

MOE, schools looking to improve primary pupils' digital literacy skills

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The Ministry of Education (MOE) and primary schools are exploring ways to better equip primary school pupils with digital literacy skills, especially as they mature and approach their transition to secondary school.

This is as device-mediated learning in secondary schools has accelerated in recent years, and as MOE announced in September a 2030 masterplan to develop digitally literate learners.

To determine if primary school pupils would benefit from owning personal learning devices (PLDs), MOE conducted a study between 2021 and 2022.

The pilot, which looked at the impact of the use of PLDs on pupils' learning and behaviour, involved five primary schools: Chua Chu Kang, Frontier, Junyuan, River Valley and Yio Chu Kang.

Responding to queries from The Sunday Times, MOE said the teachers involved observed that PLDs enhanced pupil engagement, collaboration and content mastery.

"There were concerns about the pupils' ability to regulate their use of the devices when unsupervised, which could result in issues such as more distraction from online media and games, and the potential of students being exposed to online risks," said an MOE spokesman.

As the use of digital devices for learning should be developmentally appropriate, MOE said it will not be providing primary school pupils with PLDs for now.

PLDs have been issued to every secondary school student since 2021, after MOE brought forward its original 2028 target by seven years. This was largely because the Covid-19 pandemic made online learning more acceptable.

Since then, there has been a sizeable shift towards digital learning in secondary schools, with more lessons conducted in the Singapore Student Learning Space (SLS), MOE's online learning portal.

Digital assessment is likewise becoming more prevalent at the GCE O levels: 60 examination papers are now offered in electronic modes, such as e-oral, e-written, computer-based practical and e-coursework.

On Sept 20, MOE said its EdTech Masterplan 2030 will be implemented in schools progressively from 2024 to strengthen students' digital literacy, with a focus on AI literacy.

Primary schools here said they introduce digital learning gradually. In Park View Primary School, teachers use tools such as the SLS portal and educational technology platforms such as Padlet and Nearpod to complement hands-on learning.

Mr Justin Luo, the school's subject head of data management and acting head of department for information and communication technologies, said pupils gradually build up basic digital skills to prepare themselves for secondary school.

For instance, Primary 1 pupils are taught the basics of how to log into devices and the SLS, and to operate the Zoom video-conferencing software for home-based learning. By the time they reach Primary 6, they would have learnt how to create slides on PowerPoint and Google, as well as set up their own Google Site.

Education experts said the use of device-based learning at the primary school level should be geared up carefully as children grow older.

Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice (CRPP) assistant centre director Wong Hwei Ming said traditional learning is preferred at the lower primary level. Research has shown that writing by hand is linked to cognitive development, including honing fine motor skills and fostering creativity, critical thinking, memory retention and comprehension, she noted.

"For younger kids in primary school, we still want to focus on writing by hand, rather than shifting everything to typing, where they may not fully develop some of these skills that they are supposed to have by the primary school level," added Dr Wong, who is also a senior education research scientist at CRPP, which is part of the National Institute of Education (NIE).

MOE said its guidelines for primary schools on the use of digital devices for instruction is that lower primary pupils learn best through concrete, hands-on experiences and quality interactions with teachers and friends. As such, they do not require extensive use of devices.

The frequency that such devices are used for learning increases as pupils progress to upper primary levels, and their use should be under teachers' supervision, the ministry added. A spokesperson said: "As part of a well-balanced school experience, the meaningful use of technology can bring about positive educational outcomes, including deepened subject mastery, increased student engagement and greater self-directed learning."

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AN MOE SPOKESMAN, referring to a pilot, involving five primary schools, which looked at the impact of the use of personal learning devices.