Little Computers for Little Hands

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Abstract
Children need to communicate their understanding of what they are learning. The sources of their learning can be their teachers, their parents, other adults, their peers and print media. Increasingly, though, young children are learning through accessing various types of media literacy. Exposure to these media is not enough to help children communicate their ideas; the exposure must be deliberate for children to understand each medium’s use. These media are sources for children’s learning, but they can also be sources for children’s communication. Over the past three years, I have researched first grade students adapting readily to using palm-sized or handheld computers in the classroom. A new phase of research will begin that will explore not only the direct use of handheld computers in the first grade for learning and communication purposes, but also will explore a possible link in the use of this media to reading scores on state and district mandated tests.

Proposal
Oral and written communication is a requirement for children of all ages under the national standards for English language arts. Children must be able to convey their understanding of what they are learning in order for teachers to evaluate progress. The sources of children’s learning can be through their teachers, their parents, other adults, their peers and print media. Increasingly, though, young children are learning through accessing various types of media literacy such as television, radio, the internet, computers, MP3 players, iPods, and other forms of technology. Exposure to these media is not enough to help young children communicate their ideas; the exposure must be deliberate and carefully scaffolded in order for children to understand each medium’s use. These media are sources for children’s learning, but they can also be sources for children’s communication. Over the past three years, I have researched first grade students in a large inner-city school adapting readily to using palm-sized or handheld computers in the classroom, but the interaction of students with the handheld computers was extremely limited. The recent receipt of monetary support through the Boeing Corporation will enable the continuation of this research and eliminate the limited time interaction problem. The classroom will be able to retain the handheld computers on site for extensive use of these tools for reading and writing. A new phase of research will begin that will explore not only the direct use of handheld computers in the first grade for learning and communication purposes, but also will explore a possible link in the use of this media to a rise in reading scores on state and district mandated tests. Several products will be created by the first grade students and these will be analyzed over time. By the time of the SITE conference in March, 2006, this study will not be completed; therefore, a roundtable discussion of issues encountered during the research and feedback regarding these issues will be desirable. Possible publication sites will also be solicited from attendees.