

Mount Royal Undergraduate Education Review

Volume 1(1)

Spring 2014

A wired connection: Parental engagement and digital technologies

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Abstract

This is a research study, which evaluates the impact of digital technologies on parental engagement in elementary education. Parental engagement is critical in children's education. Parents are incredibly influential in their child's lives, it is important, then, that we engage parents in the classroom to create a collaborative learning environment that will contribute to student success. This study was conducted by administering surveys using *Google Forms* through e-mail and the *Inspired Learning Network*. Participants included parents and teachers throughout Alberta who were randomly selected. This research reveals that the primary method of contact between parents and teachers is through email or blog. The vast majority of participants believe that these digital technologies have improved and positively impacted parent-teacher relationships. These findings mean that we must use digital technology to create positive relationships between parents and teachers. These relationships contribute to a home to school, collaborative environment, which translates to student success in the classroom.

Introduction

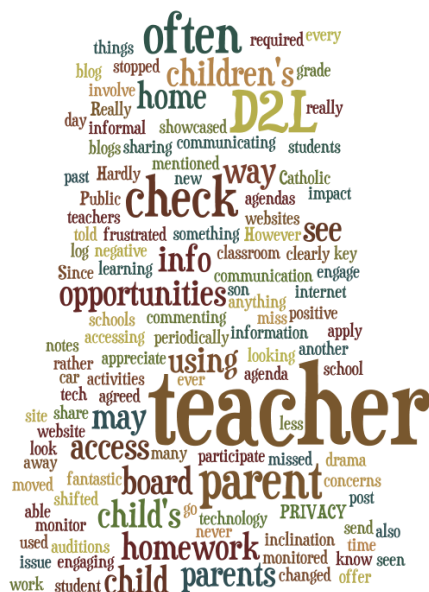


Figure 1. Digital technologies impact on parental engagement

How can we balance the positive and negative effects of increased communication between teacher and parents? Throughout my field experience and conversations with my mentor teachers and other teachers, it seems that increased communication between parents and teachers can be both positive and negative. Increased communication, through e-mail, has created a constant flow of conversation between the teacher and parents. E-mail is a helpful tool because teachers can easily access a parent if they need to speak with them about a child's behavior in class, a child's marks, or even just to inform them about classroom updates. But, this frequent e-mailing is a double edged-sword. Many teachers that I have encountered feel bombarded by the constant e-mailing. Even when they are at home trying to reconnect with their friends and family over email, they are consistently receiving messages from parents. It makes it almost impossible to escape from the classroom because you are constantly connected. In addition, it is easier for parents to belittle and, essentially, cyber-bully the teacher through the Internet. Face-to-face interaction is still incredibly important because people, in general, are less likely to communicate

the same things that they would in an e-mail. This is certainly not fair to the teacher. If a parent has an issue that it is important, they should set up a face-to-face arrangement, rather than bombarding the teacher with e-mails. Nonetheless, there are many benefits as I noticed during our school tours last year. For example, Cranston Elementary School and the Connect Charter School in Calgary, Alberta both seem to use technology in an innovative way to increase parental engagement in a positive way. The blog of the Connect Charter School (<http://calgaryscienceschool.blogspot.ca/>) is a great way to provide opportunities for parents to get involved and engaged in their child's learning. Also, Cranston's exceptional level of parental volunteers is awesome because parents are willing to volunteer, making less work for the teacher, while including the parent in his or her child's schooling. Basically, we need to strive to balance the positive and negative effects of increased communication and technology between parents and teachers. Perhaps, this could come in the form of a cap on the amount of e-mails a parent could send or rules about times to send e-mails. Whatever the case may be, the important thing is that teachers and parents are accommodated to ensure that there is mutual respect between the two parties and that the children are receiving a quality education.

Background

Research suggests that building and sustaining relationships with a variety of partners (parents, teachers, students, etc.) are major contributors to student academic success and, in general, the quality of education that children receive (Alberta Education, n.d). Therefore, we must use digital technologies that will contribute to this building and sustaining of relationships. Studies reveal that the more accessible and interactive that these digital technologies are the more effective and efficient that they will be in the classroom. Some technology requires background knowledge and can be quite complex for the average parent, therefore, we must

consider the different levels of knowledge about the use of technology. Parents must feel comfortable accessing information on their child's education (Lewin & Luckin, 2010, p. 749). A home-school collaborative environment is crucial in fostering information literacy. This relationship, of home to school, requires a great deal of parental support and involvement. At home parents need to encourage and assist their children's studies to maximize their successes. Especially, in the case of children who are diagnosed with a disability. Recent research suggests that students who are diagnosed with a disability require more frequent contact between parents and teachers. Therefore, digital technologies can be effective because they allow more frequent and more accessible communication between the teacher and the parent (Edyburn, 2003, p. 62). In general, previous research related to this topic reveals that the more involved a parent is in their children's education, the more they will achieve academically (Rygus, 2009). It is important to cultivate positive outlooks with technology because it is, seemingly, an inevitable part of the future of education and schooling (Lee & Cheung Kong 2009, p. 275).

Research Context and Methods of Investigation

Anonymous online surveys constructed in *Google Forms* were distributed to both teachers and parents via e-mail (Appendix 1). In order to conduct research using human participants, I completed the Government of Canada's Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Course on Research Ethics. This online course provided me with valuable insight into how to conduct ethical research involving humans. The research participants consented to this research because they were given an option of doing it or not. Participants were assured that they would be protected from harm and they would not be exposed to risks because their responses to the survey questions would be completely anonymous. Two distinct surveys were distributed. One survey was designed for parents and one

survey was designed for teachers. I chose to use two surveys in order to gain the most-rounded study of the issue of parental engagement. Using two surveys was effective because it allowed me to analyze both perspectives of parents and teachers. These surveys were created using *Google Forms*. These surveys were randomly distributed to teachers and parents throughout Alberta. Participants were emailed a link to the *Google Form* and completed the survey. The *Alberta Education Inspired Learning Network* was also used as a means to increase the number of responses. There were five responses to the teacher survey and nineteen responses to the parent survey. Thus, the data was collected from a very small cohort of teachers and parents but reflects larger trends in society.

My general approach to the research design was qualitative. I encouraged feedback that determined the quality of parental engagement and digital technologies, rather than, using numerical measurements. I organized and analyzed the data by constructing a variety of different graphs and tables in *Google Spreadsheets* that were derived from the responses to my online surveys.

Findings

In general, according to my research findings, teachers and parents are in contact “sometimes.” Sixty percent of my research participants suggest that they interact with their student’s parents or their child’s teacher, on average, of once a week (Figure 2).

How do you access information about parental engagement in your child's school?

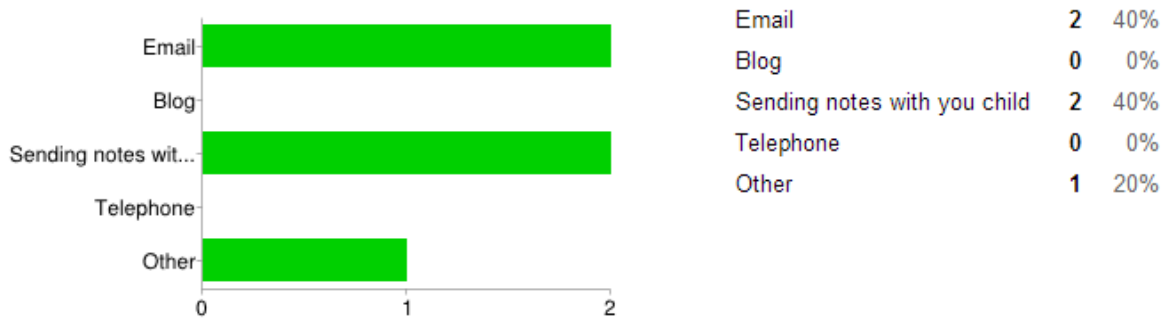


Figure 2. Accessing information

In contrast, forty percent always or never interact with the teacher or parent. Responses from both teachers and parents reveal that there is an increase in contact if there is an issue in the classroom or at home that needs to be discussed. These connections are usually conducted through emailing or blogging or by sending notes home from the school. Research participant number one is an advocate of blogging. This participant is teacher of a grade four class and is a proponent of blogging because of the level of parental engagement. “Parents participate by accessing these, commenting, and sharing.” However, she feels that at her children’s school, technology is not used to increase parental engagement. It seems, from my research, that there is quite a divide between teachers who implement digital technology to increase parental engagement and those who do not.

One computer program that was discussed a great deal in my research was *Desire 2 Learn (D2L)*. This is a learning management system. The way someone explained it to me was that it was like a *Facebook* for elementary grades. However, there seems to be some gaps in this software according to parents. Parents cannot access this program unless they have their children’s information. In addition, parents are concerned because they cannot check D2L unless they have access to Internet. This makes it difficult to check on their children’s progress

informally when, for example, you're driving your child to soccer practice. In addition, if the teacher does not post on a regular basis some parents suggest that they lose the inclination to check if there is not frequent updating. However, the vast majority of participants believe that technology has helped create and foster positive relationships between teachers and parents.

Parental engagement takes the form, directly in schools, of volunteer work. Some of this volunteer work includes; volunteering on field trips, at assemblies, in the classroom and on day and night projects at school. The teachers suggest in the survey that sixty percent of parents are eager to volunteer and engage with their children's school. However, many parents suggest that they do not feel that there are many options to engage with their child's learning directly at school. Perhaps an increase in digital technology between parent and teacher can make the dissemination of information of opportunities for engagement more accessible (Figures 3 and 4).

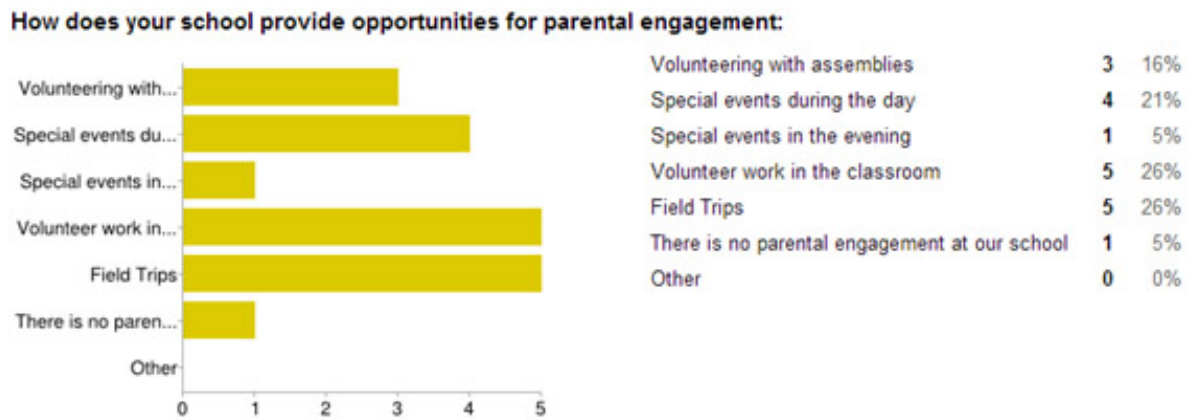


Figure 3. School opportunities for parental engagement



Figure 4. Opportunities for parental engagement

The most significant finding of mine was the simple question being posed: “In general has technology improved parent-teacher relationships?” Eighty percent of teachers were impressed with digital technologies and the impact on these relationships (Figure 5). This is significant because previous research reveals that a home-school collaborative environment is directly correlated to student success.

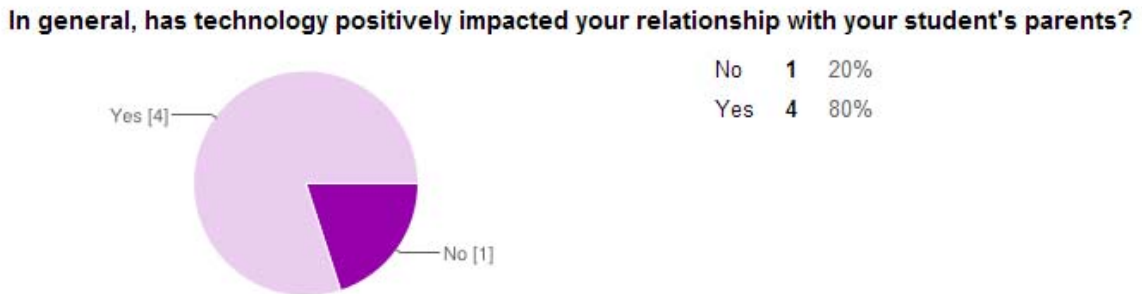


Figure 5. Technology and teacher relationships with parents

The following table provides some general comments from parents about the impact of digital technologies on parent-teacher relationships (Table 1).

Table 1

Parent comments about the impact of digital technologies on parent-teacher relationships

General comments
I really appreciate being able to look up information on websites and also to see student work showcased. I'm often frustrated when key info is not on the website when I go looking. My son would have missed drama auditions if another parent hadn't mentioned it.
D2L is fantastic, the only issue is that there is not a parent site, so you required to know your children's info
i don't have a child doesn't apply to me
When I changed from the Catholic board to Public board we stopped using agendas and moved to D2L as a way of communicating with my child's teacher. This has had a negative impact. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It has shifted communication about homework away from the teacher and my child to me and the teacher 2. I cannot check homework until I am at home, and have access to internet, <u>where as</u> in the past I could check it in the car, between after school activities. = I don't check. Really. Hardly ever. 3. Since the teacher does not post every day, but rather periodically I often miss things. I do not have the time or inclination to log in to something that may or may not have anything new. 4. There is less opportunities for the teachers to send positive notes home, or to share concerns, in an informal way using the agenda. 5. I am told the teacher can monitor how often I access D2L. I have never agreed to being monitored! PRIVACY! <p>I am a teacher, and see very clearly many of the opportunities that technology can offer for engaging parents with their child's learning. I have a classroom blog, and my grade 4 students all have their own blogs, and parents participate by accessing these, commenting and sharing. However, I have not seen tech used to engage or involve me as a parent at my children's schools.</p>

Conclusions and Recommendations

We need to make sure that we are using technology effectively, as teachers, to get parents engaged with their children's education. Parents, obviously, are incredibly influential in their children's lives. If we get them active and involved in their child's schooling, I believe that many benefits will be reaped in the classroom. We can get them more active and involved in schooling through the use of digital technologies. Digital technologies provide easier access and easier communication between parents and teachers. However, in order to use some of these technologies, background knowledge might be required. Therefore, we need to eradicate feelings of anxiety around digital technologies to make sure that both the teacher and the parent are comfortable and are provided with the necessary knowledge that allows them to operate these

digital devices. This is important because the home-to-school connection has tremendous potential to drastically increase student's success. Through the use of digital technologies, these connections are made easier and more accessible.

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Appendix 1

This was an anonymous survey created to gain a better understanding about technology and its impact on parental engagement in elementary education.

Survey questions that were distributed to parents:

1. How many children do you have?
2. What is your primary method of contact with your child's school?
3. How often do you contact your child's school, approximately, in a week?
4. In what ways are you engaged with your child's school?
5. How is information about parental engagement accessed in your child's school?
6. Do you think your child's school could benefit from an increase in parental engagement?
7. In general, has technology improved your relationship with your child's school and benefited your child's education.
8. General comments

Survey questions that were distributed to teachers:

1. Are parents, in general, willing and eager to participate in school events and take advantage of opportunities for parental engagement?
2. How often are you in contact with your student's parents?
3. How does your school provide opportunities for parental engagement:
4. Do you provide and encourage opportunities for parental engagement?
5. Do you tend to contact and communicate with parents more if there is a behavior issue or a student has a diagnosed disability?

6. In general, has technology positively impacted your relationship with your student's parents?