

APPENDIX 1: SITE PROFILES

LA1: Local authority nursery school

LA1 is a local authority nursery school attended by children who are judged to need educational support because of special needs or family circumstances. It is open for 46 weeks each year. The core hours are 9.00 a.m. to 3.15 p.m. but there are a limited number of places available for families who will benefit from an earlier starting time (8.30 a.m.) or later collection time (3.45 p.m.). There is a large playroom for three- and four-year-olds (a smaller area is set aside for 20 younger children) and extensive outdoor play space and resources. During the morning sessions 70 three- and four-year-olds attend in the large playroom. Twenty of these children attend only for the morning session. Fifty children have full-day places and remain in the nursery for lunch and the afternoon session.

During the observation period a PC was available in the large playroom. Another PC had been removed from the playroom as it was not working properly. (A Mac computer was allocated to the smaller area set aside for younger children but was not in use as the software available was not compatible.)

At LA1 staff prefer children to use the computer with an adult present, arguing that in this way children get the most out of the experience. Practitioners select the programs available to the children each day, making their selection in relation to the curriculum and the current themes or projects being undertaken. Children are usually introduced to computer use by an adult who begins by showing them how to use the drawing program. Children's ICT skills are not assessed in any direct way but their mouse control and language skills are noted in practitioners' observation records. As a result of her personal interest and expertise one practitioner has particular responsibility for computer-related matters, while planning for all aspects of the curriculum is the responsibility of nursery teachers. Practitioners sometimes find it difficult to facilitate children's use of the computer and the other activities available in the area where the computer is located.

LA2: Local authority nursery school

LA2 offers 80 morning-session places and 80 afternoon places. A few children arrive 30 minutes before the main morning session begins and up to 10 are accommodated for lunch. There are three playrooms in the nursery (each with a discrete staff team), a shared room indoors for physical play and shared outside play space and equipment. There are children in their pre-school year and ante pre-school year in each playroom.

As the nursery now has four machines for use with the children (two supplied by the authority and two purchased after fundraising) a computer is available in each playroom during free play. The fourth computer is located in a central position and is used by the teacher and small groups of children. This guided computer use is scheduled and viewed as a more systematic learning experience than that experienced during free play. During free play children can select the CD-ROM they prefer and choose which game to play within each package. The nursery tries to buy software that reflects the children's interests (for example, using characters from television programmes) but the cost of CD-ROMs and of replacing well-used and damaged CDs is considerable. Children's developing computer skills are not explicitly assessed, although any particular enthusiasm or skill might be recorded in the additional comments.

The nursery teacher oversees all computer use at LA2 and has experience of managing ICT in nursery and primary school settings. The confidence with which all members of the staff team approach computer activities has developed rapidly, largely due to their personal experience of computer use. There are computers in the homes of many of the children but the teacher argues that giving all children computer experience is an important part of pre-school provision. Nevertheless, pre-school ICT experience and familiarity with particular software has implications for primary school provision. It is anticipated that issues such as ICT provision and planning will feature in the next school development plan.

LA3: Local authority nursery school

LA3 offers 35 morning and 35 afternoon places with an adult-child ratio of 1:10. Most of the children (62) are in their pre-school year but there are also seven three-year-olds. The nursery follows the school year for term time and holidays although some of the holidays are covered, financed by an external source of funding. Children are in keyworker groups of about 12 children and children's confidence in use of the computer features in the termly plans. Children's use of ICT is included in the playroom observations that practitioners make and in record keeping, with information on use of ICT included in profiles for primary schools and parents.

Children have direct access to two computers, an old one in one room and a newer iMac with an internet connection in the other room, that can be used as part of their free-play activities. The iMac has a bench rather than chairs in front of it to encourage peer collaboration. The software is made accessible depending on themes but children are also able to request software they want to use. The nursery ensures that children receive explicit teaching at an early stage on how to use the computer and mouse skills.

The nursery has a scheme, funded by the National Grid for Learning, for parents to borrow an iBook (an Apple laptop computer) and software for 24 hours at a time. The CD-ROMs are kept in special bags on a carousel in the office and parents or children are able to choose what they want to borrow. Comments are written on a leaflet inside each bag. The software is PC-compatible so if they have a PC at home they can just borrow the software. Parents are offered some training before they borrow the equipment and, so far, the nursery has only encountered one problem with the loan of the iBook – a parent trying to get a CD-ROM out without ejecting it. The manager has encouraged staff to borrow the iBook as well and taking it home has contributed to building up their confidence.

The nursery has a Coomber listening centre, a CD player, a digital camera and an ordinary camera. The digital camera is used to take photos for display purposes and for the nursery's brochure. Although children do not use the camera itself they are involved in selecting images. The children do not use the internet connection and it is not much used by staff. They can use the iMac, iBook or the office PC for this and it is used mainly for e-mail and accessing the LA's intranet rather than materials.

V1: Voluntary sector playgroup

This playgroup (managed by a community association) meets each morning and offers government-funded places. Although the setting can accommodate 24 children there were only 17 registered for the year 2001/2 and attendance was described as patchy. V1 places a considerable emphasis on opportunities for children to develop social skills.

A PC is available (housed in a purpose-built cabinet) during each playgroup session. V1 was the only provision observed where a child's keyboard (lower case only and larger than usual keys) was in use. The playleader also expressed interest in acquiring a mouse designed for young children. Three CD-ROMs were available for the children to load and choose games from as they wished during free play. The three adults working in the playroom did not have responsibility for specific areas but spent time with children at the computer as the need or opportunity arose. Computer use was not planned for explicitly but was included as a 'staple ingredient' in the free-play mix. The assessment schedule used (one supplied by the local authority) did not refer to ICT skills other than one item that recorded the child's skill with the mouse.

The playleader described the way in which time spent on the computer had been of particular value to a child who had problems with language use and fine motor skills. She suggested that the combination of speech and visual input offered during computer games had helped with problems arising from poor sound discrimination and that the use of the mouse overcame some of the difficulties associated with a 'floppy grip'. There was some concern among the practitioners that the games that the children reportedly played on computers at home were not educational packages but often war games.

V2: Voluntary sector playgroup

This voluntary playgroup is situated in a rural area. It has 20 children on the roll and is open in term time only. They can attend for a maximum of five sessions per week and some children also attend the nursery at the adjacent school. Using the computer is seen as a free-play activity that can occur at any time other than the whole-group activity at the end of a session. ICT is not currently included in planning for playroom activities and is not included in transition records. Staff considered this to be a result of their own lack of confidence but were looking forward to training and hoping to start the European Computer Driving Licence. ICT is not much used for administration and record-keeping.

In addition to the computer, the playgroup has a cassette player and occasionally borrows the school's TV and video recorder, although this requires careful timetabling. They had recently bought a digital camera. The computer is situated on a standard computer desk in one corner of the room and the only software in use was pre-installed at the point of purchase. The monitor is high on the shelf above the base unit so the children have to look upwards to see it. There is one stool and one chair in front.

The computer belongs to the school and the playgroup has only recently started to use it. The playgroup bought a printer and digital camera and both the nursery school and the playgroup share the resources. They anticipate seeking advice from one of the new teachers at the nursery school on future software purchases. The computer is mainly overseen by the playgroup's treasurer and she tends to do research on major purchasing decisions before a decision is made by the voluntary committee. They have negotiated an arrangement whereby the school provides the paper and the playgroup provides the ink cartridges for the printer as they have sourced a cheaper supply of inks than the Council. These resources are used heavily as the digital camera is used frequently. Although staff are lacking in confidence in use of the computer they are confident and imaginative in their use of the digital camera. They are planning to buy a video camera which they will use to track child development and use as a professional development tool – as well as producing a video to sell to parents.

P1: Private sector nursery

P1 offers an extended day (8.45 a.m. – 5.45 p.m.) throughout the year. The nursery is a partner provider and received funding from the partnership for the first computer that they purchased. There is a playroom for children in their ante pre-school year and another for children in their pre-school year. Children attend for morning or afternoon sessions or may have full-day places and numbers attending fluctuate over the week, depending on the sessions chosen by parents. Numbers in the room for the younger children rise to about 25 but there are slightly fewer older children.

A computer is available in each of the pre-school playrooms but during the observation period the machine in the room for children in their pre-school year could not be used. It had been broken for some weeks and, although under guarantee, getting the CD drive repaired was proving difficult. Computer use was usually offered in both rooms during free play with a choice of CD-ROMs readily accessible to the children. No specific plans were made for computer use but interests that children displayed there would be followed up as with any other area of activity. A new transition record used by the nursery (supplied by the local authority) included a record of simple computer skills. Supervision of children using the computer rotated as practitioners changed responsibility for specific areas of the playroom. One practitioner had developed a personal interest in computers and took the lead in decisions about purchasing and using the equipment.

Both playrooms had internet connections. The nursery encouraged parents to send e-mails to their children during the day and children were helped to compose a reply. A directory of e-mail addresses was being compiled and communication with parents about routine matters (for example, reminders about parents' nights) would soon be by e-mail. The practitioner who took the lead on computer activities sometimes worked with small groups of children to find information about project topics (for example, volcanoes, dinosaurs) on the internet. Pictures were downloaded and printed for others to share. Staff turned to the internet as a resource when gathering materials for festivals.

P2: Private sector nursery

P2 is a partner provider located in newly refurbished premises. At the time of the observations there were 32 children on the roll although the nursery will admit more children over time. Attendance patterns are flexible. There are usually about 28 children in the nursery each day and about 75 per cent stay for lunch. The nursery is open for 50 weeks each year and provision is available from 8 a.m. until 6 p.m. The three- and four-year-old children spend their time in four connected playrooms arranged to cover all five areas of the curriculum, including indoor physical play. The outdoor play space is not yet completed. In addition there is a room alongside the physical area. This space is used primarily by the after-school club but it is here that the computer is currently located. Children only use this additional space when invited to do so by an adult.

When children are invited to use the computer they can choose from the software loaded onto the computer and the CD-ROMs that are suitable for use by pre-school children (others are available for use by school-aged children). One CD-ROM offers a selection of photographs of children and adults at nursery celebrations and performances. Computer use is not formally included in nursery planning or assessment. While the nursery owner is concerned that computer use should be properly supervised to avoid damage to the equipment, she had felt that including a PC was essential when selecting resources for the new premises. She feels that access to information through the computer feeds children's curiosity and opens new worlds to them.

A room has been prepared as a small computer suite, adjacent to one of the playrooms. Not yet equipped with computers, this room will contain four or five machines. The room is already wired for a fast internet connection. Pre-school children will be supervised in the computer suite, which will also be used by children attending the after-school club. In the meantime the staff team would like more software for pre-school children.