attends a network group meeting in the area, during which she is updated on developments of the learning platform. The ICT coordinator facilitated the launch of the platform in other schools, and she regularly attends training meetings herself to update her knowledge. She also joins the learning platform information group with members from other schools.

The acting deputy head is now overseeing the implementation of the learning platform. The ICT coordinator has a vision for the learning platform, and the technician and an LSA provide technical assistance. Internal training is an important element of implementation of the learning platform. Workshops with different focuses take place during staff meetings as part of school improvement, and ICT and the use of the learning platform is a regular feature of these workshops. The ICT coordinator organised three workshops to enable teachers to use the learning platform, with a specific focus such as uploading resources on the learning platform, which staff found helpful. The school leaders have paired up experienced people with less experienced individuals to enable sharing of experience and best practice. At the beginning teachers found it challenging:

"Initially I thought was like another thing we had to do on top of everything else, and there were quite a few problems with it: I couldn't upload any Word document. I know that seems to be fixed now, but it still feels to me like something I have to use to show that I can use it..." [Teacher]

Although the journey was difficult for teachers, many of them now often use it in their practice, where they consider it useful and appropriate.

“For me, when we first started using it, I was really excited about it, because I use – well, I’m sure we all do – use ICT a lot, but I found it wasn’t intuitive at all, so it didn’t operate. I wanted to click on it to make it do that and I was clicking on what seemed logical and it wouldn’t do it... But like you said, those sorts of problems seem to have been ironed out a little bit... And now I find that I use it all the time.... I find it really, really useful and I use it all the time now. But it did take me a little while of getting used to it and learning the tricks ... Now I use it as second nature, as part of my practice, but it took me a long time to get to that point.” [Teacher]

Parents were informed about the learners using the learning platform through a letter sent home and later through the parents’ launch meeting. Before remote access to the learning platform was enabled, parents and learners were invited together to the launch meeting. The meeting addressed parents’ concerns regarding e-safety and the learning platform, the goal of promoting writing as well as using ICT (‘not everything becoming ICT’) and the characteristics of the system.

“It was just an invitation to the parents to come along one evening to show them what the learning platform was, because they were a little bit worried about their kids going on the internet, for obvious reasons.... And we said it was a secure site: you needed a password and a log-in number. And that it’s a secure area and no other adults can get in to see apart from the parents. And us, as teachers. And they seemed to be reassured by that.” [Teacher]

Parents were not involved in the development of the learning platform however they are happy with the school making choices as accommodating all parents’ ideas would be difficult as they suggested. The parents’ launch meeting was a turning point for staff as they realised that parents are interested in their children’s use of the learning platform. The launch was followed up by training for staff, and that is how the learning platform gained its own momentum. Since then the approach of the ICT team has been to provide ideas and support, and drip-feed into other processes such as the staff workshops.

“I think all the staff pretty much were at the parents’ launch, and I think when they realised how many parents were on board with this, they suddenly thought, crikey, you know. And again, that was then followed up by... I’d already done one staff training session. That was followed up by three more staff training sessions, and I think just that whole sort of focus on it for half a term, sort of helped it gain momentum really.” [ICT coordinator]

One way to get learners on board in using learning platform was to allow them to use interesting areas of the learning platform (the chat room, and other tools such as avatar) and to plan fun activities.

The school ICT policy, including fair usage, is currently being rewritten by the ICT coordinator to address issues that arose with the introduction of the learning platform. The ICT coordinator has some general PPA time to devote to this as well as to provide support for other teachers. Parents also feel that a written policy on the use of the learning platform (and referring to the learning platform company too) with rules and information on safeguarding would be useful even though they feel reassured because of the platform having been chosen at county level. Parents see the use of a common platform across schools in the county as a benefit for learners when moving to secondary school, supporting continuity and consistency.

Curriculum and teaching

Currently some classes use the learning platform extensively, while others make little use of it.

Although a general principle of the school is not to set daily homework for learners, teachers regularly give reading, word work, vocabulary and tasks related to maths, literacy and topic work, and carrying research out at home is encouraged. The learning platform is used mainly for this purpose, to provide homework for children and to provide tasks for revision and extended learning. The school aims to develop children as independent learners and this is promoted through investigations and project work and the learning platform enables these processes.

Teachers provide links to websites on the learning platform which learners can use for research as well as activities for groups, targeting different levels, and provide lesson resources so that learners can revisit and reinforce their learning. Teachers are able to access a resource bank at county level (French group) but they also refer to 'brilliant websites out there' that they can use in their teaching or direct the children to.

The 'E-locker' is a learning platform area for storing work used by both teachers and learners. Both the learning platform and the school website are used, to showcase learners' work.

The Special Educational Needs coordinator and team provide their own materials for children to access in the classroom (rather than at home).

In terms of online reporting, the MIS is used for collecting data but as the learning platform is not linked with it, teachers cannot foresee the learning platform being used for this purpose. Parents also believe that the current communication on the learners' progress through the reports is sufficient.

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Class pages links

Learning and learners

Learners use the learning platform both at home and in the classroom, to access, complete and send work to the teacher. Where the learning platform is used in the classroom, children carry out directed activities, to search for information, play a game, or upload their work. Chat rooms and discussion forums are used by learners and are monitored by teachers, and as a result discussions were initiated around the rules for using online forums. Parents also acknowledge how the use of the learning platform brought up these issues, including e-safety.

The philosophy of teaching in the school is emphasising independent leaning, so teaching involves every learner's participation. Rather than using an interactive whiteboard to teach the whole class, learners can use the laptops and the learning platform to work independently. Teachers scaffold the activities they put up on the learning platform and in this way learners can focus on the learning. Learners have a direct route to appropriate and pre-planned material. They can access lessons, and can catch up with work if they missed school because of illness or other reasons.

Learners also refer to collaborative work, for example preparing a PowerPoint presentation and uploading it on the learning platform, and sharing this work with others. They have access to games through links to other web pages and like the

fact that they have them on the learning platform instead of searching for them on the internet.

Learners feel that the County owns the learning platform and they are aware that there are restrictions in what they can do on it. They also refer to problems they had when using the learning platform, for example not having instructions on how to upload files or not knowing if a message was sent. Some learners feel that teachers having control of the learning platform (checking their messages, for example) does not allow them to use the learning platform privately. However, they do appreciate that the learning platform is a safe environment to use.

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Investigative work on the learning platform

Parents and families

Parents showed interest in the use of learning platform but initially had concerns about e-safety of their children using the learning platform which were addressed during the launch meeting. During the training session, the ICT coordinator explained in simple ways how the learning platform was going to be used at school and at home by learners. The training included practical demonstrations and a workshop for parents and learners to work together on assignments prepared by teachers in their class. Parents had the opportunity to ask teachers questions about the learning platform and the ICT coordinator answered further questions.

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Using a wipe board and laptop for a maths game through links on the learning platform

Currently, parents use learners' log-ins to access the learning platform and see what their children can see (homework, resources, discussions). For some, this is difficult as they feel they are invading their children's space and would prefer to be given their own password. They appreciate, however, that the learning platform is targeted towards learners. Other parents consider the learning platform as a structured area, where the learners have specific tasks and instructions, so it is not being used as a personal area. They feel confident with the fact that their children are aware that adults/teachers can check this space (for example, the discussion threads) and therefore there is no abuse/misuse of these areas.

However, parents also feel that they could have more information on the way the learning platform is used; for example, they are not aware if or how often teachers check the learners' e-locker area to assess their work. Parents say they would also like to have more training in using the learning platform and suggested having online video tutorials. The school did a survey on home access to computers and the internet but the ICT skills or ability of parents was not questioned. The school website is considered an important channel of communication and the school does not plan to replace this in any way with the learning platform.

3. Benefits from using the learning platform

Findings from the case study are described below.

Extended learning – homework

Since having the learning platform, teachers have used it to give extra activities and homework to learners; all stakeholders (parents, teachers and learners) report that this works successfully. Children are more motivated to complete work via the platform than if it was on paper. Also, parents have increased expectations, knowing that the children have this opportunity for extended, out of school learning. An example was the use of the learning platform during the snow-falls this winter by learners who couldn't come to school but were able to access the lesson resources and work to do on the learning platform. This was greatly appreciated by parents:

“On the day there was snow there was a benefit there. Because I know when I was younger, and it snowed and you couldn't get to school, you spent all day playing. But there was an opportunity which we did use for them to continue their education on a normal day. But obviously they had breaks and they went and played in the snow at the same time. So there was a benefit in the fact that it wasn't 'Right, it's snowing, we don't have to go to school'. They continued doing some education on a working day.” [Parent]

Another example of extended learning is the History Fortnight area on the learning platform, created by teachers (shown below).

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Flexibility/consistency of work

The learning platform allows for remote access and flexibility for both teachers and learners. The learning platform enables continuity of learning on the days of the snowfall and is useful for learners who miss school through illness. A parent suggests how the use of the learning platform will enable children to understand better the way some jobs are carried out nowadays, in a more flexible way, with the use of ICT. The learning platform brings things together in a secure and methodical way, it is well structured by teachers, and parents can only see some areas through the learners' log-ins. Teachers find that homework on the learning platform allows for continuity in learners' work and for flexibility for both teachers and learners regarding when to do their work:

"It's a huge difference for me because the children can start on work in school, save it, pick it up at home, do something and send it back to themselves and that's not even formal homework. Actually, I've used it very little for formal, set homework, it's more been a continuation of work we've done in school. And to me that kind of makes it a bit more real for the children." [Teacher – subject support team]

"Well, it was an opportunity I guess for them to go back to it to support their later learning if needs be. And I guess we found with the snow days with lots of children not coming in, that that's been accessible to them at home as well. And also with the homework, where I've had children that have not been there on the day you give out the homework, I've put it on, even just the covering letter sometimes, and so they can access it straight from home." [Teacher]

ICT skills for life

Parents, teachers and learners appreciate the fact that learners advance their ICT skills but also learn to judge the sources they have available and to behave appropriately online. Parents and teachers suggest that learners acquire skills valued in real life and this is beneficial for them. Parents also appreciate that learners will be able to apply these skills later in the senior school. Improving ICT skills is not a subject in the curriculum but it is part of all the subjects taught. The learning platform provides a safe environment for learners to practise these skills.

"Yes. ... you know, just getting everybody on board, because the future has to be technological, you know, we don't even know what jobs these children are going to be doing, so they've just got to be multi-skilled. And information: there's all the information they're ever going to need already available; they just need to learn how to use it." [Deputy Head]

“I think their skills are amazing as well. My daughter goes through things and I’m thinking, what’s she doing? And they’re not scared for things to go wrong, which is great. You need to have that at this age I think. I think it’s helped, also it’s bought up issues for discussion at an earlier age, to do with safety on the internet.” [Parent]

“...Not just technical skills, but the ability to decide whether something is safe or not safe.” [Parent]

“I think they’re improving their ICT skills without really realising that they’re doing it. So you’re kind of killing two birds with one stone. And the way that the learning platform works, it is, in some ways, quite similar to various other operating systems so that if you’re... You know, the way that you attach something if you’re sending an email is very similar to how you’d do it in Hotmail or Google mail or something like that. So they’re learning skills, without really realising that they’re doing it, that they can apply outside of school as well.” [Teacher – subject team support]

“And it also means that if the parents want to, they can access it with them at home and support the learning that way. So it really reinforces it, and then when they go off to do targeted work with the learning support assistant, they can then access the work again and do the reinforcement again.” [ICT coordinator]

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Learning platform tools

Improved teachers' ICT skills

Some teachers describe how the use of learning platform helped them as well as the learners develop their skills about the internet and the platform itself:

“Well, it’s a dual benefit really, because my technical skills aren’t fantastic: they’re good in some areas and not so good in others, and so being able to use this has been a benefit to me. Firstly, because I’m learning more about the internet and I’m learning how to... how the whole system works and getting used to the technology.” [Teacher]

Parental engagement

The learning platform also is a way for teachers to communicate with parents. For example, the ICT coordinator decided to use email to keep in touch with the mother of a learner whose father died during the holiday.

Parents are more engaged in their children’s learning and show increased interest in their homework, according to teachers. One parent typed up the stories her daughter had written (as a leisure activity) and then the mother suggested that she uploaded them on the learning platform to share with the teacher.

Enabling parents to access the internet and the learning platform in the school library, and to work alongside learners, brings family and community closer:

“And of course it gets parents involved as well, because the parents come to the library after school to help with the system. Because obviously it’s not the teachers then, it’s the parents. The parents sit down with the kids, and actually it’s nice to see the parents sitting down with the kids because you don’t always know that happens.” [Teacher]

“We use the learning platform after school, because that really brings the community together. And parent and kids together, actually. Which is, you know, important...” [Teacher]

Differentiation of work

The learning platform allows teachers to prepare work for learners with different levels of knowledge/skills:

“What I find useful, from my own point of view, is putting work on there that you can differentiate, but the children don’t feel as though it looks any different to what anybody else is doing. And it means they can work on it almost at their own rate; there isn’t the same pace... Obviously I do give an input, but there isn’t the same pace of me going ‘Right, get this done, get this done.’” [ICT coordinator–teacher]

“I’ve got quite a big group who do need support with their spelling. So what I do is, I set them... And I’ve put them in a team folder, so only those six children can get into that team folder. And I set them word challenges and investigations on there, and then they go off. And they’re still learning, but then it means that they’re extending themselves, but I can focus on the rest of my class who do need help, so...” [ICT coordinator]

For younger learners, not having to type an address and being able to follow a link is very useful. The less able writers are also supported in this way, and their confidence is increased, as they don’t have to focus on the presentation of their work but on the learning.

“I think that it... you can use it to differentiate very nicely for people that find handwriting difficult. I think, you know, it’s helped the more able, as I said, in spelling. In some ways it’s helped the less able with their handwriting, and I think they find it generally easier to write using a laptop as a general rule. ... Everything can be done in pictures, you know, as well. So that’s quite good and they can enjoy that.” [Teacher]

Independent learning

Staff members consider the use of the learning platform as fundamental in promoting independent learning. Having the lesson resources on the platform enables learners to learn at their own pace and in their own way. Independent reading is also encouraged and teachers observe that learners are more willing to read something on the computer rather than something on paper. In addition, learners have taken more responsibility for doing their homework.

“Well, it’s different because you won’t have teachers shouting at you if you get it wrong, and then it’s an easier way to learn, because rather than them just talking or showing you, you actually get to try it out for yourself, and then it’s better to learn that way.” [Year 3-4 learner]

“... If you’re not very confident on one thing you can keep practising until you get better at it, and then the next time you do it actually in class you’ll be able to do it better than you usually do.” [Year 3-4 learner]

“I think it’s quite good because, like, if you wanted to, you could’ve done... you could do a whole lesson on the learning platform, so instead of having to listen to your teacher going on about how to do it, you could just go on there and do it yourself....So then you’re learning all yourself, without your teacher’s help... You might have a maths sheet that you have to do; you might have topic/task cards or something like that.” [Year 3-4 learner]

Teachers report that learners enjoy doing independent work and research and that they engage more quickly when using the learning platform:

“I mean just simple things, like I put on a question on the discussion board on the learning platform, and the children teamed up and they went off round the school, and they had to answer the question using the internet, using books and talking to people. And then my class was spread all over the school. ... And they were helping each other answer the question, so they were all putting on things that they’d found. And I, of course, was sitting at my desk watching this discussion happen, and every now and then would sort of type in a suggestion, and sort of... guide them in the right direction. And I mean, you know, they came back absolutely stoked, because it hadn’t been me going, ‘Henry the Eighth was...’, you know. It was ‘Was Henry the Eighth a hero or a villain?’ – something really open. And they went off and found out about him, and... I did the same for the Spanish Armada as well.” [ICT coordinator]

“Well, I think it’s absolutely brilliant, principally because I’m enabling the children to do very independent work by setting up very simple tasks for them to do, and a lot of that involves, you know, involves them finding something that I’ve set. I did a – well, I’ve called it a bit of an action research project on spelling – last term, where I got some very able children and divided the class into a group that were doing independent work on word definitions...And the work that they produced is fantastic from there. And I tested their spelling ages before we started and afterwards, and there’s loads of improvement in the spelling ages as well in the children, so that was a useful bit...” [Deputy Head]

“The learning platform is often one of the activities that they do independently ... so I thought about what I wanted them to achieve, and the point of the activity is that they’re learning about the different types of food you should eat to stay healthy. So it’s kind of like the food pyramid. ...And I went online and found this BBC video clip that’s... It’s embedded into the task and they just go online and log in; watch the video clip; go back to the set of instructions if they need to, and they’re... today, they’re recording it in their writing books. But sometimes I ask them to record it as a Word file. Sometimes I ask them to email me and tell me what they found out. Sometimes I, you know, might get them to make into a PowerPoint or whatever, depending on what information they’ve found.” [Teacher]

Parents perceive the learning platform as their children’s area for work, where they have less control, therefore allowing them to be more independent in their learning:

“I almost think, in a way, for homework I’m probably less aware to a degree. Because I’d have to log on to his environment to see what he’s been set. Whereas before you used to open a book and you’d go, ‘Right, you’ve got this

to do tonight'. ... Because it's, in a way I see it as his environment for him to work in. Not for me almost to pry in, if that's right." [Parent]

Engaging/motivating learning

Learners become active learners as they are involved in investigations and research:

"[the teacher] put on something where we had to find out about... we had... there was this, like, fact quiz and we had to... and it was about Queen Elizabeth I and we... and there was, like, pictures and it said, where... what... and it said, what year they were born in and when they were painted, and then we had to try and find... then we had to remember it and try and find the letter which was the same thing as the picture." [Year 3-4 learner]

Learners like showing their work to family and being involved in research and project work. They are motivated by the fact that the learning platform makes their work more visible to teachers and parents.

"Yes, because then he... if he played the game about five-times tables about 20 times, then he knows you've been practising your homework, and he knows that you probably know your five-times tables by now." [Year 3-4 learner]

In addition, learners can use tools on the learning platform which are interesting for them, such as blogs. The immediacy of communication through learning platform is also something that learners find motivating:

"And if you've got something to say and you can't really wait till the next day, because it's actually happening on that day, it's easier to go on the learning platform and do it..." [Year 3-4 learner]

Improved communication

Through sending their work to teachers via the learning platform, learners can reflect on it and communicate this to the teacher:

"Usually, when I've finished my homework, I send an email to my teacher saying how I felt about it and that it's really exciting how we thought it was." [Year 3-4 learner]

"I emailed my teachers, because we couldn't actually get the homework up to do because it wasn't actually in the folder." [Year 3-4 learner]

"It helps you to learn differently because at school you usually learn either on a book or a laptop or like a wall ... it helps you differently because you're not used to doing homework on the computer." [Year 3-4 learner]

Learners can use the learning platform to communicate confidentially with the teacher:

“Well, for some reasons it’s easy to speak to the teacher in person, but sometimes when you get bullied you feel you just can’t say in front of the class, because sometimes it can be people from your class and then you find it easier to just write it online because ... one of your friends may have bullied you and then you’re... and then you’d... won’t really want to tell the teacher because you think they’ll hear, and then they might come up and say it’s just a lie. So for some reasons it’s easier to speak to the teacher in person, but then some reasons it’s easier to speak to the teacher by computer.” [Year 3-4 learner]

Improved communication enables learners to be more organised with school work:

“Well, in Messages there are these... this stuff saying, last 367 Days, last 30 Days, and Today, and then you can click on them and then you can see the recent messages that have been sent. So, like, if your teacher’s reminding you that you’ve got a school-trip and you almost forgot to put on warm clothes, you can just, like, check that message and then you remember to put on warm clothes on the day of the trip.” [Year 3-4 learner]

“If my teacher sends me a message on Chat room I can say back, so if she says, ‘Remember to bring your book and your reading record to school tomorrow and practise your times-table’, and then the next day you can reply and say, ‘I’ve remembered to bring it in and I’ve learnt the whole of my times-table’.” [Year 3-4 learner]

Access to a wide variety of resources/materials

Learners like having various tools on the learning platform:

“On the learning platform they’ve got some icons at the top that says, Home, Calendars, Messages, E-Locker and Tools, and in Tools they’ve got like these things that you can do and where you can make your own blog. And then you can go onto Blog Search and then you can try and type in someone’s name and see if they’ve done a blog as well.” [Year 3-4 learner]

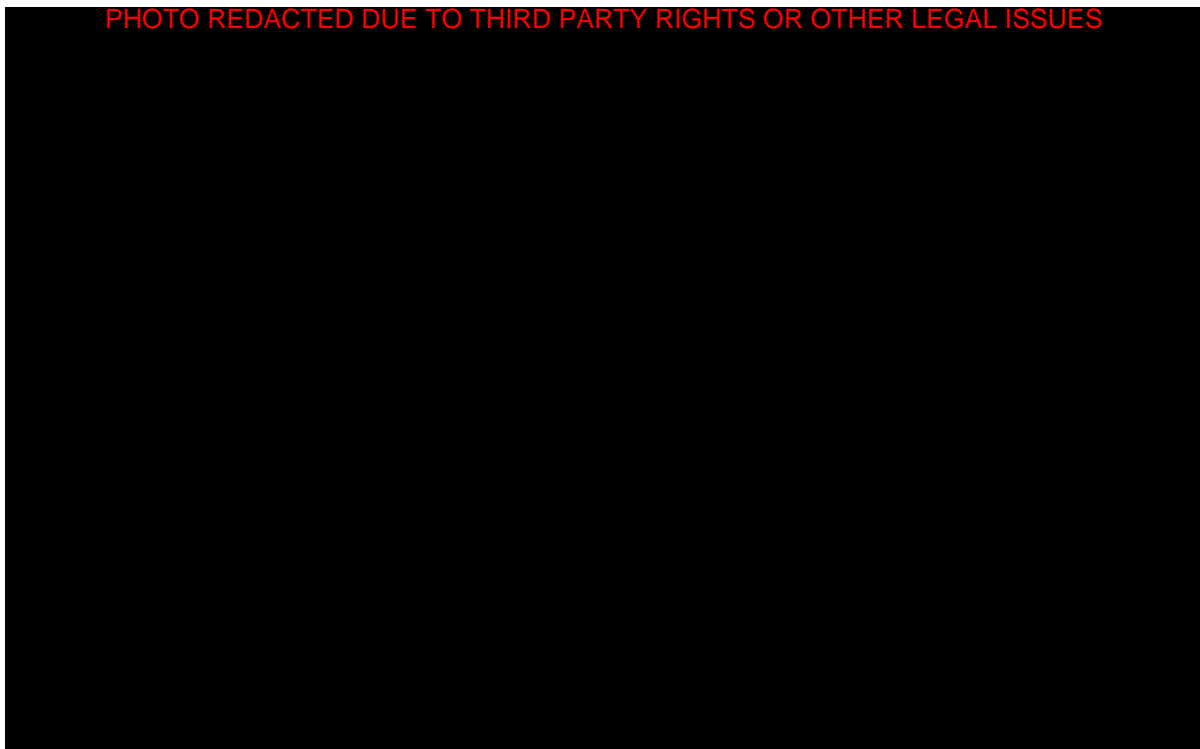
Teachers appreciate the way that the platform holds in a central space the materials and resources, providing a direct route to materials for learners:

“It focuses the children on the activity you actually want them to do... You know, I don’t have to say to them ‘Right, this is where we’re going, this is what we do’. They log in, it’s straight away there ready for them. I know it’s appropriate because I’ve planned it, so I don’t have to worry about them doing

any random stuff. It's straight on, straight through the task, and then...
[Teacher]

The ease of access to materials is also appreciated by learners:

"You could live without it, but...it's easier when you have it." [Year 3-4 learner]



Gallery images

4. Challenges and solutions

During the pilot period when the school trialled the learning platform, some problems involved getting learners on the system and hesitation by the staff to give their NI number so that they get a unique ID on the system. These were fed back to the provider and the county to be dealt with.

After launching the learning platform in the school, challenges included access to equipment and technical problems. Problematic network connection (overload of access that led to crashes of the system), problems with hardware such as printers and access to the laptops were some of these issues. Learners seem to prefer to work independently, but owing to the limited number of laptops learners may have to work in pairs, which they find tricky sometimes:

“Well, sometimes you get asked to work with a partner, but then it gets trickier because if you go on somebody else’s file, you never know, they might be in a different topic group than you. And then they might find the stuff that they need to do, so they might... be looking for the different ones and then everyone else has got paired up with their correct topic partner, but then you might be the only two left and your teacher may have mistaken you in the same group.” [Year 3-4 learner]

“Well, it will be hard to work together at school and use the learning platform because you’re going to keep arguing about whose password and user name you should put it on, and you can’t mix them up. So it’s going to be hard.” [Year 3-4 learner]

“When you’re also working with a partner, if you’ve chosen someone that can’t really understand things and have trouble doing tasks, it will... it might take up the time that you’ve got to go on to do your task, because you have to keep explaining.” [Year 3-4 learner]

“Sometimes we get told to use the computers, but if there’s not enough we go to the library. But sometimes in the library it doesn’t page up what you’re supposed to do on the learning platform, and in the classroom it’s set up of what you’re supposed to do and it lets you go on it. But then if you’re in the bay and you click on something and it doesn’t let you go on it, you have to wait or share a computer with someone.” [Year 3-4 learner]

Having well-charged laptops is also important.

Some teachers find the interface of the platform challenging, as they find that it is not practical and intuitive and they describe some of the processes they have to follow (for updating the calendar, for example) as time-consuming. The long time needed to upload pictures on the learning platform, or not being able to transfer material from

one area on the learning platform to another without sharing log-ins are also problems that teachers mention. Not being able to see the learning platform from a child's perspective unless they use the learners' log-ins is another matter that requires a solution.

"You know, you'd think it would be... you could go into something and figure out how it worked, but then it doesn't work and you don't know why, and... Well, like the teacher galleries is an example, because I've used that to put pictures up of trips and other bits and pieces that we've done, and the children have said to me, 'Oh, I couldn't work out how to look at the pictures'. You know, for me that seems like an obvious downfall. If I can upload my pictures into a gallery, but then the children who can't do anything to change it, they just click on it to look at it, and they can't figure out, that seems to me to be something that that's a frustration, isn't it?" [Teacher]

They also mention that various tools in the learning platform are redundant and that the learning platform as a whole is constraining as it is a closed environment. Having a teacher involved in the design of the learning platform interface rather than an ICT specialist is crucial, teachers suggest.

"But then, I'm used to it. But, like I say, there's loads of those icons that, as far as I'm concerned, are completely redundant – I can't use them. And I can't keep up with the calendar: it's too time-consuming to do that" [Deputy Head]

Lack of interoperability between the systems used at the school (the learning platform and the Management Information System) is prohibitive to implementing initiatives such as the online reporting for parents.

"What we've found with [the Management Information System] is that there's very little that it talks to. We found one new piece of software, but it's all to do with assessment, the APP, that does talk to the MIS. But yes, it's been a bit of a struggle." [ICT coordinator]

"And, of course, it's like this on my reporting at the moment, we're bound, because the MIS and the learning platform can't talk to each other, so if the learning platform don't give a space for parents we can't put parents on there anyway. And that's all to do with money: the more people you have on, the more it costs." [Deputy Head]

Parents also report having difficulties with using the learning platform, for example getting error messages when they tried to upload work with their children. An FAQ page for dealing with technical issues was a suggestion. Parents also feel that the learning platform could be more pictorial. They see the learning platform as a learners' area, and the school website as the main information source for parents and they would prefer to keep these separate. Parents suggest having more

information about the learning platform and would welcome another meeting on its use.

“We don’t know if the children are doing it and posting it. And then we don’t know if the teachers are checking it afterwards. So it could be going into a black hole. It could be some reason why the teacher’s not even seeing it. And I’m not sure where that loop is getting closed, to say, ‘I’ve received your homework’, ‘Now I’ve reviewed your homework’. And we don’t know what’s going on past that point do we? Or before that point.” [Parent]

In terms of communication between parents and teachers, the learning platform provides an additional way of access to teachers which could potentially violate their privacy and time. For this reason, teachers in this school, although they acknowledge the usefulness of having the learning platform as a tool for communication with parents, draw the lines for this communication.

“I didn’t like the idea of children and parents being able to email me. And I know there are other people that I know that use it, and don’t mind, but there were some teachers that were emailed over the weekend – ‘Oh, what are you doing?’, kind of thing. And I just thought I wouldn’t like that.” [Teacher]

Parents also understand the risks there are, as a result of having anywhere–anytime access enabled through the learning platform and agree that lines should be drawn on its use such as work expectations for teachers and learners during weekends. At the same time, teachers are sceptical about what information parents need to see on the learning platform. Teachers see the need to have a formal policy and procedures in place to underpin the use of the learning platform by parents.

“I haven’t thought about like a parent forum within that. You would have to be careful, wouldn’t you, that you didn’t open up a negative forum; yes, so in fact, in some ways, the more you open things up, the more you have to realise before you do it what the implications might be.” [Deputy Head]

“Yes, if you’re putting your planning on there and they’ve got access to that, if that’s what you mean, then how can they possibly understand what you’re talking about? Why should you have to then start thinking about a parent’s perception of what you’re writing on your plan? That would just be hideous.” [Teacher]

“The danger, though, with these types of things is that parents are just bombarded with information, and for parents that are involved parents, that’s brilliant. ...And then there’s the other side of the coin which, you know, the parents are busy and they haven’t got time to invest that type of time. And for them it’s just how we felt, I think, when we first had it: there’s a lot... this is a lot

of stuff, I don't really know what the purpose of it is; I feel guilty because I've not read it; and I haven't got time and I can't deal with it." [Teacher]

Currently not all the staff members are using the learning platform because of lack of confidence. When the learning platform was introduced some teachers thought negatively as they considered this as an add-on, and an extra thing they had to do, and they were concerned about the workload they would have resulting from this. To achieve independent learning which is a focus in the school, teachers need to make sure that they give instructions, select what is suitable and observe the children's work, providing feedback and directing them. For teachers this means extra time devoted, but they see the benefit of it and therefore like to use the learning platform. However, they got used to using it and they found the training and the workshops they had during staff meetings as important for developing their skills. They suggest that additional training would be useful.

Although only a small percentage of learners do not have access to computers and the internet at home (as indicated by a survey for parents that the ICT coordinator conducted) this is a challenge for the school. Lack of home access is addressed by providing an opportunity for parents and learners to use the library laptops during late-opening evening once a week. The ICT coordinator is there to provide help and support for access to the computers and the learning platform. At the same time, the school is using the Home Access scheme to apply for funding to provide laptops to eligible families.

The school also has a Special Needs Unit, and special arrangements need to be made on one hand for the equipment to be adapted to children's' needs and on the other hand to reach parents of these children.

"But because we have the unit, I'm interested in seeing if we can get some better access for special needs children and their families, because often they're the ones who are most disadvantaged and most left out. And actually, in our case, those children come by taxi, so they don't even live in the locality. So their parents are harder to reach than anybody, actually." [Deputy Head]

"I think it's harder for them, because their children aren't so skilful. I mean, if you've got learning difficulties, even if the technology's adapted, it's not as easy for you if you don't know your alphabet. You know, the bottom line is, it's just not as easy; and often their parents would need extra training as well..."
[Deputy Head]

5. Drivers

Individuals within the school act as key drivers for the use of the learning platform at whole-school level. The ICT coordinator, appointed at the time when the learning platform was launched and having previous experience as an ICT coordinator for seven years, is leading the implementation with the help of an ICT learning support assistant working for five hours a week on supporting staff, and an ICT technician visiting the school once a week for maintenance of the learning platform. By continuously giving ideas and encouraging staff to use the learning platform, the ICT coordinator manages to keep a focus on it.

“And I don’t let it drop, I’m sort of going round going... Or at the staff meetings when we talk about French I’m going, ‘Ooh, you can put this on the learning platform, and you can do this on the learning platform’. And when we had History Fortnight, you know I put a history area on the platform, and when the history coordinator was delivering the information for history of the fortnight, I then got up and did a bit on how to use ICT and the learning platform.... So we don’t ever let it go...” [ICT coordinator]

Having teaching/pedagogical knowledge and technical experience within this team is also important:

“I have the vision, and then go to those two, ‘Right, what do we need to do in terms of technical [things]?’ And [the LSA] keeps the website, the learning platform... She makes sure all the children are allocated the right things, and any sort of technical side of it. Because obviously teaching full-time, there’s no way that I can...” [ICT coordinator]

In addition, the ICT coordinator has the support of the headteacher and deputy head, who advise and coach her in her role, so that she can also take on board other staff members:

“She’s coming in with a different level of experience; she’s not a senior manager in the school, so part of what [the headteacher] and I are doing is coaching and mentoring her so she’s running the project and getting everybody else on board, really...” [Deputy Head]

The ICT coordinator evaluates the implementation of learning platform, for example through a questionnaire she sent to teachers at the beginning of the year, and that will be sent again at the end of the year so she will evaluate the progress made and identify individuals who need support.

The previous headteacher (now deputy while the school recruits a replacement) had the opportunity to see the implementation of the learning platform from a strategic perspective previously, and then from a teachers’ point of view. She was an elected

headteacher representative in the county committee that took the decision about employing a common learning platform for primaries in the county. She now oversees and supports the implementation in collaboration with the headteacher. The enthusiasm and determination of the senior management team members are crucial:

“Well, nothing works unless you’ve got leaders, you know, I’m afraid, and unless actually those people are passionate, it’s no good being a leader, but going in a different direction. And it’s no good being a leader by saying, ‘Do what you want’. You actually have to understand the issues, talk about the difficulties...” [Deputy Head]

“...I also think having the capacity within the headship and the deputy headship team to be able to oversee it effectively” [Headteacher]

The fact that the learning platform was introduced at county level, and training was provided as well as support, has proved helpful. This has been achieved through releasing teachers from schools for training and development, and centrally procuring services by the provider such as the learning platform layout development.

“There’s a team – [the local authority] put together a team of ASTs, leading teachers, and they came out of their schools for 18 months to put on training sessions, training days, support networks. So the school also belongs to a local support network and attends whole school training days.” [Senior Strategy Team]

“And also, these advanced skills teachers who are running the training at the moment, we would probably email one of those if there was a problem, and then they would, you know, pass it on, pass it on, until it got sorted out, really.” [Deputy Head]

“Also, you know, it’s not always the onus on us to fix things and get it organised, and get it up to date, you know. There’s somebody who, that is their sole job. Because if I had to do it, I wouldn’t... I wouldn’t have the time, and it would end up getting, you know, getting left behind almost. But no, having [a support team] means that they just get on with it really. It’s good.” [ICT coordinator]

Having a county-led learning platform enabled the adoption process for parents.

“I think I launched into the security straight away and how secure the site is, and how it’s [Local Authority]-led. I think parents are always a bit more comfortable when they know that it is authority-driven...” [ICT coordinator]

In terms of the adoption of the learning platform by staff, this was achieved beyond providing support and training, through making it part of the performance management and a whole-school target. Governors also shared this goal, and thus having a joint vision, drove implementation forward.

“A big way to drive things forward these days, you know, performance management; a big way: you can’t opt out. And as a whole school motivator, not a stick, a motivator, it’s very good...” [Deputy Head]

“So, because we’ve got it, and it has to be used, the teachers have to find out how to use it; so maybe some of our teachers who were a bit more reluctant before actually are being sucked into it, and the keenies – well, they’re just, you know, shooting off, really.” [Deputy Head]

“You know, to a certain extent we do have to say to people, when you’ve got something that’s going to become statutory – you know, it’s going to become statutory to you – that you’ve got to say ‘Right, you need to use this’. And in a way, you know, it’s a bit like throwing you in the deep end, but it worked. At some point you’ve got to do that, haven’t you? Because all the time someone was saying to me, you know, use it when you feel like it; I wouldn’t have probably used it. I have to have that kick. But I think it’s been pretty... it’s been done well.” [Teacher]

6. Conditions for success

The school has always invested heavily in ICT equipment and learners are confident users of technology. ICT was embedded in everyday learning and IT skills are applied in other subjects. The already established use of ICT in the school enabled the adoption of the learning platform. The current headteacher, who joined the school as a deputy head four years ago, was involved in the first place, in supporting staff to use ICT. At that time, she moved the school planning from paper and folders to the ICT network that was used by staff. Since that time all teachers had to use a Word template to create their planning and this activity indicated those individuals who were not confident using ICT. As a result, she then offered workshops in basic skills (Word, Excel) for staff on a voluntary basis, to increase their confidence in ICT skills. Since then the training has been ongoing. Staff members suggest that an excellent baseline in ICT is an important condition for success, as is ICT capability in learners:

“...I don’t think that schools who haven’t maintained their commitment to the use of ICT over a significant period could just jump straight to using a learning platform. ...And because of that, we have independent children who are confident users of ICT already and so our baseline is good. You know, the fear level for children is low and similarly with teachers, there’s always been a broad spread of ICT ability.” [Headteacher]

The enthusiasm and determination of the SMT and the ICT coordinator was a condition for success in the school. The team provides the resources and time for all the staff to become confident in using the learning platform and they are very supportive. It is also important for the individuals involved in the implementation to have a shared vision and to understand the technology.

“I think it had to be with complete enthusiasm. There was no wavering. Both [the head] and the [deputy head] and myself, who have been sort of the driving force behind it, have been nothing but enthusiastic about it in front of the staff... You know, but when it comes to me leading staff workshops, all the staff know that [they] are 100 per cent behind me, and that they want this for the school. And it is happening. It’s not one of these things that the staff can go, ‘Well I’m not very confident with computers; I’m not going to do that’. It’s like, well no, even if you’re not confident with computers, I’m going to give you the support so that you can use it. And so I think that it’s been very driven, but not in a way that is... made the staff feel uncomfortable. We’ve been very supportive. It’s been very slow, and at one point we were sort of... even sort of behind the other schools that had been doing the pilot with us. But we were like, well no, we’re doing it at the right pace that’s right for our school...” [ICT coordinator]

“When I was head, you were driving all of that forward by encouraging people and motivating them and bringing them on board and, you know, showing them – sharing their success, really.” [Deputy Head – previously Head]

Having received training, staff members were given the time to explore the learning platform and during this process they were able to access support on the spot. Teachers appreciate how the training and workshops they had in the school before and after the launch of the learning platform were useful, especially as they were focused on specific activity that was relevant to their work, such as planning resources for a topic. Teachers’ commitment is what the SMT consider important condition for success.

Another condition for success was to inform parents about the learning platform, to reassure them that it is a safe environment for their children to use and provide them with access to the learning platform (at home and at school – in library):

“And because they knew the children were going to access it from home, I think a lot of parents wanted to make sure that it was secure, that it was safe, and that, you know, there wouldn’t be any... Because obviously I’d talked about chat rooms and things, so I think there was a lot of allaying parents’ fears at the meeting. I think it’s the way the world’s going, and I think parents are just really interested in... in helping children at home, and I think they saw this as a really good sort of link between home and school...” [ICT coordinator]

7. Lessons learnt and future plans

One lesson learned is related to the school implementing the learning platform taken up at county level. The individuals involved (senior management team and ICT coordinator) realised that this entails advantages as well as drawbacks. On the one hand, the development of the learning platform happening at a distance from the school means that the learning platform interface is not directly related to the school needs and at the same time it poses restrictions to how the platform can be used. More input in the steering group level would be useful, as the headteacher suggested. Having to follow the centralised decisions taken at county level keeps the school back in some areas of development.

“No, I reckon that whatever you bought, because it’s off the peg, you haven’t invented it yourself, there’s going to be swings and roundabouts – things that are good and things that aren’t good. Some bits you lose, some won. What you would want to do is to be able to work with a company and say, ‘Look, we now need to upgrade what we’ve got; we now need to change some of this, so...’”
[Deputy Head]

On the other hand, being a primary, this school wouldn’t have the capability and budget to develop their own learning platform in an efficient way. Being part of the county practice using this learning platform means that the school receives services and support for technical matters, maintenance and training.

“Lots of things about the platform that we ended up with had nothing to do with us. We’ve never been afraid to do things on our own, but something as big as a learning platform is a bit difficult, unless you’re working as a cluster of schools, and you have the buying power.” [Headteacher]

During the first year of implementation the school staff were facing many changes (retirement of the headteacher, recruitment of new staff) so it was hard to focus on the use of the learning platform. In the current year, however, the implementation team put the learning platform in focus and enabled stakeholders (teachers, learners and parents) to use it. The ICT coordinator has realised during this process of introducing the learning platform that slow steps need to be taken owing to the different levels of confidence and IT skills of staff members. Although implementation of the learning platform is currently whole-school driven, the ICT coordinator needs to ensure that teachers’ individual educational needs are met. The ICT coordinator describes how it was crucial to allow time for the staff to get used to the learning platform, even if this meant that they were behind other schools. Following their own pace was important.

The involvement of parents and the interest they showed in the use of the learning platform during the launch meeting was surprising for staff. The school had to ensure that parents’ concerns were addressed in order to have their support. The

communication with parents has been on issues related to the boundaries on the 'anywhere anytime' access to teachers. Remote access through the learning platform and email means that the staff can be overloaded. Teachers discourage children from communicating with them at weekends, drawing lines and expectations about the use of the learning platform.

The senior management team and the ICT coordinator want to achieve the full embedding of the learning platform and its use by all staff members, before they launch new aspects and they believe this is important for implementing this in the right way. The vision of the leadership team is to address all the teachers' fears about the learning platform or ICT more generally, and to support them using these to ultimately give the same opportunities to all children. As the school focus is on children and their potential, the learning platform is considered a tool that needs to be part of every teacher's practice in appropriate ways:

"Here, as a school, the children have limitless beliefs in what they can achieve because we spend so much time ensuring that's the case. And I think sometimes, the only thing that limits them is the fear of people who are teaching them. And so my view would be that yes, it's truly embedded and it's used to move learning forward at the pace of the child, not at the pace of the teacher." [Headteacher]

The ICT coordinator and the deputy head have been looking at options for realising the online reporting initiative in the future. The school website and the email communication with parents is at the moment sufficient so there is no plan for a parents' space on the learning platform in the near future.