

# The Micro As A Classroom Tool - Choosing The Software

The potential of the microcomputer as an important educational tool may depend on the availability, quality and ultimately the application of suitable software. A special appeal is made for the appraisal of programs in use in Irish schools and the pooling of this information as a resource.

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Now that many special schools and mainstream schools with special classes have one or more microcomputers, many teachers of special needs pupils are asking what they can do with these valuable pieces of equipment.

## **Background**

Pilot schemes and case-studies carried out in Ireland and abroad have supported the view that the microcomputer can be a particularly powerful tool in the hands of a special teacher. Teachers of the physically handicapped are familiar with its use as an aid to, or very often a vehicle for, communication. Blind pupils and adults can communicate in written form with people not familiar with Braille using a microcomputer and the range of extensions developed for the micro now makes it accessible to children with widely varying degrees of motor and learning disabilities.

Many of these applications are of a technical nature, however, and do not address the problem many of us have of finding programs we can use for the development and reinforcement of language and number skills, as aids to a social maths program or as an enhancement of the existing curriculum.

I am writing this article in order to share my sources of information on the software available and ways of accessing it.

## **Software**

Just as the development of phonic and auditory discrimination tapes made the tape recorder a really useful tool for skills development in the special classroom, the development of good software was essential if the micro was to do the same. Thankfully, the money which the British government poured into computers ensured the development of a wealth of software (mainly for the BBC machine). This wealth of software is not, however, the practical teacher's dream. Quality and accessibility were two of the main problems I faced when trying to tap this new resource.

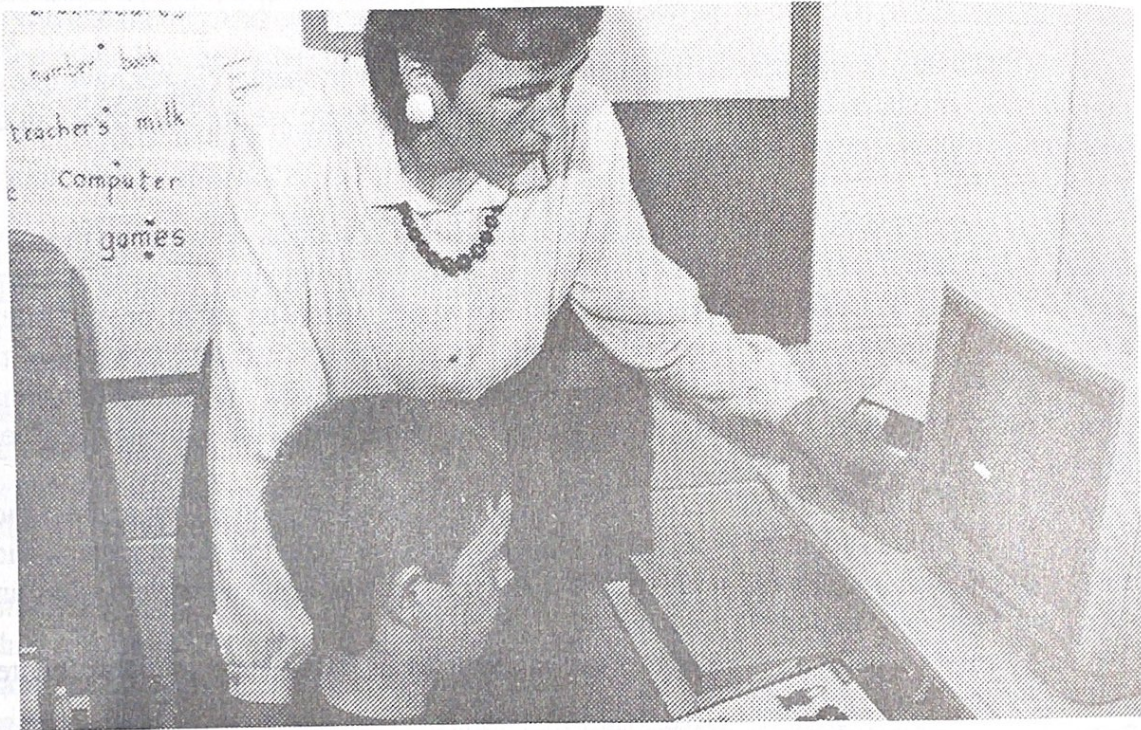
## **Quality:**

There are no comprehensive lists of software by area of application (for example, one-to-one correspondence) available, and if there were, the difficulty would lie in knowing what to choose.

Even when catalogues, articles and guides give a description of the pieces of software in question, the teacher is taking a shot in the dark ordering any one piece. Short of sitting

down and working through a piece of software for a considerable length of time, or being lucky enough to come across a really good review written by a like-minded member of the profession, there is no way to ensure that you get a program that will do what you want it to do.

There is no guarantee either that sitting down and testing a piece of software is infallible as a quality test. It all depends on the criteria the tester has in mind when looking at the program. You could for example, look at a program on matching and decide that the examples were varied and well graduated in presentation without ever considering the time factor involved i.e. how many seconds the pupil is allowed to select the correct letter/picture/symbol. Picture your frustration when the pupil you had in mind for that particular program fails on every item due to poor motor control!



*The author working with one of her pupils on the computer.*

#### **Accessibility:**

How then does a teacher get to know what good software is available?

There are a number of ways of doing this:

- A software list has been compiled and saved in the database BARDSOFT. Teachers can access this information by writing to BARDSOFT(1) and paying a small sum per sheet of printout. You can specify curriculum area and level of ability and they will give you a list of the software recorded.
- A number of software companies have developed a reputation for producing good software and their catalogues can be informative. (2)
- Four SEMERCS (Special Education Resources Centre) were set up in Britain and I have found the Newsletters from the Manchester SEMERC invaluable as a source of information on software, hardware and literature. (3)

- The IIE 'Special Education Catalogue', while it is not very selective, has 44 pages of software information listed under the following headings:

- Remedial Use/Moderate Learning Difficulties
- Severe Learning Difficulties
- Physically/Multiply Handicapped
- Visually Handicapped/Blind
- Hearing Impaired/Deaf

It also has a six-page Directory of Suppliers (4)

- A set of freely copiable Briefing Sheets is available from CET at a minimal cost. (5)

- Finally, the Curriculum Unit in the Department of Education, Marlborough St., Dublin has compiled a booklet which includes teacher reviews of software used in Irish schools and a reasonably comprehensive list of software suited to Irish primary schools.

In my experience, most of the above will welcome enquiries. Getting the software is not always so easy, however.

In some cases it is possible to order direct from the supplier and pay with a sterling draft. In others the suppliers will refer you to the Irish distributor who very often won't have the programs in stock. In both cases there is a considerable delay in getting the piece/s you have chosen. There is also the danger that they will not suit your needs or the needs of the individual you wanted to use them with when you eventually get them.

You are left with just a few options if you want to test a piece of software without actually buying it.

1. You can go to the Irish distributors' showrooms and try to put together programs they have in stock. The Educational Company of Ireland are putting together a respectable selection of software and are set up to let you browse and try out any piece that catches your fancy. The other suppliers of BBC machines, DMA and LENDAC also offer a service of this kind, though their range of classroom software is not as good.
2. You should get as much software as possible on a 'sale or return' basis. Sherston Software (mostly phonic programmes) are offering a 21 day trial period for Irish customers and hopefully other suppliers will follow suit soon.
3. Look at what is on display or on loan from your teachers' centre.
4. Contact a school or teacher in a discipline similar to your own and compare resources with him/her.

### **Conclusion:**

We are unlikely in this country to have a formalised resource centre on the lines of the SEMERCS in Britain, at least in the near future. Teachers working with micros in special education, however, are working on a reasonably closely-defined area of application for micros in special education, and we can effectively pool our ideas, resources and experience by means of appraisals of programs which can be published in Reach or in the UPDATE newsletters of NATSE.

I know (from the experience of writing this article) that it can be difficult to sit down and put together such a review. May I suggest the following skeleton format for an appraisal of a piece of software:

<b>Name:</b>	_____
<b>Publisher:</b>	_____
<b>Cost:</b>	_____
<b>Dealer:</b>	_____
<b>Subject:</b>	_____
<b>Skill:</b>	_____
<b>Age Level:</b>	_____
<b>Equipment needed:</b>	_____
<b>Comments:</b>	_____

### Sources

- (1) Bardsoft Handicapped Persons Research Unit, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE7 7TW
- (2) ESM Software, Dukes Street, Wisbech, Cambs. PE13 2AE, England.  
 ABC Software, 19 Crumstone Court, Killingworth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE12 0SZ, England.  
 Chalksoft, 37 Willowsea Road, Worcester WR3 ZQP, England.  
 CAAT Project, Brighton Polytechnic, Dept. of Computing and Cybernetics, Moulsecoomb, Brighton, Sussex BN2 4GJ, England.
- (3) Manchester SEMERC, Manchester Polytechnic, Hathersage Road, Manchester M13 0JA, England. (Due to close in March '89 — See Drumcondra Teachers' Centre for copies.)
- (4) Special Education Catalogue (Copy available for photocopying at Drumcondra Teachers' Centre.)
- (5) C.E.T. 3 Devonshire Street, London WIN 2BA, England.

### Useful Publications

- Learning To Cope*, Educational Computing Limited, Priory Court, 30/32 Farringdon lane, London EC1R 3AU, England.  
*Overlay*, Concept Keyboard News, A.B. European Marketing, Forest Farm Industrial Estate, Whitchurch, Cardiff CF4 7YS, Wales.  
*Riomhairs Na Scol*, Computer Education Society of Ireland, c/o Susanna O' Leary, Sciol Mhic Shuibne, Knocknaheeny, Cork.

### Software

Commercial software I have used to advantage:

<i>Colourcopter</i> and other early learning programs	ESM
<i>Pre-Reading</i>	ESM
<i>Sentence Builder</i>	ESM
<i>Magic E / Vowel Digraphs / Short Vowel Sounds</i>	SHERSTON
<i>Cloze</i>	LTS
<i>Lost On Mars</i> (adventure)	CAAT
<i>Granny's Garden / Dragon's World</i>	4 MATION
<i>Bank</i> (social maths)	COLLINS