**Digital technologies and parental involvement in education: the experiences of mothers of primary school-aged children. (7830 words)**

This paper makes a contribution to the developing field of the political economy of educational technology and to an understanding of the significance of digital technologies for home-school relations. The digitalisation of social life is increasing and the impact of digitalisation on home-school relations, parents, and children is under-researched. This article draws on a new qualitative study where fifteen mothers were interviewed about parenting a primary school aged child in England with a focus on digital technologies, home-school relations, and parenting. I argue that processes of digitalisation are contributing to a bureaucratisation of home-school relations. Drawing on Weber’s social theory, I argue that managing communications and information is taking precedence over other aspects of parental involvement in education. In this process, digital technologies are contributing to increasing demands for involvement in education that are placed on parents, reinforcing the wider norms of the intensification and professionalisation of parenting.

Keywords: digital technologies; home-school relations; motherhood; parental involvement.

# Introduction

The involvement of parents in their children’s education has long been a significant concern for both researchers and politicians. In Miriam David’s landmark study, *The State, the Family and Education*, she states ‘…what parents should do for their schoolchildren’ is one of the ‘…major items on the contemporary political agenda in England’ (1980, 1). Parental involvement in education has endured as site of political and policy concern and has been a significant area of interest for sociologists of education.

Parental involvement can be understood in different ways by different actors and institutions. Standing notes that in terms of schools and educational policy, parental involvement ‘involves a range of pedagogical and educational tasks which articulate to the school’ (1999, 58). These tasks can include helping with homework, reading, helping in the classroom or with school trips, and attending meetings and events at school (Standing 1999, 58). Some researchers have developed typologies to capture the different ways that parents respond to and manage the varied demands of parental involvement in education (see Vincent 1996; Standing 1999; Edwards and Alldred 2000).

The nature of parental involvement in education has changed over time both in terms of the aspects of schooling that parents are expected to be involved in and the intensity of this involvement in the home (Reay 2005, 104). Parents are now expected to play a greater role in their children’s education than previously (Selwyn et al 2011). In Britain, this shift has been formalised in the *School Standards and Framework Act*, 1998 which legislated for home-school agreements where guidelines on parental roles in education could be set out (David 1999, 125). Alongside, these more formal changes and the use of ‘home-school contracts’ or ‘learning contracts’ (Ball 2017, 201) there has been a sustained emphasis on parental involvement in education by politicians and in policy. Parenting has been represented as central to the educational success of children (Vincent 2017, 542) and as Gillies (2006, 281) observes, ‘Involvement in a child’s education is viewed as a key parental responsibility, impacting on future well-being and life chances’.

This emphasis on the role of parents in education is part of the heightened focus on parents that has happened over the last 20-30 years in Euro-American societies (Faircloth and Gürtin 2017; Lee et al 2014). Geinger et al (2014, 488) have argued that there has been a turn to parenting in the welfare state policies of many European countries where parenting has been constructed as the solution to a range of social problems (see also Goodall 2019). Scholars of parenting culture have been heavily influenced by the work of Hays who identified the ideology of intensive mothering as meaning child-rearing is constructed as ‘…*child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive,* and *financially expensive*’ (1996, 8, emphasis in original). Faircloth (2014, 48) argues that whilst there are differences between parents connected to class, gender, and ethnicity, this intensive parenting style is considered an ‘ideal’ in Euro-American contexts. Writers on parenting culture have tended to focus on how the parenting role has been reshaped in the early years of childhood with work on topics such as pregnancy (Lowe and Lee 2010), infant feeding (Faircloth 2010, Wolf 2007) and the spread of neuroscientific ideas about early childhood (Macvarish 2016). Vincent argues that ‘intensive mothering/parenting’ is becoming a normalised style of parenting in affluent societies of the Global North which ‘…imposes particular forms of behaviour on parents, especially mothers’. This is connected to the increasing ‘responsibilisation’ of parents by the state where parents are viewed as determining the conduct and outcomes of their children (Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards 2010, 144).

Whilst the social construction of the ‘good parent’ has been changing over the last two to three decades, changes have also been occurring in primary school education and in home-school relations. Many of these changes are connected to the impacts of policies informed by neoliberal ideologies and the promotion of the marketisation of education (Crozier and Symeou 2017). Ball’s scholarship has charted the ways in which ideas and practices of the market increasingly dominate ideas and practices in education (see Ball 2017) and the many ways in which private companies are now part of public education (Ball 2007).

Digital technologies are one area where private companies have moved into public education (see Williamson 2017). The recent Department for Education strategy paper, *Realising the potential of technology in education* (2019), states that schools in England spent £470 million on learning technologies in 2016-17. Damian Hinds, Secretary of State for Education, introduces this strategy paper by writing that there is a need to ‘…explore and reap the benefits that technology can bring’ (D*f*E 2019, 3). In this paper the economic significance of the ‘dynamic EdTech business’ (D*f*E 2019, 9) is emphasised as well as the potential for educational technologies to deliver ‘efficiencies’ in terms of the workloads of teachers and improvements to the outcomes of learners.

However, the promotion of the educational technologies is frequently cast in ‘enthusiastic and often exaggerated terms’ (Selwyn 2016, 1) and it can prove difficult to find sustained empirical evidence of positive impacts of these technologies. In Livingstone’s review of the effects of information and communications technologies on traditional educational outcomes, she finds that ‘Evaluations, it seems, have thrown up apparently ad hoc patterns of significant and insignificant findings which defy researchers’ ability to explain’ (2012, 2).

Whilst the beneficial impacts of learning technologies on traditional learning outcomes appears to be limited, other analyses have pointed to the ways in which educational technologies are changing the experience of education for teachers, parents, and children. Digital technologies have increasingly been used by schools to support parental engagement in their children’s education (Selwyn et al 2011, 315). Selwyn et al’s study of the use of learning platforms for parental involvement in education suggests that their usage is linked to the ‘control and regulation of parents’ engagement’ (2011, 322). A similar theme is found in Manolev et al’s (2019, 36) analysis of ClassDojo which argues that this technology intensifies and normalises the surveillance of students. In Bradbury’s work on the ‘datatification’ of early years education in England, she argues that this ‘datafication’ produces ‘data-driven subjectivities for both teacher and child’ (2019, 7) and environments where measurement is emphasised over other conceptualisations of learning (8).

From this review, we are building a picture of a changing context for home-school relations. Parenting has become more intense and demanding in some areas of the parent-child relationship. Educational success is increasingly connected to parental involvement and schools are being changed by the increasing use of digital technologies. This latter process has been usefully analysed by Williamson (2017) as encompassing both a ‘datafication’ and ‘digitisation’ of education. Datafication refers to the move of aspects of education into digital data; digitisation is the ‘translation of diverse educational practices into software code’ (Williamson 2017, 5). It is this ‘digitisation’ of educational practice that forms the concern of this paper, specifically, the digitisation of elements of parental involvement in education.

Scholars have drawn attention to the need for more critical analyses of the impact of digital technologies on education (Selwyn 2012; Williamson 2017, 6). It is notable that in two recent papers (Vincent 2017; Goodall 2019) which reflect on research on parents and education the possible impacts of digital technologies on the home-school relationship are not considered. A theme of Selwyn’s (2016) work on educational technologies has been to draw attention to the dominance of educational technologists in the public discourse around education and technology. As a rejoinder to this dominance, Selwyn has called for ‘genuine public conversation about digital education amongst those who have direct and diverse lived experience of it’ (2016, 6). This paper moves towards this and discusses the findings of a research project, ‘Exploring home-school relationships: the experiences of mothers of primary school aged children’. This project explored mothers’ experiences of the ways in which schools use digital technologies for learning and communications. The objectives of this project were to explore the implications of how educational technologies are used by schools and how this impacts on home-school relations. More broadly, the aims were to contribute to wider debates about parenting culture, parental involvement in education, and the increasing digitisation of many aspects of our everyday lives.

**The study and research methods**

Between June-August 2018, 15 qualitative interviews were conducted with mothers of children in reception or year one of primary school (children aged 4-6 years old). The participants were recruited via online and face-to-face methods. A post was placed on the author’s Facebook page and the sharing of this page led to a number of potential participants expressing interest in taking part. As the mother of two primary school children my own social networks provided another means for reaching potential participants. Recruitment was limited by geographical area with most of the participants being resident in the West Midlands where the researcher also lives. The research was limited to this region as it was an exploratory project with a small budget.

Fifteen face-to-face interviews were conducted in total and these were held in a variety of locations, including workplaces, my home, and the home of the participant, depending on the preference of the interviewee. The participants ranged in age from early 20s to early 40s and all had one child in reception or year one of primary school. A small number of participants had children in both of these year groups[[1]](#footnote-1). All of the participants had children in state primary schools although this had not been part of the inclusion criteria for the project which simply stated that participants should be the mother a child in reception or year one of school. The schools attended by the children of the participants varied considerably and included very small village primary schools in rural areas to large inner-city primary schools. The participants had varying levels of educational qualifications and included mothers who left compulsory education at 16 and those who held postgraduate qualifications. Most of the participants were cohabiting or married. Neither class nor ethnicity were used in the sampling criteria for this project which was small-scale and aimed to generate new knowledge on home-school relationships in the context of digital technologies in a way that could inform more focussed work in the future. There was a mix of working-class and middle-class participants when categorisations were made on the basis of the occupation of the interviewee. Analyses of parental involvement have tended to emphasise ‘the binary of middle class and working class’ (Vincent 2017, 552). Vincent has argued that this binary obscures ‘class fractions’ and the experiences of those in an ‘intermediate’ social class location (ibid.). In this study, there were not clear differences between participants when a social class lens was used in the data analysis. A small number of participants were from minority ethnic groups and a majority of the sample were white and British. All the participants were from households where at least one adult was in paid work.

The interviews were loosely structured to explore the participants’ experiences of parenting a primary school age child with a focus on home-school relations. The interviews explored how schools communicated with parents; how parents were involved with their child’s schooling; behaviour management systems used in schools, and experiences with homework. The focus of these interviews were on these topics in relation to the reception or year one child, but some participants had older or younger children and spent some time reflecting on their broader experiences of parental involvement in schools.

The data was coded using NVivo software. Some of the themes that were developed in this process were subdivided into smaller topic areas. For example, the theme of ‘communication’ was subdivided into ‘face-to-face communication’, ‘experiences of communication’, and ‘forms of communication’. The findings section, below, draws on these themes and the themes of ‘managing information’, ‘informal networks’, and ‘digitised homework’. In the presentation of these findings, I draw heavily on the interview transcripts as the emphasis of this project was to understand mothers’ experiences (see Yemini and Maxwell 2018, 1034).

**Findings**

***How are schools using digital communications?***

All of the participants reported that the primary school their child attended was making use of digitised communications with parents. The participants reported that emails, text messages, social media, and apps were all used for communications. Social media was also used by schools with Facebook and Twitter the platforms that were mentioned most frequently. Some mothers reported that school communications were mostly dependent on emails.

Emma: What about…forms of communication? What does the school do?

Lisa: They are still quite old school really, so I get emails constantly which does my head in.

Some participants noted that multiple forms of communication were used to convey the same information:

Donna: I think we have every type or format of communication possible.

Katie: Any information goes on to ParentMail, we also get informed via text message. It sort of duplicates whatever's on ParentMail via text message and email as well.

Nicola: …anything that comes through the app, we also receive on email. And we also get via text message so we get three messages.

Participants reported that schools used a range of apps and websites for communications and financial transactions for school dinners, trips and school-based activities where parental contributions were requested. These included Eduspot (communications and payments to school), Edmondo (communications), Parentpay (online payments), ParentMail (payments, communications, online booking for parent-teacher meetings), ClassDojo (used for communication and behaviour management), and Tapestry (used to share photographs of school activities). Other apps and websites were used as learning platforms (discussed below).

Some participants talked about how they managed the volume of communications that schools sent and which mode of communication they preferred:

Catherine: Texts are a pain. I would rather have an email…emails, it’s quiet. You check them at the beginning of the day or at the end of the day… it’s done.

Hannah: I personally prefer the text message form… email, you just get that much span and that many emails… it’s exhausting searching through. Whereas text messages… you pay more attention to it, you’re drawn to it more.

Victoria: I get emails for everything, so I find that emails… get a bit more lost whereas the text message is a bit more immediate.

Katie: I personally prefer the text message form… I rarely log on the app to the read the newsletter unless I’m looking for something in particular.

Samantha: I find it difficult to keep up with the different online versions…. I know that the texts prompts will come, I ignore at least the first three until it gets time critical.

Here, we get a sense that some of mothers were feeling overwhelmed with the amount of communications from their child’s school and the different platforms that were being used, sometimes simultaneously. As Redshaw (2019, 2) observes, it is the extent of the connection of people by ‘new devices’ that is the definitive mark of a digital society. This digitisation of school communications reported here allows for a connectivity between parents and school that was not previously achievable. Wajcman (2015, 10) argues that these new networks of ‘constant connectivity’ in our ‘technologically suffused’ environments are changing the ‘pace and scope of human interaction’. For these participants, this is the case as communication with the school is not limited to the beginning and end of the school day but can happen at any time. The ‘relentless’ demands of contemporary parenting (Faircloth and Gürtin 2017, 13) can be seen here in the sphere of school communications.

***Managing information: the bureaucratisation of parental involvement in education***

Many of the participants used particular strategies or systems to manage communications from schools:

Donna: As soon as I see an email I try and read it and mentally note what that means and what the things for that will be.

Katie: I generally keep the text messages on my phone, and pretty much remember. In fact, she’s had a dress-up day this Wednesday, and I’d kept that text message on my phone, and I did… refer back to it Tuesday night, just to check that it was definitely Wednesday.

Others had systems that relied on diaries, calendars or both to keep track of school events, non-uniform days and items that their child needed to take to school:

Nicola: We have a family Google calendar… everything now goes on the calendar.

Amy: In a diary, and my calendar in the house as well, so I can make sure that I know what’s going on at what time.

Lisa: …there is a lot that you have to be involved in… I’ve got different sections in my planner now and the dates. And I have to colour code things. Or else I forget what I am supposed to be doing for my son on that day.

Catherine: We’ve got a family calendar… and if I’ve forgotten to do it [add a school event] then that’s when I know all hell will break loose.

Two participants had developed more extensive systems of organisation where paper-based and digital forms of school communications could be tracked:

Samantha: I have a diary and calendar and then kitchen table – kitchen table until dealt with… fridge for future events not yet attended but which may have some information about the location that I have not put on the calendar.

Kelly: I have got two of my kitchen cupboards and a packet of Blue Tack…if it comes home, it goes on the cupboard… Otherwise, it’s on a Post It note… if it’s been a text message… I need the system…otherwise, it just gets too much and then I don’t know what we’re doing.

An added complication for a few participants were the errors in the information sent out by schools or the fact that sometimes short notice of items needed for school events was given:

Nicola: generally, what happens with communication… we get communications sent out to us… and it can be anything... sports day, or the start of term, the new start of term dates. We will get an email… and nine times out of ten [an error]. Or the newsletters... ‘please find attached the newsletter’, there is no newsletter attached, so, then we get another email, ‘oh, sorry, the newsletter is attached’. Then we get, ‘just to confirm the start of term is Wednesday, 7th September’… and you’re like, ‘no, 7th September is a Tuesday so, is it the Tuesday or the Wednesday’? Then ten minutes later, we’ll get another email saying, ‘oh, I am sorry... the correct dates are...’

Kelly: The only issue that I have got with any of that communication is that, quite often, things change and that’s just the annoying part. And quite often, it’s like, whoops, sorry, ‘we put the wrong time’, or, ‘whoops, sorry, it’s tomorrow’.

In the interviews, the strength of feeling from some mothers about the demands of managing school communications was clear. The key elements of parental involvement in education for some of these participants was related to managing information, record keeping, scheduling and time management. Certain levels of literacy, numeracy and computing skills were also required. The digitisation of school communications was contributing to what could be termed a *bureaucratisation of parental involvement*. Weber’s (1968) theorising of bureaucracy was focused on the state and enterprise. He emphasised the ‘technical superiority’ of bureaucratic modes of organising over other forms by citing its ‘precision, speed, and unambiguity’ (Weber 1968, 973). In the many years since Weber’s writings and in the move to an increasingly digitised society, more tasks previously allocated to bureaucracies or business are now carried out by the individual citizen or consumer. Graber (2015, 18) has termed this the age of ‘total bureaucracy’ where ‘bureaucratic practices, habits and sensibilities engulf us’ (44). Parental involvement in education, has become yet another bureaucratised sphere of life, a process aided by the digitisation of communications.

***Digital technologies and household divisions of labour***

For the participants in this study, most of whom were in marriage/cohabiting heterosexual relationships, tasks related to their child’s schooling were largely their responsibility rather than their partners. This is perhaps to be expected in a study centred on mothers’ experiences of home-school relations, but this is consistent with the literature on parental involvement which finds mothers doing the bulk of these tasks (Jezierski and Wall 2017, 4; Hornby and Lafaele 2011, 42; Standing 1999, 58). For some participants, the emphasis on mothers in the home-school relationship seemed to be an artefact of the school’s information and communications systems (or decisions made by school staff entering data) which meant that one partner and not the other were receiving school communications:

Nicola: I have been forwarding him [her partner] the emails and newsletters that we get.

Natalie: I need to be the chain of communication because he [her partner] doesn’t get the information.

Emma …So, [your partner] doesn’t have the app or the text messages? Do they just come to you?  
Victoria …they only come to me and that’s the school system there…they can only send it to one person per child, apparently, which is frustrating.

This problem with school communications meant that some mothers in this study had the additional task of passing information onto their partner. This suggests that some of these technologies needed more user-centred designs than is currently the case.

***Informal online networks***

For some participants, the development of informal networks with other mothers at their child’s school were an important way to deal with the volume of communications and the difficulties of managing information that was sometimes incorrect or confusing. The notable feature here was that these networks also used digitised communications:

Emma: Tell me about the WhatsApp group. How did that start?  
Louise: Because I think people were forgetting things so they can ask a question on there.  
Emma: Is it for that class or is it for the school?  
Louise: …year one… one of the parents suggested… ‘let’s have a group’... it’s just useful. So, they [another parent] will put on ‘I forgot to take this today’…and then it reminds you as well… you will think, ‘oh gosh, I forgot about that. I better pack that for today’. The last week of term, it was something every day you’ve got to take in.

Using social media and messaging platforms becomes a way to manage the information coming from school and adds another layer of communications for these mothers to deal with:

Donna: quite early in the year we created a Facebook group for the class, which has been really good for keeping up to date with what’s happening because somebody will inevitably write, ‘what are we dressing up as today?’ so the support system… mostly comes from there really... ‘Are you ready for this’? ‘Have you got that’? Like today [last day of the school year], nobody knew whether the children were supposed to be in school uniform or not because in previous years they weren’t.

Nicola: …the incorrect information that we constantly receive is an issue… and what’s happened now is that a lot of parents have set up their own WhatsApp groups or Facebook groups to try and determine what’s going on.

These informal digital networks were also seen as useful for mothers who were not able to take part in school-based conversations:

Nicola: ‘There are a few parents on there that are like, ‘thank god this group exists because I don’t know what I would do’…and then you’ve got parents on there who don’t do school drop off and pickup, who are finding out things from other parents’.

Emma: …do you find that quite positive, the WhatsApp group?  
Sarah: Really nice, yes. Because some of the mums teach themselves so they never do the pick-ups or drop-offs so what’s been really nice is that it’s inclusive… they can still get messages about school, as well. We’re new to the school, so some parents are like, ‘oh I’ve got other children there’. [Someone will ask]… ‘what’s this prize giving about? Does everybody get a prize?’ It’s stuff like that, so that parent’s that have perhaps got children in other years, they’ll say, ‘oh well, it’s like this and you need to come or…’

Sarah’s quote illustrates the way in which these networks can work as a way to help parents new to a school understand the practices of a new institution. Here digital networks function as a way to build a sense of community amongst mothers connecting newer and more established primary school parents.

Social media platforms were also used by some schools for information, reporting on activities at school and, sometimes, for more urgent communications. Not all participants were users of social media or accessing these platforms regularly and this did cause difficulties. This was the case for Kelly who took her child to school on a day when it had been closed due to the weather conditions:

Kelly: we walked to school… in the snow only to be told that it was cancelled… I said, ‘I didn’t know at the house, when were you going to tell us it’s cancelled?’ If you are going to tell us it’s cancelled, don’t tell us… when we are already at school… that’s when we got the text message but we’re already there then, a lot of us…. Before they sent the text message to say that things were cancelled, they put it on the Facebook page. Oh, you need to go on the Facebook page? What Facebook page? And what if you don’t do Facebook?

Not all of the participants saw these more informal social networks as useful. I mentioned to Hannah that some mothers join WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger groups to keep track of school events, she replied ‘I always find it odd when that happens… just ask the school’. Hannah works in a professional occupation and felt able to ask questions of her child’s teacher. There was variation amongst the participations in how approachable they found the staff at their child’s school. There were not clear patterns here related to social class. Some mothers felt reluctant to ask queries of busy school staff; others did find the opportunity to do so at the beginning or end of the school day. Vincent (2017, 547) reminds us, ‘for many parents, nurseries and primary schools are the first public sites from which the private sphere of the family is (partially) viewed’. The reluctance of parents to appear confused about school communications might become understandable in a context where ‘good’ parenting is equated with intensive and responsibilised parents who know all the details of their children’s lives. Digital networks become a collective space that some mothers can access at a time when public spaces for families are in decline; public services for families have been cut (McRobbie 2013: 131); and when patterns of employment preclude some mothers from meeting others at in the school playground.

Only one parent talked about involving her children in keeping track of the demands of school and this was a mother who had an older child also at primary school. Natalie (working in a professional role with long working hours) managed the demands of school involvement by distinguishing between activities she needed to remember and those she expected her children to keep track of:

Natalie: …because there are two of them, I have a chance that one will mention [any events or activities]. Things like non-uniform are fun… so they will remember… And sometimes I will write in my diary… if it is something very far away, [like the] Christmas concert…but I don’t think non-uniform I would write. If I need to be there… if there is a demand on my time [I would]….

Writers on motherhood have noted that mothering is becoming an increasingly ‘private issue’ (Littler 2013, 233) in a post-feminist culture where choices and responsibilities are emphasised (McRobbie 2013, 128). In this context it is noteworthy that mothers are using online social networks for support, information, and a sense of community.

***Digital homework***

The second way that aspects of home-school relationships had become digitised in this study was through the use of apps and online platforms and resources for children’s homework. All the participants reported that their children received homework and mostly this was in both paper and digital forms. The (paper) reading diary was an important tool which carried information between home and school and tracked parental involvement in children’s reading at home. Many of the children of these participants also received digital forms of homework. The participants mentioned a number of different apps or websites that were used by the schools their children attended. These included EducationCity, Espresso, (where a range of homework activities can be set); learning resources based around maths activities: DoodleMaths, MyMaths, Times Table Rockstars; and online reading platforms.

There were varying responses to this aspect of primary school education and some mothers did not seem to feel as strongly about this aspect of digitisation as they did about their experiences of digitised communications, explored above. This may have been connected to the uncertainty that some participants expressed about the expectations from their child’s school in terms of engagement with digital learning resources at home:

Natalie: We were wondering what was going on with Maths… sometimes they will have to do homework on MyMaths… the communication is not so good… sometimes they put a sticker in the diary, ‘there is MyMaths’ but sometimes not… perhaps it is still up to us [to decide]. I am not sure.

Some participants felt able to resist or ignore the demands that schools made about this aspect of parental involvement and had not encouraged their child’s engagement with some online forms of homework. Catherine explained that her child’s school used Espresso:

Catherine: I stuck it [the password] to the fridge and I’ve never done it! …I mean we’ve had them [online learning resources] and they do soon tail off in interest… I just don’t want them sitting by a screen.

Victoria had a similar experience; her son was initially interested in his school’s online reading club but this enthusiasm was not sustained:

Victoria: what I have found is that we have a flurry of interest and then they run out of stuff to do… then they lose interest… my five year old is quite scary because he will go on book club and then the next thing, he will have music playing.

Other participants had experienced their own or their child’s frustration with learning technologies:

Amy: …they have this thing called EducationCity which is online… she [her daughter] prefers to do her [paper] workbook than go on… she gets a bit frustrated with the laptop because she can only use one finger and she doesn’t know how to lift her finger off to click… we only have laptops we don’t have a [desktop] computer with a mouse.

Samantha reported that her daughter had changing feelings towards the digital learning resources available to her. Her child’s school had an online maths resource:

Samantha: ‘…they [the teacher] has only opened up times table for ten, it’s the only one you can do so she is very bored of that and she can do it very quickly... I did email the teacher and say, ‘could you open up maybe twos?’… ‘And then she stopped doing it so, now I look like a fool.

Samantha’s children had been much more enthusiastic about a previous app her school had used but then replaced, ‘They’ve had their fingers burned! They invested so hugely [in the earlier resource]… and got nothing for it’. Samantha’s felt the school moved too quickly from one online resource to another: ‘they just move through them too fast... for the kids who were using it [the previous platform], it was really quite sad.’

Kelly had also had difficulties with a maths platform:

Kelly: …there’s an online maths thing that we are supposed to do that we don’t. We can’t get past the level that we are on, so I don’t know what we are doing wrong so I have given up… I am not too hung up about homework.

Kelly was the mother of a larger family and this feeling of not being too concerned about homework was shared by Victoria and Louise. All three are mothers of larger families including children older than their reception or year one child. Louise commented on her child’s reading diary and Victoria reflected on homework in similar terms:

Louise: I rarely now, to be honest, after [my older children], fill it in. Because I think it doesn’t get looked at, really, a lot.

Victoria: my time is a lot more stretched with four of them. It’s like, come on… let’s do homework’. And if they don’t want to do their homework there and then, I am kind of beyond battling with them.

A consequence of the growing educational technology market is that parents can be exposed to a range of different apps and resources in quite a short period of their children’s schooling. In this, we can see the liveliness, or volatility, of the EdTech market and the way in which the market increasingly dominates many aspects of children lives (see Martens 2018). For some parents, digital forms of homework are a way to support the formal learning of their child. However, digital homework, like the management of digital technology, demands certain skills and resources from parents that not all possess. This has the potential to deepen inequalities in educational experiences for children. Online homework can appear to be time-saving for teachers due to automated marking but can add to the workload of parents.

**Conclusion**

This paper has explored the ways in which digital technologies are shaping the experiences of home-school relations for a sample of mothers of primary school aged children in England. Aspects of home-school relations, here communications and homework, have become a marketplace for educational technology companies. The political and economic dominance of neoliberal ideologies mean that more areas of our lives have been opened up to the market (see Davies 2016). In itself, the role of the market in parental involvement in education is not new; Reay (2005, 105) cites evidence that 2003 was the first recorded year in the history of state schooling where parents were spending more per annum on textbooks than schools. The newer development here is the use of digital technologies in home-school relations which carry the demands of schools more directly into the home. This brings the public sphere of the school further into the private sphere of the home (Reay 2005) and a quality of connectivity between parents and school staff that was not possible with analogue methods of communications.

This marketisation of home-school communications means the unpaid labour of parents indirectly contributes to the profits of the growing educational technology sector. There has been a neglect in scholarship of the political economy of educational technologies (Selwyn 2016, 5) and there is a need for greater analyses of the roles of parents and children in this area. The accounts of the mothers in this study suggests that digital technologies do not always fit the needs of the end users – this was seen in the duplication of messages across platforms and the inflexibility of some systems to deliver messages to both parent of a child. Some participants felt able to disengage with elements of digitised parental involvement, but others put significant effort into managing communications and supervising digitised homework. The *bureaucratisation* of parental involvement was felt particularly keenly by some participants where managing information, scheduling events, and keeping up with the requests that flowed from schools to parents dominated over other aspects of their involvement in their child’s education.

The accounts of the mothers presented here suggest that schools are a place where ideas of intensive parenting are reflected and reproduced. The ‘professionalisation’ of the domestic sphere (McRobbie 2013, 130) is seen in this study in terms of the skills needed for parental involvement in primary school education. Digital technologies involve parents more closely in their child’s education, reinforcing the responsibilisation of parents for their children’s outcomes (see Lupton 2011; Geinger et al 2014; Lee et al 2014).

For teachers, digital technologies are sometimes presented as a ‘solution’ to the problem of heavy workloads. The Department for Education strategy paper on technology in education puts together the issues of parental engagement and teacher workloads in one of the ten challenges that are posed to ‘industry, the English education sector and academic’ to ‘improve parental engagement and communication, whilst cutting related teacher workload by up to five hours per term’ (2019, 33). The consequences that these ‘improvements’ might have in terms of the demands made on parents is not considered and is not one that looks likely to be placed on the policy agenda.

The promise of ‘personalisation’, experiences tailored to meet the needs of individuals (Williamson 2017, 10), is often made in connection with digital educational technologies and in the contemporary education system (see Ball 2017, 163). However, this professed goal of personalisation might not be realised with the increased use of digital technologies in education. Research on learning platforms has suggested they are used in ways that are connected with regulating parents and they reproduce ‘existing patterns of school/parent engagement’ (Selwyn et al 2011, 323). Grant (2011, 297) has cautioned that digital technologies might be a ‘Trojan horse’ that extends the agenda of the school into the home, rather than leading to a ‘more productive dialogue’ between home and school cultures.

In this study there was little evidence of communication between school and home about the use of digital technologies or about the ways in which communications were best suited to the needs of different families. Indeed, it was clear that some schools would benefit from having clearer processes to inform the use of digital communications and homework that are shared with school staff, parents, and children. Vincent has advocated for a ‘more dialogic home-school relationship’ particularly in relation to face-to-face parent-teacher meetings (2017, 549). Parents did value face-to-face communications and many also saw advantages to digital technologies in aiding communication for those who were not able to be at school at the beginning and end of the day and for the speed at which information about school activities could be communicated.

The focus of the paper has been on the experiences of parents of younger primary school aged children. Some of these findings might relate in particular to the experiences of parenting during the early years of primary school. It is possible that in the later years of compulsory education other aspects of the digitisation and datatification of education will be more significantly shaping the experiences of parents. This is rich ground for future research projects, as is the need for research which goes beyond the scope of this exploratory project to consider the impact of educational technologies on parents taking into account differences of ethnicity, social class, and family structures. Diane Reay (2017, 11) argues that the educational system is one that ‘…both mirrors and reproduces the hierarchical class relationships in wider society.’ Without careful planning and greater critical scrutiny of the ways in which digital technologies are used by schools, it seems likely they might contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities in education. There is a need for careful thinking about the role of digital technologies in home-school relations so that these inclusively support children and their parents in ways that promote positive home-school relations and the well-being of families.

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1. For clarity, I refer to primary school child or children in the text rather than child/children. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)