

P.44 Investigating the use of the Local Area Network in a Primary School

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Background

I am a higher level teaching assistant working primarily in year 5/6. I work with individual children, small groups and whole classes as directed by the teacher or headteacher. I have worked at the school for more than 5 years with experience from reception up to year 6.

What is LAN?

Local area network is a system where computers are linked together by a server. In our school we have a wired and a wireless network. You can log on to any computer in school and access my documents, shared resources and staff area (if you are a member of staff). The server is maintained by a technician and two staff members with administration privileges. This safety measure prevents children and staff from installing or deleting programmes accidentally.

Who will be involved in this study?

I have compiled a questionnaire which I will ask several key members of staff to complete. Myself (a high level teaching assistant), a teacher (with prior testbed knowledge) and the headteacher. I would also like to question a year 6 pupil who might remember the days before the project.

A Teaching Assistant's use of the LAN ?

I use the LAN everyday.

Every week I make a powerpoint for our plasma screen display. These are stored in my folder on the shared area so that other staff members and pupils can access them. There is also a sub-folder with all the photographs taken by me or children. Again this can be accessed by all in school. This is very useful as staff access them as evidence for the subject which they coordinate. Children also enjoy looking through them especially the year 6 children as they prepare for the leavers assembly. They can use them to build their memories powerpoint.

I have many charts saved in my folder such as consequence sheets and spelling score sheets that I print out weekly. Some resources that I make each year such as class welcome boards and homework records can be altered with new names and printed out to save repeating work.

During the past couple of years I have built up a bank of grammar posters and numeracy posters. These are also available for teachers to use on their electronic whiteboards via the shared area. Copies of these are laminated and used as visual aids around the school.

I have had mixed results using the wireless network in various classes. We have one wireless point in each classroom and have been advised that they can cope with fifteen laptops at once. If we use more than that we plug in an extra portable wireless point. However on many occasions laptops have been unable to connect wirelessly and we have resorted to plugging them into a hub. This isn't ideal as we then have one table congested with laptops and children. When the network is operating well however the children can work independently accessing the teachers file and working before saving to their own my documents area. It is excellent for example when you are working with key stage one children using the internet. You can set up a hyperlink in the shared area. This allows them internet access quickly and easily without having to type in long addresses. In the past you would have to go to each

laptop and type in the address or ask the children to copy the address from the board. This invariably cost a lot of time as mistakes were common.

A pupil's perspective

I spoke to a group of three year six children that had confirmed that they could remember using stand-alone computers. I asked that about their early experiences with stand-alone computers. One child said

"We only used them once a month".

Another added

"We had to save to floppy disks and we kept losing them. Sometimes they wouldn't work very well (the disks)."

I then went on to ask them about using the network. Firstly I asked them how they use the shared area. They talked me through getting homework from their teacher's folder and saving it to their home laptops to work on at the weekend. When they get back to school on Mondays they transfer the work to the teacher's hand in folder. This means the teacher doesn't have to log on as each child but that the homework is stored in one place to be marked and assessed.

I went on to ask them about using the wireless network. When asked about reliability, one child said

"No, not always it, can take ages and it's very annoying."

Another child added,

"Sometimes you just get started and the lesson finishes."

When I asked them what they would miss most if we didn't have a network they said the internet access. When I asked them about websites they had enjoyed they mentioned one we had used in history. It was a tudor website that was interactive. They could see what happened to each wife by clicking a caricature of each one. The website is called www.brimms.co.uk/tudors .

Finally I asked them which system they preferred network or stand alone. They all agreed it was

"network definitely"

because of the wide range of programmes available. They compared using the network at school to using them off line at home. They all gave positive comments about network and no-one wanted to go back to the old system.

A teacher's perspective

I asked an experienced teacher to give me her insights of the network. I first asked her to tell me how her planning has changed. She replied that it's available to the head instantly. She doesn't have to photocopy Monday's planning anymore because she doesn't hand in her paper planning folder. Similarly with end of year reports they can be checked electronically saving paper and time.

When asked about sharing resources the teacher was very positive. She had both given and received resources from other staff members and children.

This teacher also spoke about how often she uses the network. She uses it everyday across the curriculum. In literacy she often uses literacy world on her whiteboard to explain a word or sentence level task. In numeracy she uses ITP's (interactive teaching programmes) these are available online or on the network. In other curriculum areas the internet is widely used as a research tool by the children. She also has a class folder where children can save work for her to assess.

When I asked about her wireless experience she was very pleased to report that she had had no problems. I enquired as to how many laptops she had used at once to which she replied fifteen. I discussed some of the wireless problems I had encountered during the past year with her. We agreed that it could be that the wireless network can't cope with too many laptops at once.

This teacher's best experiences with the network have been sharing information with children, using programmes mentioned above and the internet. One of her favourite websites is www.starfall.com This is a literacy website that is aimed at early readers. It says it inspires children to read and begin to work independently. She added that some children needed to see moving images in order to fully understand new concepts. The whiteboard and network provide this opportunity easily and quickly. When asked what she would miss most if the network was removed she said "the easily accessible resources such as weblinks." Finally I asked her to choose her preferred system and she agreed with the children and myself. When asked why her main reason was that it saves time.

A Headteacher's perspective

The headteacher agreed with the teacher that planning can be checked much more easily on the network. There is also more flexibility as to when to check it as the file does not need to be returned to the teacher.

This flexibility is also reflected in report writing as the headteacher can correct errors and add comments more easily. When I asked about sharing resources the headteacher said

" I share many policies with other cluster heads. Many can be easily adapted and used by other schools."

I asked whether LAN is used to convey information to staff. It is used to record minutes of meetings, PIAT documents, SIMS information and also daily news can be displayed on the intranet.

The headteacher's experience of wireless network has been very positive. One useful area is the community centre which has access via a mobile point. One excellent use was the recent Hunwick digital village meeting where members of the community came and shared stories about the village. These could be typed onto the network and displayed on our digital village website, also photographs of the village in the past could be scanned in.

The headteacher's best experience of the network has been storing and sharing of school documentation. As the SENCO she is able to see IEP's and other information easily and quickly. When asked what she would miss most if the network went she said

"Accessibility and sharing of school information and internet access across the whole school."

In conclusion she agreed with the other people I have interviewed that network is much better than stand-alone. One good example she used is that staff meetings can be held in any room as they all share the same access to the network.

My Conclusions

I have to conclude that network is much better than stand-alone based on both my experience and from the interviews I have held. The system of sharing information is invaluable as well as time saving. Of course there are some drawbacks for example when the server goes down the network is not accessible but this does not happen very often. If I were asked for advice by another school I would definitely advise them to go for a network. However I would talk to them about the problems we have incurred using a wireless system so that they were aware of the problems they may encounter if using many laptops simultaneously