An exploration of parents' engagement with their children's learning involving technologies and the impact of this in their family learning experiences

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Contents

Introduction 4
Policy context: parental engagement and learning in families 4
Research context: issues for schools 5
What we did 7
Definitions 9
Structure of this report 9
Technology and communication with schools 11
Thick and thin communications 11
The medium and the message 30
Issues affecting parental engagement 31
Conclusion 39
What parents need to engage with schools 40
Learning in families with technology 42
Technology in the home: parents' perceptions of the educational value of different technologies 43
The role of parents in their children's technology use 48
Conclusion 61
What parents need to support learning in families 62
Key 63
Recommendations 65
Schools and local authorities 65
How do parents want to receive support and guidance? 69
Policy-makers 70
Further research 72
References 74

Introduction

Becta commissions research into how schools can better use technology to improve various aspects of their practice and to improve children's experiences of education. This research explores specifically how schools can better support parents in the light of technological changes. Following the explosion of new digital technologies in the home, there is a growing body of research on how new technologies are being used in the home and in families and what children and families learn from this. This research hopes to contribute to this body of knowledge.

This research examined parents' views and experiences of schools' and local authorities' technology practices to support parental engagement in their children's education. It also explored the impact of this on learning in the family.

The research makes recommendations on how schools might better communicate and engage with parents; and how they might contribute to learning in the family using technologies.

Policy context: parental engagement and learning in families

Parent's engagement in their children's learning is perceived to have an impact on children's attainment and is hence a current government policy concern.[1] This agenda is situated in a wider context of a gradual shift in schools' attitudes towards parents, whereby parents are increasingly recognised as co-educators.[2] Today, parental engagement is one of the priorities of the Children's Plan for 2009, which underlines ministers' commitment to helping parents and schools work more closely together. It is central to the principles of the Government's parental engagement agenda, Every Parent Matters.[3]

Technology clearly plays a role in this. The Every Parent Matters agenda stresses the need to use new technologies to make communication quicker and easier. Furthermore, Becta's revised Harnessing Technology Strategy[4] recognises the increasingly important role of technology in home-school communication. This includes informing parents about the support available, as well as engaging with specific parent groups such as fathers.

[1] Desforges, and Abouchar 2003; DCSF 2007a; DCSF 2007b
[2] Tomlinson 1991; Bastiani 1997; August et al 2006
[3] DSCF 2007a
[4] Becta 2008

However, the parental engagement agenda today goes deeper than parents' involvement in their children's schooling. It is also concerned with the knock-on effect that learning in families may have on children's formal education, as well as with adult's own relationships to learning and education.[5] The Harnessing Technology Strategy[6] discusses the role of technology in supporting learning in families, stressing the need to support parents in getting the most from digital technologies for learning, while also recognising parents' concerns about safeguarding their children.

Research context: issues for schools

From schools' perspective, engaging all parents in their children's education is an important, but challenging task. Schools and policy-makers often use the term 'hard-to-reach parents'. This generally refers to those parents with whom the school finds it difficult to communicate. This may also include parents that schools perceive as being less likely to engage in the education of their children.[7] Schools' perceptions of 'hard-to-reach parents' are usually based on the attitudes or behaviours of certain parents, such as not attending parents' evenings or not responding to requests to meet with staff.

From parents' perspective, research shows that they want to be more involved in their children's education, but not all parents feel that it is easy to get involved.[8]

Barriers to engagement

Research has highlighted the major barriers to engagement. These include:

- time – parents who work, fathers, or single parents can find time a key barrier to engaging with school. Furthermore, time is a key factor restricting parental engagement in their children's learning more generally.[9]
- language and literacy barriers – parents who do not speak English fluently or who cannot read or write well, face obvious barriers to communicating with schools and supporting their children with homework.[10]
- social and cultural experiences – parents may feel that they lack the skills or knowledge to help their children at home or engage with school staff. Parents who had negative experiences of their own education may feel intimidated and alienated by the school environment.[11] Working class

[5] See Grant 2009
[6] Becta 2008
[7] Family and Parenting Institute 2008; Carpentier and Lall 2005; Home Office 2004; DCSF 2009a
[8] DCSF 2007b; Carpentier and Lall 2005; Moon and Ivins 2004
[9] Family and Parenting Institute 2005
[10] Home Office 2004; Gillborn 2002
[11] DCSF 2009a; Williams et al 2002

parents are particularly likely to feel less confident or less entitled in engaging with schools or making demands on teachers, which is likely to inhibit their involvement and visibility in the school.[12] There is a need for 'equitable dialogue' between schools and parents.[13]

- cynicism – some parents may feel that they do not have the power to influence their children's school and thus feel reluctant to engage.[14]

These various barriers impact differently according to parents' gender, ethnicity, and social class. Within the group which might be labelled 'hard-to-reach', Carpentier and Lall[15] argue: "It is very clear that there is no one such group and consequently there is a difficulty to develop targeted policies."

Clearly a one-size-fits-all approach to understanding parents' engagement with their children's learning is not useful. An article in Futurelab's *Vision* magazine makes the valid point that, in this policy drive, there is a danger that schools could treat parental engagement as something that they expect from parents. They may do this, rather than consider parents' own needs and find ways of working more collaboratively with them.[16]

Some research warns that using the 'hard-to-reach' or 'hard-to-engage' label can reify middle class values of involvement in schooling.[17] Being 'involved' or 'engaged' will mean different things to different parents. Involvement in the school is not the same as involvement in their children's learning. Further, different types of families will have different practices and consider different things to be of value to their children's learning. Using labels can thus set up a deficit model where, by implication, the 'problem' lies with the parent essentially being 'difficult'. This does not allow for the idea that it may be schools, local authorities, and/or the education system in general, that might be 'hard-to-reach' for parents.[18] Furthermore, labelling sets up an artificial binary that constructs a 'normal' group of parents, and, conversely, those who are 'problematic'.[19] In fact, parents and families in general are hugely diverse. They will all use different techniques or methods to engage with the school and hence with their children's learning.

It is for this reason that we give weight to parents' views and experiences in our research. We emphasise their voices in this report, rather than beginning with the school perspective.

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[12] Reay 1998; Crozier 1997; Tett 2001
[13] Crozier and Reay 2005, p159
[14] Williams et al 2002
[15] Carpentier and Lall 2005, p10
[16] Futurelab 2009
[17] Crozier and Ray 2005
[18] Crozier and Davies 2007
[19] Vincent 1996, p189

What we did

In this research, we explored how parents' experience schools' use of technology to support parental engagement in their children's education and the impact of this on learning in the family.

We focused on parents of children in Key Stage 2 (primary aged 8-11years) and Key Stage 3 (secondary aged 11-14 years).

We selected five local authority areas across England (Croydon, Brighton and Hove, Hampshire, Luton, Leicester City) to serve as case study areas.

Within each area we carried out focus group discussions involving a total of 80 parents. We made specific effort to access a range of parents who may be less engaged with, or have less contact with, their children's school. We did this by involving parents through a variety of networks outside of schools such as voluntary and community sector organisations. We also made specific effort to obtain a diverse spread of parents in terms of income groups, ethnicity, marital status and age. We aimed to get a substantial minority of fathers, minority ethnic parents, those with English as an Additional Language (EAL), single parents and parents of children with special educational needs (SEN) (See Table 1).

The discussions with parents were contrasted with interviews with relevant staff in schools and with relevant representatives from the local authorities. (See Appendix 1 for detail of this methodology and Appendix 2 for a more thorough breakdown of the parents' demographic data. In Appendix 3, we provide more contexts on the five local authorities and their strategic position in terms of implementing technology in schools, and the role of parental engagement. These are shown as separate documents.)

Table 1: Basic breakdown of parents' demographic information

Gender	Mothers	79%
Marital Status	Single Parents	15%
Ethnicity	White British	55%
Employment Status	Unemployed	20%
Income	£20,000 or below	30%
Housing Tenure	Owner Occupied Council Renting	54% 17%
Education	Level 3 or below (A level equivalent)	35%
School Type	Primary Secondary Special Educational Needs (SEN)	40% 21% 4%

Definitions

We are working within the definition that parental involvement and parental engagement can be used interchangeably to mean the practices and processes of taking part in their children's education. This might refer to their relationships with the school, the formal education system or with learning more broadly.

We are working on the assumption that good communication channels between schools and parents allow greater possibilities for parents to engage. Or rather, good communication channels between schools and parents allow parents to have more positive relationships with learning in general (this might include learning about their children's education, learning about technology or learning for their own benefit).

Following Grant,[20] we also use the term 'learning in families' to encompass a wide range of activities between parents, children and the extended family. This includes:

- formal, non-formal and informal learning
- adults and children learning together
- adults helping children learn
- adults learning from children
- adults learning skills in order to help their children learn.

We will use the term 'learning in families' as it encompasses 'family learning,' which refers to formal schemes or activities run for adults to learn with their children.

Structure of this report

The findings in this report are divided into two main chapters, Technology and communication with schools and Learning in families with technology.

The first chapter, Technology and communication with schools, explores the communication between parents and schools and the place of technologically mediated communication within this.

To help develop an understanding of the success of different methods in different contexts we construct a typology of 'thick' and 'thin' communication. We analyse the differences in types of communication experienced by the parents in our research

[20] Grant 2009

according to four key factors:

- the direction of information flows
- the complexity of the message
- the extent to which the communication is personalised or universal
- the extent to which a medium allows for immediate real-time interaction or not (synchronicity).

We argue that all these elements have an impact on the extent of parental agency involved in the communication. Further, we argue that parental agency is essentially the mechanism for strong parental engagement in their children's learning.

This allows us to develop an understanding of the success of certain types of communication in engaging with parents, as well as the barriers they may present. This typology also allows us to understand the ways in which different types of communication might improve or hinder parents' relationships to their children's learning.

In the second chapter, Learning in families with technology, we focus on technology practices in the home. The aim is to shed light on the role that technology plays in constraining and facilitating parents' relationship to their children's learning and to their own learning. To do this, we explore two inter-related issues:

- the educational 'value' that parents attach to different technologies
- the role that they, as parents, play in relation to their children's use of technology in the home.

We present a discussion of the differences between parents in the relationship they have to their children's, and their own, learning using technologies.

We illustrate our findings with some short vignettes,[i] based on archetypes of parents in the research. Throughout these chapters we also provide insights into the perspective of the schools and local authorities that participated in this research, discussing what they do or are planning to do to increase parental engagement using technologies. At the end of each section, we provide a list of the wants and needs identified by the parents in relation to communicating with the school, helping their children learn and learning about and with technology.

The report ends with recommendations to schools, local authorities and policy-makers. It also identifies opportunities for further research in this area.

Technology and communication with schools

> "You find almost conclusively if parents make good contact, children make good progress. And so if you want to make the ones that aren't making good progress improve, one of the things is improving the parent contact." (Headteacher, Hampshire Secondary School)

As this headteacher's comments suggest, in order for parents to better engage with their children's formal learning, good communication with the school is important. In this section, we draw on focus groups with parents and interviews with school and local authority staff. We look at the key ways in which schools and parents communicate with each other, with a particular focus on the ways in which technologies are used. We then discuss the barriers involved in home-school communication.

Thick and thin communications

The revolutions in mobile and online technologies over the past decade have transformed people's communication practices and hence their expectations[21] We have found it useful to characterise parents' experiences of technologically mediated communication in terms of a distinction between thick and thin communication.[22] This framework draws inspiration from some of the existing literature on technologically mediated communication. It is also based on an understanding of communication that moves away from the mechanistic metaphor of information exchange and transmission, between a sender and receiver. Instead, it views communication as a social practice anchored in common beliefs, shared rules and reciprocal expectations.[23]

Our typology of thick and thin communication has four key elements:

1 Synchronicity. This is the extent to which the communication is an immediate, real-time interaction or whether there is a delay between the send time and the response. For example, telephone and face-to-face forms of communication are synchronous. This type of communication tends to be more open and interactive.

2 Personalisation. This is the extent to which the message is generic to all parents, or specifically about an individual child. For example, communications on the school website are universal to all parents,

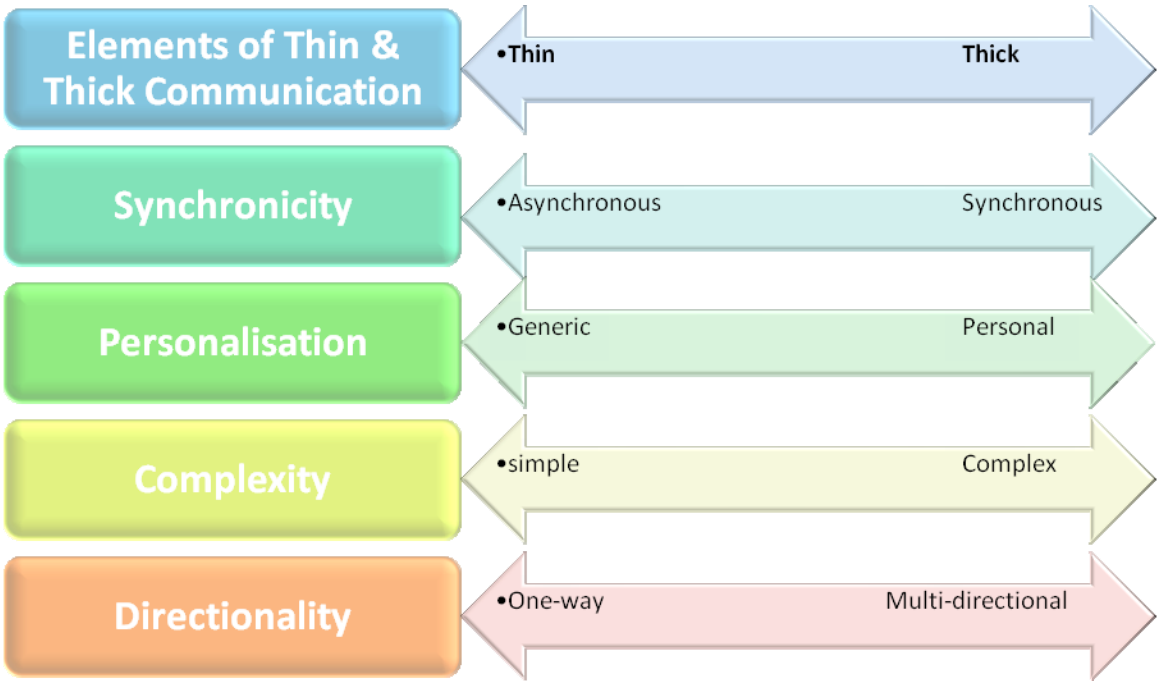
[i] These vignettes are compiled from several focus group participants.
[21] Geser 2004
[22] These terms evoke Geertz's discussion (1977) of thick and thin forms of ethnographic description. See references list.
[23] For instance, Geser 2004; Nardi et al 2000; Rettie 2009; Rettie 2005

whereas an individually addressed letter or email to the parent is personalised.

3 Complexity. It is clear that more complex messages require more sophisticated forms of communication practices. For example, text messages are simple, whereas emails can be both.

4 Directionality. This is the direction, in which communication flows emanate, and the norms, rules, and practicalities that govern response. For example, school newsletters tend to be a one way information-sending process and do not usually warrant response.

Figure 1: Elements of Thin and Thick Communication



It should be noted that thick and thin communications are not 'good' or 'bad' kinds of communicative practice. They are merely appropriate to the context. Different modes (or media) of communication have different capabilities and allow for different levels of thickness. For example, the archetype thick communication medium is a group face-to-face meeting. The archetype thin communication medium is a one-way text message.

Thin communications, tend to be more flexible, less time consuming and less socially demanding of parents, whereas, thicker forms of communication can call for more investment of time and resources. We make the distinction between communications about administrative, organisational and logistical issues. There is a difference between communication about ensuring the smooth running of the school and communication specifically about children's learning, though of course there is overlap between the two. We found at present, a great deal of communication using technology is about this administrative and organisational aspect. It is less about learning, though there is potential for this to change with the harnessing of learning platforms.

All these elements have an impact on the extent to which parental agency is involved in the communication. Parental agency is the ability of the medium to facilitate parents' voice and empowerment. This, we argue is essentially the mechanism for strong parental engagement in their children's learning. As we indicate in our analysis, it is the opportunities that schools provide for these different types of communication and the impact these have on parents that are most important.

The next sections discuss the different media commonly used by schools to communicate with parents. We discuss six key modes:

- Email
- Text messaging
- Websites
- Learning platforms and online reporting
- Other new technologies
- Face to face.

The chapter begins with email, text messaging and school and local authority websites. It then goes on to discuss parents' views of learning platforms and online reporting as well other new technologies being implemented. It ends with a discussion of the different approaches to face-to-face communication that schools use to engage parents in their children's learning, such as drop-in information sessions, learning workshops and classes.

Email

Summary

Email mediated communication tended to be thin. Characteristically, it was used for one-way (school-parent) communications. It did not allow for parents to reply or to contact each other. Its format tended to be bulletins that covered general information, rather than communication about a particular child.

Communication tended to be thicker when parents could use email to communicate with their children's teachers, addressing specific issues about their children. Email communication usually led to arranging face-to-face meetings. In these instances, the asynchronous, multi-directional capacity was empowering for parents.

Although allowing free email contact can be a burden on teachers' workloads, restricting parent's opportunities to initiate or respond to emails could suppress parental voice and reduce opportunities to communicate about children's learning.

Organisational issues often prevented schools from making the best use of email.

The ease of email

A majority of the parents in this research had experiences of using email to contact schools or of being contacted by the school via email. It was seen as an easy, direct and efficient way to communicate and it fitted around their lifestyles.

> "I mean, you're on the internet almost 24 hours, you can get messages through at any time of the day and you can respond immediately and things like that. ... That's how we work." (Black mother of children in special and mainstream schools)

> "My son broke his little toe so he was missing about three lessons. In senior school it's different teachers for every lesson, so instead of writing three duplicate letters, I just emailed them all. Just clicked on the teacher and sent them a note and it was done. So for me, in my busy life, it's much quicker." (White British mother of children in special and mainstream schools)

Parents told us that schools mainly used email to communicate information regarding events, notification of website updates, newsletters and trips. Many parents said email was much more reliable than 'pupil post', which was often lost by children or left in the bottom of their school bag.

Parents also liked the way that emails were easily retrievable:

> "If it's paper we lose it, if it is email we can track it down somewhere." (White British father of children in primary school)

The issue of letters being left in the bottom of a child's bag is one that both parents and schools identified as a difficulty on several occasions, so email was a welcome development for many. The headteacher in the Hampshire secondary school explained how, from the coming year, they intended to replace paper mailing and pupil post with email, for all except those (estimated 15-20 per cent) who do not have email access. However, parents in the focus groups often claimed they would like the choice of having paper or electronic communications. They said that just because they had email access, this did not mean that email was their preferred method.

One-way communication

The majority of email communication initiated by schools was one-way. A number of parents told us that it was not clear whether they were expected to or could initiate communication with the school via email. A few parents told us that they had replied to emails from the school or sent messages that had been met with no response.

> "We get communications from the primary school, through email. But if you try and contact them back ...I've never had a reply from them." (White British mother of children in primary and secondary schools)

> "I have emailed the headmaster and they've not replied ever. Although emails are really good, sometimes it doesn't work – whereas in the end I walked into school - so sometimes technology can be really good, but it depends on everybody using it, both sides." (White British father of children with SEN in primary school)

The frequency with which parents were emailed by schools varied, with a few receiving emails on a daily basis. Some parents felt that the increasing frequency of email communication placed a greater demand on them.

> "I don't check my emails regularly. I do it once a week and I don't want to be doing it every day." (White British mother of children in primary school)

Those who received daily emails said that the emails were often generic in content and not relevant. However, parents said that they still appreciated the contact and the feeling of a close relationship, which this communication evoked.

> "The thing about an email is you can just delete it...I'd rather get too much than nothing. ...It's kind of nice because you do get a feeling of what the whole

> school are doing...so we don't mind." (White British father of children with SEN in primary school)

Two-way communication

For those parents who used email to initiate communication with schools, this was generally done to arrange face-to-face meetings or address specific issues relating to their children. Such emails were often used in sophisticated ways to communicate messages to several recipients and to renegotiate parents' relationships with schools.

One parent told us how using email facilitated the special needs statementing process. Another told us that email communication allowed her to establish a rapport with teachers when her daughter was having difficulties. This eventually extended to face-to-face communication. This parent said:

> "I think the email was good because it gave me a chance to sit down and think [about] what I wanted to say and be far enough away not to get emotional and then…get a response. I could sit and read and think about and so [to have] that space and that time. And then when I did get to see him [the headteacher] we had already had some contact and we knew what we were both coming in to talk about and so that was quite useful." (White British mother of children in secondary school)

In this instance, the asynchronous, multi-directional capacity was empowering.

Absence of email communication

A fair proportion of parents said that they had no experience of email communication. Several were unsure whether their children's school had email facilities or whether these were simply not being used to communicate with parents.

> "I've got a vague memory of having signed up for an email newsletter but it's never appeared." (White British mother with children (some with SEN) in primary school)

> "I wrote down my email address to the school, but I don't receive any information actually." (Chinese father with children in primary school, some of whom have SEN)

A few parents told us that schools (particularly secondary) often made it difficult for them to have relevant teachers' email addresses.

> "No, they don't like you to have individual teacher's email addresses because otherwise they would be bombarded." (British mother with children in secondary school, some of whom have SEN)

This parent recognised there might be good reasons for mediating access to teachers, such as workload burden for teachers. However, restricting parents' opportunities to initiate or respond to emails could also suppress parental voice and close down opportunities to communicate about children's learning.

While most parents were appreciative of the benefits of email communication, a few told us that they preferred the warmth of face-to-face contact. They felt that emailing could not express or replace the richness of that form of conversation.

> "There is still something about talking to someone that's nicer than email." (White British mother with children in primary and secondary school)

Centrally managed email systems

There were roughly two groups of parents who used email to communicate with the school: those who communicated directly with the school and those whose school used a centrally-managed, school-to-home email service.

Some parents expressed frustration at such managed systems for being cumbersome and giving users insufficient control over the flow of emails. Schools expressed similar logistical issues. One school was in the process of setting up 'interest groups' to which parents could register and receive more targeted emails. This more direct approach has the potential for increased communication about children's learning.

Schools themselves said that they experienced organisational problems in managing some of these centralised emails. The home liaison worker in the Hampshire secondary school told us that the school's use of it could be more effectively organised:

> "…it is not my job to actually send out the messages. I try to look after our use of [the central email system], but we have one person who has got the authority to access and run off reports. We have another person whose job it is to just send out the messages. Now that lady is an admin person. Really [the central email system] needs to have somebody who is a champion of it at all times and keeping an eye on what's going on."

Good practice using email

Allow thick communication by email. Open up the flow of information, allowing parents to email the school, teachers and each other. This, in turn, may encourage more complex, personalised communication about children and learning.

Set up email or internet groups, based around common interests (such as different year and form groups or specific after-school activities), where parents (and pupils) are able to join the group and communicate with all within. This could become empowering and engaging.

Appoint a member of staff responsible for parent liaison, who also manages the communication systems.

Text messaging

Summary

Text messaging as a medium is the archetypical thin form of communication, but it includes time flexibility as a bonus. It was seen as a more inclusive technological medium because more people have a mobile phone than have internet access.

Text messaging tended to be used for short, simple time-sensitive information (such as notifying parents of school closure, or their children's absence).

It is used almost exclusively by schools as one-way communication.

It was common for parents to have experience of text messages as part of their communication with schools (although this was the case for far fewer parents than those who had used email). Experience of text messaging was also mostly confined to secondary school parents.

Time-sensitive communication

Text messaging was mainly used to relate time-sensitive information, such as pupil absence, lateness, illness, school closure and changes to scheduled events. Schools reported that they found having the facility to send text messages by batch to be particularly useful in times of sudden change, such as closing the school due to snow. This technology is clearly being used more for administrative purposes than for pedagogical.

As was the case with email, some parents spoke of being bombarded by irrelevant and generic texts from schools. Others complained that text messages could sometimes be inaccurate and cause unnecessary worry (such as reporting their children absent mistakenly). Some parents consequently saw this as an inappropriate medium in cases such as this. However, some parents told us that text communication from schools gave them greater powers of surveillance over their children. One parent said:

> "I think it's a good thing yeah a very good thing especially at that age because she's 16 and at that age they can truant and so I think it is very good that they do that." (White British, mother with children in primary and secondary school)

Mobile telephones were generally perceived by parents to be a highly democratic medium with few or no material barriers to access. Text messages were succinct, highly individualising (that is, normally owned by one individual rather than shared between family members), quick and relatively cheap.

> "I think one of the things it's [text messaging] done is open up schools. [Schools] actually communicate with people a lot more." (Mixed-ethnicity, father with child in secondary school)

Inclusiveness

Parents said that text messaging was an inclusive form of communication that did not require high oral or literacy skills. Also, it did not place the same kinds of social demands on them as other technologies. In relation to communicating a child's absence, one parent said:

> "I suppose it de-personalises it a bit as well – you have to make an excuse when you're ringing up – but with a text message you don't." (Mixed-ethnicity mother with children in primary school)

One-way communication

Even more than email, text messages tended to be one-way: there was no facility for parents to respond.

One parent explained how she was able to use the text messaging service to contact other parents and buy a gift for a teacher. Yet, on the whole, examples such as this are rare. Overall, parents' experiences suggest that the rules and expectations regarding text messaging are somewhat ambiguous.

> "I think it tends to be used by schools to send messages out and I don't know how much they would appreciate it if we [texted] back." (White British mother of children in primary school)

Good practice using text messaging

If text messaging is going to be solely one-way information from school to parent, use it for short, timely and generic information. Consider a different medium for more personalised information about individual children, or allow other, easily accessible, channels for parents to respond.

School and local authority websites

Summary

Websites were representative of fairly thin communication. The information offered tended to be of a fairly static nature, such as term dates, events and staff lists. Other findings about websites include that they were:

- designed primarily as a marketing for the school
- used more often if linked to a learning platform
- not regularly updated
- reliant on parents being proactive and checking it
- not visited regularly by parents.

A further issue is that different members of staff were responsible for different aspects of the website, often with a lack of communication between those involved.

Using school websites

Parents' discussion of school websites were mainly about the front-end interface of the website. School websites were seen as sources of relatively static information such as, term dates, events and Ofsted reports. One parent said that the school website was focused on marketing to prospective parents and therefore held little interest for existing parents.

Whether parents used school websites tended to be linked to their use of email and other online mediums. If a school already had a learning platform or a centrally managed email system, parents were more likely to report using the school website. Conversely, in schools where online and email communications were less developed, parents were less likely to use school websites.

School staff claimed that following the implementation of learning platforms, they anticipated keeping their websites as a showcase for the school. The websites would provide a top layer of information to the outside world (more administrative), while

the learning platforms would be used to share more complex and in-depth information between pupils, staff and parents (more focused on learning).

A number of parents said that, rather then being signposted to the websites, schools simply expected that parents would be proactive in visiting school websites. Thus, many parents came across their children's school website in haphazard ways.

Parents also said that when they did visit the school website, they found that the site was not regularly updated.

> "As long as they updated it regularly, which they don't. ... It's a great idea but they need to make it work." (White British mother of children in primary and secondary schools)

A small proportion of parents said that their school had no website and this was more common among primary school parents. While a majority of parents were aware of their school's website, it was not thought of as the primary medium of communication or to seek information about the school.

> "It's just remembering that it's there. Sometimes you know, I just forget about it." (White British mother of children in primary and secondary, some of whom have SEN)

> "I'm a bit naughty really I don't look at it as much as I probably should do." (White British mother of children in primary and secondary schools)

The home liaison worker in the Hampshire secondary told us that some of the issues relating to website updates were often organisational. Different members of staff were responsible for different aspects of a website and there may be a lack of communication among these staff. As she explained:

> "The admin member of staff will ask for information for that website and will ask for updated details and the calendar should be automatically updated on the website and the same for the school publications. But, that calendar is done by somebody else and it's reliant on that calendar being updated by all members of staff all the time and so that information goes out onto the website. And so yes, they will ask for information to be updated, but they are reliant on other people giving it to them...It is an organisational nightmare you know. Dates get changed, things get changed and it's bringing that information always and updating it and following it through." (Home liaison worker, Hampshire secondary school)

Using local authority websites

Local authority websites were consulted even less than school websites. However, a few parents said that they regularly consulted these. In such cases it was because either the school did not have its own website, or the information on the local authority site was considered to be more accurate and up-to-date.

> "Yeah I always look at the County Council website as well, you know just to have a look at things. And I just like to know about pupil numbers and budget shares and things because I'm a bit sad and so I just have a look at that kind of stuff." (White British mother of children in primary and secondary schools, some of whom have SEN)

> "You can also go into like the school websites from there [the Council website], which is useful. Because sometimes for the life of me I can't remember all the websites [of the different schools] and if you don't put them into your favourites….so instead it's easy enough to go there [the local authority website]." (White British father of children in primary and secondary schools)

That these two comments come from parents in the same local authority is highly suggestive of differences between local authorities.

Good practice with websites

Divide the site into a clear front end and back end. Have an area for prospective families and an area for current families. The area for existing families could be linked to or contained in the learning platform.

Responsibility for the website could be divided between someone with knowledge of home-school liaison (who would oversee the back end) and someone with knowledge of marketing (who would oversee the front end).

Information for existing parents should be regularly updated. Parents should be notified of updates.

Online reporting and learning platforms

Summary

Online reporting and learning platforms have the potential to offer thick communication to parents.

On the whole, parents welcomed their introduction. However, parents' experiences were found to be fairly limited and there was evidence that such platforms were not used to their full potential.

Issues include:

- getting teachers 'sold' on the benefits of moving over to learning platforms
- ensuring secure access and data protection
- providing access to families who do not have an internet connection at home.

Background

The expectations for online reporting were described in a ministerial letter to schools.[ii] These expectations refer to parents having secure online access to information about factors such as attainment, attendance and behaviour.

We would argue that online reporting and learning platforms have the potential to offer thick communication to parents, by:

- providing information about their children's learning
- communicating in a two-way fashion via the learning platform
- enabling parents to email teachers (specifically about their children), which allows for greater parental agency
- offering both simple and complex information, depending on the context.

It is even possible, in theory, for communication using online reporting and learning platforms to be synchronous, if required. However, at the time this research was conducted, parents' experiences of online reporting and learning platforms were found to be fairly limited.

While the schools in this study were collecting a range of data electronically on their pupils, none of this information was presently directly accessible online for parents

[ii] Exploiting ICT to improve parental engagement, including online reporting – July 2008.

through individual logons. School staff were aware of the expectations for online reporting by 2010 and 2012 and the majority were working towards implementation by these dates. In all five case study areas, this was being co-ordinated by the local authority, in consultation with schools, or by individual schools with their existing suppliers of management information systems and learning platforms.

Parents' experiences of online reporting

Some parents discussed how schools had notified them of their strategy towards online reporting – through letters or parent forums. Although online reporting was not commonly available, it was generally welcomed by parents as a feature of the development of communications with schools.[24] Parents welcomed the ability to have more regular information, which they could view at their own convenience, rather than having to wait for parent consultations.

Only one of the parents in our sample had some experience of online reporting that involved logging on to a website that gave access to information held in the schools management information system. This parent had access to her daughter's timetable, authorised absences, unauthorised absences and predicted grades. At first she said she found it a bit 'Big Brother-ish'[25] and did not like the idea of being able to access information on her teenage daughter without her daughter knowing. However, she said that she soon got used to it. Another mother of Key Stages 2 and 3 children expressed concern that such surveillance would put pressure on her children to behave and work hard, something of a 'double edged sword', in her opinion.

Using learning platforms

More parents were aware of the concept of learning platforms than they were of online reporting. Greater numbers of parents had experiences of learning platforms, but, these were limited to email (such as centrally managed email services) and most of these were parents of secondary school aged children.

One parent told us of the difficulties she encountered when using the learning platform:

> "I had to just find my way around it. ... I was constantly selecting the wrong thing and going somewhere I didn't want to be and having to come back and start again. And so it wasn't really greatly signposted. Now I know how to do it, it's easy but the initial thing there was no introduction to it." (White British mother of children in secondary school)

[24] See also DCSF 2009b
[25] See also DCSF 2009b

Other parents felt that schools could do more to raise awareness of learning platforms and support parents in using these. One school had a 'parental responsibility group' to encourage parents to use the learning platform.

Barriers to using learning platforms: schools

Several barriers were identified by the schools and local authorities in implementing learning platforms and online reporting. The main concerns were:

- teachers' scepticism of the potential of learning platforms and training provision
- managing safety, security and data protection

A further concern, providing hardware internet access for families that do not have provision at home will be discussed later in this document.

Teachers' scepticism

Convincing school staff that a learning platform could be beneficial, over and above what provision they already had, was an issue. One local authority representative pointed out that often teachers did not realise the learning platform's potential until they used it. Scepticism was visible in the interviews with primary schools, largely due to the time and effort required to install learning platforms. While many of the school staff interviewed welcomed the learning platforms and were fully committed to their implementation, few were able to specifically identify the advantages of learning platforms over methods they already used.

One primary school headteacher expressed his views on the proposed learning platform following the local authority training session:

> "There were lots of positive things about it, but at the moment I couldn't see whether investing time would be worth it. We have to create our own content. The amount of time we'd have to invest, would it be worth it basically? Can you do the same thing in a far more efficient way...and at this moment in time, 'yes' is the answer to that." (Primary school headteacher, Leicester)

Another teacher said that they remained sceptical:

> "I don't have any issues with [technology]. We are in an electronic age [and] I suppose at a simplistic level it's going to enable children to e-mail homework. We could actually do that now if we gave them all e-mail addresses. I just wonder how much of it we're not already doing through the website and so I'm yet to be convinced." (Primary school teacher, Hampshire)

Similarly one father was disappointed by the schools' use of the learning platform. He said:

> "Its just worksheets' that teachers upload." He was expecting it to be more interactive. (White British father of child in secondary school)

One local authority was in the process of setting up an authority-wide user forum for learning platforms so that schools could share ideas, knowledge and teaching resources, thereby pushing the development of the technology along.

Managing safety, security and data protection

Ensuring data protection and secure access to systems was also raised as a huge issue by local authorities in the study (Hampshire & Leicester) and some parents.[26]

> "Eventually, local authorities would like to allocate every user - pupils, teachers and parents - with a unique identifier via an Identity Management System enabling 'individual[s] to access whatever system they are authorised with that one single identity." (Local authority representative)

However, even once this level of security and access is achieved, the local authority recognised that there will be further difficulties in managing data protection in relation to parents. This is particularly the case in light of the complicated family structures that exist for example, in relation to step-parents and court orders.

Confidentiality of information, once online reporting is established, is one of the main concerns raised by schools in our research. One headteacher outlined the issue:

> "For example, on our behaviour management tool we would report an incident about a fight or a disturbance. We would put the children's names down. I can give you access to your son's information, but not about somebody else's son who was the other person in the fight. That's the problem and so we've got to be very careful about that so there is information on it that we can't allow to be passed into the public domain really." (Secondary school teacher, Hampshire)

[26] See also DCSF 2009b

Good practice using learning platforms and online reporting

Link the learning platform to the front end of the school website that is seen by the public. Make the back end more interactive by using email, instant messaging or blogs to communicate with parents.

Set up a user forum on the learning platform to share ideas, knowledge and teaching resources between different schools and staff. Give specific attention to parental engagement.

Hold demonstrations on using the learning platform for staff, pupils and parents.

Other modes of communication using technologies

A small number of parents had experience of using online blogs to communicate with schools and other parents. This was seen as an especially good medium in which to exercise parental voice and potentially to discuss curriculum, pedagogy and learning with other parents and teachers.

Another parent mentioned the use of wireless voting pads as part of a parents' forum. This technology was seen as being particularly interactive. It also enhanced face-to-face interaction and provided a feedback mechanism within such forums. However, these modes were not common.

Face-to-face communication

Summary

This is an archetypal medium for thick communication. However, it can be demanding and time consuming (for schools and parents). There are greater opportunities for face-to-face communication with parents in schools that have a home school liaison person or an 'open door' policy.

Most parents in the study welcomed group information sessions, forums, workshops and classes. However, not many parents had attended these events.

The demanding nature of face-to-face communication

Although this chapter focuses on technologically mediated forms of communication, it is worth giving attention to face-to-face forms of communication as they remained

important for a majority of parents as part of their ongoing relations with schools. It was perceived by many as the epitome of a thick medium for communication and highly valued. However, parents also recognised that it was also the most demanding and time-consuming forms of communication, and thus for many, it was not practical or feasible on a regular basis.

One-to-one communication

In line with other research on parental engagement,[27] we found that overall, parents with children in primary or special schools, were more likely to cite face-to-face communication as part of their routine practices. Face-to-face communication in secondary schools was often less direct and mediated by specialist home/school liaison personnel. This contrasted with primary and special schools, where parents generally reported having direct communication with class or senior teachers.

> "It's easier when you've got one teacher doing the whole thing rather than having ten different teachers or so that you have to approach." (White British mother of children in secondary school)

Where the school had an 'open door' policy and/or a home school liaison person, schools reported that experiences of engaging with parents were more positive.[28] Two primary schools specifically stated that they operated an 'open door' policy which, according to the home-school link worker at one of the schools, had a positive effect on how the school communicated with parents:

> "We've got an open door policy. Parents are coming through the door because I speak the common language [...] more parents are actually able to come into school and talk to us about their children's issues and concerns and everything like that." (Luton primary school, home/school liaison)

In referring to the 'common language' this teacher felt that she was particularly approachable and parents found it easy to get on with her.

Group sessions

In addition to face-to-face communication between teacher and parent, many schools were found to be running awareness-raising sessions and learning workshops to try and engage parents further in their children's education and learning. These can be understood as types of thick communication. They are two-way and synchronous, which can be universal and personalised, as well as complex. Consequently, parents reported positive experiences of such exchanges, although the uptake appeared to be low.

[27] Owen et al 2008
[28] See Page 2009

In policy aims, these types of extended school activities can have a dual function of community cohesion. They combat social exclusion by drawing parents in who might be less engaged with the school. They also provide adult education and family learning opportunities.[29] Schools said that the primary function of such sessions, in their eyes, was often to make contact with parents in the first instance. The idea behind this is to lay the foundations of a relationship between home and school.

The types of face-to-face opportunities offered by schools

The main types of events offered by schools included information evenings and drop-in sessions during the day. They also offered workshops and formal classes, both during and after school. Five of the schools interviewed (three primary, one secondary and one special school) organised family learning programmes. The special school offered a structured ICT family learning course for parents that ran for one term and was delivered by the ICT teacher. Eight to ten parents attended the course. Many of the schools (at least five of the eight) offered parents courses and information evenings in ICT. Often, but not always, such courses were aimed specifically at supporting those without the necessary skills in technology required to support their children's learning.

Secondary school courses were more structured around specific computer packages or how a child should use a laptop. One secondary school, specialising in business and enterprise, offered a five-week introductory course in spreadsheets and word processing as well as a follow-on course in using presentation software.

One primary school reported some increase in the level of parent and pupil interaction as well as learning, during a 'technology outcome' session. Parents were invited into school to see the results of a particularly interesting project the pupils had been working on during the term. The event involved the children giving a multimedia presentation about Greek myths. The teacher observed:

> "...we had 30 or 40 parents in the ICT suite looking at children's [presentations]....some of them didn't know how to use the software and then other parents were going 'ooh do you know you can also do this?' So there was this lovely thing of some of them taking the children forward a couple of steps and some of the children taking their parents forward a couple of steps..." (Hampshire Junior School)

[29] See Grant 2009, p2

Parents who had attended courses had found them useful and informative.

> "I've been to like a few of them and they've really helped me, like you learn a bit more what's going on. Those courses are ideal." (Asian father of children in primary and secondary school)

From interviews with schools there appeared to be much on offer and parents reported being aware of such opportunities, which they often welcomed. However, the majority of parents interviewed had not participated in such opportunities. They cited a number of reasons. These included lack of time, unsuitable timetabling, classes being cancelled and not rescheduled and unsuitable expectations of parents' abilities or needs. One parent had declined to attend an ICT course because she felt it was 'too basic.'

Good practice using face-to-face communication

Allow the opportunity for parents to initiate face-to-face meetings, for example via open door policies.

Build in as much flexibility as possible for face-to-face meetings and group sessions. For example, run a rolling programme of these sessions, rather than one-off events.

Ask parents what information they need from the school and make sure sessions provide this.

The medium and the message

This section has highlighted how the medium used to communicate the message is important and has a bearing on the success of that communication. However, more importantly, the medium used can impact on parents' sense of involvement in their children's learning. According to parents, emails and text messaging were used predominantly as one-way communication, which is suitable for generic, timely information such as newsletters or a school closure notice.

However, parents felt this approach to be less appropriate for specific communication about their individual child. They felt this particularly strongly when there was no facility for parents to respond, or when responses were not followed up by the school. A two-way telephone conversation might be more appropriate and lead to less confusion or frustration.

Classes or workshops inviting parents into the school seem to be the most appropriate medium for engaging in complex, individualised dialogue. This also has real potential for parental agency, if set up in a collaborative way, such as having a

knowledge-exchange, rather than the school simply imparting of information to parents.[30] However, this type of communication is the most demanding and time-consuming for parents and hence can result in a poor turnout. Such sessions might best be supplemented with an online forum, online resources or booklets for those who are unable to attend.

Issues affecting parental engagement

In this section, we discuss some of the barriers parents faced in engaging with schools and consequently, their children's learning. Of course, while we have separated them analytically, in reality they are all interlinked.

- Language
- Material resources
- Social and cultural resources.

This parallels the earlier discussion in the introduction regarding more general barriers parents might face in engaging with schools. Also, please note that some parents may not see the way schools use technology as a barrier, as they are already engaged in some way.

We provide vignettes based on archetypes of parents to illuminate the research findings.

Language

Much policy and research literature relating to parental engagement highlights English as an Additional Language (EAL) as a barrier to parental engagement.[31] However, this is not necessarily the case. We found among our sample of EAL parents, a diversity of ethnicity and countries of origin, as well as of social class. For example, we had high earning and highly educated EAL parents, who were proficient in English and had spent most of their lives in England. We also found parents who had only recently arrived in the country, spoke little English and lived in low-income households. Among the more educated EAL parents, language did not feature in their discussions as a barrier in communicating with schools. On the other hand, for those with a poorer grasp of English, language was a barrier. This reflected wider difficulties in their engagement with schools. One Arabic speaker told us:

> "The language is different and everything is different." (Arab mother with children in primary school)

[30] See Hughes and Pollard 2006
[31] Thomson et al 2004; Moon and Ivins 2004

Most EAL parents were enthusiastic about technologically mediated communications and wanted to learn more, particularly about email. For this group, email was useful due to its asynchronous nature, which gave them time to read and translate the information at their own pace. However, several parents were unsure or unaware if their children's schools offered such facilities and support. Parents with poor English language skills were also more likely to have their communications mediated by interpreters or school reception staff. One Asian parent told us:

> "I find it easier talking to family workers in school. I think they're softer and I find them very easy to talk to." (Asian, mother with children in primary school)

Others relied more on family members to write or speak on their behalf. Overall, the communication practices of these parents tended to reactive, rather than proactive. This is partly because of the language difficulties and other disadvantages that they experienced, such as low educational qualifications and a lack of experience of the English educational system.

Case study

Sami is a 36-year-old, Persian speaking, Iranian who has lived in Brighton for four years with his wife. They have a seven-year-old son.

They have a computer and internet access at home and their son uses the internet everyday. He likes to play the brain training games on Cbeebies.[32] Sami and his wife do not speak English very well themselves. They like to use the internet to help improve their English language skills, using online dictionaries and language learning clips on YouTube. Their son often helps them.

They don't have much contact with the school and often forget when school holidays are. They never seems to get the 'pupil post' that their son is supposed to bring home. Sami prefers face-to-face communication with the school, as on the telephone he cannot always understand everything that is being said. If they cannot meet the teacher, he sometimes has to ask his brother-in-law if he can phone the teacher and discuss the issues.

He is frustrated that they only get results about their son's progress once a year and it arrives after the summer holidays. He feels that if they had found out before the holidays, they would have had more opportunity to help him with his learning over the summer. What he would like is more regular reports about his son's progress. He feels that mobile phone communication would be useful as sometimes he has very little time to check his emails.

[32] This is a children's programme produced by the BBC. www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/

Material resources

The digital divide, between those who have access to technology and those who do not, is well recognised as a barrier to home-school communication. It is a topic of much research and debate[33] and is at the heart of Becta's Home Access initiative.[iii]

In this research parents from low-income households unsurprisingly reported concerns about the prohibitive costs of computers and the further expenditure required for online connectivity. One parent said:

> "Even if you get a laptop and everything you have still got to then...you've got to subscribe to Virgin or Sky or something like that or buy one of these sticks [wireless dongles] that cost absolutely a fortune... And so yeah, it is not just about the computers it's about having the internet as well because sometimes people can have a computer without the internet or the internet can be cut off and then they've just got the computer." (White British mother of children in primary and secondary schools)

This lack of access hindered parents' ability to freely email schools and regularly check the school website. This is clearly a concern with the Government's policy drive for schools to implement online reporting starting in 2010.

It is noteworthy that mobile technologies were considered an affordable option by the vast majority of parents.

> "Whether you've got internet or not, I'm sure everyone has got £10 to top up the mobile." (Asian mother of children in secondary school)

[33] See, for example, Grant 2007; Selwyn and Facer 2007; Schofiel et al 2005; Valentine et al 2005

[iii] Becta's Home Access initiative is helping to ensure that all pupils in state maintained education in England have the opportunity to have access to computers and internet connectivity for education at home. www.becta.org.uk/homeaccess

Case study

Eileen is a 43-year-old, White British mother of four children in primary and secondary schools in Leicester city, whom she looks after full-time. She is divorced.

They do not have a computer at home. Eileen says she just cannot afford the monthly internet connection charges and she is also wary of her children using the internet anyway, as she doesn't know how to protect them.

However, her eldest child is beginning to need to use a computer for his homework. His school now has a learning platform, where they can complete exercises, download resources. They must use the learning platform to submit their homework.

Eileen is frustrated that her son has to use a computer, as when he gets home from school, she has to send him to the local library to do his homework and he rarely wants to go. The library is far away. There is rarely a computer free and he has to wait. He also finds that the allocated time for using the computer at the library is rarely enough. Sometimes, he manages to do his homework at school in the lunch period, but he always rushes it then. Otherwise he doesn't get a break all day.

She heard that the school also has online reporting where she could view her son's grades, behaviour and attendance every month. However, not having a computer, she has never looked at this. She waits for the end-of-year report.

Currently, school staff interviewed claimed that there was no obligation for pupils to use computers and the internet for their homework.

> "The access is given to them to do that if they wish...but it's not enforced." (Secondary school teacher, Leicester)

> "That would just create a divide between people that could do it and people that couldn't do it." (Primary school teacher, Leicester)

School and local authority staff interviewed were clearly aware of the equality issues. However, one school involved in the research (Hampshire Primary School) confirmed that once it is fully up and running, pupils will be expected to use the learning platform for homework. Some parents of secondary school children, whose school had introduced a learning platform, reported that schools were insisting that pupils carried out and submitted homework online.

One parent said:

> "We didn't have a computer in the home let alone Internet or anything and he was threatened with detention for not going on the school learning site and not getting enough hours on this learning thing." (White British mother of children in secondary school)

Several schools involved in this research offered alternative options for pupils who did not have access to technology at home. This mainly took the form of ICT homework clubs. Some of the local authorities were running Home Access sessions to help parents learn how to use the technology. One school (Luton Primary) runs workshops in the evenings and at lunchtimes and another school (Leicester Secondary) offers sessions every Monday to Thursday after school. However, as we discuss in the next chapter, this access is still restricted and thus has potential equality issues.

One local authority (Leicester) pointed out that the Home Access initiative is unsustainable due to a lack of continued revenue funding and therefore the reliance on parents to pay for internet connection in the long term. Currently funding only covers the hardware and not the administration, communication and parental training that is also required for pupils to use the technology appropriately and effectively.

These parents without connectivity tended to use more face-to-face communication or simply had less contact with the school, particularly at the secondary level. When we asked: 'When does the school contact you?' common responses were:

> "You get a school report every year but they don't really communicate with you apart from that.... Only when the child is poorly." (White British mother of children in primary and secondary schools)

> "When they're off school [they contact you].... 'oh why are they off school?'.... If there is fighting at school, they are definitely on the phone. Things like that." (White British mother of children in primary and secondary schools)

These experiences suggest fairly one-directional communication with little option for parents' agency, let alone engagement about their children's learning.

Social and cultural resources

Material and financial resources are just one facet of (dis)advantage. Research suggests that middle class parents are able to draw on a wider array of cultural and social resources or 'capital' – particularly knowledge of the education system. They also tend to have educational credentials, time to invest and social connections,

which set their children at an advantage educationally.[34] Several parents in this research recognised that their communication practices were underpinned by particular social and cultural resources that were not equally distributed among parents.[35]

In this research, we found:

- working parents with little time to 'get involved'
- parents who felt 'labelled' and undervalued by the school because of their social circumstances
- parents who were cynical that their particular views and concerns would be heard
- parents who lacked confidence with technology who avoided this kind of communication.

All these factors hindered parents' ability to engage with the school.

Parents who did not have to work were able to spend more time investing in the school and building connections with teachers. They also could generate the resources to support their children's learning. This parent recognised her advantage:

> "I mean I do a bit of voluntary work at the school, which you know I make a lot of effort to be involved and I'm not working. I think if you're a working parent you just drop off or- not even drop off -and pick up you could have very little involvement." (White British mother, of children in Primary School)

Schools stated that they believed that, on the whole, their parents feel valued and are comfortable discussing their children's progress with members of staff. However, this is contradictory to the views of some of the parents in the focus groups. School staff stated that they try to offer parents the opportunity to contribute to a dialogue regarding their children's progress and achievement. Many make information about the learning and wellbeing of pupils readily available to parents. Schools were aware that parents played an essential role in supporting the school and stressed that this should be reciprocal.

[34] See, for example, Reay 1998.
[35] These terms refer to the work of Pierre Bourdieu and are widely used in educational research. Economic capital refers to money and other financial resources. Cultural capital refers to knowledge as a resource, often in relation to the educational system. Social capital refers to the resources that people are able to draw on as a result of their social connections. See Grant 2007 in the reference list.

Schools said they needed to support parents for the pupils to gain the maximum benefit.

> "I suppose it's to support us as much as we'd like to support them. I mean support us in educating the children but also that works both ways in that we support them at home in continuing that work if you like after they've left school so that they carry it on when they're at home." (Special school)

However, parents did not always feel that schools engaged particularly well with them. Some parents felt 'labelled' by teachers because of their personal circumstances, whether it was because they were unemployed, struggling with the English language skills, or because they had a child with special needs. This affected their level of school engagement. Parents felt that teachers were too busy and unable to talk to every parent. One parent simply wanted some basic communication:

> "I would like a one-to-one conservation with the teacher, more than anything." (Single mother of children in primary and secondary schools)

Some parents did not feel listened to or consulted by the school. For example, when asked if she felt that the school listened, one parent replied:

> "No, they're set in their ways they haven't got time to sit and listen to what your points of view are. They've got their set schedule and they will do it how they want to do it and not how you're expecting them to do it." (White British mother of children in primary and secondary School)

As one local authority representative pointed out, if the relationship between schools and parents is not there already, no amount of technology is going to engage parents.

Case study

Marie is a 45-year-old single mother with a daughter in secondary school.

Marie works fulltime and has her own laptop. However, she is not confident using computers and doesn't let her daughter use it in case she breaks it. She cannot risk this, as she wouldn't know how to fix it and needs the computer for work. She says she recognises that she is 'holding her daughter back' because she cannot use the computer at home, and she, as her mother, is unable to help her daughter with technology-related learning.

Marie doesn't have much contact with her daughter's school. She doesn't have time. She goes to parents' evenings and receives her daughter's annual report by post. Other than that, she says she only hears from the school if her daughter is ill, or there has been a fight or something. She finds the staff in the school office hostile and gets a feeling that they 'look down on her', so she avoids communicating with them. She believes that teachers are busy people and they cannot spend all their time speaking to parents. Besides, she would prefer it if teachers concentrated on teaching.

It was apparent that irrespective of background, parents' unfamiliarity with new technology was often a barrier in their use of technologies for communication and in relation to learning in the family. One middle-class parent with children in both the state and independent sector said this in relation to learning platform use:

> "I mean for me I don't know how clunky it is or whatever, but what would be…to cut down this resistance to use, would be the school has our email address, is a push email that basically says this is your user name, password, this is how you get in, a couple of sheets about it and then you're in .... And right now I feel a little bit like Winnie the Pooh on a great day out I don't know where the bloody hell I'm going." (White British father of children in secondary school)

For those with poorer computer skills and less confidence, this apprehension could lead to avoidance:

> "I try to avoid it [technologically mediated communication] as much as I can ... Like at school I'd rather go and talk to them face to face than e-mails." (Asian mother of children in primary school some of whom have SEN)

This apprehension about using technology is something we will discuss in further detail in the next chapter, in relation to learning in the family. A few of these parents preferred face-to-face communication, often mediated by specialist school personnel such as home/school liaison workers. This suggests that schools need to be aware that excessive focus on online modes of communication may alienate some parents.

The one non-resident parent in our sample who did not live in the home, raised issues in relation to the way schools tends to focus communication on households rather than individual parents. This is an important point which deserves further exploration given the increasingly complex family formations in which children live.[36]

Conclusion

The first section of this chapter used the concepts of thick and thin communication to highlight the way in which different communication mediums used by schools in can constrain and enable meaningful interaction with parents.

The chapter also documented parents' experiences of schools' use of mediated communication. It found that there are tensions between schools' practices and preferred means of communication (for one-way, centralised systems) and parents' desire for more flexible, mobile, two-way, richer forms of communication. Also, it highlighted that there are constraining organisational issues. For example, the personnel responsible for managing the email systems are rarely the ones who send the messages or deal with parental liaison. This hinders schools' capacity to be more responsive to parental communication or to use technology as effectively as they might.

As the second section of the chapter discusses, there are still barriers faced by certain groups of parents namely language, material and social and cultural barriers. These need to be taken into consideration when choosing the medium(s) schools use to communicate with parents.

We argue that the purpose of the communication is a key factor for consideration. Also, recognising the potential for reciprocity and valuing parents' knowledge is vital.[37]

[36] Lewis 2001; Barret 2004
[37] See Hughes 2006

What parents need to engage with schools

Parents need:

- more positive, two-way communication
- opportunities for multi-directional communication, where appropriate (contact with other parents)
- an appropriate medium for the message
  - for example, an email conversation discussing their children's behaviour, followed up by a face-to-face meeting or a regular text message service to congratulate parents if their children made good progress, with details of a contact person if the parents wish to follow this up.
- a suite of options for communication, not just one.[38] This might include a choice of receiving communication by post or email, or both.
- better communication with secondary schools and a dedicated parent liaison person[39]
- more coordinated online and communication systems that embed an understanding of where parents fit in
- to feature in regular communication even if they are a non-resident parent, step-parent or second parent.
- technological resources (including connectivity) provided at home for those who don't have access, when the school expect pupils to do their learning online

Schools need to:

- provide information and training about learning platforms and online reporting
- keep school websites updated
- ensure school websites have a clear area for prospective parents and an interactive and regularly-updated area for current parents and pupils
- offer online learning as option, rather than an obligation[40]
- send regular updates about children's grades throughout the year, not just at one or two key points
- provide a rolling programme of group events for information raising and learning, particularly involving new technologies and systems the school is

[38] See Page 2009
[39] See Page 2009
[40] See DCSF 2009b

using.

In the next section, we explore parents' discussion on their children's use of technology in the home and the opportunities for learning in the family.

Learning in families with technology

> "My daughter has got a DS... My husband plays video games...so does my 4-year-old... I use Facebook myself. Both my daughters and my son search the internet and they do their homework. My son loves playing games on the computer. They've got educational software... And my son is always making videos on my phone and taking photos with the camera. And they've got a Wii. I download music." (White British mother of children in primary and secondary school)

In this research, it was clear from parents' discussions that technology had a ubiquitous and large presence in the home. The above quote illustrates this. Parents were able to talk at length about a range of technologies that their children use. The chapter focuses on two key, interrelated issues:

- the educational value parents attached to different technologies
- the role they, as parents, play in relation to their children's use of technology in the home.

These two issues impact on the learning that parents see as possible using these technologies and consequently, the part that parents play in this.

The first section of this chapter explores the educational value parents attribute to the different technologies their children use. We introduce Davies and Furlong's framework of different typologies of learning as a way of understanding parents' perceptions of technologies and their educational value.[41] This framework provides three typologies of technology-mediated learning: high-status, scholastic learning; quasi-formal learning; and informal or incidental learning. We discuss how parents viewed technologies used by their children in relation to these typologies. In the next section of the chapter we explore how parents viewed their role in relation to their children's use of technology and outline the factors which inform these roles. These factors include:

- parental concerns about the 'harmful' aspects of technology
- parents' pedagogical know-how and technological competency
- a concern with enabling independent learning
- differences between 'access' and 'use of technology particularly the internet.

These factors can influence parents to take up restricting roles in relation to their children's technology use. This ultimately creates a distance between parents and their children's learning.

[41] Davies and Furlong 2009

Technology in the home: parents' perceptions of the educational value of different technologies

Summary

In relation to technology use in the home parents created a hierarchy between:

- high status scholastic learning (mainly using the computer and internet for homework)
- quasi-formal learning (some educational websites and software, personal internet research as 'hobby')
- informal or incidental learning (computer games).

This hierarchy affected the value they saw in the different technologies their children used and in many cases, led parents to ration their children's use of the technologies that were seen as having a 'lower' learning status.

What parents said

> "I would say a part of it [is learning] but I also think a lot of it is a waste of time." (Asian mother of children in primary and secondary school)

There was variation in the educational value that parents attributed to different types of technology that were used in the home. However, this process was not straightforward. Parents did not simply distinguish between technologies for play (for the purposes of entertainment or fun) versus technologies for learning (as related to the acquisition of 'useful' knowledge or skills). Rather, they shifted back and forth between them in complex and contradictory ways.

According to Davies and Furlong[42], learning can be understood to involve practices in which individuals are 'adding to and adapting [their] existing repertoire of knowledge and skills'. They argue that judgements are made about the 'worth of different kinds of learning'. Thus different types and forms of learning – concerned with what knowledge we learn, how we learn and in what space – are attributed with different value or status as 'desirable', ''useful', or conversely, 'wasteful' or 'idle knowledge'.

[42] Davies and Furlong 2009

They come up with three typologies of learning, which are associated with technology use. These are:

- high-status scholastic learning through technology. This is related to the formalised, prescribed and assessed curriculum of 'high status' knowledge. This includes, for example, using the internet for school homework.
- quasi-formal learning around areas of personal interest, supported by background use of technology tools, especially the internet
- informal or incidental learning relating to personal interest, identity, social interaction, which occurs in the context of technology-enabled activity. This includes, for example, gaming or social networking.

This framework of the different typologies of technologically-assisted learning provides a useful way to understand how the parents in this study viewed and responded to their children's use of technologies in the home. Using this framework, we first examine how parents understand the different types of technology that their children are using in the home and the educational value they see these as having.

High-status learning

Many parents talked about the role that technology plays in their children's schoolwork. Here, learning was framed as responding to or contributing to school prescribed learning. This includes revision, researching topics for coursework, word processing homework assignments and submitting work online.

Commonly, parents discussed how their children searched the internet for information. This echoes findings from other research on children's ICT use, which discovered that search engines are commonly used in the home.[43] Parents said:

> "I left him at home tonight doing a school project on ecological disasters. He just uses Google and then goes on through that avenue." (White British mother of children in primary and secondary school)

> "She searches the internet when she is doing something for homework...She was doing something about landmarks in Brighton and so we looked up the Chattri and we look up the pavilion." (White British father of child in primary school)

Despite talking about the role that technology played in their children's school work, parents' discussion of technology was predominantly oriented around its place in other activities that are not directly related to formal, high-status, scholastic learning.

[43] Grant 2009; Davies 2008

We cannot assume from this that children therefore spent more time using technology for non-school related activities, although previous research indicates that this may be the case. For example, research conducted by Hart and colleagues found that children in their study tended to say they used technology mainly for non-school activities – such as socialising, play and their own research.[44] Our concern here, however, is not what children are actually doing, but how parents perceive their children's use of technology and its relationship to learning.

The next two sections focus on quasi-formal learning supported by technology and informal or incidental learning occurring through technologically-enabled play. Here, the educational value and learning capacity of technologies was more ambiguous than that in technology use for schoolwork. We draw out these tensions and ambivalences in parents' perception of the value of these types of technology use. We also highlight some of the factors that inform how different judgements of value are made.

Quasi-formal learning

Other research shows that technology plays an important role in supporting children's informal, independent or self-directed learning. This refers to learning that takes place outside formal scholastic learning processes and settings and which is based around a child's personal interests.[45] However, Sefton-Green notes that for most of us, 'discussion about learning is inextricably related to formal education systems...[and] in our society we often don't tend to value learning until it can be categorised with reference to the frameworks of academic disciplines we recognise as 'knowledge'.''[46] Thus, learning experiences that do not replicate the intentions, structures, settings, and conventions of scholastic learning are often 'overlooked or unacknowledged by research, policy and practices.'[47]

In this research, we found that parents often talked about non-school related use of technologies primarily as 'leisure activities'. They used terms such as 'play', 'fun' or 'down time' and as being separate to scholastic learning. Parents often viewed technology use as a reward that children could enjoy after they had done their homework. It was therefore something that had to be rationed. We discuss this in greater detail later in this chapter.

> "He is not allowed to go on any of his computer games or anything until he has done his homework because he would go on his Playstation 3 and be on there all evening." (White British mother of children in primary and secondary School)

[44] Hart et al 2008
[45] Grant 2009; Davies et al 2008; Sefton-Green 2004
[46] Sefton-Green 2004, p6
[47] Sefton-Green 2004, p2

> "It's golden time, when you've been good and you get to go on the [computer]." (White British mother of children in primary and secondary school)

There was evidence though, that parents were able to recognise some types of this non-school related technology-use as having educational value. This most commonly occurred when parents discussed their children's use of educational software or websites such as Cbeebies, where parents felt they could 'sneak learning in' through dressing it up as a fun or playful activity. One parent said:

> "Sometimes you can use it for like an extra learning tool....when it comes to learning it's unlimited... she has to go on the BBC website for schools. And so she's doing extra maths which she think is really good... you can sneak it in as extra learning!" (Mixed race mother of children in primary school)

These types of educational software or websites were often recommended to parents by schools. For example, staff at one primary school (Luton Junior) claimed that they made lists available to parents of what software or websites they would recommend and claimed that parents were keen to receive this.

A number of parents also discussed how their children used technologies for hobbies – or 'self-motivated information-gathering'.[48] This is where children were seen to develop their knowledge of a subject they were passionate about.

> "Research...Google is forever being used. Lots of maps and stuff like that and so he likes to use Google Earth and [has] a look at our house and his Nan's and his friend's houses and anybody else's he can find!" (White British father of children in primary and secondary school)

> "Even things like Robin Hood and Primeval you can bring out the historical aspects or the evolutionary aspects. And we think those sorts of programmes are actually fantastic because, although it's entertainment, you can bring so much more out of it" (White British mother of children with special educational needs)

One EAL parent discussed the benefits of YouTube as an additional learning tool, in this case for developing language skills:

> "Sometimes the YouTube puts up some courses ...that I can do with my daughter, some courses about alphabets Arabic and sometimes alphabet English." (Arab mother of child in primary school)

In these cases, parents were most able to see educational value in types of technology use where children were believed to be developing their knowledge of a

[48] Davies 2008

subject or particular skills, albeit in contexts separate from their formal learning. As such, it can be suggested that parents were most able to attribute non-school related technology-use with value or status when it was seen to replicate or contribute to the high-status learning that is done in school. While parents could identify some incidental learning that can take place through technology-mediated activities for play (such as using hand-held computer games or social network sites), parents were most ambivalent about these forms of technology. Many were reluctant to identify any educational value within these forms of technology at all. This suggests that the hierarchies of high and low status learning were largely present in parents' understandings of the educational value of different types of technology.

Informal or incidental learning through technologically-enabled play

As we explain in the next part of this chapter, many parents talked about rationing their children's use of computer games. This arose in response to particular concerns around the damaging effects of their excessive or unregulated use. This meant that such forms of technology were not immediately identifiable as having educational value. For example, one parent suggested that most learning children gained from using technology was 'idle knowledge'. Another parent shared his amusement at the idea that computer games could aid any 'useful' learning:

> "I like the fact that you've got the DS and the Wii on [the focus group handout] (laughter). My kids would love to know that you class that as educational." (White British father of children in primary school)

Despite these sentiments, some parents saw some benefits of computer games as developing general or other soft skills, rather than being 'just fun'. These soft skills include problem-solving and risk-taking, as well as hand-eye coordination.

> "There is a lot more to gaming than just the fun element...There is a lot of learning on it. It might not directly improve your literacy and numeracy but there are other skills." (Asian single mother of child in secondary school)

> "I'm completely supportive of him playing most computer games. Although it might not be educational he's learning hand eye coordination he is learning other sort of physical skills that he's not going to pick up in your know your standard education as such." (White British mother of child in primary school)

One parent was a teaching assistant in a local secondary school, and was using the Nintendo DS in class. Indeed, Nintendo DS Brain Training was positively discussed by parents as a way that children can learn soft or life skills (such as managing finances).

> "I think these DSs are not always such a bad thing because a lot of the games that they have are actually- she can actually learn from them because a lot of

> the games she's like making her own zoos and stuff. She's actually got to learn strategies and she does a lot of planning. She's got to buy her own stuff so she's got to learn." (White British mother of child in secondary school)

The most ambivalence arose around social networking sites and applications such as Myspace, Facebook and MSN messenger. No parents explicitly identified the learning that may take place using these. Rather, these were seen as solely a leisure time activity and thus something which had to be rationed. We discuss parents' responses to these issues further in the next section.

We suggest that parents' ambivalence around the educational value of technologies means that they are primarily concerned with rationing and managing their children's use, rather than participating in the (potential) learning that is occurring.

The role of parents in their children's technology use

Summary

There was some evidence of parents learning with their children using technology, and we illustrate this with example vignettes.

However, the research also found substantial barriers. These are:

- parents' concerns about the damage and risks of technology use
- the fear of 'doing something wrong' in terms of helping their children with their formal learning
- lack of competency with technology among parents
- a perceived conflict with independent learning
- differences between having access to the technology and using it.

All of these factors hindered parents taking an active role in learning with their children.

Parents' participation in learning

Despite evidence that there is a great deal of technology being used in the home, and some evidence that parents can identify educational value in these, there was little evidence of parents regularly participating in their children's use of technology. Examples given by parents of occasions where they participated with their children included:

- a father making short film and animations with his autistic son

- a mother with EAL watching television together with her daughter to learn English
- a mother and son creating a family tree together online.

Case study

Jennifer is thirty-five and a single mum of two girls in primary school. She describes her family as Black British. Jennifer is educated to degree level, but doesn't work, as she looks after her children full time.

When her girls get home from school she sits down with them at the kitchen table for several hours and helps them to do their homework. She says she does sometimes worry though, as she does not always know the way they have learnt something in school. She is not sure that she is showing them in the 'right' way.

She lets the girls use the internet after they have finished their homework. They often spend time together on educational websites such as Education City[iv]. She says her girls like to use the internet and it is good to be able to 'sneak in' some learning while they are doing so.

Case study

Dan is a White British fifty-year-old father of three children in both primary school and secondary school. Their youngest son is nine and is autistic. They recently moved him to a special school. Dan works fulltime as a reverend and his wife, Sue, works for the local council.

They feel it is the 'job' of the school to educate their children. They prefer to spend the little amount of time they have with their children when they are not working, engaging in fun activities. Dan thinks that schools tend to give children too much homework and don't allow them enough time to play and have fun.

Their autistic son, Oliver, is very good with computers and all sorts of technology. They try to encourage this, but they also restrict the amount of time he spends on computer games. This is because they say he will play all day everyday, if he could. They think this is unhealthy.

The family has a digital camcorder. Dan and the children have been making short films and have started experimenting with making animations.

[iv] This is a children's educational site that has resources for teachers. www.educationcity.com

Case study

Ed is Chinese and he and his wife have lived in Croydon for fifteen years. They have three children in primary and secondary school. They run their own business.

They have the internet at home and they have recently bought the eldest children Nintendo DS. Ed and his wife use the internet regularly. Ed spends a lot of time with the children on the internet. He uses the resources to teach his children about China: about the history and the geography of their home country. He thinks this is important additional knowledge for his children, as it is not something they learn in school.

These vignettes give insight into the occasions and scenarios that stimulate learning in families. However, on the whole, parents felt that they generally stood outside of the learning (both directly school-related and otherwise) that happens in the home. We identify several factors below that contribute to this apparent distance between children's learning with technology and what parents do.

The 'harmful' aspects of technology - parents' role as supervisory and rationing

> "I don't like computer games, I think they're really bad for kids." (White British mother with a child in special school)

Parents tended to talk about technology through a lens of 'damage' and 'risk' before seeing the educational benefits. That is, damage and risk in terms of:

- e-safety
- negative impacts on learning
- negative impacts on physical and social health.

These discussions reflect a legacy of concerns around the damaging impact of the media and technology on young people over the past 50 years and particularly since the 1980s (so-called 'moral panics').[49] Such concerns are rooted in a general shift towards a more privatised and individualised every day life. This includes the loss of public leisure spaces and the corresponding ubiquity of media and technology within the home and particularly in children's bedrooms.[50]

Throughout our discussions with parents, it was evident that concerns over the negative impacts of technology were underpinned by generational tensions or gaps. In these cases, parents made comparisons with their own childhood to suggest that

[49] Buckingham 2000; Barker and Petley 2001; Press Association 2009
[50] Livingstone 2002

technology was taking too large a role in young people's lives. Furthermore, this generational gap created a vacuum in parents' knowledge about the ways in which technology is used by their children. This generational gap in knowledge can be seen as a barrier to parents' capacity and readiness to recognise the educational value of their children's technology use. It can also be seen to inform parents' own relationships with learning how to use technology themselves and how to use technology to support their children's learning.

This section introduces the concerns that were discussed by parents in relation to their children's use of technology. We suggest that over-riding concerns around the harm technology can do to children means that parents saw their role in the home as supervisor, to the exclusion of other, potentially more active or participatory roles.

E-safety on the internet

E-safety was an overwhelming topic of parents' discussion around their children's use of technology. This generally related to concerns over 'stranger danger'. This was mainly in relation to social networking sites and children accessing unsuitable or in appropriate adult content through the internet more generally.

> "He loves YouTube, and I've found that he has been looking at things that shouldn't be looking at.... some of the videos are very violent... he's not learning the things that I want him to learn." (White British mother of children in primary and secondary school)

> "She has had a couple of close shaves and weirdoes that come on and said a few things...I got a bit worried." (White British father of children in Primary and Secondary School)

Perceived negative impacts on learning

While parents could see some of the additional learning benefits of technologies, a significant concern was the negative impact that technology use may have on their children's learning. Two key themes emerged within these discussions: concerns over the impact on their children's literacy and concerns around children's 'easy' access to knowledge.

The demise of reading or library culture featured strongly in parents' narratives. For example, parents were concerned that children's use of technology may have a detrimental affect on their reading, spelling ability and handwriting. For example, this might happen by choosing computers over books or having an over-reliance on the spell checker.

> "I think they should also get back to pen and paper...writing itself, English, not just spell checking on a PC...cos sometimes they use American words also so

> it's not a good thing." (White British mother of children in Primary and Secondary School)

> "I'm saddened books don't get used as much because there is a lot of fantastic stuff that is relevant to what they're doing. And sometimes you can Google a word [instead] and not get relevant information." (White British mother of children in primary and secondary school)

Some parents raised the concern that, because of the fast and immediate nature of sourcing knowledge on the internet, their children might lose the ability to search for knowledge by visiting a library and looking at different books. They could miss out on the enjoyment, discovery and imagination that come with this. There was also a concern that technology use was shortening children's attention spans and instilling an ethic of 'immediate gratification.'

> "Now everything is on line, if you want to know something you go on Google…As a parent I think it's fantastic [but] I think it's quite damaging, certainly concentration…they want it now...rather than thinking 'well, I have to make a choice, I can't have everything I want, when I want it.'" (White British mother with child in a special school)

> "Do you not think we used to use our imagination more? (laughter)…it's just kind of, you know, go onto Google…pick up stories about bicycles... I don't know…maybe I'm just old." (Mixed race father with child in secondary school)

Physical and social health

Another concern among parents, though not as prominent as the previous two, was the effect of technology use on children's physical health and social well-being. A complaint was that children were choosing computer games over outside play and that this could lead to obesity. Also, it is solitary, virtual and artificial in nature and could therefore become an inferior substitute to social interaction.

> "I think it's a bad thing to be honest that's why they are all getting fat because they're always sitting down at computer games." (White British father with children in primary and secondary school)

> "They could end up lonely no friends or anything. My kids come to me, 'We've got 200 friends [on Facebook].' No you haven't! It can be a bit scary." (White British mother of children in primary and secondary school)

These concerns were often discussed through a narrative of generational change, as parents compared their own experiences of learning and leisure to that of their children's generation. This suggests that parents' fears and ambivalences around technology may be bound up with nostalgia.

Parents' responses to the risks of technology use

As parents understood their role as having mainly a supervisory or policing capacity, this meant that there was little evidence of parents regularly participating in their children's learning using the technology. Consequently, a theme in parents' discussion of technology was the strategies they employed to manage their children's use of technologies in the home as they performed the role of supervisor. This high degree of parental regulation of children's technology use has been found elsewhere.[51]

Parents' strategies included:

- rationing internet, computer or games console use to a particular number of minutes or on certain days
- installing parental controls
- watching over their children as they used the technology
- placing computers in a central place in home (mainly in the living room) so that they could what their children were doing online
- secretly logging into emails or Facebook accounts
- checking the computer's internet history.

Typical comments were:

> "I have to limit my son. Like on a Sunday afternoon he would be on it from 1 o'clock ... I will stop him by 3 o'clock [and I say] 'go outside.'" (White British mother of children in primary and secondary school)

> "I do also go into her email account and I have a look. I'm quite happy, but I don't think she's actually aware that I know her passwords." (Black African mother of children in primary and secondary school)

> "[Our] computer is in the living room and so I've only got to look over and see what's on the screen. I have jumped up several times and seen something and it's come off." (White British mother of children in primary and secondary school)

Some parents felt uneasy about playing this role and displayed ambivalence around how much they should regulate and monitor their children's use of technology. Instead, these parents suggested that too much parental supervision could stifle their children's own capacity to use technology and the internet safely themselves.

[51] Davies 2008; Livingstone and Bober 2005

> "I feel I have to look over his shoulder and that's not right either, because that doesn't give him independence." (White British mother of children in primary and secondary school)

> "We are expected in a way to kind of bubble wrap our children but they need to be kind of made more independent they should be able to decide what's right and what's wrong for them. And obviously there are ways of [ensuring] safer browsing ...but I think they need to explore sometimes otherwise the kids will never learn themselves." (Asian mother of children in primary school)

Not all parents were knowledgeable about how to install parental controls and did not feel they knew how to protect their children from inappropriate content or communications online. This led to anxiety.

> "I worry a little, I haven't used these controls and I wonder if we should have them." (White European mother of children in primary school)

> "I haven't got internet because I'm a bit wary about having it. What's safe and what's not." (White British mother of child in secondary school)

Thus, many parents discussed the need for greater information from schools on how they could protect their children and support them in using technology safely. This supports other research which suggests that 'without adequate support, parents find the process of guiding and protecting their children online both difficult and worrying'.[52]

Parents' pedagogical know-how: the fear of 'doing something wrong'

Other than policing their use of ICT, parents mainly talked about checking their homework rather than participating, again taking up a supervisory role, rather than an active role in children's learning. A typical statement follows:

> "My daughter, she gets on with it and then sort of calls me in to read through it." (Black African mother of children in primary, secondary and special schools)

We suggest that parents' relationship to their children's learning with technology was heavily informed by their own relationships to learning in two ways. We discuss these in turn:

- Parents' pedagogical know-how
- Parents' technological competency in comparison to their children's.

[52] Livingstone et al, p4

Some parents' described how they lacked confidence in their own skills and knowledge of subjects taught at school. For example, there was a lot of anxiety about not disturbing their children's learning by teaching something differently to how the school did. This led to a reluctance and ambivalence about what they could or should do at home.

> "Emily would sit and spell things and I would be like no, no, tell me the letter and not the sounds. And they teach them everything by the sound. You feel like you're impeding them because you're not doing it the way that they do it." (White British mother of child in primary school)

> "She was reading a book and I was trying to say the letters for her, but the way I taught her is totally different from the way the school teaches them and so she's getting two different types of teaching...because I'm doing it one way and she's doing it another at school she's just getting totally confused." (Mixed raced mother of children in primary and secondary school)

Another mother relayed similar fears that she was teaching her child in different ways than are used by the schools. She said:

> "I don't know if I'm helping her in the right way...I may be teaching her something wrongly."

It is striking that these parents interpreted this variation in pedagogical approaches between parent and teacher through a hierarchy in which the schools' teaching methods are seen as right and those used by parents as 'wrong.' This raises important questions about how parents' skills and knowledge – and thus role in their children's learning – is valued.[53]

These anxieties echo findings of previous research on parents' perceptions of their role in their children's education. It has been found that, while many parents want to be involved in their children's education, they do not always feel that they have the appropriate skills and knowledge to fully support their children's learning.[54] Consequently, many of our parents expressed a feeling of being 'kept out of the loop' by schools. They stated a desire to know more about the curriculum, the particular teaching methods used by teachers and technical terminology regarding their children's progress.[55] These wants and needs are discussed in greater detail later in this report.

[53] See Hughes and Pollard 2006
[54] DCSF 2009b; Owen et al 2008
[55] Owen et al 2008

Playing 'catch up': parents' technological competence in relation to their children's

As discussed in the previous chapter, there was evidence that some parents were highly apprehensive about technology, which could lead to avoidance in using it. This was not only informed by their fears about the harmful aspects of technology, but also their feelings about their own (lack of) technological competency. Parents reported their children's high levels of technological competency in comparison with their own. There was a strong discourse of 'children as the technology experts in the house', in many of the parents' accounts (particularly for parents aged forty and over).

> "All three of my children use various bits of [technology], they are all proficient at it, more than me and their mother are." (White British father of children in primary and secondary school, aged 43)

> "Our son is better than us with technology. When he was two we went to a friend's house and they had a Mac and none of us had ever worked on a Mac and he learnt how to use it and do this and that ... He got it quicker than someone like me who grew up playing marbles." (Asian father of child in primary school with SEN, aged 40)

Other examples given by parents included:

- children assembling new technical equipment and teaching their parents how to use it
- children teaching their grandmother how to use the internet or DVD player
- children helping a parent create a multimedia presentation for work.

One parent discussed how he felt that his child's competence with technology provided valuable opportunities for him to learn from his child:

> "Anything I buy in the house he will put it together and I always find that's quite good, because it builds that kind of bond between you – that he's showing me how to do something, I can actually sort of say I really appreciate you doing this, stuff like that." (Mixed race father with child in secondary school, age not provided)

However, on the whole, parents felt they lagged far behind. This could potentially have a negative impact on their own relationships to education (that is, developing their own technological skills) as well as their role in their children's learning (that is, learning how to support their children's learning using technology).

> "What you've got now is a big, big generation gap where they [children] know all about it and we don't." (White British mother of children in primary and secondary school, age 44)

Some schools had a good sense that parents were hesitant about the benefits of using technology in learning.

> "They understand that technology is going to increase and enhance their children's learning but they are also quite wary in the same stage, feeling that it is not something that they have had access to while they were growing up so why is it necessary now?" (Luton Junior School)

Some parents felt so out of touch with technology they 'fazed out' as one mother described. That is to say, they claimed to withdraw from, or be excluded from, their children's use of technology in learning and so felt unable to support their children.

> "I'm not confident at all which I realise that holds my kids back because I don't want them to go onto the computer because I'm scared they're going to break it." (White British mother with children in primary school, age 53)

> "I do try [to use technology with them], but I don't think they'd ask me much about the computer because I'm not really computer literate." (White British mother of children in secondary school, age 43)

The 'reinterpretation of power relations' in the home[56] that occurs through children's often greater technological competency can be troubling. We found that for those parents who themselves had negative experiences of education, the role reversal of children being the bearer of (technological) knowledge and the parent being the learner was a difficult and alienating experience.

> "When the computer first got delivered I daren't press anything ...And the kids come home and just… they were on it and they were just showing me. I didn't like it. I think they are [ahead of us] yeah but I don't tell them that! ... I hate it." (White British mother of children in primary and secondary school, age 32)

Another parent described her own experiences of attending an adult education course on basic ICT:

> "The girl that taught me how to do my emails I was old enough to be her mother. I think it is quite off-putting really you being taught by a child.... I feel like the dunce yeah sitting in the corner!" (White British mother of child in secondary school, age 47)

[56] Holloway and Valentine 2003

These hesitant and fearful responses in relation to using technology echo those of more 'disengaged', low access technology users in research by Pharoah and Rowe.[57] They found that some low-income family members – particularly women – were seen to 'opt out' of technology due to embarrassment and fear. This data, and ours, suggests that parents' lack of technological competency can create significant barriers to their capacity to support, and participate in, their children's learning. Furthermore, it suggests that the emotions surrounding parents' technology use need to be taken seriously. This refers to both policy development and practitioners' attempts to encourage technology-enabled learning in families.

There were some exceptions to this general set up of the 'child as expert' within our sample of parents. Specifically, those parents who were employed in ICT-based professions discussed having greater skills than their children.[58] While these parents with much greater technological know-how illustrated a greater capacity to become involved in their children's learning, they too relayed (albeit different) fears about this role. For example, one parent who was also an IT consultant was concerned that her knowledge of technology could cause her to have a potentially stifling role in her child's learning:

> "I think I get quite a lot involved, I try to step back, being an IT consultant myself, it's really hard, because when I see her doing things….they do sometimes say to her…all you need to do is do this, do this, do that and bang, it's done and she's like oh gosh, mummy (laughter)." (Black African mother of children in primary and secondary school, aged not provided)

Enabling independent learning: respecting children's boundaries and school's informal guidance

Concern over independent learning was another barrier to parents' involvement in their children's learning. This concern arose from two sources: children wanting their own space and messages from schools relating to parents' role in their children's learning.

Some parents talked about the ways their children – especially the older children – did not welcome help from their parents. They felt that homework, as well as technology use in their leisure time, was 'their own space.'

> "They like their school to be theirs I think. They like something that is nothing to do with you... the ability is there for you to be more involved. It's whether they want it." (White British mother of primary and secondary school children)

[57] Pharoah and Rowe 2008
[58] Holloway and Valentine 2003

This confirms findings of research by Owen and colleagues who found that '…some parents were...concerned about becoming more involved and engaged in their children's learning because they felt that the children (particularly secondary age students) may rebel against such close involvement'.[59]

Closely related to the above, some parents felt that the school itself encouraged parents not to interfere in their children's learning. This was especially the case as children made the transition to secondary school, where there is emphasis on developing pupils' independent learning skills required for exams and other forms of assessment.

> "They like to do it by themselves. If they get stuck they will call you. I mean you can keep popping in and checking them and saying do you want any help and that but they don't like you to. Schools try to encourage them not to ask parents. They said let your child do it and if they're stuck they will come to you and they do." (White British mother of children in secondary school)

Social class differences in parents' perception of the educational value of technology

Grant and others remind us of the crucial difference between access to technologies and the use made of technologies in relation to the digital divide.[60] Much effort has gone into extending access to technologies, through programmes such as Becta's Home Access programme. However, Grant suggests that overcoming inequalities in access to technologies is different from tackling inequalities or differences in how families use these technologies.

A person's skill and experience of using the technology affects how they use it. Drawing the elements of access and use together, Robinson suggests that limited or restricted access to technology and particularly the internet, affects people's use of the internet in terms of their autonomy.[61] She claims those who have high levels of access have high autonomy. They are afforded 'open-ended roaming and browsing' and are able to explore and take risks, which ultimately improves their use and their learning. By contrast, individuals 'without plentiful resources' whose internet use is rationed, are 'doubly constrained in terms of both access and autonomy'. She claims that these individuals develop a task-oriented approach that is characterised by a 'taste for the necessary'. This is where any activities that are not directly related to schoolwork, such as open-ended internet browsing, are avoided. In this way, these individuals are denied the learning benefits that accompany this type of approach.[62]

[59] Owen et al 2008
[60] Grant 2009; Selwyn and Facer 2007; Livingstone 2002; Somekh et al 2002
[61] Robinson 2009
[62] Robinson 2009, p492

Within our sample of parents, the majority (89%) had home internet access. In discussions, it was evident that technology had a ubiquitous presence in their homes. Yet, there were key differences in parents' capabilities, confidence and enthusiasm for technology, which can be seen to relate to their familiarity with it. While our small study is only indicative, our findings suggest that parents' attitudes to and behaviour around their children's use of technology is influenced by social class.

For those without home access, time for the benefits of open-ending browsing that Robinson discusses was particularly restricted. These parents described how their children were limited to using public access spaces (such as visiting public libraries or using the school's computer facilities after school or in lunchtimes) in order to complete their homework.

> "We didn't have the Internet and I would send him off up to the library or tell him to do it during his dinnertime...He was very reluctant to do it and to be honest once, now that we have got internet and all that sort of thing I'm not overly impressed with it. I mean it's all right but. And they don't really want to do it either. but they've sort of been bullied into it and pushed into it and threatened with detention if they don't." (White British mother of child in secondary school)

> "Some people take longer and they need the time at home when they are actually sitting down and actually concentrating rather than rushing it in 15 minutes in their break. And so yeah I do think it is a bit unfair...the library has a limited number of computers... And if you are not really that good at finding out things by the time you've researched and found the things that you wanted you have seconds and then you have to log out." (Mixed raced mother of child in primary school)

It can be suggested that for these families, using technology was a time-pressured and often anxiety-producing experience of risks and costs, oriented around completing specific school-related tasks. This, they saw to be unfairly required by schools. The frustrations and concerns attached to this overrode any sense of enjoying using technology. As such, they and there children were unable to identify and experience the benefits of technology.

Similarly, those parents without home access, who had lower levels of education and income, were more likely to be hesitant about their own ability in using technology and in managing their children's use of it. Consequently, they were more ambivalent as to the benefits of using technology – thus taking a 'merely necessary' stance towards their children's (and their own) technology use.

Conversely, those parents with home access, higher income and educational levels, were more likely to express greater confidence not just in using technology, but also in managing their children's use of it. This is particularly the case for those parents

who used technology in their professional lives. With their greater resources, these parents more readily permitted their children to use the technology beyond merely school-related activities and were themselves more able to identify the educational value of technology.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored two issues:

- how parents see the educational value or 'learning potential' of different types of technology
- how parents see their roles in relation to their children's use of technology.

We have suggested that these two issues are related. Parents' views of the benefits and risks associated with different technologies inform the roles that they take up.

Although parents made particular value judgements around the learning potential of different types of technology, they were also able to identify some educational value in technology-use that was not directly related to schoolwork. However, we suggest that even in these cases, parents were highly ambivalent. They were generally most likely to attribute non-school related technologies with having value if these technologies replicated some aspects of, or were seen to contribute to, formal, high-status scholastic learning.

We have suggested that parent's overwhelming concern with the risks and damage associated with children's technology use, as well as feelings of technological incompetence and a lack of pedagogical know-how, places them in a mainly supervisory role. This creates distance between parents and their children's learning. It can also create or exacerbate tensions within their own relationship to learning. This thereby reduces the possibilities for learning within the family in its fullest sense.

We have also suggested that social class dimensions relating to parents' behaviours around technology need further examination. This is about the ways in which technological access, competence and familiarity – that are related to income, education and employment – can become forms of 'capital', which set some parents at a clear advantage.

The factors that facilitate learning in families using technology include:

- parents' amount of free time
- parents' competence with technology
- unlimited home access to the internet
- parents' understandings and knowledge of the educational value of different technologies

- parents' own positive relationships to learning
- parents' comfort with learning from their children
- the encouragement and support to be involved in their children's learning that parents receive from the school
- the age of their children and levels of dependency on their parents
- the amount of information and support available to help parents deal with the perceived risks associated with technology.

What parents need to support learning in families

Parents need more information from schools (or other agencies) about:

- the curriculum, terminology and pedagogy
- what they can do to support their children's learning
- what technologies and software their children are using in school so parents can use them at home to support children's learning
- recommended learning websites and software
- the different programmes/aids that schools use for SEN
- the benefits of having technology at home
- how to protect their children in terms of e-safety. A few parents said that they felt there should be government regulation of the internet, so their children couldn't access unsuitable material.

In the next sections, we summarise the research findings and discuss their implications. We then go on to highlight key recommendations that these findings can make to policy and practice.

Key findings

Following technological advances, schools are using different types of media to communicate a variety of messages to parents. However, at this stage, technology is facilitating predominantly administrative and organisational communication. There appears to be limited thick communication about children's learning. Parents want much more information from schools on what their children are learning and how they are being taught. They also need guidance on how they can support their children's learning. Technology can play a role in mediating this. The roll-out of learning platforms has the potential to facilitate more complex, two-way, personalised communication between teachers, pupils and parents about learning. However, it is early days and we are yet to see the success of this.

Presently, schools don't appear to play a major role in the learning that happens in families. Our research highlights a disconnection between the learning that happens in and for school and other learning that might take place in the family. Also, schools are not extensively tapping into parents' 'funds' of knowledge.[63] This research uncovered several reasons for this. There was reluctance among parents to intervene too much in their children's formal learning. This was often due to fear of risking 'doing something wrong' or teaching them in the wrong way. Some research has found that the importance placed on exam results in the existing education system has resulted in learning becoming 'high stakes'. Therefore, it may appear to be too risky to parents to intervene.[64]

The generational aspects of the digital divide have an impact on the ability to harness technology for learning in the home. Parents reported that children were using technology a great deal in the home, for their schoolwork and for play (such as computer games and social networking). However, this was often done alone, or with parents' role merely being supervisory. Certain parents' fear of, or lack of competence, with technology has the potential to hinder engagement with their children's education. However, this was not solved simply by providing ICT classes for such parents or providing them with the necessary equipment. Issues such as mistrust of technology (specifically the internet) and generational issues, such as discomfort at being taught by children were key barriers to parental engagement and learning in families. Nevertheless, this research also suggests that learning in families is one of the key ways in which adults do learn about technology (that is, learning from their children) and this opportunity could be utilised more.

The age of their children also arose as a factor that impacted on parents' engagement. Parents of Key Stage 3 children did not feel it was appropriate to get too involved in their children's formal learning. They felt that older children needed

[63] See Hughes and Pollard 2006
[64] See Gillborn and Youdell 2000

more autonomy in their learning (to develop independent learning skills) and privacy in their leisure time. Formal learning in school appears to reflect this with more individualised approaches to study and assessment as children get older. There is perhaps a conflict between the policy drivers for formal, compulsory education (that is, a focus on individual, measurable performance) and the learning in families agenda (which requires more collective, collaborative and open-ended learning).

The key challenge is how schools, local authorities and policy-makers can address these challenges to fully harness technology to facilitate learning in families. We make several recommendations in the following section.

Recommendations

Schools and local authorities

Designing strategies that reach all parents:

- In designing their policies for parental involvement, schools and local authorities need to think in wider terms about how to engage parents in their children's learning. This needs to go beyond simply communicating with parents.
- Schools and local authorities must recognise that there is no one-size-fits-all approach when designing effective strategies to communicate with and engage parents. A suite of options, rather than just one should be offered. Parents should have an option of methods that fit around their needs and circumstances and which include technology mediated and non-technology mediated strategies.
- Schools should think about the diversity of family forms when structuring communication. They need to consider who is in the 'family' and who requires communication (for example, parents, non-resident parents, grandparents and siblings).

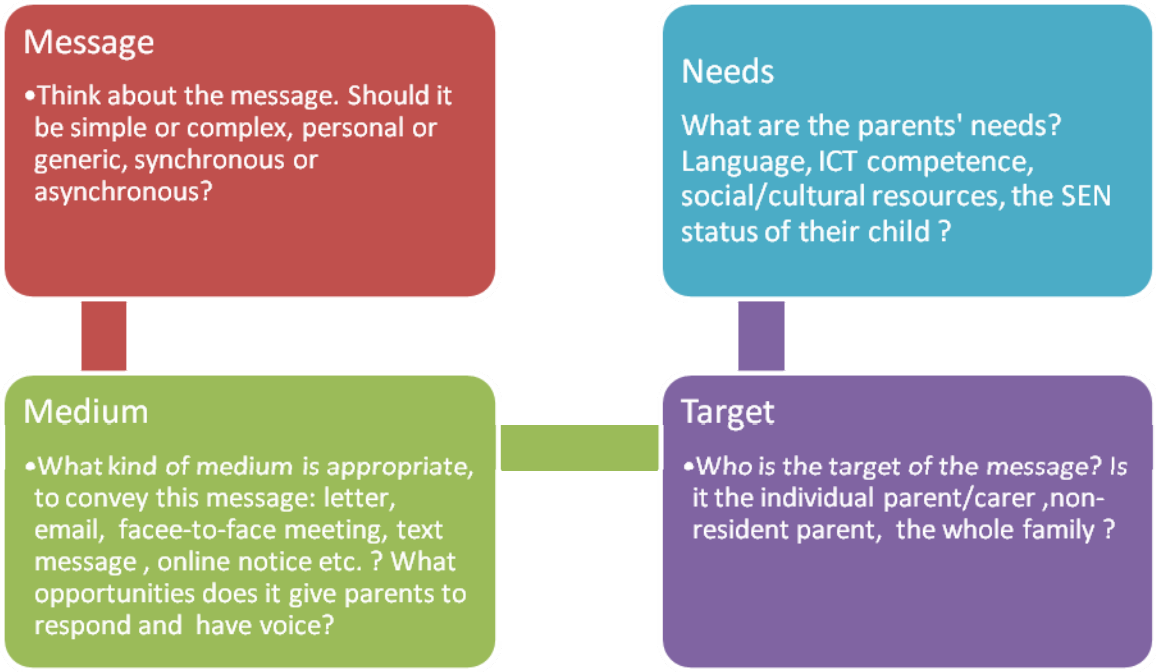
Think:

- Who are our parents and what methods might suit them best?
- Can we offer parents the option to send us text messages rather than just using the phone?
- Can we offer parents an online forum to share their views in case they can't attend the PTA meeting?
- Can we offer paper-based and online reports?

Encouraging and enabling communication that is thicker:

Schools can use the four key elements of the thick and thin communication typology to improve their practice. We recommend that schools work with their staff to review a proportion of their recent communications with parents using the four elements. Then, decide on what they'd like to prioritise and create an action plan. Figure 2 may be a helpful guide.

Figure 2: Action planning for improved communication



Think:

- Is what is being communicated simple or complex? (simplicity or complexity)
- In which direction is this communication flowing? Does it come from the school to the parent, parent to school or both? Is there an opportunity for parents to exchange knowledge with teachers or just receive it? (directionality)
- Does the parent need to respond now, or do they need time to digest/consider? (synchronicity)
- Is the communication best delivered universally or specifically to individual parents? (individualisation)

What else?

- Does this communication require or allow parents to respond? Does it give parents a voice or is it just informing them? (parental agency)
- Is it push or pull communication? Is this information that we need to push out to parents or information that they will want to pull down?
- What is the content of the information? Is communication only negative ('your child has been in trouble') or positive ('your child has got a merit in his homework')?

Meeting parents' needs

Schools and local authorities should provide mechanisms to consult parents about what they need to engage in their children's learning.

Think: what methods can be used to find out what parents need and want?

Consider:

- Parent forums
- Online voting
- Questionnaires
- Coffee mornings.

Schools should be aware that internet safety is likely to be an area with which parents want to engage. It is therefore a potentially important starting point for building strong partnerships with parents. Schools might also make use of key parents who have good 'school gate' networks. These parents can communicate with other parents on a variety of issues, including encouraging the use of learning platforms.

Parents also need regular personalised information on their children's progress (secondary schools). Online reporting will address this for most parents. However, schools should also be aware that they need to provide parents with the tools to interpret such reports.

Schools should also provide parents with more information about what their children are learning in school and teaching methods used (curriculum, terminology and pedagogy) so they can help at home. For example, *Changes to the primary curriculum: a guide for parents and carers*[65] and similar such publications would be welcomed by parents. However, awareness needs to be raised among parents about where to find this information. Parents suggested that schools provide a link for parents to one key website that would signpost this information. The Becta commissioned site for coordinating information and resources for informal learning could also be a useful resource, linking parents own informal learning with information about their children's.

[65] DCSF 2009c

More information about technology, a general de-mystification of it is also important. Parents need to know:

- how to protect their children in terms of e-safety
- what technologies and software their children are using in school and how parents can use these at home to support learning
- recommended learning sites and software
- the different programmes and aids for SEN
- the benefits of having technology at home.

Schools need to be aware of the benefits of mutual information exchange and support between parent to parent also. For example, schools could draw on parents with technology expertise and contacts.

Think: How can we exchange knowledge between the school and home? Can we bring what learning happens in the home, into the school? How can we tap into parents' skills and knowledge?

Some suggestions are to:

- invite parents in to school to showcase what their children have been learning using technology. Our research suggests that this can open parents' eyes to the extent of their children's technological skills and can potentially initiate learning in families.
- Carry out a skills audit among staff and interested parents. Run knowledge sharing sessions around particular topics or subjects, including technological expertise.
- Facilitate online networks, groups or blogs between parents and staff, where parents can share knowledge and raise questions about their children's learning.

Making the best use of online services

The school website is an important source of information for parents, but parents get frustrated when the site is out of date. Keeping websites updated can improve parents' relationship with the school.

Think: How can we make the website more accessible and useful to current parents?

Consider a split website with a front end devoted to prospective parents, which is focused on marketing, and a back end, which is for existing parents and children. This back end could be linked to the learning platform and would be more interactive and regularly updated.

Schools need to be proactive in promoting their online services and how to make best use of these service, instead of expecting parents to know where to look and when.

There needs to be greater promotion of learning platforms and online reporting among parents. Parents tended to be aware of learning platforms only by chance if at all – that is, if their child was using the learning platform in front of them. They felt they needed more support and guidance on how to make best use of these. Similarly, while parents had little knowledge of online reporting, they welcomed this. However, they felt that more guidance was needed.

Think: How can we get parents on-board with our school's learning platform and online reporting? What do they need to know? Are workshops needed to introduce parents to what these do? Can we use the children in our school to get parents on board?

Secondary school age children could play an important role in communicating with other children's parents, as well as their own parents, about learning platforms. For example, Year 9 young people might talk to parents of Year 7 children at a parents' evening or workshop.

How do parents want to receive support and guidance?

Workshops and classes can be a key source of information for parents, but parents' commitments mean that they cannot always make these. Running continuous refresher courses is a way of reaching more parents.

Think: How might we be able to deliver support and training for parents about how to use technology?

Consider:

- family learning ICT sessions
- an introductory session to technology or more targeted workshops on topics such as using learning platforms
- DVDs or other electronic packages
- online video tutorials
- booklets.

Provide paper-based and online summary material for parents who are unable to attend face-to-face sessions.

Policy-makers

If family learning is to be a continued priority, the curriculum needs to be developed so as:

- to enable more collaborative learning
- to find ways of recording, rewarding and valuing informal learning outside of school.

Enabling more collaborative learning

Curriculum reform is indeed moving further in this direction at both primary and secondary levels.

Primary

The Rose review of the primary curriculum, proposes to reduce prescription and content so that schools have greater flexibility to meet local circumstances and pupils' individual needs.[66] The implementation of this could allow for more collaborative and project-based learning, drawing on family and community interests.

The piloting of a creative entitlement of five hours a week,[67] if rolled out, may allow for opportunities to link with creative and cultural learning in the family.

[66] Rose 2009
[67] DCSF 2007

Secondary

The new diplomas qualification is likely to facilitate more project-based work.

Recognising informal learning

Examples of this include:

- The 'Creative Portfolio' offered in The Robert's Review of creativity[68]: a personal record of creative achievements which reflects what students do inside and outside of school, and can take virtual form.
- Young People's Arts Award: accredited scheme which provides opportunities for young people to work on a self-designed project based on a creative or cultural activity.

However, an over-emphasis on 'high stakes' testing is likely to mitigate opportunities to experiment with creative learning, and for parents to get involved.

More work needs to be done to raise parents' awareness of the value of technology in their children's learning and skills development. For example, Government promotional material could formulate messages for parents and schools. This could be based on research about the impact on achievement in formal learning of:

- informal learning
- creative pursuits
- the uses of different technologies.

Becta's e-safety packs were well received by parents in this research. In line with the adult informal learning pledge[v] endorsed by Becta, collaborative work could be done between relevant bodies such as Becta, NIACE and creative and cultural skills Councils to develop information packs for parents that pull together these strands.[69]

Work needs to be done to help parents with 'techno-fear', which takes into account generational factors and mistrust of technology. The Digital Mentors scheme as proposed in *The Learning Revolution*[70] could potentially address this issue, if a sensitive approach is taken to the mentoring relationship. This needs to take into account both the age dynamic and the importance of 'hot knowledge' in certain communities.[71]

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[68] Roberts 2006
[v] This is a pledge by agencies to improve the quality and quantity of adult informal learning opportunities. www.dius.gov.uk/skills/engaging_learners/informal_adult_learning/pledge
[69] DIUS 2009
[70] DIUS 2009
[71] Ball et al 2000

Provision of information on the basics of curriculum, current pedagogy and terminology are also needed. (Initiatives such as the Parent Know How scheme[vi] should facilitate this.)

Following efforts to address gaps in home access to technology, more work needs to be done to tackle inequalities in the use of technologies. We commend continued work to address home access via the provision of technological equipment to those homes who cannot afford it. We recommend that this is a more equitable means of providing access than via school or public computer facilities. This is because time-limited access does not allow for open-ended use and autonomy in learning using technologies.

We recommend more democratic and egalitarian approaches to internet access, such as publicly funded wireless hot spots or 'clouds' rather than individualised provision per household. Connectivity via mobile phones and television can be more equitable routes also.

The issues of equitable access and use need to be addressed before learning platforms can become an integrated part of young people's daily learning and parents' engagement. Obligatory use of learning platforms at the present time will only add to existing inequalities in children's performance.

We do not recommend that online reporting replaces paper reports at this stage. This is likely to alienate precisely those whom schools wish to engage.[72]

Parent consultation about the design and procurement of technologies in schools is needed at higher levels in the decision making process. This would enable greater mutual understanding between the two parties with regard to attitudes and views towards technology (see Appendix 3).

We would recommend that a person be employed in the local authority with strategic responsibility for parental engagement and ICT (see Appendix 3).

Further research

More qualitative research is needed on different groups of parents who face barriers to engagement and the nature of their specific needs (for example EAL, low income, low literacy, non-resident parents and fathers). Separate focus groups with different specific groups of parents, followed up with more in-depth work, such as individual interviews or ethnographic work on technology use in the home, would provide greater insights into the needs of these groups.

[vi] Parent Know How. This scheme funds organisations to provide parenting advice and support. www.info4local.gov.uk/documents/related-links/rhn1319510

[72] See DCSF 2009b

A network analysis of the key actors or groups involved in home-school relationships (staff, pupils, parents, senior management, support staff and local authority staff) would systematically map the ways in which interactions take place. It would also uncover elements that would improve communication and interaction between these groups.

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