Creating a Home-School Connection in Early Childhood Through Technology:
Parent Engagement and ABCmouse.com

Leslie Ponciano
Loyola Marymount University
United States
Leslie.Ponciano@lmu.edu

Abstract: Research demonstrates that parent engagement leads to higher levels of academic readiness and achievement. Online early learning websites have the potential to offer opportunities for teachers and parents to collaborate on the education of young children. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) supports six principles for family engagement. Three of these best practices are illustrated with ABCmouse.com, an award-winning early learning website that is free to ECE teachers. Strategies for using technology to engage parents in their children's education are discussed. Educational technology provides the opportunity for children to gain 21st century skills while increasing their competencies and, simultaneously, forges a new pathway for a positive home-school connection.

Introduction

A strong connection between home and school, particularly in early childhood, has long been considered the key to educational success (Beveridge, 2005; Esler, Godber, & Christenson, 2002; Hara, 1998; Jeynes, 2007). In K-12, research has found that parental engagement leads to higher achievement in math and reading (Griffith, 1996; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). Moreover, research on parental engagement in early childhood has found higher skills in language and literacy (Marcon, 1999; Sheridan, Knoche, Kupzyk, Edwards, & Marvin, 2011). The expectations for parents to be involved and engaged in their children's education goes beyond good attendance and good behavior. Parents are now expected to take responsibility for their child's schooling (Whitty, 2002); yet, there is little to no guidance as to what this should look like. Even scholars have not reached consensus on the definitions or the terms. Parent engagement and parent involvement are used interchangeably in some of the literature and are qualitatively different concepts in other literature. Some parents may choose to be involved in home-related educational activities only and avoid school events or discussions with the teacher. Other parents may volunteer within the school environment but fail to provide assistance for their children with schoolwork. Alternatively, some parents feel marginalized and avoid all involvement while others find and fight for social justice or policy issues within the school. Well-intentioned teachers and parents may misinterpret each other's cues as to how, where, and when to communicate about the progress of students. The ambivalence of parents to become involved may be associated with their physical, emotional, or intellectual capabilities rather than motivation (Eccles & Harold, 1993). Parents may feel intimidated and limited (DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, & Duchane, 2007). These and other barriers may prevent parents and teachers from establishing this important partnership.

A developmental-ecological perspective acknowledges that the family system is the most direct and influential system in the early years of learning while also recognizing the important connection between the family system and the school system (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Yet, the family environment has undergone changes to which school systems have failed to respond. The additional economic and time constraint stressors that are evident at all socioeconomic levels have increased the reliance that parents have on schools and early childhood educators to take responsibility for preparing children for school success (Swick, 2004). Family structures are more diversified and parents are working longer hours with shrinking social support networks (Coontz, 1997; Hanson & Lynch, 2004). Further, the increased role of technology in our society allows for parents to continue their work when they arrive home and may decrease their availability to engage with their children's education (Knopf & Swick, 2008).

Simultaneously, teacher beliefs about parent engagement can support or inhibit the establishment of the home-school connection. Even teachers that express a belief in family involvement may behave differently when there is conflict between the parent's goals and the teacher's goals for the student (Gonzalez-Mena, 1994). Teacher beliefs about the role of the parent in a child's education may be associated with what they experienced in their own education (Comer, 2001). Yet, regardless of their personal beliefs, there are powerful messages that early childhood educators must engage parents in order to best prepare their students for success. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) supports six principles for family engagement: 1) including families in decision making and goal setting, 2) utilizing two-way communication, 3) reciprocity between programs, teachers, and families, 4) developing learning activities for both the home and the community, 5) family participation in program decisions and advocacy, and 6) comprehensively addressing family engagement within the program (www.naeyc.org/familyengagement/principles).

With consideration for the developmental-ecological context within which children are growing and learning both at home and at school, new approaches and strategies need to be included in building home-school connections that will take into account the changing family environment and teacher beliefs. Therefore, I propose that educational technology may offer the solution to engaging parents and creating positive teacher-parent communication in regards to each child's academic readiness and achievement. This paper will use an online early learning website, ABCmouse.com, to illustrate how NAEYC's first three principles of parent engagement can be achieved with educational technology.

ABCmouse.com

ABCmouse.com is an award winning online early learning academy that is free to early childhood education programs and school districts. The thousands of activities on the site are developmentally appropriate, align with state and national standards, and address important academic and developmental domains (math, language arts, science, social studies, art, music, health and self-care) for children ages 2 – 6 years. The website also incorporates the social-emotional factors related to education such as motivation, persistence, engagement, and attention. Teachers are provided with free classroom accounts for their students. These accounts can be accessed both in the classroom and at home with a computer or a tablet and teachers and parents are able to monitor children's progress on the activities. The website is effectively used in whole group instruction with an interactive white board or as background music. Small group centers where children can share their successes on activities using individual computers in the classroom are useful in creating peer interaction. Teachers can also create specific, differentiated lessons for each child to complete at home. Parents can subscribe to the website for a fee in order to have full access; however, this is not required for the child to work on the activities assigned from the teacher's free account. In other words, the home-school connection can be established through ABCmouse.com at no cost. At home, children are able to directly share with their parents the songs, books, and activities that are part of their daily classroom routines.

Access to the internet and either a computer or tablet is needed for children to use the website at home and while this is a potential barrier for low-income families, research is indicating that families from all socioeconomic levels with preschool-aged children have access to a wide range of technology hardware in their homes and/or communities (Plowman, Stephen, & McPake, 2010). ABCmouse.com addresses this potential inequity by providing an option for the teacher to create "printables" for some of the activities. Furthermore, the website can be accessed from any computer, such as those found at community centers and libraries.

There are three main ways for children to use ABCmouse.com. First, the teacher chooses a level for the child to begin working on the Step-by-Step Learning Path. The learning activities are offered to the child in a sequential order. The activities are varied, engaging, and educational. Each completed activity earns tickets that can be used to purchase virtual items for the child's virtual room, virtual hamster cage, or virtual aquarium. This motivational tool encourages persistence and self-determination. The second way to use the website is teacher-directed in that the students complete the activities assigned by the teacher that are differentiated to each student's needs. The completion of these activities also earns tickets. The third

way to use the website is child-centered exploration. Students can visit the zoo, the farm, or choose various activities based on their own interests.

Including families in decision making and goal setting

Parent-teacher collaboration is needed in order to reach consensus about the educational goals for each student. Parents and teachers may differ in what they each believe are the most important goals for the child. For many parents, a lack of pedagogical tools and a lack of clarity on developmentally appropriate practice may result in the implementation of ineffective strategies to engage their children in learning. Yet, the extensive range of activities available on ABCmouse.com can help the parents and the teachers find agreement on developmentally appropriate educational goals and the strategies for reaching mastery of important concepts.

For example, perhaps the teacher would like the child to gain better self-regulation when experiencing frustration and the parent would like the child to learn the alphabet. On ABCmouse.com, the teacher can choose alphabet-related activities that are at, as well as slightly beyond, the child's level. Songs, puzzles, games, and books placed in the child's online file are accessible at home. After the parent redeems the code provided by the teacher for access to the student's individual ABCmouse.com account, the parent can log in and click on the child's file to find the activities that are differentiated for that student's needs. The parent will observe the child practicing letter recognition, letter sounds, and letter writing in developmentally appropriate ways while also witnessing the child's struggle at times. Both the teacher and the parent can provide guidance at school and at home towards more appropriate coping strategies and emotional regulation. While it is possible for this scenario to occur without the use of a website, the child's desire to "play" on ABCmouse.com and earn tickets for activity completion will motivate persistence and achievement; thereby, accomplishing both goals and supporting a positive partnership between the parent and the teacher. The following unsolicited comments from parents provide authentic examples of this concept:

"Absolutely WONDERFUL! I was looking into the site as a form of intervention for four of my very low level Kindergarteners. I was going to use my classroom money to buy a subscription for each of them because they so desperately needed help. I was so shocked and excited to find that it was free for the whole class that I cried. Thank you for allowing me to help the parents of my students help them." – Kindergarten teacher

"Great site! The token economy system with the tickets is a major incentive for the kids to complete their activities. I love how easy it is to personalize it for each student and increase parental involvement at home." - Teacher

"I love this site! It allows me to set activities for each child based on the level they are on. I also love that I am able to have activities sent home for parents to work with their children on as well. ABC Mouse is awesome!" – Teacher

Utilizing two-way communication

In order for parents to be engaged in ways that are helpful and supportive, rather than intrusive or disruptive, to their child's learning and to the functioning of the classroom, communication is essential. As the school environment becomes more tech-savvy, technology becomes the means to convey information to parents (Hick, 2006). For example, in the K-12 environment, a number of different technology-based strategies have been employed. Online 'intranets' and 'learning platforms' give parents information about homework assignments, grades, and content (Selwyn, Banaji, Hadjithoma-Garstak, & Clark, 2011). Furthermore, the use of email and text messaging has emerged as a strategy to share information quickly and effectively. However, research has been unable to establish the impact of these strategies and concludes that the small amount of effort on the part of the parent within these strategies may diminish the role and importance of parental engagement (Lewin & Luckin, 2010).

ABCmouse.com was designed with the concept that parents serve as encouraging coaches for their children's learning, creating a bridge between the home and school contexts. The activities are pre-determined to be developmentally appropriate and aligned with standards. Scaffolding and instructional strategies are built-in, allowing parents to feel confident that they are using best practices to help their child learn. As parents "play" ABCmouse.com with their child, they will witness their child's strengths and difficulties. Although this is not the traditional definition for two-way communication, it provides a starting point for these conversations between teachers and parents to develop. At drop-off and pick-up, parents can quickly and easily report to the teacher what was accomplished at home on ABCmouse.com. Parents can intuit what teachers believe are the important concepts for their child and ask questions related to the activities. They will understand what the teacher wants the child to learn and they will be oriented towards a positive partnership with the school. The following comments from parents help to illustrate this idea:

> *"I have been teaching for 25 years and find this site both educational and comprehensive. I have incorporated this site into our classroom and the children love it. We have a group session together, then each student gets individual time to work on his/her own lesson path. The parents love that the children can work on their lessons from home and keep track of what they are doing. I am VERY impressed with this whole set up and can't wait until it is available for higher grade levels. Keep up the good work!" - Teacher, mother of 2, grandmother of 5.*

> *"My students are SO excited about this site. Parents flock to my room to see what the hype is about." – Teacher*

> *"I really love the site and LOVE the fact that I can share the site with my families/parents so that the children have the opportunity to further their skills at home as well." – Teacher*

Reciprocity between programs, teachers, and families

Early childhood educators play an important role in providing an inclusive and respectful environment for all families (Gay, 2002; Hein & Miller, 2004). Students and their families come from diverse backgrounds and today's classrooms are multilingual, multicultural, and multiracial. A multicultural curriculum is a top-down approach that creates equal opportunities and positive attitudes about the cultural differences represented in society (Banks & Banks, 2004). An anti-bias curriculum focuses on how each person responds to discrimination and prejudice (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006). The intercultural approach adds a component of bi-directionality so that children have the opportunity and encouragement to share their cultural context from home with their peers and teachers (Ponciano & Shabazian, 2012). The home-school connection is strengthened by this reciprocity and for those parents who are unable to directly contribute to the school community, culturally responsive educational technology provides one potential pathway through which they recognize the celebrations, routines, and traditions of their cultural context in the curriculum.

For example, there is a language setting that switches many aspects of the website into Spanish. The students will complete all activities in English; however, the children and parents are able to hear and read the instructions in their language of origin. Additionally, cultural celebrations and traditions that the families experience in the home are reflected in a number of activities. Below are a few examples including a painting to create a card for Dia de las Madres and a poem about Kwanzaa:

Conclusion

The use of educational technology to establish and maintain the home-school connection may raise concerns about "screen time". However, proponents of technology counter these concerns with research studies designed to demonstrate the contribution of quality educational media in skill-formation (Chiong & Shuler, 2010), knowledge of the world, operational skills, and learning dispositions (Plowman, Stephen, and McPake, 2010). NAEYC supports the use of technology in ECE classrooms in their position statement (NAEYC, 1996; 2012). While the debate may continue about the role of technology in early childhood education, American society has already developed into a technology-rich environment providing unique opportunities to involve parents in their children's education. Educational technology, such as ABCmouse.com, meets the current needs of teachers and families and facilitates the development of the home-school connection.

References

Banks, J. A., and Banks, C. A. M. (Eds.). (2004). *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Beveridge, S. (2005). *Children, families, and schools: Developing partnerships for inclusive education*. London: Routledge Falmer.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (Ed.) (2005). *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Chiong, C., & Shuler, C. (2010). *Learning: Is there an app for that? Investigations of young children's usage and learning with mobile devices and apps*. New York: The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop. http://pbskids.org/read/files/cooney_learing_apps.pdf

Comer, J. P. (2001). Schools that develop children. *The American Prospect, 12*(7), 3-12.

Coontz, S. (1997). *The way we really are: Coming to terms with America's changing families*. New York: Basic Books.

DePlanty, J. Coulter-Kern, R., & Duchane, K. A. (2007). Perceptions of parent involvement in academic achievement. *The Journal of Educational Research, 100*(6), 361-368. doi: 10.3200/JOER.100.6.361-368

Derman-Sparks, L., and Ramsey, P. G. (2006). *What if all the kids are white? Anti-bias multicultural education with young children and families.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Eccles, J.S., and Harold, R. D. (1993). Parent-school involvement during the early adolescent years. *Teachers College Record, 94*, 568-587.

Esler, A. N., Godber, Y., &Christenson, S. L. (2002). Best practices in supporting home-school collaboration. In A. Thomas & T. Grimes (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology IV.* Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

Gay, G. (2002). Preparing culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education, 53*, 106-116. doi: 10.1177/0022487102053002003

Gonzales-Mena, J. (1994). *From a parent's perspective*. Salem, WI: Sheffield.

Griffith, J. (1996). Relation of parental involvement, empowerment, and school traits to student academic performance. *Journal of Educational Research, 90*, 33-41. doi: 10.1080/00220671.1996.9944441

Hanson, M., & Lynch, E. (2004). *Understanding families: approaches to diversity disability, and risk.* Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

Hara, S. R. (1998). Parent involvement: The key to improved student achievement. *School Community Journal, 8*(2), 9-19.

Hein, N. P., & Miller, B. A. (2004). Quien soy? Finding my place in history: Personalizing learning to include family diversity. *Multicultural Education, 13*(2), 6-10.

Hick, S. (2006). Technology, social inclusion and poverty: An exploratory investigation of a community technology center. *Journal of Technology in Human Services, 24*(1), 53-67. doi: 10.1300/J017v24n01_04

Jeynes, W. H. (2007). The relationship between parental involvement and urban secondary school student academic achievement: A meta-analysis. *Urban Education, 42*(1), 82-110. doi: 10.1177/0042085906293818

Knopf, H. J., & Swick, K. J. (2008). How parents feel about their child's teacher/school: Implications for early childhood professionals. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 34*, 291-296.

Lewin, C., & Luckin, R. (2010). Technology to support parental engagement in elementary education: Lessons learned from the UK. *Computers & Education, 54*(3), 749-758. doi: 10.1016/j.compedu.2009.08.010

Marcon, R. A., (1999). Positive relationships between parent school involvement and public inner-city preschoolers' development and academic performance. *School Psychology Review, 28*(3), 395-412.

National Association for the Education of Young Children. Engaging diverse families: Family Engagement. www.naeyc.org/familyengagement/principles

National Association for the Education of Young Children (1996, 2012). *Technology and young children - Ages 3 through 8: A position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Plowman, L., Stephen, C., & McPake, J. (2010). Supporting young children's learning with technology at home and in preschool. *Research Papers in Education, 25*(1), 93-113. doi: 10.1080/02671520802584061

Ponciano, L., and Shabazian, A. (2012). Interculturalism: Addressing diversity in early childhood. *Dimensions of Early Childhood, 40*(1), 23–30.

Selwyn, N., Banaji, S., Hadjithoma-Garstak, C., & Clark, W. (2011). Providing a platform for parents? Exploring the nature of parental engagement with school Learning Platforms. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, 27,* 314-323. doi: 10.1111/j.1365-2729.2011.00428.x

Sheridan, S. M., Knoche, L. K., Kupzyk, K. A., Edwards, C. P., & Marvin, C. A. (2011). A randomized trial examining the effects of parent engagement on early language and literacy: The Getting Ready intervention. *Journal of School Psychology 49*, 361-383. doi: 10.1016/j.jsp.2011.03.001.

Sui-Chu, E. H., & Willms, J. D. (1996). Effects of parental involvement on eighth-grade achievement. *Sociology of Education, 69*, 126-141.

Swick, K. (2004). *Empowering parents, families, schools, and communities during the early childhood years*. Champaign, IL: Stipes.

Whitty, G. (2002). *Making sense of education policy*. London: Paul Chapman.