

# Providing a platform for parents? Exploring the nature of parental engagement with school Learning Platforms

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## Abstract

This paper investigates how schools are supporting parents' involvement with their children's education through the use of 'Learning Platform' technologies – i.e. the integrated use of virtual learning environments, management information systems, communications, and other information and resource-sharing technologies. Based on in-depth case studies of six primary and six secondary schools across England, the paper explores the various ways that schools are implementing, adopting, and using Learning Platforms to engage with parents. The paper also considers how these technologies are being received and used by parents. A number of underlying issues and tensions behind parents' engagement with school Learning Platform technologies are considered, and the potential of digital technologies to reconfigure pre-existing school/parent relationships is examined.

## Keywords

home, learning platform, parents, schools, virtual learning environment.

## Introduction

One of the most notable shifts in compulsory education over the last 20 years is the increased part that parents are expected to play in their children's schooling. Parents of school-aged children in most developed countries now have a considerably expanded educational role when compared with that of previous generations. As well as acting as quasi-consumers and choosers in educational 'marketplaces' (Gewirtz *et al.* 1995), parents are increasingly compelled to act as monitors and guarantors of their children's engagement with schooling. The notion of the 'engaged parent' has become a key element of governmental policy efforts to improve educational standards and reduce inequalities. The emphasis of educational debate has shifted from

ensuring 'parental rights' to encouraging 'parental responsibilities' in supporting children's schooling (Whitty 2002). As Gill Crozier concludes, 'whether parents like it or not and whether teachers like it or not, parents are part of, even central to, the education strategy' (Crozier 2000, p. ix).

Parents are expected to be educationally involved in a number of different ways. These include parents assisting children in their learning (most commonly with homework); ensuring school attendance and supporting good behaviour; and having a 'greater say' in how schools are run. A wide range of institutional strategies and devices has been employed to support these forms of 'parental involvement'. In the UK, for example, many parents are now subject to mandatory school-home agreements or 'contracts' that cover topics such as homework and behaviour. All parents are expected to attend parents' evenings and, for a few, encouraged to participate in parent-teacher associations and act as

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parent–governors. Whereas most schools have long utilized a range of ‘offline’ strategies to connect with parents, digital technologies have been increasingly deployed over the last 10 years or so as an additional means of supporting the engagement of parents in their children’s schooling.

The use of digital technology to increase parental engagement has taken a number of forms. During the 2000s, for example, some schools developed online ‘intranets’ and ‘managed learning environments’ to allow parents to access information and resources relating to their child’s education, thereby easing the transfer of school work into the home. Some schools also made use of various modes of computer-mediated communication with parents – not least email and mobile phone-based text messaging. Some schools loaned portable devices such as laptop computers and other personal digital devices to ensure that all students – and it was hoped by extension their parents – have access to technology at home. Yet while instances of innovative practice could be identified in a small percentage of individual schools, it is generally accepted that these technologies have up until recently proved ineffective in ensuring the sustained involvement of many parents in their children’s schooling. As Lewin and Luckin (2010, p. 749) concluded bluntly:

a historical perspective on the technology initiatives to engage parents (and carers) in their children’s education reveals a considerable amount of effort but little evidence of impact.

This previous lack of impact notwithstanding, as the 2010s progress growing efforts are being made both from within schools and from national and regional policymakers to encourage the coordinated and systematic use of digital technologies to support parent–school engagement. In particular, schools around the world are now being encouraged to develop and maintain integrated schoolwide ‘Learning Platforms’ to enable all members of the school community to access learning resources, communicate and collaborate with each other, as well as monitor, assess, and report on student progress. For example, primary and secondary schools in the UK were given financial and technical supports from central and local governments throughout the latter half of the 2000s to develop Learning Platforms. Similarly, the development of shared learning spaces and virtual learning networks lay at the heart of the

recent New Zealand ‘E-learning action plan for schools’ and the Australian Government’s ‘Digital Education Revolution’ strategy. Similarly, widespread commitments to Learning Platform technology can be found in northern Europe. For instance, the Estonian ‘ekool’ Learning Platform is now used widely in Estonia and Sweden – offering a shared management information system (MIS), virtual learning environment (VLE), and computer-mediated communication environment for teachers, managers, learners, and parents. Similarly, the majority of Danish, Finnish, and Norwegian schools also now use some form of Learning Management system – with a growing preference for open-source applications.

All these examples can be classed as variations of ‘Learning Platform’ technology. In this sense, the concept of a school’s Learning Platform basically relates to the integrated development and use of a number of different digital tools and applications. In particular, this involves the integrated use of a school’s MIS to support the routine recording and sharing of data between school leaders and administrators, teachers, students, and parents. This use is integrated with the school VLE to allow students and teachers to engage in learning activities through the creation and sharing of online learning resources, communication and collaboration between individuals and groups, and the assessment and grading of work. These systems are also expected to be integrated with the schools’ use of communication technologies to relay information between school managers, administrators, teachers, students, and families, such as email, mobile phone-based messaging, online discussion boards, and other forms of Internet-based messaging.

A school’s Learning Platform should allow for the seamless inclusion of parents into all aspects of their children’s schooling via the integrated use of these technologies. As Lyndsay Grant concludes, political efforts to increase the use of these technologies in schools are not merely technical or logistical in nature, but ‘part of a wider strategy to inspire parents to support conversations with their children about their learning’ (Grant 2009, p. 3). Yet while Learning Platforms have obvious managerial benefits for school leaders, teachers, and administrators, a number of questions now need to be asked of the effectiveness of these technologies in increasing and widening levels of parental involvement in schools and schooling. In this spirit, the remainder of

this article will address the following research questions:

- In what ways – and with what intentions – are primary and secondary schools using Learning Platform technologies to engage with parents?
- How are these Learning Platform technologies being received and understood by parents?
- What outcomes appear to be achieved through parent-focused uses of Learning Platform technologies?
- What factors and issues appear to underpin the use of Learning Platform technologies with parents?

## Methods

These research questions are addressed through a comparative case study of 12 schools in England. As the main aim of the project was to explore the potential of Learning Platform technologies, research activities were concentrated on schools who could act as exemplary case studies of how Learning Platforms could be used in schools. As such, this was not a representative sample of all schools in England, although in terms of their size and non-technological characteristics the schools could be considered typical UK primary and secondary institutions. The 12 schools were selected on a purposive basis to represent institutions that were already making sustained use of Learning Platform technology. From an initial 'long-list' of 198 award-winning schools supplied by the UK's education technology agency (Becta) and augmented by recommendations from 15 expert interviews, a subsample of 30 possible study schools was selected to fulfil the following selection criteria:

- Learning Platform technologies had been embedded in the school for more than one year;
- Clear evidence from external reports and previous evaluations of identifiable school leadership around Learning Platform use;
- High level of visible activity on the school Learning Platform technologies.

From these 30 schools, the final sample of 12 schools (six primary and six secondary) was selected to offer a diversity of school types (i.e. a range of specialisms, urban/rural, large/small, co-educational/single sex) and a range of different Learning Platform applications and

providers. In this manner, the schools were selected as appropriate case studies.

Data collection took place in these 12 case study schools between October 2009 and February 2010. The research design for the school case studies focused on the use and benefits of Learning Platforms and associated technologies across the 'school community' – encompassing areas of management and administration, teaching, learning, and parental engagement. Within each school, a range of data collection methods was employed. These research methods were designed to move the data collection from an initial broad 'school level' picture of learning platforms and associated technologies to a more focused perspective on activities taking place in the classroom and on the border between school and home. Each case study therefore consisted of

- In-depth interviews conducted with school senior managers, administrators, and information and communication technology (ICT) co-ordinators involved in the use of the Learning Platform in each school (interview questions focused on leaders' and managers' perspectives on the benefits of using Learning Platform technologies for parental involvement, students' learning, teachers' work and school management and administration, as well as understanding how schools had implemented and utilized the technologies);
- Interviews with subject/classroom teachers to gain a sense of their use of Learning Platforms in the course of their practice (interview questions focused on teachers' opinions and experiences regarding the ways in which Learning Platform technologies were part of their own practice, and whole-school practices and processes); and
- In-depth interviews with parents/carers allowing parents to explore and expand upon wider issues relating to their engagement with the Learning Platform (interview questions focused on parents' experiences of using learning platforms and their perspectives on the benefits/limitations of using learning platform technologies for their child's learning and for their relationship/communication with the school).

This paper draws on data from all these research activities. As can be seen in Table 1, a total of 133 respondents were interviewed across the 12 schools. The topic of parental engagement with Learning

**Table 1.** Number of interviewees across the 12 case study schools.

	Primary schools ( <i>N</i> = 6)	Secondary schools ( <i>N</i> = 6)	Total
Senior management	24	11	35
Information and communication technology coordinators	6	11	17
Teachers	24	30	54
Parents/carers	14	4	18
Others (governors, library managers, administrators)	6	3	9

Platform technologies formed a focus for all of the interviews, thus compensating for the relatively low numbers of parent interviews (*N* = 18). The constant comparison technique was used to analyse the dataset that was generated from these interviews (Glaser & Strauss 1967). This first involved reading all the interview transcripts to gain an overall sense of the data. A sample of the dataset was then read again and ‘open-coded’ until, in the opinion of the researchers, analysis had reached theoretical saturation. From this basis the whole dataset was then coded selectively in terms of categories identified with the initial code list directly related to the aims of the study. Thematic analysis enabled the data from the different datasets to be combined to produce a coherent variety of influences and factors underlying parental engagement with Learning Platform technologies. These issues are discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

## Results

### Schools’ use of Learning Platform technologies to encourage parental engagement

Learning Platforms were being used in all of the case study schools to ensure that parents were kept aware of school-related issues. The Learning Platform was most commonly used to share newsletters and information bulletins with parents, as well as to convey important messages regarding specific activities or developments. Some schools were also using the Learning Platform to share recordings of school activities with parents (e.g. class presentations, assemblies, school trips). These information flows generally took a one-way ‘broadcast’ form – exemplified by one school’s ‘Parents TV’ channel which used video pod-casts to provide information to parents (see Fig 1). As one school’s ‘e-learning

consultant’ put it, Learning Platforms were being used to ‘stream’ resources and information into homes ‘very, very easily’ (e-learning consultant – secondary school D). The head-teacher of another school talked of using their Learning Platform for ‘getting the message out there to parents’ (headteacher – primary school R). In this sense, one overriding intention was to ensure complete and continuous coverage of the parent population. As one teacher put it:

Letters that we send home we can also upload onto the platform, so there’s no excuse for any parent to say ‘I didn’t know’ because it’s there on the platform for them. And because we can access it from home, if we’re aware of things coming up we can just add things, delete things, and let parents know at five to six in the morning (teacher – primary school T).

Another major focus across the sample of case study schools was the use of the Learning Platform to support learning outside of the school. Some teachers posted multiple batches of homework tasks through the Learning Platform, therefore allowing students to work through homework as they wished throughout the week (see Fig 2). Some schools messaged parents with details of specific homework tasks. Some teachers were making an effort to set homework tasks on the Learning Platform that made use of discussion forums, blogs, and other collaborative applications. In this sense, one underlying intention of these activities was to increase parental involvement in students’ homework. As one ICT co-ordinator reasoned:

I want to see a parent having a window into their child’s learning that they never saw before unless it was an open evening. I want a parent that can see that their child’s just dipped over fractions . . . otherwise they cannot help them out until it comes to the end, and it’s too late (ICT coordinator – primary school F).

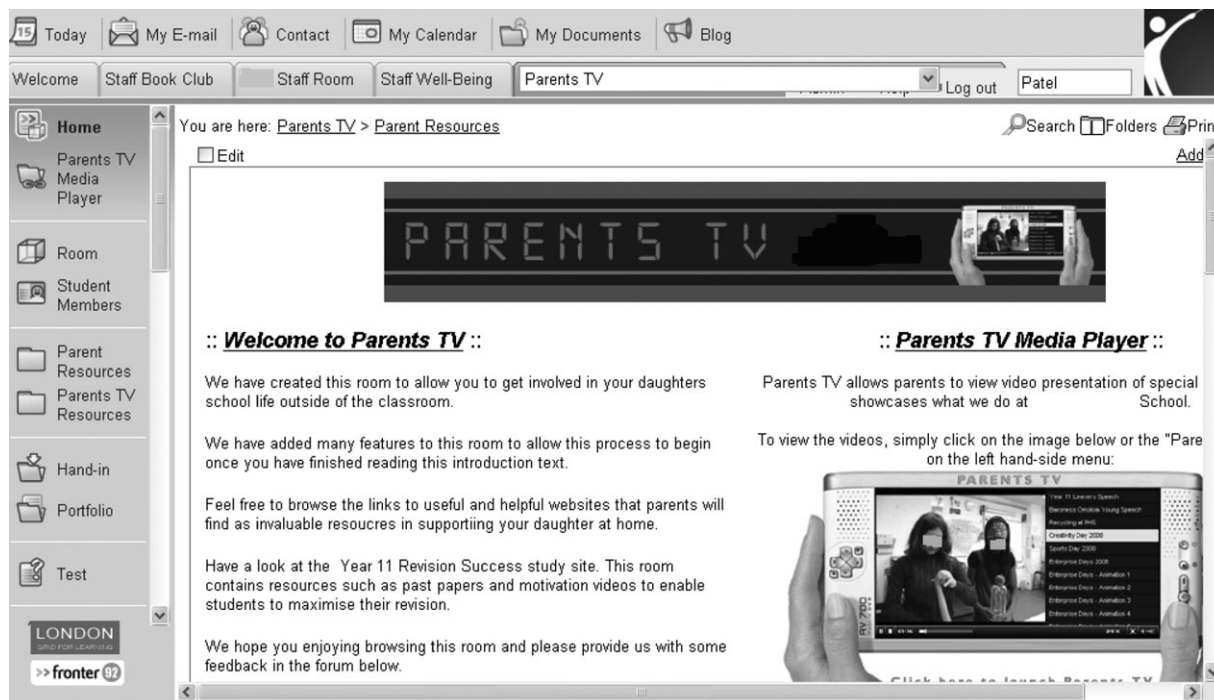


Fig 1 Parents TV Channel (secondary school P).

These Learning Platform activities were also justified in terms of 'show-casing' work to parents. Many schools were using the Learning Platforms to publish students' work – sometimes in the form of scanned documents produced by students, photos and videos from lessons, or through the replication of lesson plans. Students were enabled – in theory – to share these resources with their parents, thereby making school-based learning more 'visible' to the parent. As one teacher reasoned, 'I think it helps [parents] understand the importance of learning and the relevance of what [students] are doing as well' (teacher – primary school T).

Most of the case study schools were also found to be using their Learning Platforms to provide parents with access to information about students' attainment, attendance and behaviour. In particular, schools were importing attendance and behaviour data from the MIS and representing it in the Learning Platform in a more comprehensible way for parents. These often took the form of 'progress graphs', behaviour and achievement 'dashboards' and 'events systems' which monitored 'positive' and 'negative' behaviours in student datasets (see Fig 3). This was seen to be a especially appropriate means of establishing contact with 'hard to reach

parents' (headteacher – primary school T) who were seen to be less engaged formally with their children's education. In particular, the visual display of information was felt to make it easier for these parents to 'see' the picture of their child – as one teacher put it, helping 'parents [who] wouldn't necessarily know unless it's put in front of their face and it's multimedia and they can see it' (teacher – primary school T).

### Parents' reception of schools' Learning Platform technologies

From the data collected directly from parents, as well as from the reports of school managers and teachers, it would seem that parental reception of these applications and services was 'mixed'. On one hand, some parents appreciated being able to access online information and resources, and generally feeling 'more connected' to their child's school and schoolwork. As one parent reflected

It's lovely – you don't always get to know what they've been up to because they don't always tell you in that much detail. And when I looked . . . this week there were some photos on there of some of the work that the children have been doing, and that's really nice because as a



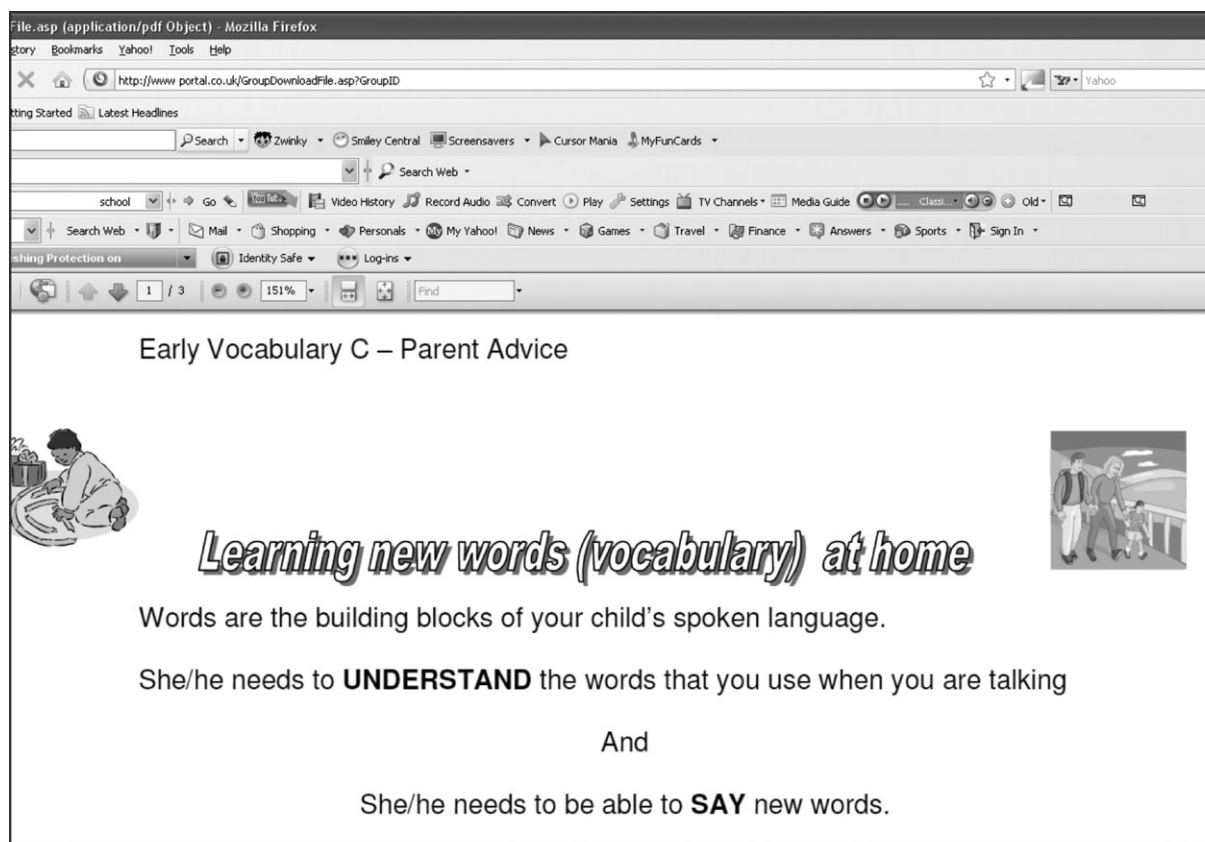


Fig 2 'Parent advice' homework folder (primary school H).

parent, that's not normally an insight that you would get into the classroom is it? (parent – primary school F).

However, in most schools the 'external' take-up of the Learning Platform by parents had not been as successful as its 'internal' take-up by staff, students, and school managers. The services and applications described in the previous section were being used by some sections of the parent population but not by others. In some schools, students and staff commented that parents were not highly aware of online resources and communication. As one teacher recounted ruefully

Even though we did parents' meetings, a lot of parents don't actually realize how much information there is at their fingertips for their child . . . (teacher – primary school F).

Most schools considered this low level of engagement as not being specific to Learning Platform technologies *per se*, but linked to a general disconnection of some parents from school life. One school noted that there

had been 'virtually no take-up' of in-school provision of Learning Platform access for parents without the Internet at home (governor – primary school F). Some teachers recognized that the Learning Platform could be seen merely as an additional burden for some parents. As this teacher argued

The danger with these types of things is that parents are just bombarded with information. . . . For the parents that are involved parents that's brilliant . . . And then there's the other side of the coin which, you know, the parents are busy and they haven't got time to invest that type of time (teacher – primary school G).

Some parents that were interviewed felt that the Learning Platform did offer opportunities for enhanced communication and sharing of information between home and school, although others expressed a sense of frustration at the lack of participation of the wider parent population. Some parents remained sceptical about the full extent of the material that they were being provided



Fig 3 Parent view of a student 'dashboard' profile showing data on behaviour, attendance, grades, and reports (secondary school E).

access to – as one interviewee reasoned, 'I'll only be aware of certain snapshots. I don't know, I won't know the range of the things that are going on' (parent – primary school R). Other parents highlighted the limited nature of the information exchange and dialogue that the Learning Platforms were providing. As one parent put it, her school's Learning Platform was not felt to satisfactorily 'bring down those walls' between school and home. As she argued, 'I want to know what's going on with my child' (parent – secondary school P). As another parent in the same school concluded

It's a one-way directional thing ... it isn't a forum, there's no two-way communication so you have a way to go back and ask questions. It isn't quite the open democracy you want (parent – secondary school P).

### Outcomes of parent-focused uses of Learning Platform technologies

Learning Platform tools and applications appeared to be resulting in a range of positive outcomes along the lines intended by the school management and teaching staff.

There was evidence across all of the schools that the Learning Platforms were being used to provide parents with the opportunity to review and support their child's learning, ensure that parents were given important organizational and logistical information, and therefore leave some parents with an enhanced sense of being involved in the day-to-day running of the school. As one school's e-learning coordinator reported

We're just starting on the cusp of greater parental engagement. At the moment, we've got parental communication ... they're seeing and enjoying what their children are doing (e-learning coordinator – primary school F).

Across the case studies, specific instances were found of the Learning Platforms helping 'remote' parents maintain contact with their child's progress at school (e.g. parents working away from home, or parents who were not living with the child). The extreme weather conditions experienced during the fieldwork period had prompted instances of Learning Platforms being used to

ensure continuity of learning despite school closure. As one parent described, the closure of the school because of heavy snowfall had seen her being able to replicate the school day at home through the Learning Platform:

When I was younger and it snowed and you couldn't get to school you spent all day playing. But on the day with the snow there was an opportunity for them to continue their education like it was a normal day. Obviously they had breaks and they went and played in the snow at the same time. So there was a benefit in the fact that it wasn't a [case of] 'Right it's snowing, we don't have to go to school'. They continued doing some education (parent – primary school G).

While this extension of 'school-to-home' connections was valued by some parents, our analysis suggested that the use of Learning Platforms to engage parents was often serving to frame and regulate the activities and behaviours of parents and students. In addition, the impact of having the accuracy and quality of one's work rendered visible to parents was an issue also commented on by school staff. For example, school administrators talked of the heightened need to ensure that there were no 'discrepancies' in online information (e-learning co-ordinator, secondary school I). Perhaps more concerning was the bearing of the Learning Platform on teachers' sense of professionalism. As one teacher put it, 'one fear [is that] the parent will be online every second, looking at what the teacher's done or hasn't done' (teacher – primary school F). For some teachers, the Learning Platform was leading to a reconsideration of how they 'presented' their teaching activities and – it follows – how they presented themselves as teachers:

Parents don't always understand the pressures. I mean, for instance, I've told you how many hours I did this weekend, and if I've forgotten something, or if a child didn't get a target for some reason. You know, that's going to be highly visible, isn't it, if parents are looking. And so I think what you're doing . . . you are much more accountable than you were (teacher – primary school F). If you're putting your planning on there and they've got access to that then how can they possibly understand what you're talking about? Why should you have to then start thinking about a parent's perception of what you're writing on your plan? (teacher – primary school G).

### **Factors and issues underpinning schools' use of Learning Platform technologies with parents**

As the data presented so far suggest, many of the factors and issues that underpinned these uses of Learning Plat-

form technologies were related to wider social aspects of schooling such as time, space, discipline, and regulation, rather than issues specific to the use of the technology. That said, many interviewees were keen to highlight a range of technology-related issues – not least the varying levels of parental access to the Internet. This was clearly an issue for some of the case study schools, especially those in more economically deprived areas. As a headteacher of one inner-city school put it, 'although one-tenth of our parents are computer literate, nine-tenths aren't' (head teacher – primary school S). School managers also highlighted mitigating issues of 'e-safety' and the need to clearly define the nature of 'appropriate' access – for example, deciding which family members were given access to the Learning Platform and how to gain parental consent for the sharing of photographs and videos.

Yet parental use of the Learning Platforms also appeared to be shaped by existing home-school relationships and the wider 'politics' of parental engagement. All of the 12 case study schools could be said to have had developed forms of Learning Platform provision that mirrored their established offline forms of parental engagement and involvement. In this sense, Learning Platforms were proving to be an effective way of building upon pre-existing school/parent relationships and activities. Learning Platforms were also providing a new site for the continuation of some existing tensions – particularly in the ways in which Learning Platforms served to support uni-directional communication and maintain strong borders between 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. This was clearly an issue for some of the school leaders in the case study schools, with some talking in guarded terms of 'having to be careful' and not wanting to 'open up a negative forum' (deputy headteacher – primary school G).

### **Discussion**

Even within a purposive sample of high-using schools, there is currently limited use of Learning Platform technologies to engage with parents. The majority of these case study schools were using Learning Platforms to augment the 'top-down', broadcast delivery of information, communication, and homework resources to parents, with limited opportunities provided for reciprocal contact. This use of Learning Platform technologies should not come as a complete surprise. Indeed, the



observation that the use of Learning Platforms within schools appears to often conform to existing 'one-way' patterns of delivery of information and resources has been noted by other authors. As Lyndsay Grant (2009, p. 5) similarly concluded, '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" '.

In most of the case study schools, Learning Platforms appeared to be most often enrolled into the existing one-way 'involvement' of parents in their children's schooling, rather than a more 'democratic' empowerment of individual parents *per se*. At best, Learning Platforms were being used to 'show-case' examples of finished work, provide detailed reporting on student 'progress', and engage distanced and remote parents. Thus, in all of the case study schools, Learning Platforms could be characterized as 'institutional technologies' inasmuch as they were being used to sustain and underpin 'the formalised, technically developed, and rationalised procedures that regulate the everyday operations of institutions' (Griffith & Andre-Bechely 2008, p. 43). While Learning Platform technologies clearly have the potential to be used in a number of different ways (especially through the use of social media applications such as social networking, folksomony applications, and wiki tools), in many schools most of the 'parent/users' were being configured by school managers, ICT staff, and teachers in a bounded manner as a passive recipient rather than an active participant.

The underlying reasons for schools using Learning Platform technologies in the ways that they would not appear to be predominantly technical in nature – rather, they relate to a number of pre-existing social, cultural, and political issues. A key issue arising from the case studies was how Learning Platform technologies were being configured and implemented by schools as part of the wider pursuit of parental 'responsibilisation' – i.e. where parents are obliged to actively support schools in their endeavours (Crozier 2000). For example, Learning Platforms were commonly being used to encourage parents to act in ways that contributed to the overall well-being of the school – e.g. ensuring that homework was completed, ensuring students' attendance at school, and so on. It is important to recognize that while Learning Platforms were being used to reinforce this framing and 'regulating' of parental com-

pliance, they were not the only means of pursuing these goals. Indeed, Learning Platforms appeared to be often used by schools to build upon and reinforce pre-existing relationships with parents. Crucially, these relationships were generally already 'top-down' and one way with little room for parent input or negotiation with school leaders or teachers. At best, Learning Platforms were being used as an additional means for schools to talk to (rather than 'talk with') parents.

Of course, Learning Platform technologies were being used by parents to engage with schools, albeit in a largely passive and reactive manner (e.g. responding to school requests for the completion of homework tasks, rather than entering into dialogue with the schools about the nature of that homework). In particular, Learning Platforms appeared to be used as part of the 'mutual surveillance' that characterizes the contemporary parent/school relationship (Crozier 2000) and, indeed, many different aspects of public/private technology use (see Albrechtslund 2008). For example, through the Learning Platform, parents were able to view their children's work and gauge a sense of their 'progress', as well as gain a sense of what the school was doing to fulfil their duties to educate students. This was accompanied by school managers and teachers working hard to manage their technology-mediated 'accountability' to parents. Learning Platforms were therefore fulfilling a role in allowing schools and teachers to formally and visibly demonstrate their professional competence and expertise to parents. That this 'presentation of professional self' was often taking a rather formal and static form is understandable, with schools using Learning Platforms as a means of increasing parental 'trust' in them to do their job.

All of these issues go some way to highlight the complexity of using technology to encourage parental 'involvement' in the processes and practices of their children's schooling. Learning Platforms were being used to enhance existing forms and routines of parental engagement, rather than lead to any 'new', different, or distinct alterations to parental involvement. In the 12 case study schools, Learning Platform technologies appeared to be linked clearly to the control and regulation of parents' engagement. There was little evidence that Learning Platforms were contributing to conditions for more harmonized or more productive partnerships between parents and schools *per se*. Instead, Learning Platforms were enforcing and extending the wider

pre-existing school cultures of parental engagement and control. In this sense, it could be concluded that Learning Platform technologies are unlikely to drive any changes in parental involvement unless accompanied by wider shifts in the 'parent-centeredness' of a school's organizational culture. It would seem that Learning Platforms could certainly not be said to be providing a 'technical fix' to the social issues that underpin the 'problem' of widening parental involvement in schools. In and of themselves, Learning Platform technologies appear to reflect and reinforce – rather than reconfigure – existing patterns of school/parent engagement.

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