

Children of Icwili picked as guinea pigs for CSIR

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A PILOT project to see whether SA's children can learn to use computers without any teaching is to be launched in Icwili, Eastern Cape.

The quirkily named Minimally Invasive Education project will be launched on December 21 by the science and technology department and the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR).

It aims to verify research in India which seems to show that children can acquire computer skills without any formal training. If that thesis proves true, SA could develop policies and new teaching practices to boost computer literacy, says CSIR CEO Sibusiso Sibisi.

The concept was pioneered by the Centre for Research in Cognitive Systems in India. Its hypothesis was that any child could learn basic computing skills through incidental learning, as long as there was access to a computer with entertaining content and minimal human guidance.

The experiment was conducted in two rural areas by installing a PC, a monitor, a touch pad and internet access.

Children aged between five and 16 were immediately drawn to the machine. Despite their limited understanding of English and the fact that the PC's content was all in English, they were able to teach themselves the basic operations and invented their own computer jargon. None of the adults seemed to make any effort to use the PC, and few girls were seen to use it.

The experiment will be adapted for SA to see whether community members, given enough access, motivating content and time, will learn how to use an unattended computer.

The approach could lead to new initiatives for introducing IT for distance education, telemedicine and government services.

Various sites have been identified in areas where there is no access to technology, but where there is sufficient infrastructure for a PC be installed. How many sites are used will depend on the success of the Icwili experiment.