

The Rafi.ki revolution:

is your school on board? Schools all over the world are rushing to sign up to this new educational tool. Annie Makoff speaks to Rafi.ki director John McNutt and online facilitator Chris Llewellyn to find out why

It is eight pm on a school night. An eleven-year old from London is learning about Darfur with an eleven-year-old from Romania. Meanwhile, in Norwich, a fourteen-year-old is working on a magazine with a thirteen-year-old from New Delhi, India. This isn't time travel at its most effective: this is Rafi.ki and it just may be coming to a school near you.

Imagine a global community where everyone has something to give and contribute. A community that is made up of people from all over the world: as far away as Australia, and as hidden as Tajikistan. A place where ideas are shared, friendships are formed, and culture, religion and social class are not just accepted but celebrated. If it sounds like some sort of far-fetched utopia, you couldn't be more wrong.

Because this is just what Rafi.ki is and what it stands for: and for the thousands of schools that have signed up to the community worldwide, it is a reality.

Rafi.ki was started just two years ago, initially set up as a charity collecting textbooks from British schools and sending them to East Africa. But when students began requesting links for pen pals with the schools they had partnered with, the concept of an online community was born.

Rafi.ki enables schools to work together and share a vast array of projects all based around the national curriculum. By the use of video conferences, chat rooms and image and photograph exchanges (to give just a few examples) pupils can actively participate in the learning process, all in entirely safe surroundings. And of course, Rafi.ki takes pupil safety extremely seriously.

Everyone using Rafi.ki is issued with their own username and password and all staff are checked to confirm they are teachers at the school.

Every conversation is moderated by facilitators, and any use of abusive language is automatically reported and looked into. "Rafi.ki is seen as a walled garden," says online facilitator, Chris Llewellyn. "It is rigidly password protected and any breaches of the code of conduct are dealt with in conjunction with the relevant teacher."

At the time of writing, 1100 schools from over 100 countries have signed up to the global community. Schools in the UK pay the subscription fee, (this covers the cost of the moderators and facilitators who ensure child safety is a number one priority) but the service is free for any school outside of the UK.

According to Rafi.ki director, John Macnutt, there are three overarching aims of Rafi.ki. One: to raise attainment across all subjects in the curriculum; two: to bridge social, cultural and religious divides and three: to ensure pupils are equipped with a range of essential skills to set them up on their

career paths. "We wanted to provide a long term solution where schools could create a long lasting partnership"

John explains. And Rafi.ki is certainly destined to be long-lasting. At such a politically sensitive time in international terms, it has never been more crucial to teach children about religious and cultural tolerance.

Nothing demonstrates this better than the large amount of communication between children from a school in Iraq and from the USA. "They were eager to work with the American children," Chris Llewellyn explains.

"This really shows how bridges across cultures can be made. And it was reciprocal. It was lovely to see."

Certainly, neither John Macnutt nor Chris Llewellyn could have predicted the huge impact Rafi.ki would have on the teachers and pupils that use it. No one could have guessed that 96 per cent of teachers would report that Rafi.ki has increased motivation and learning in the most disengaged students, or that more than half of students using Rafi.ki would become online friends with overseas students or that 38 per cent of students' use Rafi.ki outside of school hours. And perhaps most astonishing of all are the huge improvements in learning and achievement of pupils with special educational needs...

Eddie B² is in year 11 at Belfairs High School. He has atypical Autism and has a statement of special educational needs. Due to his condition, Eddie found it difficult to socialise with his peers and struggled to communicate and read verbal and nonverbal signs, such as facial expressions and body language. His condition was affecting his confidence and self-esteem and no doubt would cause problems as he progressed through adulthood. But Eddie was introduced to the world of Rafi.ki.

From the start, it proved a great success. Due to the nature of virtual communication, typed communication is wholly literal. Subtle modes of speech such as sarcasm or irony cannot be picked up through text: to convey a feeling behind words, emoticons or pictures are used. Such a means of communication suits Eddie perfectly, and it is this literal communication, that has caused his confidence in himself to soar. He is now an ambassador for Rafi.ki at his school and helps teachers and online facilitators with the site. His tutor, Melanie Hoppgood says: "Rafi.ki has enabled Eddie to develop his communication skills. It is an environment where he feels safe

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Learning to be Pupils of all ages from across Rafi.ki

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and in control." And having an element of control is something that many people with Autism need. If a situation becomes uncomfortable, Eddie is able to navigate away from the webpage, without fear of feeling victimised, or he can simply take his time when responding to online messages which he couldn't do during face-to-face conversations.

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John Macnutt explains. And since Eddie is given the responsibility to moderate chatrooms and other online conversations within Rafi.ki, his own confidence in social situations outside of Rafi.ki has soared. Melanie Hopgood adds: "the responsibility that the facilitators have bestowed upon him has played a large part in this development. Rafi.ki has had an extremely positive effect on him."

And so it is with many children with special educational needs. Children with dyslexia, dyscalculia, ASD, ADHD etc. can all benefit from the skills that Rafi.ki teaches and develops. Simply by enabling a child to learn with others from a wide range of different countries about many different topics, learning becomes a different experience altogether. Learning becomes fun. "Rafi.ki takes away obstacles facing SEN students in their social and educational experience", Chris Llewellyn says.

Headmaster Martin Crabbe of Glebe Special School, Bromley, agrees. "Rafi.ki is giving our students the confidence and motivation to develop their learning at a pace that suits them." He says. Rafi.ki, by its very nature, is multifunctional.

Children can improve their foreign language skills dramatically by conversing with other children from around the world, they can improve their geography skills by working with a number of global schools, and by working with other children on a whole host of exciting and challenging projects, those who would otherwise struggle in the textbook-style of lesson are thriving in key subjects initially thought too much for them. Through the realms of Rafi.ki, children share knowledge and discuss aspects of the national curriculum they would not otherwise have done. And on some projects, children have video conferences with experts or specialists from a particular field, where they can ask them questions about their area of expertise. Rafi.ki is a wholly interactive medium.

Perhaps one of the reasons for Rafi.ki's success with children is that the concept is familiar to them. Being of the Facebook and Bebo generation, children are comfortable experimenting with the different mediums available within Rafi.ki. Yet, unlike Facebook, the Rafi.ki community provides a deeper experience. Chris Llewellyn recalls a talk he gave at a local school, and remembers the show of hands when he asked how many pupils had used Facebook to communicate with their peers. "But when I asked how many of them had met new people from Facebook, the show of hands fell," he explains. "People use Facebook to catch up with friends and have fun, but that is all. With our community, you can do this and more. You can learn about global issues, you can meet new people. With Rafi.ki, you are going somewhere."

But let's not forget the benefit Rafi.ki has on special needs children overseas. Rafi.ki has inspired Headmaster Youssef El Assali of the Al Massira school in Morocco to integrate children of all abilities within the school and ensure they are proficient in IT systems. And Dushanbe Deaf School in Tajikistan is set to join the Rafi.ki community later in 2009.

So no matter where a school is situated – an ill-equipped school in Maldives or a bush school in Kenya, Rafi.ki's flexibility enables access to any school connected to the internet.

Currently, Rafi.ki benefits children from 11 to 18. But launched as early as March of this year, a primary version of Rafi.ki, known as Rafi.ki Kidogo will be available for children of five years and up. And

although Rafi.ki was launched in order to improve children's learning, the very nature of the community means that teachers and other educational staff greatly benefit from the network too: they can speak to other teachers from across the globe, compare lesson plans and experiences, discuss future projects and make new friends. The learning opportunities available are infinite.

Rafi.ki brings together people from all over the world. Teachers engage with teachers, students with students. Projects are worked on, friendships are formed. Achievement levels are rising. You could say it's fast becoming a revolution. And most encouraging of all, is that children with special educational needs are not just thriving from using Rafi.ki, but exceeding expectations.

"SEN children no longer have to feel like they are SEN children," John Macnutt says. "They are as good as or, in some cases, outperforming their peers. Rafi.ki has created a level playing field."

And with such a playing field like Rafi.ki, textbook-learning is certainly a thing of the past.

- 1 Students who participated in Rafi.ki's phase one study
- 2 In keeping with Rafi.ki's child protection policy, we have not printed Eddie's surname to protect identity

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