

Children using home computers: bridging the gap between home and school?

Cindy Kerawalla

PhD student, Loughborough University, L.J.Kerawalla@lboro.ac.uk

Dr Charles Crook

Reader, Loughborough University, c.k.crook@lboro.ac.uk

Is the domestic computer turning into an important link between home and school? Judgement about this depends on knowing what children are doing with it. Our research at Loughborough University has been looking at how KS2 children from 33 families actually use computers at home. The project is unusual in that it makes use of software to log actual patterns of computer use moment by moment. However, the research also looks carefully at the way this technology gets 'fitted into' families – thinking of the home as a kind of ecology. To create a useful contrast, we have also studied ICT use in the five primary schools that represented the catchment area for the participating families.

It is clear that the reason families own a personal computer has a lot to do with aspirations for their children's progress at school. Interviews reveal that 73% of parents bought a computer to support their child's education, and that over 60% of the software available in these homes was of a kind that would be appropriately found in classrooms. Moreover, the ethos of school is probably very much in mind when parents think about incorporating computers into family routine. When deciding where to place it, issues such as parental supervision, having a quiet or serious place to work and ensuring equity of access to all family members, were commonly raised by these parents.

Yet in spite of all this investment, monitoring of computer use shows that the most common activity for children was playing non-educational games. In a somewhat disheartening manner, parental aspirations for computer use seem not to be met. This was the case even though we furnished each family with six new educationally-oriented CD-ROMs.

We were interested in finding out more about this shortfall between aspiration and reality. One issue must surely be the extent to which parents get involved themselves in their children's activity. Our logs show that most computer use was solitary and parent's involvement was very limited. In interviews, parents admitted this and cited reasons such as lack of time and confidence. But many parents (72%) referred to a feeling that their intervention and guidance was not particularly welcome: children may sometimes resist the tutorial role when adopted by adults close to them. Obviously, this is in direct contrast to the social environment surrounding computer use in primary schools where much use will be collaborative and where adults are

on hand naturally to adopt the tutorial role.

This study also investigated general parental attitudes towards children learning at home. Whilst most parents recognised the importance of their children pursuing their learning at home, they were also concerned not to be seen as parents who might 'pressurise' or 'hothouse' children. Often they see school as a long and focused day – something finding a release at home. Despite the modest role of parents in managing *computer* experience, all parents still claimed to provide help and support for their children's general homework. There is perhaps a proper feeling of responsibility for supporting tasks that have been formally brought home from the classroom.

In evaluating these tensions, it is important to focus on classrooms and homes as two different environments. Our study suggests a certain gulf. Classroom computer use is curriculum led and children have shared knowledge of this agenda. Peer collaboration is possible and adult guidance is always on hand. Homes however, have a different kind of ecology. Activity is diffuse, improvised and not always co-ordinated among family members. Moreover, importing the formal role of 'teaching' from classroom to home may violate something of what children normally expect about their domestic relationships. It is important to remain conscious of this cultural organisation and not suppose that simply furnishing a new and powerful technology will allow a simple side-stepping of the contextualising that organised and purposeful learning often needs.

Yet we do not wish to promote a dispiriting story from this project. It is true that with older children in our sample, computers were often implicated in preparing homework assignments. Moreover, in our observations we found some children some of the time engaging with computers in truly creative ways and sometimes taking this work into school. What is needed is a fuller partnership. Most of the parents participating in our project had little sense of what their children were currently doing in class and virtually no conception of how or to what extent classroom computers supported this. Our findings may be sobering, but if there is a good lever to operate on the home-school interface, this technology probably is still a strong candidate.

If you wish read the full research report from which this article is drawn, a draft is available at <http://devpsy.lboro.ac.uk/psy/ckc/papers/cindyD3.htm>