



Learning Gains through Play

Western Cape project school visits

3 June 2015

Katie Huston (DG Murray Trust), Rodney Nissen (WCED) and Tracey Butchart (SchoolNet) visited two project schools on Wednesday, 3 June 2015.

Temperance Town Primary

We arrived at Temperance Town Primary in the early morning during an unexpected break in the cold and rainy weather. Principal, Gwen Opperman, welcomed us into her office and we had a chat with her about how the school has grown over the years that she has been there. Gwen gave us a formal printed plan for our visit which involved a meeting with all staff and then six class visits using a variety of the technologies. Sadly, Gwen is retiring at the end of the term but will still be involved with school affairs until her successor has been appointed and takes over management of the school.

Staff Discussion

We proceeded to the staffroom for a quick meeting with all of the teachers involved in the project. Katie met Mary-Anne Meyer, the enthusiastic Foundation Phase Head of Department; Grade 1 teachers - Ella Klaasen, Bianca Beyers, Jesmina Waries and a new observer, Jayde Meyer; and Grade R teachers – Amanda Hughes, Alfarita October and Marianne Benjamin. We discussed the following.

1. Use of Technology

The technology is being used at least twice a week by each class. Some weeks (for example during assessment week) it is used less often but this time is made up on other weeks. The Xbox is set up in the computer room (rather than in library as before) on two days of each week. Classes rotate so that all visit the computer room during the day to make use of the Xbox. Generally, Grade R classes are using the Xbox more often than the Grade 1 classes. The bank of tablets is split into three groups of 6 tablets each. These groups are distributed in each of the grade's classes. Generally Grade 1 classes are using the tablets more often than Grade R classes. Overall the technology is used by each class for about a half an hour to an hour twice a week. Teachers are using the learning stations strategy most often and are finding it very successful. They feel that including the tablets as a station is motivating for the learners. They were unanimous in the view that the learners were more engaged when the tablets were used and that classroom discipline was significantly improved as a result. Teachers also said that, while they might have felt that the technology was "stealing" curriculum time last year, this was no longer the case. They were confident that they were integrating the technology with their curriculum demands. Most of the time they are using the learner tablets in consolidation of learning. All teachers said that they used their own tablets every day and in almost every lesson and that these had provided a wonderful opportunity to share photos and videos related to the topics they were studying.

2. Teacher Development

Katie asked the teachers what has been the greatest change for them through the project. Jesmina responded by saying how her familiarity with using the tablet had grown so much. Ella agreed and said how much she enjoyed that she could take her tablet home with her and play and explore with it after school. She mentioned that it was exposing her to more opportunities for her classroom. Bianca is synching her cell phone with her tablet and is enjoying how her technology is working for her. She said that the technology is broadening the experiences of her learners – she mentioned how in the past she would explain how a sheep is sheared and now she shows them a video on her tablet and they are spellbound. Alfarita had experience of the Xbox before the project began as her son has one and she has played it with him. She had no experience of tablets and she is so excited by her Grade R learners' excitement at using them. Amanda also mentioned how she is using her tablet at home, sharing it with her family and learning new things every day. Marianne suggested that she was the slowest to master the tablet. She said that she was "very scared in the beginning" but she was improving to such an extent that she was using the Memoires app more and more rather than writing things down with paper and pen.

3. Challenges

Teachers identified their own lack of experience with technology in the classroom as the biggest challenge at the start of the project. However they all felt that this was no longer the case and that they were all progressing well with the tablets and Xbox. The Xbox still poses some challenges in setting up and the computer room venue is not ideal as there is a central 'island' desk in the room. The new dance game (Dance Studio?) is very difficult to set up.

Class Visits

1. Grade R with Mrs Marianne Benjamin

The Xbox was set up in the computer room. The chosen game was River Rush but the setup of the game was very difficult. Mrs Benjamin tried to help the two learners but it took a long time to get the game started. The learners enjoyed the game. Unfortunately the rest of the class could not see the screen easily as their view was obscured by a large fixed counter in the middle of the room. The second group of two learners were more successful at setting up their game and Mrs Benjamin was able to direct their movements to do this using only verbal instructions. It was a good demonstration of the vocabulary of physical movement and the learners moved well in response.

2. Grade R with Mrs Alfarita October

We went to the library where 14 learners were sitting in pairs sharing a tablet. It was a structured lesson in Mathematics using the app 'Oata en Eara – Op Die Plaas'. The learners had to find farm animals to expose hidden numbers up to ten. They had to count objects on screen to confirm the cardinality of the number and Mrs October reinforced this with a physical counting activity each time too. It was a really great lesson – the learners were focused on important CAPS requirements and seemed to really enjoy the lesson. Mrs October was adaptive to make the most of her teaching opportunities even when the learners clicked on different numbers to what she had directed them to look for. It was wonderful to see such a useful Afrikaans app that had been independently sourced by the Temperance Town teachers and used so effectively to teach key concepts in Maths.

3. Grade 1 with Mrs Bianca Beyers

In Mrs Beyer's classroom the learners were at learning stations learning phonics. There were seven different stations with mostly six learners at each but all were mindfully employed so the class didn't seem as big as it was. Six tablets made up one learning station. Learners were also using the 'Oata en Eara – Op Die Plaas' but this time the focus was on letters and the pronunciation of words beginning with those letters. Mrs Beyers demonstrated on her tablet and then each learner worked individually at their own pace on their own tablet. Mrs Beyers moved around the station listening to each learner's pronunciation one-by-one. Learners clearly were enjoying the activity.

4. Grade 1 with Mrs Ella Klaasen

The Temperance Town Primary teachers meet weekly and prepare their lessons together. This means that classes in a grade are doing the same learning activities. We saw the same lesson in Mrs Klaasen's class. She had eight stations and 35 learners and again, the tablets made up one station's activity. The learners were capably navigating through the same app and clearly enjoying the activity.

5. Grade 1 with Mrs Jesmina Waries

Grade 1C were working in groups to create their own 100-charts but a learning station using the tablets was set up on the carpet at the front of the class. There were six groups and 35 learners in total but six learners were using the tablets at a time. These learners were checking their subtraction calculations with a calculator app on the tablet. Mrs Waries said that she finds it easier to check their work when they work on the carpet the way they were doing.

Conclusion

Unfortunately due to our time pressure to get to the next school, we were unable to make the last class visit which was Mrs Amanda Hughes and her Grade R class using the Xbox. The Temperance Town staff continue to be very positive about the project. They are a strong group of organised, good teachers and are clearly putting extra effort into their teaching, their classroom resources and their learning environments. MaryAnn Meyer, as HOD, is a definite technophile and even though she is teaching Grade 2, she is an active leader of the project. (She had sourced the 'Oata en Eara – Op Die Plaas' app that we saw being used so effectively.) Gwen Opperman, as principal, seems so proud of her school and very interested and involved in all its projects. It was a pleasure to spend time with the Temperance Town staff and their learners.

Solomon Qatyana, N2-Strand-Somerset West

We drove back to the N2 and on to Solomon Qatyana Primary. The principal, Ms Nokwazi Mniki, was absent and so we were greeted by the Senior Phase Deputy, Mr Xolani Gontshi. He called Mrs Noxolo Buyeye, the Foundation Phase HOD to join us in the principal's office for a chat.

Staff Discussion

Mrs Buyeye is always very excited about the project. She ventured that she had never used a tablet before the Learning Gains through Play project but now she was "hooked" despite being an "older teacher". There are nine teachers with tablets at Solomon Qatyana Primary. Mrs Buyeye seems to feel that the teachers are more positive after the recent visit by Hlengiwe and myself. She said that the teachers were learning to use the tablets much more slowly than the learners and that was sometimes demotivating.

1. Use of Technology

There are many learners at Solomon Qatyana (five Grade 1 classes with at least 40 learners in each class) and the school is still growing. The teachers are mostly using the tablets all in one class but sometimes they split them into four tablets per class. Mrs Buyeye confirmed that the tablets are used more by Grade 1 classes and the Xbox is used more by Grade R learners. Mrs Buyeye has the key to the safe room where the technology is stored and she unlocks it for the day and the tablets and Xbox are moved to the different classrooms. She secures it again at the end of the school day. Solomon Qatyana are also using the technology two days a week.

2. Teacher Development

Mrs Buyeye is always very excited about the project. She ventured that she had never used a tablet before the Learning Gains through Play project but now she was "hooked" despite being an "older teacher". There are nine teachers with tablets at Solomon Qatyana Primary. Mrs Buyeye seems to feel that the teachers are more positive after the recent visit by Hlengiwe and myself. She said that the teachers were learning to use the tablets much more slowly than the learners and that was sometimes demotivating. As Foundation Phase HOD, she has found some apps are really useful for Grades 2 and 3 and she is incorporating these too. She mentioned that the app Maths Duel is very successful with the Grade 3 learners and that they have found the app Follow the Road very useful in the Maths topic of Measurement.

Class Visits

1. Grade 1 with Mrs Mandongwana

There were eight groups with 39 learners in total working on tablets. Only 17 tablets were working. A teaching assistant was present to help. The activity was less structured than what we saw at Temperance Town Primary but that afforded the learners more opportunities to experiment on the tablets, which they did. The focus was supposed to be the app My Emotions but the learners had been using the app Maths Duel before we arrived in the classroom and so many of them clearly wanted to continue with it. I was impressed that Maths Duel was being used so enthusiastically as it was a new app that we had demonstrated to Ms Buyeye on the recent visit with Hlengiwe and she had obviously shared it with her colleagues and they were using it already. The learners were having a lot of fun and despite the large size of the class, they were all working. A little concern was that the desk orientation was such that the Maths Duel players were reading their half of the screen on its side which for young learners still developing number representation is not ideal. Some learners were also racing to touch the answer first without seeming to consider which answer they were choosing – still it was wonderful to see the levels of enthusiasm.

2. Grade 1 with Mrs Mnyanda

The Xbox was set up in Mrs Mnyanda's classroom and the Just Dance game was selected. The teacher had some difficulty in setting up the players and called on Katie and I for help (which we couldn't provide). Luckily she eventually managed and two young girls danced through the first song. Mrs Mnyanda danced alongside them keeping them going – she is a great dancer herself! Again, I was encouraged that this was a new game recently received and it was already being used. There were 37 learners in the classroom with all but two sitting watching so we encouraged Mrs Mnyanda to get everyone up on their feet and dancing. They had a wonderful time and it looked a bit like a 'flash mob' happening. Unfortunately the volume of the Xbox was quite low even though it was turned up to full strength and it was difficult to hear the music. The entire class danced through two songs and afterwards they had all clearly had had an energetic work-out.

3. Grade R with Mrs Zolisa Sophazi

Despite it almost being one o'clock, we watched a Grade R class working with tablets in Ms Sophazi's classroom. There were 24 learners grouped at five desks with some sharing tablets. The learners were able to choose their own app. They were confidently navigating through the different apps on the tablet. Most were doing Maths Duel (it is great to see this excellent app being so well-used), many were doing Cupcake Maker but I saw My Emotions, Subway Surfers, Glow Hockey, Talking Kids Penguin Math, Sing Sing Together, Angry Birds Animal ABC and Simply Sequence all being used. Some learners were watching YouTube videos. The learners were engaged and were having a lot of fun. Mrs Sophazi mentioned

that she really needs apps in isiXhosa, not only for her Xhosa learners, but many are not isiXhosa speakers even though isiXhosa is their language of learning and teaching.

Conclusion

It was heartening to see that the technology is being used by so many learners in this big school. Mrs Buyeye is a real champion of the project – she is clearly enjoying the technology learning path that she is personally on and is very keen to inspire her colleagues to journey with her. The Grade R and Grade 1 teachers are on board and the comments that the technology is helping with discipline issues was made again. We were also told that school attendance numbers are higher when the technology is being used – learners do not want to miss the opportunities to learn through playing games on the tablets and the Xbox Kinect.

Tracey Butchart June 2015



