

*Suddenly, the boy who hated maths became our 'star' at doing mathematical drawings and programming using Logo. We used multimedia to record members of our local community for cross-curricular projects involving history, SPHE, English and geography. The children whose best hand-writing was difficult to decipher could now produce perfect print-offs. The children whose learning strengths were not of a linguistic or mathematical nature found success in their ability to use multimedia to record their own voice-overs to explore and tell the story of their learning.*

## **Opening up our school to the world**

Inver National School is a small, rural four-teacher school in west Mayo, just a few miles along the coast from Belmullet. It was built in 1885 as a three teacher school. The area has a dwindling population, with school numbers dropping from over a hundred children twelve years ago to under fifty at the moment. Being part of the initial Disadvantaged Schools scheme meant that our pupil/teacher ratio has always been favourable. While most classrooms have traditionally been multi-grade, there have been no more than twenty children in any classroom over the past ten years.

Like most other schools, we have received no funding for ICT since 2002 (and then it was the sum of €700 which at that time bought half of a computer). We spend a lot of time patching old computers together and coaxing them back to life. We continue to do this because we believe, and have found to be true, that using technology in our teaching and learning has enriched the education process and made it more meaningful and accessible for our children.

### **A decade ago**

About ten years ago, two interesting paths collided in our school - and in other schools in Ireland at around the same time. On the one hand we had the intrigue and anticipation generated by the introduction of the *Primary School Curriculum* and, on the other, we had the excitement generated by *IT2000* (the national policy on ICT in education, launched in 1997). Reflecting on it now, I don't think the two events were co-ordinated in any hugely cohesive manner, but I think the timing of the two events was serendipitous. The underpinning principles of the *Primary School Curriculum* and the possibilities surrounding the inclusion of technology in education seemed to be mutually supportive of one another. At the same time they both seemed to be empowering for teachers and encouraged autonomy and creativity in classrooms.

Together, they managed to instigate some of the most powerful changes primary education has seen for decades.

### **Talking education with other schools!**

One of the biggest changes that occurred in our school was the way we have opened up to doing various collaborative online projects and having creative educational conversations with other schools. One of my earliest adventures with technology in my classroom enabled my class of six and seven year olds to 'visit' a classroom in Australia on a nearly-daily basis via e-mail. Our children were fascinated by the differences in our seasons, by killer sharks and the joy of lemon trees. The children in Sydney learned a lot about our lambing season and our reluctance to swim in the sea in March (see <http://www.iol.ie/~bmulleys/australia.html>). This collaboration took place via a trailing phone cable plugged into the phone socket in the principal's classroom where we dialled out for our internet connection...but we were among the lucky ones because our neighbouring schools had no telephone at all at that time!

This term, eleven years on, my class are doing a similar project with a school in New Zealand. Nowadays we blog and exchange digital photographs (see <http://inverns.edublogs.org/>), but the same principle exists; technology can help us to open up our classrooms and enables us to explore learning processes with other people and places outside of our school. No longer do we have to fly to New Zealand to visit our pen-pals. Now, we can virtually visit their school, respond to their blog, see the photographs, ask some questions and get 'feel' of life in New Zealand in just one morning's work.

### **Schools Integration Project (SIP)**

As IT2000 became established, our school was included in a project being administered by the National Council for Technology in Education (NCTE) called the Schools Integration Project (SIP) and we received ten desktop computers. For us, this was hugely enabling and we revelled in the joys of pushing the possibilities of teaching and learning with technology to the limit.

### **Children learn in different ways**

Suddenly, the boy who hated maths became our 'star' at doing mathematical drawings and programming using Logo. We used multimedia to record members of our local community for cross-curricular projects involving history, SPHE, English and geography. The children whose best hand-writing was difficult to decipher could now

produce perfect print-offs. The children whose learning strengths were not of a linguistic or mathematical nature found success in their ability to use multimedia to record their own voice-overs to explore and tell the story of their learning. They found freedom in the ease with which they could use visual images and video to enhance and share their learning. We could embrace the defining ideas of the curriculum; namely that different children learn in different ways, through the judicious use of technology in the everyday projects we undertook in our classroom (see <http://www.iol.ie/~bmulleys/community/index.html> for an example of a cross-curricular project on the topic of *People in our Community*).

### **Our school website**

Because we began to publish our work on our school web site, a whole new educationally creative conversation began for us. No longer did we solely seek guidance and expert ideas from outside our school; now others were turning to us to seek our advice and to use our ideas in their teaching and learning processes. Our own projects began to be used as examples of good practice by various educational bodies. One sixth class group even got an invitation to sing at a wedding when they performed 'Let it Be' (albeit slightly out of tune!) on our web site (listen at <http://www.iol.ie/~bmulleys/karaokeandchimes.html>).

### **Guide on the side**

This 'opening up' was not just about exploring and sharing ideas with far-flung schools; it also began to happen in the learning process in the classroom. No longer was the teacher always the expert or the person with all the answers in the classroom. One of the underpinning principles of the *Primary School Curriculum* is that the child is active in their own learning. The move from teacher as 'sage on the stage' to 'guide on the side' is an important element of enabling children to be active in their own learning. Much of our work in the use of technology in education is driven by these very same ideas. Very often, the teacher and the children learn alongside one another in a collaborative educational conversation. I am currently experimenting with *Scratch* (a programming language) and, sometimes, the children from sixth class are racing ahead of me as we grapple with the various challenges posed. However, we teach and help one another and, hopefully, we will be able to publish some samples of our experiments soon.

**Focal scór**

The *Primary School Curriculum* celebrates human values in terms of the uniqueness of the child, as it is expressed in each child's personality, intelligence and potential for development. We have found that the use of technology as a tool in teaching and learning can enhance this celebration. However, for this celebration to continue, it is crucial for the stakeholders in education to honour their commitment to teaching and learning. We really hope that funding for technology that has now been absent for seven years will come to our school in west Mayo soon.

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