

# Children's role in home-school relationships and the role of digital technologies

**A literature review**

**Lyndsay Grant, Futurelab**

August 2009

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# About this review

Children's learning is not restricted to the time they spend in school; they learn in different ways in a wide range of different contexts, with friends and family at home and in other settings. Taking this more holistic view of children's 'learning lives', it is clear that children do not leave the rest of their lives behind when they enter the school gate, and so to support children's learning in the broadest sense, we need to take account of their lives and learning in and out of school.

Much research, strategy and policy on home-school relationships has focused on the relationship between parents and schools. This is particularly seen in the strong current focus on improving parental engagement in children's learning, which is a significant factor in children's educational achievement. Parents' engagement in their children's learning is clearly related to the relationship between home and school, and the connections and overlap between parental engagement and home-school relationships will be discussed. This review does not offer a full review of literature around parental engagement, which can be found elsewhere.

Children themselves can and do play an active role in influencing and facilitating the nature and extent of this relationship and mediating between school and home contexts. Their active role in this three-way relationship therefore needs to be acknowledged and explored.

Digital technologies are an integral part of many families' home environments and communication strategies, and are increasingly used by schools to support learning, communicate with parents and provide access to school resources from the home and so may offer opportunities to facilitate communication and the building of relationships between home and school.

This review provides an overview of the key debates and current practice and research into home-school relationships, with a particular focus on children's role and the opportunities offered by digital technologies to facilitate home-school relationships.

In order to explore children's role in home-school relationships, the role of parents in home-school relationships will first be discussed, focusing on

parental engagement and parent-school partnerships. The review will then move on from looking at parents relationships with schools to looking more broadly at connections between learning in the different contexts of home and school. It then goes on to explore how children themselves make transitions and connections between home and school, focusing on children's agency in and perspective on this relationship. The use and potential of technologies to support the home-school relationship is discussed within these main sections.

This review is intended to serve as an introduction to the broader context of this topic, discussing key issues raised by research and practice, to inform professionals and practitioners with an interest in the field. Relationships between home and school have been the subject of many years' research, and this review does not intend to provide a comprehensive academic analysis of the entire field, to make claims about the 'effectiveness' of different approaches, or to provide recommendations for policy-makers or practitioners.

# 1. Policy overview

Parental engagement in children's learning is currently a high priority for schools' policy, giving rise to several strategies for improving communication between school and home, including encouraging greater engagement from parents in their children's learning and school life. Indeed, one of the priorities of the Children's Plan in 2009 is to "work with schools to help more parents get involved in their child's learning"<sup>1</sup>.

The recent 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools white paper contains a parents' guarantee cementing support for, and an expectation that, parents will be involved with their children's learning and exercise choice in educational matters<sup>2</sup>. This white paper also reflects a policy trend towards more collaborative and partnership working in schools, engaging parents, local communities, other schools and children's services to continue raising standards and contribute to Every Child Matters outcomes for all children in ways that schools cannot achieve working alone<sup>3</sup>.

Digital technologies are also heavily implicated in policies that seek to connect home and school and raise parental engagement, seen in the Home Access initiative and Online Reporting requirements.

The Home Access initiative aims to remove the barriers to using computer and internet technologies to support children's learning at home by providing financial support for those who need it and campaigning to promote the benefits of technologies for learning to families who choose not to buy or use technologies to support learning<sup>4</sup>. Home Access to computers is thought to be able to improve parental engagement and strengthen home-school links by providing opportunities to use technologies to support learning in the home, providing a means of communication between school and home and access to school resources via learning platforms or websites.

The online reporting requirements will see parents given online access to information about children's attainment, attendance, behaviour and special needs by 2010 (for secondary) and 2012 (for primary)<sup>5</sup>. Becta's 'Inspire parental engagement' web pages make it clear that online reporting is not just about providing information to parents, but is part of a wider strategy to inspire parents to support conversations with their children about their learning<sup>6</sup>.

Ultimately, all of the above policies and strategies aim to raise children's educational achievement and to 'narrow the gap' in achievement between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers<sup>7</sup>. Policy aims to support these goals by adopting a more holistic view of children's outcomes through the Every Child Matters agenda, increasing parents' involvement through exercising educational choices and supporting children's learning and harnessing digital technologies to facilitate these changes.

<sup>1</sup> DCSF 2008

<sup>2</sup> DCSF 2009

<sup>3</sup> HM Government 2004

<sup>4</sup> Becta 2008a

<sup>5</sup> Becta 2008b

<sup>6</sup> See [www.becta.org.uk/engaging](http://www.becta.org.uk/engaging)

<sup>7</sup> See HM Treasury's Public Service Agreements 10 and 11: [www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/pbr\\_csr07\\_psaopportunity.htm](http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/pbr_csr07_psaopportunity.htm)

## 2. Parental engagement and parent-school partnerships

Parental engagement in children's learning at home is a priority for education policy as research consistently shows it is a significant factor in enhancing children's achievement at school<sup>8</sup>. Parents' engagement with what children are learning at school both requires and is an expression of a relationship between home and school, and is therefore a key issue in discussing home-school relationships<sup>9</sup>. Schools are seen as needing to work with parents to help them better engage with their children's learning, often characterised as working 'in partnership' with parents, and digital technologies are one way in which schools can support and encourage parents to engage with their children's learning<sup>10</sup>. This section gives an overview of and discusses some of the key issues pertaining to parental engagement<sup>11</sup>.

### Parents helping children learn

Parental **involvement** in school activities, such as the PTA or volunteering for school trips is distinguished from **engagement** with children's learning **at home**, with the latter being a strong predictive factor for children's achievement while the former confers few benefits for the child<sup>12</sup>. However, this distinction should not be over-emphasised: involvement with school activities may lead to engagement with learning and may also be a way in which parents communicate their educational values and positive attitudes towards learning to their children. This modelling and reinforcement of a positive disposition towards learning is seen as one of the aspects of 'good at-home parenting' that result in children's higher achievement<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> See Desforges (2003) for an influential review of the evidence on the impact of parental engagement on children's achievement and Harris and Goodall (2008, 2009) for a recent study showing the link between parental engagement in learning at home and children's achievement.

<sup>9</sup> IPSE/FPI (2009a)

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the Becta website [www.becta.org.uk/engaging](http://www.becta.org.uk/engaging)

<sup>11</sup> For a more thorough discussion of the evidence around parental engagement see Desforges (2003), Harris and Goodall (2008, 2009); for discussion of the use of technology in parental engagement see Somekh (2002), Grant (2009), IPSE/FPI (2009a, 2009b).

<sup>12</sup> Harris and Goodall (2008, 2009)

<sup>13</sup> Desforges (2003)

### Supporting children's school learning

For many schools and parents, homework is the most obvious occasion in which parents engage with their children's school learning and is the most common way in which parents of secondary school aged children engage with their learning, with 48% of parents spending between three and five hours per week helping with homework<sup>14</sup>. Both children and parents can find parents helping with or 'enforcing' homework a source of tension in their relationship that also detracts from the effectiveness of time spent studying<sup>15</sup>. Time spent on homework can also be resented by parents and children as it can displace other family activities including more informal learning opportunities such as discussions, activities or simply spending time together<sup>16</sup>. Parents generally become less involved with children's schoolwork as they get older, only getting involved where they perceive a problem and otherwise not 'interfering' with the teacher's job<sup>17</sup>.

Parents often report that they feel unable to help with children's school learning or homework because they do not know enough about the curriculum or modern teaching methods, especially in maths, and so many schools and family learning providers have focused on providing resources and courses to equip parents with the skills and knowledge to be able to support children's learning of school subjects at home<sup>18</sup>.

Parents who use different methods to those taught in school can find the experience of trying to help their children learn particularly frustrating, especially where their personal attitudes or cultures place a strong emphasis on parental authority and expertise<sup>19</sup>. The perception in their children's eyes that they do not have the skills or knowledge that children are being taught can be humiliating, and parents can feel deprived of their knowledge and skills because they are unable to use it to help their children. This implies that it is 'school knowledge' – doing things in the way that school does

<sup>14</sup> Opinion Leader (2009)

<sup>15</sup> Page et al (2009)

<sup>16</sup> Opinion Leader (2009)

<sup>17</sup> Page et al (2009)

<sup>18</sup> Opinion Leader (2009; LSC (2008)

<sup>19</sup> Bouakaz and Persson (2007)

them – that is important, rather than simply having the knowledge or skills about multiplication or spelling.

As well as direct help with school work, parents also support their children's school learning through helping children make choices about their education and through providing what some have called 'moral support', that is, providing encouragement to persist with school work and giving emotional support to children to help them believe they can succeed with education and that it is worthwhile<sup>20</sup>.

### Technologies to help parents support children's learning

Learning platforms, otherwise known as VLEs (Virtual Learning Environments) or MLEs (Managed Learning Environments), can make it possible for parents to view children's reports, attendance and assessment scores without needing to go to school or wait for parents' evenings. From 2010, secondary schools will be obliged to report this information to parents online<sup>21</sup>. Learning platforms can also allow parents to access children's school work and help with school activities, and can be used to provide parents with tools to support children's learning. Some schools are already using their Learning Platforms to engage parents in children's learning, for example Ranvilles Infant School in Hampshire invites parents, many of whom work for the Navy and are often away from home, to track children's progress, answer questions about their trips and ask questions about children's schoolwork, and contribute ideas via school message boards<sup>22</sup>. However, looking at the bigger picture, learning platforms are currently mostly used for uploading content rather than interactive communication or learning and most schools do not yet offer parents secure access to their 'intranets'<sup>23</sup>.

While extensive use of technologies to support parental engagement is not yet widespread, some schools are beginning to explore ways of using technologies to support parents' engagement with children's school learning, including providing online access to curriculum and revision materials designed for parents, often alongside face to face courses to help parents understand how to use the technologies and resources available<sup>24</sup>. This is not just about using technologies to provide information. The 'Oh, Nothing Much' report emphasises that it is parents and children talking about school that makes the difference, and that access to online information can help by providing prompts for parents to start conversations with children<sup>25</sup>. Parents do not necessarily automatically know what to make of the information provided; in order to address this issue, Cardinal Wiseman Catholic Technology College in Birmingham gives guidance to parents on how to use the data provided to have conversations with children and assist with their education<sup>26</sup>.

The 'HomeWork System' was a research project that used numeracy activities on portable tablet PCs to 'seamlessly' link learning at home and school<sup>27</sup>. Parents reported that the system allowed them to adopt 'the same agenda' at home as was used at school, allowing them to use teaching strategies that were used in school and apply them in daily life. Portable technologies such as the tablet PCs used in this project have been thought to have significant potential for linking learning between home and school as they travel with the learner between the two contexts. However, the 'HomeWork' project showed that the way activities were contextualised was critical in how successful the technology was in linking learning between different environments, and that it was important for teachers to help children and parents understand the relevance of the technologies.

Several projects have attempted to use portable, or handheld, technologies to connect children's learning at

<sup>20</sup> Page et al (2009)

<sup>21</sup> Becta (2008b)

<sup>22</sup> See [awards.becta.org.uk/display.cfm?resID=34519](http://awards.becta.org.uk/display.cfm?resID=34519) and more examples in Becta's 'Parental Engagement Toolkit': [publications.becta.org.uk/display.cfm?resID=38170](http://publications.becta.org.uk/display.cfm?resID=38170)

<sup>23</sup> See Smith et al (2008) Harnessing Technologies Schools Survey, commissioned by Becta, which assesses the 'state of the nation' in terms of the uptake and impact of educational technologies in maintained schools across England; the term 'intranets' is not defined, but is taken here to mean secure access to the school's internal websites and information technology infrastructure, including communication tools.

<sup>24</sup> See case studies from the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust ICT Register at [www.ict-register.net/pe-schools.php](http://www.ict-register.net/pe-schools.php) and from Microsoft at [innovativeschoolsonline.com/casestudies/default.aspx](http://innovativeschoolsonline.com/casestudies/default.aspx)

<sup>25</sup> Byron (2009)

<sup>26</sup> [www.becta.org.uk/engaging.php](http://www.becta.org.uk/engaging.php) (click on 'local authorities' tab)

<sup>27</sup> Kerawella et al (2007)

school with their home lives and involve parents in the school based learning<sup>28</sup>. For example, the 'Learning2Go' project in Wolverhampton gave students their own PDAs on which they could access multimedia learning materials; it was intended that children could use these to share their school-based learning with parents. Children used their PDAs for homework as well as non-school related activities, and there is some evidence that they were also used by other family members and that some schools used them to communicate with parents. However, a 2007 study found little evidence of much parental engagement around the use of the technologies<sup>29</sup>.

The use of handheld technologies to connect learning at school to the home appears to be most successful when there was little technology in the home; where technology access was already high, handhelds did not necessarily provide any additional opportunities<sup>30</sup>.

Despite there being many anecdotal examples of projects that use digital technologies to engage parents in their children's learning, there have been very few studies that examine the effectiveness of these projects on raising children's achievement or enhancing parent-school communication<sup>31</sup>. As most programs use technology as one part of a broader series of reforms, it is also very difficult to assess the particular contribution made by technologies to parental engagement or parent-school partnerships, and the effects of technology on programmes to enhance parental involvement are not well understood<sup>32</sup>.

### **'Invisible' engagement**

In emphasising the role of the school in inspiring or instigating parents' engagement with children's learning, it is all too easy to overlook engagement that is not visible to the school, even though it may be significant

<sup>28</sup> See Faux et al (2006) for four case studies of using handheld technologies for learning and an overview and analysis of the potential and challenges of using this type of technology for learning.

<sup>29</sup> McFarlane (2007)

<sup>30</sup> Faux et al (2006)

<sup>31</sup> This was the conclusion of a large review by Penuel et al (2002); there still appears to be very little research in this area.

<sup>32</sup> Penuel et al (2002)

for the child's learning. One study found that teachers themselves were not very good judges of parental engagement with learning in the home, rating aspects of parents' behaviour they were unlikely to know about, such as monitoring TV watching, and assuming that parents who do not come into school for parents' evenings are not engaged or interested<sup>33</sup>. Parents may support their children's learning in many ways that are not seen by the school, for example through teaching their children 'life skills' and through the informal learning that happens as part of daily family life, including using digital technologies<sup>34</sup>. For instance, families from ethnic minority backgrounds are often involved with their children's education through participation in supplementary schools, even when cultural and language differences mean they are not confident or do not feel it is their role to come into the school<sup>35</sup>.

It is therefore important not to assume that parents whose involvement is not visible to the school are not engaged in their children's learning. Some research has explored the use of technologies to make learning outside school more visible to teachers<sup>36</sup>. While young people were able to use mobile and video technologies to capture their out of school learning experiences, they needed significant support to recognise the learning benefits from their experiences and did not expect teachers to be interested. They were also concerned that if they were to share their experiences with teachers and others, that it should be in a safe and constructive space. This implies that schools and teachers would need to actively consult with and prompt children and parents in order to understand the learning they engage in out of school.

### **Parent-school partnerships**

Parental engagement in children's learning is seen as both supported by and a central part of a 'partnership'

<sup>33</sup> Laueau and Shumar (1996) referenced in Theodorou (2007); Bakker and Denessen (2007)

<sup>34</sup> See Grant (2009) for a typology of learning in the family including many forms of parental engagement with children's learning,

<sup>35</sup> Alldred et al (2002); and see Bouakaz and Persson (2007) for a discussion of parents' involvement with supplementary schooling.

<sup>36</sup> Mobile Pie / Futurelab (2008)

between parents and schools<sup>37</sup>. Parents acting as partners with schools in the joint enterprise of educating their children goes beyond their direct engagement with children's learning to include participation in decisions about school, parents working in school, communication about school events, and sharing information about school and home. This section discusses the key issues in the nature and development of parent-school partnerships as it informs parental engagement with children's learning as well as forming part of the broader ecology of home-school relationships.

The informal nature of primary school is seen by parents as making communication easier than at secondary school. Dealing with many teachers, the fact that parents are less likely to be taking their children to school and expectations of children's independence can make parent-school communication weaker than at primary<sup>38</sup>.

### Technologies in parent-school partnerships

Many parents say that they hear very little about their child's experiences at school from children themselves and would like to know more<sup>39</sup>. They are also generally positive about using digital technologies to communicate between home and school, with 68% of parents saying they would like schools to use technologies such as text messaging and email to communicate with them more frequently<sup>40</sup>. However, parents and teachers also recognise that digital technologies should be only one of a range of strategies for communication<sup>41</sup>.

Some schools are beginning to explore new ways of using digital technologies to communicate and build partnerships with parents, for example, using Learning Platforms to consult with parents and sending text messages about children's attendance and progress<sup>42</sup>. However, overall the picture is typically of one-way

broadcasting from the school to the home. While 80% of schools provide some information for parents on their websites, only 3% of secondary schools used their websites to communicate directly with individual parents, even though 48% of secondary schools said that using technology to communicate with parents was a high priority<sup>43</sup>.

While technologies may play a role in enhancing communication between home and school, it is important to recognise that different strategies and different technologies may be more suitable for some types of communication than others. The concepts of 'thick' and 'thin' communication can be used to distinguish between different types of communication. 'Thick' communication, such as face to face conversation, is richer, more extended and detailed, while 'thin' communication, such as text messaging, is more 'lightweight', shorter, faster and less nuanced. Both thick and thin can be useful for different purposes, but 'thick' communication supported by the use of diverse communication channels appears necessary for stronger home-school relationships and greater parental engagement<sup>44</sup>. Teachers are also aware that while some communications benefit from the speed and convenience offered by technologies, it is important they do not take the place of forging real relationships between teachers and parents, and that some matters are best dealt with via the 'higher bandwidth' modes such as face to face<sup>45</sup>.

### Parents' roles

Policies and strategies to promote parental engagement or parent-school partnerships, including those that encourage the use of digital technologies, convey expectations about parents' roles in relation to their children's learning and education. The roles that parents choose to and feel able to play, and the roles that schools expect them to take on, are significant factors influencing the nature of the relationship between home and school and are discussed below.

<sup>37</sup> Page et al (2009)

<sup>38</sup> Backe-Hansen (2002); Page et al (2009)

<sup>39</sup> Byron (2009)

<sup>40</sup> Populus (2008)

<sup>41</sup> Page et al (2009)

<sup>42</sup> See case studies from the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust ICT Register at [www.ict-register.net/pe-schools.php](http://www.ict-register.net/pe-schools.php) and from Microsoft at [innovativeschoolsonline.com/casestudies/default.aspx](http://innovativeschoolsonline.com/casestudies/default.aspx)

<sup>43</sup> Smith et al (2008)

<sup>44</sup> IPSE (2009b)

<sup>45</sup> Castelli and Pieri (2007)

## Parents' 'role construction'

Parents' 'role construction' describes the activities that parents consider to be their responsibility, and is part of parents' 'cultural capital' – that is, the ability to operate within the dominant cultural structures of society, including schools<sup>46</sup>. Parents' understanding of their role in relation to their children's education is influenced by their own experience of education and their expectations of others' responsibilities towards their children<sup>47</sup>. Parents' role construction will influence, for example, the extent to which they become involved with children's homework, or with their children's school life and learning more generally.

Nearly all parents highly value their children's education, and most want some involvement, with 70% wanting to be more involved than they currently are and over 50% believing they have equal responsibility with the school for their children's education<sup>48</sup>. Parents' perception of their involvement in their children's education has increased since 2001, as has their perception that their children's education is wholly or mainly their responsibility, perhaps reflecting the emphasis on parental choice and involvement from policy and schools themselves<sup>49</sup>.

However, there are big differences in parents' role construction. Some parents, particularly working class parents, are more likely to trust the school to provide for children's learning needs and do not see the need or feel able to involve themselves with the school or children's learning activities, or fear making matters worse by involving themselves<sup>50</sup>. Teachers also have their own expectations about what parents' roles should be, which are not always explicitly communicated to parents. When teachers and parents have different underlying expectations about parents' roles, it can lead to tension and conflict between home and school<sup>51</sup>.

## Parents as partners

In seeing parents as partners, schools and policy-makers acknowledge a sharing of responsibility for children's education. This division of responsibility and rights is underpinned by Home-School Agreements (HSAs), which every school is legally required to produce, although parents are not obliged to sign them. However, in a recent survey, only 40% of parents have heard of HSAs and only 39% remember signing one, suggesting that this may not be a very effective method of establishing a meaningful partnership<sup>52</sup>.

The language of 'partnerships' suggests that there is an equal power relationship between parents and schools. However, the terms of the partnership are often defined by schools, with parents' views, needs and concerns given little weight<sup>53</sup>. Rather than collaboration, then, it seems a form of 'colonisation' can be at work in efforts to recruit parents to the project of delivering the school's agenda<sup>54</sup>. The Home School Knowledge Exchange project found that most of the communication between home and school was 'one-way traffic', with few mechanisms to discover parents' concerns<sup>55</sup>. This one-way communication has actually been shown in Sure Start Children's Centres to have negative effects on parental involvement as it fails to establish a 'personal' and 'meaningful' relationship that respects parents' knowledge and input, and was seen as a barrier by both parents and professionals<sup>56</sup>.

As well as being partners with the school, parents are encouraged to act as consumers, exercising choices and making demands in order to drive schools to compete for their custom. Parents need information in order to be able to make informed choices in their consumption of what schools have to offer. Initiatives such as the School Report Card are intended to provide parents with the information they need in order to make informed choices about schools<sup>57</sup>. Parents role as consumers driving change in education may not always sit easily with the expectation that parents act as supportive partners to schools.

<sup>46</sup> Bourdieu (1993, 1997)

<sup>47</sup> Deslandes and Rousseau (2007)

<sup>48</sup> Reynolds (2006)

<sup>49</sup> Peters et al (2008)

<sup>50</sup> Boakaz and Persson (2007; Crozier and Davies (2007)

<sup>51</sup> Deslandes and Rousseau (2007)

<sup>52</sup> Peters et al (2008); however, the recent white paper (DCSF 2009) sets out plans to revamp HSAs and give them legal power

<sup>53</sup> Alldred et al (2002)

<sup>54</sup> Edwards and Warin (1999)

<sup>55</sup> Hughes and Greenhough (2006)

<sup>56</sup> Sure Start (2007)

<sup>57</sup> DCSF (2009)

## Parents as providers

An area of critique of parental involvement approaches over the last ten years has focused on the extent to which parents are seen as educational providers themselves, expected to develop their pedagogical knowledge and take on teaching roles at home, and parenting itself reframed as an educational activity. Some research studies have shown that the expectation that parents can take on such teaching roles underestimates the professional skills required in teaching, and parents themselves can feel uneasy about being required to work in 'teacherly' ways with their children<sup>58</sup>. Indeed, some question whether parents should take on such teaching roles at all<sup>59</sup>.

Some digital resources that are provided for parents to use with their children at home appear to have been designed on a pedagogic model more suited to the classroom than the daily routines and practices of family life. The role of the adult suggested by some such resources is a didactic role rather than a more open-ended role that builds on parents' intimate relationship with children<sup>60</sup>.

## 'Hard to reach' parents

Parents who do not come into school are often termed 'hard to reach' by teachers, policy-makers and researchers<sup>61</sup>. The term 'hard-to-reach' implies parents who are socially excluded, indifferent to their children's education and need to be 're-engaged'. In the worst cases, it can be used by schools as an excuse for not being more proactive in working with parents from diverse backgrounds<sup>62</sup>. However, from the parents' point of view it is often the school that is hard to reach<sup>63</sup>. Those parents deemed 'hard to reach' are also not a homogenous group and it is important to remember that different strategies are likely to be needed to meet the

needs of diverse groups of parents and a one-size-fits-all model is unlikely to be effective<sup>64</sup>.

Many models of what parental engagement and involvement should look like have been argued to implicitly favour a middle class model<sup>65</sup>. Several studies have shown working class parents were more likely to think that the school had no expectations of them, or that their role was limited to making sure children attend school and do their homework; while white middle class parents were more demanding in their attempts to secure an advantage for their children in what they see as a competitive process<sup>66</sup>. The 'unseen pedagogy' and hidden expectations of parental engagement can thus disadvantage those parents who do not already hold the same notions of parental involvement as the school.

Some of the discourse around 'uninvolved' parents focuses on the fact they may not have the necessary skills or knowledge to support their children's learning, and so require support themselves<sup>67</sup>. However, starting with such a deficit model of parenting can be disempowering for parents and may alienate parents from engaging with the school<sup>68</sup>. This implies that a more effective approach may be one in which the positive interactions and relationships that parents already have with their children are supported and developed.

## Barriers to parental engagement and parent-school partnerships

There are a number of practical barriers that parents face in engaging with children's learning and communicating with schools, with time to help with homework or meet teachers often cited as a major barrier, with working parents, fathers and lone parents more likely to see this as a problem<sup>69</sup>. Childcare and transport costs and opportunities are also described by parents as significant barriers.

<sup>58</sup> Edwards and Warin (1999), Alldred et al (2002)

<sup>59</sup> Edwards and Warin (1999)

<sup>60</sup> See Eagle (2008) for how some digital educational resources for use at home imply a didactic parental role.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, Levitas (1998)

<sup>62</sup> Crozier and Davies (2007)

<sup>63</sup> Crozier and Davies (2007)

<sup>64</sup> Smit et al (2007), Crozier and Davies (2007)

<sup>65</sup> Alldred et al (2002), Crozier and Davies (2007), Edwards and Warin (1999)

<sup>66</sup> Alldred et al (2002), Theodorou (2007), Crozier and Davies (2007), Bakker and Denessen (2007), Edwards and Warin (1999)

<sup>67</sup> Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) in Edwards and Warin (1999)

<sup>68</sup> Edwards and Warin (1999)

<sup>69</sup> Grant (2009), Owen et al (2008)

Communication difficulties between parents and teachers can present obstacles. This can include parents for whom English is not their first language, those who felt that they do not have the 'right' vocabulary to speak to teachers, and those parents with literacy difficulties who found it difficult to understand the way that information was communicated to them<sup>70</sup>.

Parents' previous bad experiences of education or low basic skills levels can hamper their involvement, although their perception of their skills level is more important than actual level achieved, suggesting confidence as well as ability is important<sup>71</sup>.

<sup>70</sup> Harris and Goodall (2009)

<sup>71</sup> Gilby et al (2008)

# 3. Connecting home and school learning and culture

It has been argued that learning at school is increasingly disconnected from children's lives, cultures and learning experiences at home and outside school. This can be especially true for children whose home cultures are particularly different to school cultures, such as working class families and families from ethnic minority backgrounds<sup>72</sup>. Developing relationships between home and school therefore needs to take account of the different cultures at home and school.

## Transitions between home and school cultures

Home is not only a physical place, but a social construct that encompasses the family's routines and structures. So home-school relationships are not just about linking one geographic setting with another, but about negotiating the different social constructs of home and school. The concept of 'school readiness' describes how children from some homes are well prepared by their home experiences to understand how to operate within school and are therefore more able to benefit from the mutual reinforcement of values and practices in both home and school<sup>73</sup>. 'School readiness' however is not a neutral concept: it describes how families who share the norms and cultures of school are able to pass on these norms and cultures to their children, who therefore are more likely to make a more seamless transition from home and school, while families with children from different backgrounds have much further to 'travel'.

Children's transitions from home to school involve a change in identity from the child at home to the pupil in the classroom. There may be continuity or discontinuity between these two identities depending on how appropriate children's behaviour from one setting is in another, and whether adults' responses to children's behaviour are consistent between settings. When there is discontinuity, children embark upon a continual task of adjusting or adapting to the new contexts they are faced with – either more or less successfully<sup>74</sup>. Particular ways of knowing and learning are embedded in social and cultural practices. When the practices of 'knowing'

in home and school are very different, learners' rich and successful experiences of learning at home may not facilitate, or even mediate against learning at school. For example, in Australia, Aboriginal practices of knowing and working are more communal, which can lead to children being told off for 'cheating' when helping each other in a more 'individualised' learning paradigm of the classroom<sup>75</sup>. However, attempts to teach parents to interact with their children in more 'school-like' ways and integrate divergent values of home and school can give rise to conflict and tension that can actually reinforce rather than overcome inequalities<sup>76</sup>.

## Third spaces

Rather than attempt to integrate home and school cultures or encourage homes to adopt school cultures, third space theories have been applied to attempts to create spaces in which aspects of the two different cultures of school and home can coexist and come into 'conversation' with one another<sup>77</sup>. It is hoped that this approach can make school learning experiences more meaningful to children by connecting them with the cultures and contexts children are familiar with and interested in outside school<sup>78</sup>.

For example, in a recent study, some young children's emerging conceptions of themselves as readers – as people who enjoy books, and can understand and make meaning from a range of texts including pictures, websites and games – were challenged by their perception that being a reader in school was about being able to decode printed words. Some children were able to create conceptual 'third spaces' where they could bring together aspects of both home and school discourses about reading that challenged and reshaped both their academic school practices and the discourses of their everyday lives. However, other children began to forsake their own ideas of themselves as readers in

<sup>72</sup> Maddock (2007)

<sup>73</sup> Bernstein (1971)

<sup>74</sup> Lam and Pollard (2006)

<sup>75</sup> Maddock (2007)

<sup>76</sup> Alldred et al (2002)

<sup>77</sup> Levy (2008)

<sup>78</sup> For examples of projects that attempt to create such third spaces, see the Home School Knowledge Exchange project at [www.tlrp.org/proj/phase11/phase2e.html](http://www.tlrp.org/proj/phase11/phase2e.html).

favour of what they regarded as more in keeping with school discourses<sup>79</sup>. These same arguments are likely to also apply to children's conceptions of themselves as 'learners', with educators needing to facilitate space in school for children's own ideas of what it is to be a learner to coexist with school discourses.

## Technology connecting cultures of home and school

The pervasive nature of technology may offer opportunities to expand traditional notions of curriculum and pedagogy to include the kinds of learning that children are engaged in at home as well as at school. Rather than using technology to extend school learning into the home, it could be used to capture and bring together learning from a range of different sources<sup>80</sup>. Mobile and portable technologies in particular are seen by some as having potential to link learning across different contexts, and to link formal and informal kinds of learning<sup>81</sup>.

One example of schools using technologies to link home and school can be seen in blogging projects in which children write short posts about their experiences at home or school and both parents and teachers can comment. For example, in an early years project, children took a teddy bear home and took photos of its adventures, then dictated stories that were written up on the blog. Parents and grandparents commented on the children's posts – enabling even distant family members to keep in touch with children's interests and learning<sup>82</sup>. Several schools use blogs to allow parents to keep up to date with school activities, and communicate with teachers and children, which appear to be particularly successful when children are away on residential school trips<sup>83</sup>. Some schools have also begun exploring the use of Twitter to communicate classroom activities to parents, although

parental uptake is so far minimal<sup>84</sup>. One primary school uses a digital photo frame in the school reception area to share images of children's activities at school with parents when they come to pick up children from school<sup>85</sup>.

Despite the aims of projects such as the 'HomeWork' system to 'seamlessly' connect home and school, digital technologies by themselves are not necessarily effective at facilitating the transition between school and home cultures or creating spaces where the two can coexist. In a recent review of technology-facilitated home-school communication, the most successful examples were those where there was already "cultural harmony between home and school"<sup>86</sup>. A vision that attempts to use technologies to link home and school without considering the socio-cultural differences and unequal power relationships between home and school may potentially reinforce rather than overcome inequalities<sup>87</sup>.

Digital technologies are used in very different ways at home and at school<sup>88</sup>. While parents often purchase educational technologies to use in the home with the express purpose of supporting children's school learning, the important structural differences between contexts mean that they get used in very different ways<sup>89</sup>. Educational use of digital technologies tends to be planned and scaffolded within an organised curriculum, and links to a broader programme of learning. In contrast, educational home use tends to favour individual use with little collaboration with or tutorial support from other family members. It also tends to be restricted to 'discrete' activities that are not connected to other aspects of family life, and to be more playful and exploratory<sup>90</sup>. This implies that extending educational technologies from the school to the home does not necessarily lead to these technologies being used to support school learning in the home. While parents support the idea of using

<sup>79</sup> Levy (2008)

<sup>80</sup> Lewin et al (2003)

<sup>81</sup> Vavoula et al (2007); Kerawalla et al (2007)

<sup>82</sup> Marsh and Parveen (undated)

<sup>83</sup> See, for example, Green Park School's collection of blogs at [greenparkschool.org.uk](http://greenparkschool.org.uk)

<sup>84</sup> Twitter is a 'micro-blogging' service that enables its users to send and read short messages, see [twitter.com/ClassroomTweets](https://twitter.com/ClassroomTweets)

<sup>85</sup> Personal communication with Ollie Bray, Learning and Teaching Scotland

<sup>86</sup> Lewin et al (2003)

<sup>87</sup> Lewin et al (2003)

<sup>88</sup> Kerawalla and Crook (2002); Kerawalla and Crook (2005); Blackmore et al (2003)

<sup>89</sup> Kerawalla and Crook (2002)

<sup>90</sup> Kerawalla and Crook (2002); Blackmore et al (2003)

technologies to support children's learning, they also have reservations about potential 'hothousing' effects and in taking on the role of tutor in relation to children's digital activities<sup>91</sup>. Children's use of technologies at home may provide them with different learning experiences, yet schools often know little about children's technological competences and practices outside school<sup>92</sup>. Schools may be able to build connections with children's learning at home by exploiting children's skills with technologies developed at home within the school, in a kind of 'reverse homework' that imports home practices into the school<sup>93</sup>.

## Boundaries between home and school

While efforts are made to 'bridge the gaps' between home and school, the differences and boundaries between home and school can be very important and a completely 'seamless' experience may be undesirable from the perspective of children, parents and teachers. In thinking about the relationships between home and school, it is therefore important to look at where it may be important to maintain separation rather than connection between contexts.

Children themselves value the differences between home and school. They often characterise school as a place of formal rules and constraint, while home is often seen as a site of relaxation, leisure and fun where there is more scope for negotiation over rules<sup>94</sup>. The gap between home and school may also be seen as 'protective' by children who feel marked out as different to their peers by ethnicity, class, religion or disability. They may feel that they need to keep those aspects of their family and home life private from the eyes of both their peers and teachers, for fear that they will be judged badly or marked out as 'different'<sup>95</sup>. Children are also often very protective of parents who do not speak English well or who children see are likely to be embarrassed at talking to teachers. Both children and parents may go to efforts to preserve the home as a private space, as opposed to the public

space of school. Policies and strategies that emphasise the educational responsibilities of the home challenge this distinction<sup>96</sup>.

Attempts to extend learning from school to the home and involve parents in their children's learning are in danger of reframing children's lives outside school and family life purely in terms of an educational project, with a worst case scenario being children continuously worked on by ambitious parents and teachers, leading "a curricularised life within a professional logic"<sup>97</sup>. Many parents, in fact, see part of their role as protecting children from school's incursions into the home and ensuring that children socialise, play and relax as well as learn<sup>98</sup>.

<sup>91</sup> Kerawalla and Crook (2002)

<sup>92</sup> Blackmore et al (2003)

<sup>93</sup> Kerawalla and Crook (2002); Blackmore et al (2003)

<sup>94</sup> Edwards (2002), Montandon (2002), Mayall (1994)

<sup>95</sup> Alldred et al (2002)

<sup>96</sup> Alldred et al (2002)

<sup>97</sup> Erikson and Larssen (2002)

<sup>98</sup> Grant (2009)

## 4. Children's role and agency in home-school relationships

Research and strategies that focus on parental engagement or home-school relationships tend to emphasise the role and activities of parents and teachers, with children seen as benefiting from the efforts made by parents and teachers on their behalf. The majority of research into home-school relationships and parental engagement does not consider children's views, or how they may actively influence home-school relationships or their parents' involvement in their learning<sup>99</sup>. This section therefore will focus on children's active role in the nature and extent of relationships between home and school.

### Children's role in parental involvement

The most frequent way for children to play a role in home-school relationships is as 'messengers' between school and home, often by delivering letters from the school to parents, and in telling parents about their experiences at school. However, letters are often not passed on and most parents report that they would like to know more about children's school experiences than they hear from children themselves<sup>100</sup>. It is seen as important for children to talk about their school experiences for their own learning, as well as brokering the relationship between their parents and school. In overcoming this "crisis in communication" between children and parents, it is important to acknowledge the agency of children, with guidance emphasising that parents should try to find out what children are enthusiastic about, ask open questions and wait to be 'invited in' by children rather than demanding information in an interrogatory fashion<sup>101</sup>.

In one of the few studies to explicitly focus on children's role in parental involvement, children were seen to play a major role in the extent of their parents' involvement in their education, with children taking an active or passive attitude to facilitating either their parents' involvement, or 'uninvolvement'<sup>102</sup>. That is, children would either actively seek parents' involvement or uninvolvement, or passively 'go along with' parents' involvement or uninvolvement. Children may involve their parents in some aspects of their learning, while resisting involvement in others.

Children who actively involved their parents were usually motivated by a desire for intimacy with their parent, most often their mother, rather than to improve their educational achievement, emphasising the importance of the parent-child relationship. Children may resent their parents' 'intrusion' into school matters because they feel competent to deal with the situation alone, they think their parents will be unable to help, or because they fear their parents' involvement may make matters worse, for example, by being singled out by the teacher<sup>103</sup>. However, children's efforts to keep home and school separate does not imply that they value one sphere (home or school) at the expense of the other – some children maintain separation while highly valuing both home and school<sup>104</sup>.

As children negotiate the transitions in context and in identity (child at home or pupil at school) between home and school, they actively construct, reconstruct and respond to the situations in which they find themselves. In a study of children's transition from home to nursery, children negotiated their adaptation to the changing demands of the classroom, making use of the cultural tools at their disposal, bringing to school the competencies and learning dispositions that they had learned at home, in a dynamic and continuous process of adaptation that may redefine both the classroom and the home<sup>105</sup>. While this study referred to very young children, this process of negotiating the daily transitions between home and school is likely to continue throughout children's school careers.

### Children's personal learning agendas

A study of young children showed how they connected their learning at home and at school to further their own 'personal learning agendas'<sup>106</sup>. Children were able to exploit, appropriate and transform the opportunities for learning presented by school and family to make them personally meaningful. For example, while two children who appear to be learning the same thing, such as how to ride a bike, will need to learn some of the same skills, such as balance, they may also appropriate

<sup>99</sup> Reynolds (2005)

<sup>100</sup> Crozier and Davies (2007); Byron (2009)

<sup>101</sup> Byron (2009)

<sup>102</sup> Edwards et al (2000)

<sup>103</sup> Erikson and Larsen (2002)

<sup>104</sup> Edwards et al (2002)

<sup>105</sup> Lam and Pollard (2006)

<sup>106</sup> Maddock (2006)

this experience to their own more personal learning agendas. One child might connect learning to ride a bike with learning about freedom from the home while for another it might connect to competition with siblings. The deeper learning that children engaged in in this study was intimately connected to the children's own deep concerns; their own personal agenda actually transformed what they took from the learning experience.

Children in this study appropriated their learning experiences to explore personally significant issues, such as death, or how to deal with being seen as different from peers. To understand children's personal learning agendas, teachers and parents need to have a deep relationship with children, in which children are able to express their voices and perspectives on their learning experiences. Listening to children's perspectives allows parents and teachers to see beyond the child they would like or expect to see, to the 'third child'. This is the person the child him or herself wants to be, "the most powerful child, with the most work to do, the agent of his/her own learning"<sup>107</sup>. Fundamentally, this means a commitment to listening to children and seeing them and their learning from their own perspective, rather than seeing them as we would like or expect them to be.

## Children's rights

As well as acknowledging that children do influence home-school relationships, it is important to recognise that they also have a right to do so. Children want their rights to privacy respected, to know how data about them is used, to have a say in how it is used, and need to be taken seriously in the sharing of information about them between home and school<sup>108</sup>.

As adults, we have a right to know about how data is used, and we have to give our informed consent for people to use data about us. These rights are not extended in full to young children (for example medical information about young children needs to be shared with their parents without the child's consent) but as children grow older

and are able to give their informed consent to decisions about them, their views need to be taken seriously.

## Children's different roles

Older children, children from working class backgrounds and children from different cultures tend to place more emphasis on maintaining a distinction between the spheres of home and school – possibly reflecting the greater 'distance' between the cultural worlds they travel between<sup>109</sup>.

Some children may resist parents' involvement because they see themselves as competent to deal with schooling without their parents' involvement – an attitude that was more prevalent amongst children from middle class backgrounds<sup>110</sup>. Children who resisted their parents' involvement because they felt their parents would be unwilling or unable to become involved were more likely to be from working class rather than middle class backgrounds. Working class children were also more likely to take an active stance towards either involving their parents, or resisting their involvement, whereas middle class children were more likely to passively 'go along with' their parents' involvement or uninvolvement.

As well as class and ethnicity, gender also plays a role in the kinds of parental involvement that children elicit, with girls more active in involving parents (mostly mothers) in a wide range of aspects of school life, whereas those boys who did involve parents focused on schoolwork. These differences along class, ethnicity and gender lines indicate how important it is to understand the local and personal context in which relationships are developed between home and school as well as the concrete ways that gender, class and ethnicity play out in individuals' lives<sup>111</sup>.

<sup>107</sup> Maddock (2006): 166

<sup>108</sup> Edwards et al (2002); Page et al (2009)

<sup>109</sup> Edwards et al (2002), Crozier and David (2007), Hughes (forthcoming)

<sup>110</sup> Edwards et al (2002)

<sup>111</sup> Edwards et al (2002)

## 5. Summary

While there is broad agreement that parental engagement with children's learning plays a crucial role in children's achievement, relationships between school and home are a complex business.

The kind of engagement with children's learning that happens in the home, intimately bound up with the relationship between children and parents and embedded in the cultures of the home, is most significant for children's learning. When the cultures and learning of the home and school are in alignment, children can benefit from easier transitions between the two contexts and the mutual reinforcement of learning practices and values. Where there is less overlap between the cultures of home and school, such as for children from working class or minority ethnic families, children have to work harder to move and adapt between home and school and there is a danger that their learning at school becomes disconnected from their wider learning lives. The benefits that are gained from alignment between home and school therefore potentially discriminate against children who already experience unequal outcomes from their education. For these reasons, developing a working relationship between home and school is crucial if we are to support children's learning in the broadest sense and 'narrow the gap' between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers.

While some schools are working towards this form of relationship, much of the rhetoric around partnership focuses on recruiting parents and activities in the home to support the schools' agenda, by extending school learning activities to the home, requiring parents to work with children in 'teacherly' ways, and adopting a one-size-fits-all model of one-way communication from the school to home. These strategies are likely to be counter-productive and serve only to alienate families, deprive them of their skills and confidence to support their children, and emphasise a disconnection between school and home. Building a meaningful partnership between schools and home is challenging, because it requires a change in the power relationships between schools, teachers and children.

This is not to say, however, that learning at home and school should be completely 'seamless' with the

same kinds of experience in each context. Children's experiences and learning at both home and school need to be respected and built upon, creating spaces in the classroom and home which these different experiences could come into 'conversation' with one another, reshaping both their home and school experiences. The value that children, parents and teachers place on the differences and boundaries between home and school need to be recognised, to make the most of the different opportunities for learning afforded by each context.

In connecting the cultures and learning between home and school, children themselves have an important role to play, although children's active role has received less attention in the literature reviewed and more research on this is needed. They themselves make both a physical transition and a transition in 'identity' as they travel between the contexts of home and school. Children must negotiate these transitions and relationships, using the resources available to them, including people and various tools and technologies. This may include encouraging, resisting, or 'going along with' their parents' involvement or uninvolvement in different aspects of their learning and education. As they move between and learn in different contexts, they may be engaged with their own personal learning agendas, adopting the activities, experiences and opportunities for learning to further learning about the issues that most concern them. Any strategy that aims to facilitate successful relationships between home and school, then, needs to consult with children about making connections between home and school and encourage them to initiate and facilitate their parents' involvement.

By recognising children's active role in mediating their own learning experience between home and school and furthering their learning agendas, the focus is shifted from a model in which the school controls learning and attempts to recruit the home and family to deliver its agenda, to one in which school and home are adopted and exploited to further children's own learning agendas.

Through the online reporting and home access initiatives, digital technologies are being harnessed to the parental engagement and home-school relationships agendas. However, as this literature review makes clear, we will need to do more than simply provide access to digital

technologies and information in order to foster working relationships between home and school. There is still limited evidence available on the use of technologies to support home-school relationships, and much of the available evidence is anecdotal. No empirical evidence could be found that explored how children's active role in home-school relationships could be supported by digital technologies and further research in this area is needed.

The most successful examples of using technologies to link home and school are those where there is already cultural alignment between home and school. In order to use technologies to connect home and school, we need to consider how this may play out with the unequal power relationships and socio-cultural differences between school and home, otherwise inequalities are likely to be reinforced instead of overcome. It is also important to distinguish between different types of technologies and different types of communication between home and school, differentiating between 'thick' and 'thin' forms of communication. However, technologies may also offer the possibility of a virtual 'third space' where children themselves are able to bring together and connect aspects of their lives and learning from home and school, reflecting and furthering their own learning agendas.

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## About Futurelab

Futurelab is passionate about transforming the way people learn. Tapping into the huge potential offered by digital and other technologies, we are developing innovative learning resources and practices that support new approaches to education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Working in partnership with industry, policy and practice, Futurelab:

- incubates new ideas, taking them from the lab to the classroom
- offers hard evidence and practical advice to support the design and use of innovative learning tools
- communicates the latest thinking and practice in educational ICT
- provides the space for experimentation and the exchange of ideas between the creative, technology and education sectors.

A not-for-profit organisation, Futurelab is committed to sharing the lessons learnt from our research and development in order to inform positive change to educational policy and practice.

Futurelab  
1 Canons Road  
Harbourside  
Bristol BS1 5UH  
United Kingdom

tel: +44 (0)117 915 8200  
fax: +44 (0)117 915 8201  
e-mail: [info@futurelab.org.uk](mailto:info@futurelab.org.uk)  
blog: [flux.futurelab.org.uk](http://flux.futurelab.org.uk)  
[www.futurelab.org.uk](http://www.futurelab.org.uk)

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