




CHAPTER ONE

REALISING POTENTIAL - AN OVERVIEW



**M**obile technologies are powerful tools in helping to release previously trapped learning potential of students with literacy difficulties. Along with increasing access to the curriculum, these technologies engage students in active learning, increase motivation and self-esteem, and give them a bigger stake in the learning process. This can help reduce marginalisation and thereby contribute to the inclusion of students with difficulties.

Equally, the adoption of technology can be very satisfying for teachers and can greatly enhance their professional work. Detailed technical knowledge or expertise is not a prerequisite. Teachers who initially have limited confidence may find the use of laptops in their teaching much less daunting than they anticipate. Therefore, with benefits for both children and teachers mutually involved in teaching and learning, the adoption of laptops and other mobile information and communication technology (ICT) has a lot to offer the general school community.

Before exploring the various issues involved in realising this promise, primarily from the perspective of the 31 second-level schools that participated in the Laptops Initiative over a four-and-a-half year period, the transformational potential of mobile ICT can be illustrated from the perspective of the main stakeholders in one of those schools – St. Joseph’s Secondary School in Foxford, Co. Mayo.  **See below for a closer look at St. Joseph’s**

## PERSPECTIVES




*“We have learned a whole lot more”.*

**Stephanie Murphy and Kathleen Ferguson, Students.**

### **‘We have learned a whole lot more’ - THE STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVE**

“We have learned a whole lot more” sums up the experience of students who began using mobile technologies during St. Joseph’s participation in the Laptops Initiative. The views of three students in particular are illuminating as they used the laptops over an extended four-year period. These were Kathleen, Stephanie and Otto.

The three students, each with a specific learning disability, initially arrived in St. Joseph’s with significant literacy problems and with diminished self-images. Otto, for example, said he “was considered dumb and stupid” in national school and Stephanie had a similar experience: “It was hard - I could not figure out why everyone else could understand what the teacher was teaching. Every teacher thought I was lazy and stupid - that really hurt.” 



## St. Joseph’s Secondary School

A 350-pupil mixed school in Foxford in Co. Mayo, St. Joseph’s could be considered a ‘normal’ school as the challenges presented by the deployment of mobile technologies were typical of most schools. Similarly, the outcomes for the students and teachers represent the kind of potential that is realisable in schools in general.

Under the Laptops Initiative, St. Joseph’s initially purchased ten laptops, along with associated peripherals and software. Supported by the Principal, Brendan Forde, their use was integrated into the school’s developing learning support system and this was led by the Learning Support Coordinator, Patricia Fielding. With little ICT expertise and no previous experience of using ICT in her teaching, Patricia was typical of the Laptops Initiative teachers, demonstrating that technical expertise is not the prime requisite for the successful deployment of ICT in this context.



St. Joseph’s subsequently purchased more laptops and their everyday use in the students’ mainstream activities quickly became a normal aspect of school life. This had very significant benefits for the children concerned and it is now considered normal that children receiving learning support will use mobile ICT.

This experience in St. Joseph’s has led to a growing use of laptops across the school.

Otto was the pioneer of mainstream laptop use in St. Joseph's because, in the early days of the Laptops Initiative, he was the first pupil to begin using it in his mainstream subject areas. His need for the laptop as part of a range of strategies was indeed great because his dyslexia had a very big impact on his functional literacy; his writing is especially affected and is sometimes practically illegible.

Leading the way in the school, Otto agreed that the laptop was an initial distraction in class. However, this lasted for just a few days and it then quickly became integral to his schooling. After using it continuously for a number of years, he described it as having been "very, very helpful."

Stephanie and Kathleen are also enthusiastic about the benefits:

*"Before we got the laptops we were constantly falling behind - when we got the laptops, suddenly everyone else was behind."*

The girls especially found it a relief not to have to write so much by hand and found school much more tolerable and interesting as a result:

*"You have more interest. When you have the laptops you don't mind doing homework because you don't have to write it by hand."*

The novelty and distraction of having laptops in class quickly faded away and they did not experience

problems with other students "messaging" with them. They also felt that teachers were more aware of their difficulties when they used the laptops in class:

*"We have learned an awful lot more through the laptops - we would encourage others to use laptops because they would probably learn an awful lot more."*



*"The approach has given a fresh chance to post-primary students who have experienced failure. The most exciting aspect is that it has raised the self-esteem of a group of students who felt*

*excluded by their difficulties – the students themselves say they felt special. It has been rewarding to see them develop new skills and their experience of the classroom has changed as it has allowed teachers to incorporate ICT into their lessons."*

**Patricia Fielding, St. Joseph's Secondary School, Co. Mayo.**



### Otto's Writing

A sample of Otto's handwriting demonstrates the difficulties caused by his dyslexia. Even though still containing some errors, the same text produced through his laptop is clearly legible. He describes the laptop as having been "very, very helpful."

My hobby is birds. I have one big collection of them. I have about 130 birds and 56 fowl. there are some rare breeds in the collection of them. So I got in to it about 2 years ago. It is no longer a hobby it is now a addiction. I am the secretary of the ballina bird keepers society.

My hobby is Birds I have  
one big collection of them.  
I have about 130 birds and  
56 fowl. there are some  
rare breeds in the collection  
of them. so I got in to  
it about 2 years ago it is  
no longer a hobby it is now  
an addiction of mine. I am  
the secretary of the ballina  
bird keepers society.



*"I could not imagine teaching without laptops now. They have allowed me to teach in a way that I love".*

**Patricia Fielding,  
Learning Support  
Teacher.**



*"A wonderful approach and a lifeline for these students".*

**Brendan Forde,  
Principal.**

### **'The way forward' - THE LEARNING SUPPORT TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE**

Patricia Fielding led a cohesive learning support team in deploying laptops in St. Joseph's and, while initially anxious about their use in mainstream situations, she now thinks they are "fantastic" and sees them as "the way forward:"

*"The approach empowered a group of students who were able to become independent learners. The downward spiral of failure was reversed. The classroom became a more exciting and collaborative place as traditional approaches were replaced with activity-based learning."*

Along with benefiting the students, the approach also had much to offer Patricia. From a situation of having very basic ICT skills and no previous experience of using technology, ICT is now an integral part of her teaching and a source of satisfaction:

*"I could not imagine teaching without laptops now. They have allowed me to teach in a way that I love – it gives me great satisfaction to see students actively involved in their own learning and laptop use fits in with my belief that students learn best when they are active rather than passive."*

### **'A lifeline'- THE PRINCIPAL'S PERSPECTIVE**

The Principal, Brendan Forde, is very committed to the inclusion ideal and, from the outset, strongly supported the mainstream application of mobile ICT for students with literacy difficulties. He was delighted with the outcomes, describing it as "a wonderful approach and a lifeline for these students."

Brendan got much satisfaction from observing the personal development of the students concerned and, along with the benefits to their normal curricular work, emphasised "the building of self-esteem" as being hugely beneficial. "They are not afraid – it has removed the fear of writing, it has taught them how to research and it has given them the assistance they deserve," he added. One of the students, for example, told him that for the first time in her life she could get an essay to write and "did not feel like falling down and dying."

He was also very happy with their Junior Certificate results which, he considered, would not have been as good without the prior use of laptops. Along with this, he was satisfied that retention levels of students with literacy difficulties had been improved in St. Joseph's as a result of the approach taken.



*"Their results benefit – they want to learn more".*

**Willie Thornton,  
Mainstream Teacher.**



*"We are happy that she is getting a chance we didn't get".*

**John Murphy,  
Parent.**

### ***'Their results benefit'* THE MAINSTREAM TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES**

The use of laptops by particular students in 'mainstream' classes was new to the staff in St. Joseph's but it quickly came to be considered as normal – "nobody bats an eyelid now." The Science Teacher, Willie Thornton, taught Kathleen and Stephanie for the Junior Certificate and provided insight from a 'mainstream' teacher's point of view:

*"Their results benefit – their presentation is better. They are also more enthusiastic for their work – previously they would have been reluctant to participate but I think the confidence it has given them is fantastic – they seem to have come out of themselves and they want to learn more. Their overall confidence in other subjects has increased also."*

Along with the general literacy dimension, Willie also exploited the benefits of the laptops for specific curricular work. For example, the students generated various tables and graphs that were relevant to the Junior Certificate Science curriculum.

Feedback from other teachers in St. Joseph's was also very positive and they commented positively on better writing, spelling and grammar, enhanced motivation and application, along with improved standards of work in general.

### ***'The chance we didn't get'* THE PARENTS' PERSPECTIVE**

The parents of the students were very supportive and delighted with the results. Indeed, other parents of children with dyslexia began sending their children especially to St. Joseph's because of the type of ICT-based provision developed there under the Laptops Initiative.

It is significant too that the use of technology helped to break the cycle of literacy difficulties between the generations. For example, Otto's parents considered the laptop to be one of the essential strategies in assisting Otto to manage in mainstream education.

Similarly, Stephanie's mother had significant literacy difficulties during her schooling and she and her husband were delighted to see the benefits for her daughter: "We are happy that she is getting a chance we didn't get."

On the whole, according to the Learning Support Coordinator in St. Joseph's, parents were very supportive of laptop use: "They like to see the work their children produce and there is now an expectation that they will have access to laptops and that they will be able to use them in mainstream classrooms."

While the staff in St. Joseph's experienced the normal anxieties that would be expected when faced with deploying mobile technologies as part of an inclusive, mainstream-focused learning support strategy, the approach quickly became accepted as normal practice in the school. According to the Principal, any hesitancy about the use of laptops in classes soon dissipated: "Laptops are just part of the furniture here now and nobody bats an eyelid."

Moreover, this use of ICT heightened awareness of the potential of integrated mobile technologies throughout the school: "The real place for ICT is not in a compartmentalised room but out in the classrooms as an added resource for teaching and learning," the Principal added.

Inevitably, there are a wide range of factors to be considered in developing a school's systems so that the full potential of children can be unlocked with the assistance of ICT, as occurred in this instance. These factors are common to most schools and, drawing on the combined experience of the 31 schools in the Laptops Initiative, the issues concerned are further explored as follows:

- Establishing the will to pursue the benefits of using mobile technology and getting ideas about how to start with its introduction, with particular reference to the literacy and inclusion contexts (chapter 2)
- Helping to navigate through the software jungle by indicating appropriate software options that will assist teachers in meeting specific educational needs (chapter 3)
- Focusing on the ways in which mobile technology can be deployed in Irish second-level schools so as to meet the diverse literacy needs that occur in the system (chapter 4)
- Examining the practicalities of managing and organising mobile technology in the busy school environment, along with issues that facilitate the ICT integration process such as students' technology competencies and options for teachers' professional development (chapter 5)
- Looking at how the introduction of ICT in the above fashion can influence schools' thinking about the role of technology and lead to structured, whole-school approaches to the broader integration of ICT into teaching and learning (chapter 6).