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Parent and carer engagement with children's digital lives

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Abstract

This article employs a human rights based framework to investigate the preparedness of parents and carers in engaging digitally with their child. By examining the digital literacy of both parents and children, the roles parents often take on in digital engagement is shown to reflect an outdated understanding of parent digital identity. Furthering the problem, COVID-19 has revealed and exacerbated gaps in parental and child digital literacy. However, it also revealed the power of community mobilisation in supporting parents to engage with their child's increased digital learning. Considering this, this article affirms the need for carving out a specific space for parents involved with community-based digital literacy projects to form their own identities as digitally engaged parents. This article suggests how existing People Know How's services could be adapted to help parents fill the digital gap and develop digital literacy for themselves and their children.

Keywords

Children and young people, digital skills, digital exclusion, digital inclusion, connectivity, COVID-19, Positive Transitions, Reconnect

Key points

- Being a digital native does not equate to ownership of digital literacy.

- Parental and carer engagement are extremely important in the child's digital learning process and respect for children's rights.

- There is a significant need to carve out parent-specific spaces in community-based support/ resources for developing parental digital literacy to aid digital engagement with their child.

Introduction

Due to rapid technological advancement and the proliferation of digital technology in homes during the first decades of the 21st century, it is posited that children growing up in this era can be considered digital natives, while parents and carers are digital immigrants (Helsper & Eynon, 2010). Digital natives refer to those who were in touch with digital since early childhood and digital immigrants refer to those who adapted to digital in later life (Helsper & Eynon, 2010). As such, this categorisation of digital ability generally leads to parents believing a child's adoption of digital literacy is a natural process and does not necessarily require parental support (Plowman et al., 2008). This begs the question of how useful it is to categorise an individual's digital literacy based on the amount of time one is exposed to digital. These are important points to consider because children's acquisition of digital literacy is important to their ability to navigate modern society and can be considered a right under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Dias et al., 2016). Digital literacy does not merely mean skills competency; its acquisition also means an ability to contextualise this set of competencies in various situations (Thomas, 2011; Hoechsmann & Poyntz, 2012).

As defined in Goodall & Montgomery (2013), parental engagement refers to greater commitment and ownership of the child's learning journey. The practical implications of this are reflected through the ever-increasing dependence of educators on digital tools in children's education, affirming the need for parents to be well-prepared in engaging digitally (Scottish Government, 2020). Now, in the face of social changes brought about by COVID-19, increased reliance on digital by schools has accelerated this urgency of needing digitally literate parents and carers who are able with the child digitally. At the same time, COVID-19 has revealed the power of community-based innovation and resources mobilisation (Roeschert et al., 2020). At People Know How, this power is reflected through projects underpinned by the social innovation model. For example, the Computer Delivery project began as a response to the lockdown shows the urgency of enhancing digital accessibility and literacy (People Know How, 2019; Baldacchino, 2020).

This article first looks at issues surrounding parental and child digital literacy. Then, an examination is provided of the role of parents in digitally engaging with the child and its relation to COVID-19. Finally, this article affirms the need to treat parents as their own category when designing spaces for acquiring digital literacy in community-based support via People Know How's Positive Transitions and Reconnect services.

The digital literacy conundrum

In examining how prepared parents are in engaging digitally with their children, it is important to first understand the digital baseline for both parents and children. The idea of parents as digital immigrants and children as digital native suggests a role reversal between the two, where parents are often the ones learning from their children about the uses of digital media (Nelissen & Van den Bulck, 2017). Moreover, a new generation of parents who also grew up as 'digital natives' are increasing in numbers in the larger parent population – this trend suggests that younger parents/parents of the near future and their children are on the same level with each other in terms of being digital natives (Dias et al., 2016).

Seeing that society will soon be filled with digital natives, this begs the question of whether this affects the engagement levels of parents with their child in digital, and if parents could engage as such effectively and appropriately. Herein lies the digital literacy conundrum: being a digital native does not equate to being digitally literate for either parent or child. It is unclear how aware parents are of this and of the importance of having the skills and knowledge themselves to engage effectively with their child to help them become digitally literate.

Literacy in any form is a learned process. For instance, one might consider the original meaning of the term. Language has existed

for a very long time. It is comparable to digital technology as both tools permeate society at every level and are key tools in knowledge transmission and acquisition (Hoechsmann & Poyntz, 2012). Research shows that infants are born with the ability to use sound cues to distinguish between different languages, which supports their language(s) acquisition process (Gervain & Werker, 2013). In this sense everyone is a 'language native'. Yet this does not mean children are born literate – parents still have to engage with the child's language acquisition process so that they can communicate effectively and gain competent literacy skills for school and beyond (Sheridan et al., 2011). This is the same for digital literacy. Parents should engage with their child in ways they would with language acquisition, or any other learning areas for that matter, so that the child could achieve digital inclusion.

Children's rights and the digital native rhetoric

An examination of the 'digital native' rhetoric in children and how it relates to children's rights further illuminates why parental digital literacy is significant. In the UNCRC, rights under the convention are grouped into 3 pillars: provision, protect, and participate (OHCHR, 1989). In provision, this includes the rights which are growth-enabling, such as the right to education. In protection, this includes protecting children from exploitation of various forms including privacy and right to be protected from abuse. In participation, this includes rights granting the child appropriate agency in decision-making and right to information (OHCHR, 1989, Dias et al., 2017, Rosani, 2019). The are many ways which issues under this article's topic can fit into the 3 pillars, but here I will focus on the digital native rhetoric as it is the most relevant to this study.

A potential issue with the rhetoric is that it creates a digital native/immigrant dichotomy. This perpetuates the idea that children and parents stand on opposite ends in digital, rather than standing and moving forward together. This idea suggests a divergence from the UNCRC principles of protection and provision of children by parents; where

it appears the child's right to have their best interests provided for were somewhat neglected in digital literacy due to the digital native identity badge (OHCHR, 1989). However, the principles also uphold the right to participation of the child, where this role reversal granted agency to children within the family sphere in learning how to be digitally competent (OHCHR, 1989, Dias et al., 2017, Rosani, 2019). The digital native/immigrant dichotomy seemingly manufactures a divide which is not useful for parents in engaging with their child digitally. As evident in studies such as Dias et al. (2016), Plowman et al. (2008), Livingstone (2016), and Thomas (2011), a more nuanced understanding of parental and child digital identities can better contribute towards enabling and protecting the child's best interests (Article 3 UNCRC) in digital. In Blum-Ross and Livingstone (2020), it is also suggested that digital engagement helps to explore and define the child's interests and development, and that parents should engage the digital behaviours of children to guide their "learning identity" towards one that focuses on long-term excellence (Wortham in Blum-Ross and Livingstone, 2020, p. 153).

Socioeconomic challenges for parents

One key divider in how well-prepared parents are in digital engagement is the socioeconomic status (SES) of the family unit. Differences in SES present different challenges which threaten parental preparedness across a variety of areas, including preparedness in digital engagement (Andrew et al., 2020). With these embedded inequalities often spanning across different aspects of life, parental preparedness in digital for those from disadvantaged backgrounds can be doubly difficult (Scottish Government, 2020). Socioeconomic conditions often prevent this group of parents from being mentally and physically prepared to engage as the lack of time, resources, and additional work and care responsibilities creates difficult situations for parents (People Know How, 2020a). People Know How's research through their archived Whit Dae Ye Hink project under the Positive Transitions service supported this point – combining the studies across four schools,

parents appear to wish they were more engaged with their child's learning. However, they also express their inability to do so due to time constraints and other commitments (People Know How, 2020a). In turn, these problems project onto children and pose a potential hazard to their rights. In 2018, it was found that a third of children in the UK live in poverty and the numbers are set to increase (Alston, 2019). Due to the socioeconomic factors behind level of parental digital engagement, this trend could perhaps increase digital disengagement between parents and children and digital exclusion among children.

In light of COVID-19, these inequalities have worsened; instead of being the great equaliser that many thought COVID-19 was in its early stages, it turned out to be a great revealing of inequalities embedded in society, and a perpetuation of these inequalities (Roeschert et al., 2020). Community solidarity and innovation have stepped in to alleviate these problems, such as People Know How's delivery of 500 computer devices within 5 months of launching the new computer delivery scheme (Baldacchino, 2020). By sharing and distributing these resources, People Know How showed how community organisation can be one step towards easing digital inaccessibility and illiteracy.

Nonetheless, digital exclusion is a problem predating COVID-19. The pandemic had merely accelerated the urgency of this problem that we as members of society must address (Andrew et al., 2020). In the most recent 2020 study by the Scottish Government on COVID-19 and equality in Scotland, 23% of people across Scotland were found to have no foundational skills in digital, which is 8% higher than the UK as a whole. Groups such as rural residents and lone parents were also hit particularly hard by lack of access and basic digital skills (Scottish Government, 2020).

Practicing parental agency

Levels of parent engagement with the child's learning in digital calls for more parental agency because engagement requires greater commitment to, and ownership of, the child's learning journey. Studies by the US Family

Online Safety institute affirms that parents are eager to engage with their child digitally: 78% of surveyed parents thought their child using technology will bring them a positive future and 55% confirm using technology with their child often (Livingstone, 2016). From here, we can see that parents are willing to engage with their child in digital, and that a significant number of parents already do engage with their child in digital, although this is not necessarily restricted to only the child's education and can extend to social aspects by using digital media platforms (Blum-Ross and Livingstone, 2020).

However, across traditional and digital methods, parents can often be more passive than they would ideally like to in child learning engagement when it comes to school-based learning. Common practices of home-school interactions such as parent-teacher conferences, PTA nights and school fundraisers often involve teachers leading the space. Despite the best efforts of schools, time and resources constraints are still major barriers in activating parental engagement (Goodall & Montgomery, 2013). As such, it is important that parents actively seek ways - independent of what the school provides in terms of digital learning - to enhance their preparedness in engaging digitally with their children. Parents themselves are of varying degrees of digital literacy and so their ability to do this may vary. The idea of parents being digitally excluded is perhaps hard to believe, as we might imagine parents having frequently used such technology in the workplace and in their social lives. However, this image might be mostly a reflection of the experiences white-collar working parents, to the exclusion of parents belonging to other SES groups such as those discussed in the above section (Livingstone, 2016, Blum-Ross and Livingstone, 2020). With appropriate support that is tailored to parents' interests and needs, parents can better harness digital literacy and engage with their child digitally more effectively.

Carving out parent-specific spaces in digital support

There have been major shifts and debates around what role(s) parents have in child digital

engagement. For the majority of research in parent-child digital engagement and popular opinion (Helsper & Eynon, 2010; Samuel, 2017), this surrounds questions of parental preparedness in engaging with their child in digital learning and their role in encouraging the digitally literacy of their child, as well as concerns over the child's online privacy (Dias et al., 2016).

The parental identity is described by Fracasso (2017) as "one of the most dramatic and significant identities that an individual assumes" (p. 152) and adopts itself according to the child's needs. At the same time, a parent is not just a parent; they are also a colleague, friend, family member, and may be constituted by various other identities. However, arguably the parent identity is paramount and will often or always be the core of the parent's understanding of themselves (Fracasso, 2017). Balancing these identities can pose its own challenges. Reflecting on the literature and People Know How's practical expertise, an answer lies in creating a specific space for parents to actively engage by defining their own role. This could be achieved by encouraging parents via services to form their own categorical understanding of 'being a parent who is digitally engaged' which incorporates the other aspects of their being. Existing services could be adapted to work collaboratively with parents to merge the parent's other interests and knowledge needed to support their child digitally. Encouraging parents to self-identify beyond their role as parent can help to encourage digital engagement and digital literacy in them in a meaningful manner; one where they could apply these competencies not just for engagement with their child, but also in their own daily lives. To facilitate this, carving out specific spaces for parents could greatly enhance services aimed at parent-child digital engagement.

Bridging Reconnect and Positive Transitions

Reconnect's Wellbeing & Digital project supports users to learn and improve digital skills. However, the project does not provide parent-specific digital competency skills. Meanwhile, the Positive Transitions service supports vulnerable young people and their families through befriending, and parents' opinions are harnessed through other projects such as Whit Dae Ye Hink, but the core focus of this programme is children and young people (People Know How, 2020b, People Know How, 2020c). Reflecting on People Know How's projects, a new and unique space for digital literacy acquisition could be carved out for parents as their needs do not conveniently fit either service's existing projects.

The Epstein model offers insights to practical activities under each type of parental involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, home-based learning, decision making, and community collaboration (San Diego State University, 2020). While this model has attracted critiques of being centered around schools, putting parents into passive positions and does not fit exactly with how this article defined parental engagement (Goodall, 2017), it is a well-rounded, effective conceptual framework and is widely accepted in the field of parental involvement/ engagement studies (San Diego State University, 2020). Each type of parental involvement described demonstrates the various ways which parents could increase engagement with their child. In this research, the 6th type, community collaboration, corroborates the need discussed in this article to carve out a parent-specific spaces in community-based digital literacy schemes such as is facilitated by People Know How's Reconnect service.

To take the Epstein model from involvement to engagement, parental agency can be introduced into community collaboration, which addresses the critique faced by the model as mentioned previously.

Community collaboration is a good reflector of the social innovation model used by People Know How. By identifying the needs of the community through Reconnect and Positive Transitions, this research now asks how those needs can be met. Comparing the Epstein model with People Know How services shows how this model can fit into the existing services

of Reconnect and Positive Transitions so a version of it can be implemented in practice. With the model itself being about what parents would do in parental involvement; this provides a theoretical justification for the development, expansion and bridging of these two services (Goodall, 2017; People Know How, 2019). As mentioned earlier, COVID-19 saw unprecedented speed in community mobilisation and resources distribution. At People Know How, an example of this is the Computer Delivery programme's success in distributing 500 devices within 6 months of launching (Baldacchino, 2020). This project shows Epstein's community collaboration at work; at People Know How, bridging the two services can add onto the success of the Computer Delivery project and solve some of the challenges Epstein set out in this type of parental involvement, which includes the integration of community programmes with education set out to benefit children and parents (San Diego State University, 2020).

Conclusion

An analysis of the literature shows that while most parents are not digitally excluded, socioeconomic conditions are a key factor behind the level of parental engagement with their child in digital. This encompasses all aspects of digital learning, ranging from accessibility to a computer, to helping children set up/sign into online meetings, to using both basic and specialist software in finishing a piece of homework. While there is literature suggesting that parents display their own preferences in engaging with their children in digital and the importance of their agency in doing so, mainstream practice still prioritises a school-based approach. This is still true during the COVID-19 pandemic, where parents continue to execute and implement their child's transition to learning digitally as prescribed by the school. This article identifies gaps both for future research and for practice in using community resources to mobilise parental agency in developing both their own and the child's digital literacy.

Parents are not merely an extension of their child's life. Parents can and do have identities outside the parameters of being a parent – they are a friend, a colleague, a whole person with their own interests and wishes in life that do not always completely align with childcare. This article has displayed the digital native/ immigrant dichotomy as a largely insufficient framework in determining the preparedness of parents and carers in engaging digitally with their child, and suggested a nuanced understanding will be more useful and can be better grounded in children's rights. It is important to consider parental preparedness in digital engagement and how this is affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, parents can be understood as having agency in creating their own identities in their engagement with community-based digital literacy support, and in defining their own roles as digitally engaged parents in this regard, rather than having this imposed upon them. This article has suggested how People Know How could work collaboratively with parents to help them achieve this through the Reconnect and Positive Transitions services.

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