



**SCHOOL
PROFILE**

Location: Norfolk
Pupils: 900

OK: COMPUTERS

➤ SAL MCKEOWN VISITS A NORFOLK SCHOOL WHERE AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO ALLOCATING BOTH HUMAN AND TECHNOLOGICAL RESOURCES IS EMPOWERING LEARNERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS...



ABOUT THE EXPERT



Sal McKeown is a freelance special needs journalist and author of *Brilliant Ideas for Using ICT in the Inclusive Classroom* (Routledge) and a book for parents, *How to help your Dyslexic and Dyspraxic Child* (Crimson Publishing).

“I have very much come to the conclusion that classroom support is not always the most effective way of making a difference to a child. What we have to do is target the underlying difficulties that lead to lack of achievement in the first place,” says Brett Butler, additional educational needs coordinator at Great Yarmouth High School.

Many schools allocate teaching assistants (TAs) to individual children with special needs or attach a TA to a particular class or group. Great Yarmouth High School has 900 children aged 11-16 and they are experimenting with a different model whereby individual teaching assistants take responsibility for a piece of software, and the learning programme around it, and work with children right across the school.

Great Yarmouth has undergone many changes in recent years. Like other seaside towns, there has been a change in the nature of the local economy and the community is

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becoming increasingly diverse with a rising number of EAL students who may need a boost in their language skills. The school also has a higher than average proportion of students who have been assessed as having special educational needs. Brett Butler and his team make it a priority to help them to develop independent learning skills.

When children move up to secondary school, it is important that they make rapid progress so they do not become disaffected and disruptive. Often just changing school can have a strong impact. Some children coast at primary school and moving to a larger arena brings out the best in them. Boys often benefit from having more male teachers, a wider range of subjects, and specialist facilities for sports and science.

Technology too has a role to play. At Great Yarmouth they blitz literacy and are now planning for numeracy, especially with that group of children who are just above the bottom end of the spectrum. They use Lexia Learning, which covers phonics. It is a personalised program and provides reports for teachers and parents. Best of all, pupils can see their progress. It is great way of identifying and plugging gaps and is especially useful for EAL pupils who may have some large gaps in their knowledge but still be very quick learners.

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bottom of it,” explains Butler. “There’s no point providing support in class if children can do it for themselves and it is so much better if children make progress alongside their classmates.”

This is where technology comes in. Good software monitors, reports and adapts to the level the child is at. Children with special needs often complain that they have a succession of different people and have to explain what they need over and over again to a new person. Some schools have found that children become very passive and don’t want to try to do things for themselves. There have also been instances where a child has become over-dependent on adult support and cannot work unless ‘his’ TA is in the classroom. Technology by its very nature encourages the child to move to the next level and gives him more chance to monitor and take more control of his own learning.

At Great Yarmouth High School they are finding that getting TAs to take charge of a software learning programme is paying dividends. They can go on training courses and cascade information to other staff; they can really get to grips with all the extras that some programs offer and help staff to make the best of the software. They can withdraw pupils for short periods of intensive training which seems to accelerate progress.



One TA for example has taken responsibility for working with the Mastering Memory program. This is used with children and adults to help them to learn about different memory processes and strategies. Some children have poor recall, others have not learnt strategies for remembering information and some do not seem able to concentrate long enough to encode information and make it enter the memory store. Problems with working memory mean that children cannot hold information in their head long enough to copy notes from a board into an exercise book so they never have an accurate record of information to work from.

Unlike many basic skills programs, Mastering Memory is not designed to be used totally independently by children. Part of its strength lies in the conversations which occur between helper and child. The TA working with Mastering Memory helps pupils to link and chunk information so they encode memories more effectively and are not just learning by rote.

As well as using the software, the TA sets learners a memory task each day, often based on their interests and hobbies. The software and the follow up activities help them to find out about the best approaches to learning, what works for them and this has a knock on effect on their ability in the classroom and with homework.

Numeracy is another area where children experience difficulties and many come up from primary school with a feeling that they are 'no good at maths.' If they haven't yet achieved level 4 they may well be dispirited. Some programs such as CatchUp Maths and the new Achieve Mathematics Revision Level 4 App from Rising Stars are attracting interest for pupils at the transition stage.

Both work on iPads and so suddenly maths can seem a little more glamorous. Some

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schools report that children are downloading the Rising Stars maths app onto iPhones and using it while they are out and about. It seems that software can reach parts where more traditional methods have failed.

Good software can provide a real breakthrough for reluctant learners, simply because it is delivered by a computer and not by a person. Often children who feel they are disappointed to their parents or teachers freeze up when they are working one to one on literacy and numeracy tasks where they have a history of failure. Freed up from these emotional constraints they seem to focus better on the task and the instant feedback means that they can correct errors before they become ingrained.

Computers are more consistent than humans too. Some children can be put off their stride by noticing mannerisms, clothing, accent or intonation or trying to gauge the other person's mood. A computer is always the same and that can be very comforting for children who have a history of bad relationships with adults. Similarly once children have their headphones on, they tend to become engrossed and are less likely to be distracted by the behaviour of other children so concentration is more absolute

Back at great Yarmouth High School they are extending the use of ICT. Following a suggestion by a speech and language therapist, they are currently working on using mind mapping both on paper and on the computer. The school plans to carry on using

TAs for intensive intervention and support to develop skills in memory, literacy, emotional and learning.

“It has many advantages,” said Brett Butler. “The TAs become the experts on suitable ICT resources and can support both pupils and teachers. The children get very excited when they realise they can use their new skill in class and start to believe they can do things for themselves.”



USEFUL SITES

Lexia Learning: www.lexialearning.com

Mastering Memory: www.masteringmemory.co.uk

CatchUp Maths: www.catchupmath.com

Achieve Mathematics Revision Level 4 App from

Rising Stars: www.risingstars-uk.com