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'It's just another nightmare to manage:' Australian parents' perspectives on BYOD and 'ed-tech' at school and at home

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ABSTRACT

Discussions about computers and media technologies have long been infused with optimistic and future-focused rhetoric about their educational potential. Australian schools have the highest proportion of students using digital media in the OECD, and have implemented a range of ed-tech policies and programmes. Not everyone is satisfied with educational uses of digital media technologies, however. This article documents the concerns, perspectives and experiences of 40 Australian parents in relation to their children's educational uses of technology. It reveals a number of concerns, including that it undermines parental agency and involvement in their children's learning; is a source of distraction for their children; makes parental mediation increasingly difficult, and ultimately increases the parenting burden. These findings highlight that governments and schools need to take into account the experiences and concerns of parents when developing school technology programmes and policies.

Introduction

Discussions about computers and media technologies have long been infused with optimistic and future-focused rhetoric about their educational potential (Buckingham 2007; Sellar 2016). Selwyn (2016) argues that this optimism has historically been expressed through enthusiastic, exaggerated and hyperbolic 'ed-tech' speak. Sellar (2016), adopting a more moderate position, argues that education is oriented by a desire for progress and a view to the future. In any case, throughout the developed world at least, computers and digital technologies have come to be seen as important tools for children's education and future success. There is a significant body of literature examining the place of digital devices within children's education (see, for example, Buckingham 2007; Selwyn 2012; Loveless and Williamson 2013).

The educational benefits of technology have long been taken as axiomatic by governments (Moran-Ellis and Cooper 2000; Buckingham 2007) and technology-assisted learning has become a norm within all Australian schools (Graham and Sahlberg 2021). Governments throughout the developed world have promoted the opportunities provided by digital media technologies in terms of the growth, development and competitiveness of young people – and by extension, the nation (Silcock, Payne, and Hocking 2016). This is especially the case in Australia, where government policy has sought to provide the necessary infrastructure, remove barriers to technology uptake and provide students with access to devices which have come to be considered essential ingredients of a contemporary education (see, for example, Rudd, Smith, and Conroy 2007).

The prevalence of digital technologies within contemporary educational contexts, however, has generated new challenges for parents of school-age children. Parents have long been responsibilised for mediating their children's digital media use, primarily to minimise harm, but also to maximise opportunity (Livingstone et al. 2017). Not only do digital technologies blur the traditional spatial and temporal boundaries of the school, conflating the parent/teacher role; they also present new challenges for parents attempting to mediate their children's digital media use.

Much of the research about Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) policies and educational uses of technology ('ed-tech') focuses on the site of the classroom (see, for example, Selwyn et al. 2017; Alirezabeigi, Masschelein, and Decuypere 2020). This article explores the perspectives, concerns and experiences of Australian parents of teenagers in relation to their children's ed-tech use at home. It contrasts their perspectives with those of teachers, as documented in the Gonski Growing Up Digital Report (Gonski Institute for Public Education 2020), and makes two overarching arguments: (1) There is an implicit agreement about the inevitability of technology between, parents, schools and teachers, and its necessity for children's futures (noting that the perspectives of students are largely absent in these discussions); and (2) There is a clear tension between teachers and parents about who is responsible for facilitating this future. These findings highlight a need for better communication between Australian schools and parents regarding ed-tech use both at school and at home. Additionally, this article may offer valuable lessons to other countries seeking to incorporate, or increase the use of, digital media technologies in the school curriculum.

Future-focused narratives, generational rhetoric and the perceived inevitability of technology

Well before schools responded to COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns with digitally mediated 'remote learning', there had already been a significant shift in how education is delivered throughout the developed world, towards an increasing incorporation of digital devices, platforms and systems in the school curriculum. There are at least three possible reasons for this shift: (1) optimistic and future-focused rhetoric about the educational potential of digital media technologies; (2) the evolution of 'network society' and the 'knowledge economy', and (3) the discursive emergence of the 'digital native'.

There is a long-standing optimistic – even utopian – rhetoric about the transformative potential of digital media technologies. Despite scholarly criticism – see for example Selwyn (2002; 2016) and Buckingham (2007) – these narratives have flourished within a broader discursive context of a network society and knowledge economy (Thomas 2011), further elevating claims about the importance of technology in education for preparing our nation's future workers for the jobs of the future (see also, Buchanan 2011). According to Silcock, Payne, and Hocking (2016), the discursive construction of developed nations such as Australia as a knowledge economy serves to equate technological progress with national progress and productivity. This, they argue, has led to a kind of governmentality whereby schools uncritically incorporate technology into the curriculum.

Adding to this already powerful narrative is the widespread belief – critiqued by academics yet promulgated by the popular media – of the existence of a digital generation gap which positions young people as digital natives and hence 'naturals' when it comes to digital technologies. The persistence of this generational rhetoric, despite its now dated premise, adds further weight to claims that contemporary education must keep up with and harness technological progress. Children's alleged mastery of and reliance on communications technologies by virtue of their generational status suggests that we must change our educational practices to accommodate their skills and unique ways of learning (Bennett, Maton, and Kervin 2008).

Even if we are not entirely convinced by this optimistic and generational rhetoric, a particular effect of this discourse is an ongoing expectation of inevitability which implies that resistance is futile and that we cannot afford to be left behind (Buckingham 2007; Robins and Webster 1999). A clearly technologically deterministic rhetoric, parents and schools are urged to prepare children

for jobs that have not been invented yet, and to live in more digital and connected ways (Livingstone and Sefton-Green 2016). If we do not, children will lack the necessary skills to compete in an increasingly competitive world. In this sense, children are being made up to be productive, competitive citizens of a digital future.

How have governments and schools responded? The digital education revolution

Governments throughout the developed world have operationalised elements of this optimistic and future-focused discourse in various ways. In the past 15 years in Australia, state and federal politicians have developed policies which endeavour to equip all Australian schools with digital technologies and provide computers to all senior secondary students. This 'digital turn' culminated in the Government of the day's Digital Education Revolution from 2008 to 2013 (Buchanan 2011), which sought to 'revolutionise classroom education' by providing every secondary student with their own computer, and schools with upgraded ICT equipment (Rudd, Smith, and Conroy 2007; Maher and Twining 2017). This ultimately meant that when the funding for devices eventually ran out, schools had to adopt BYOD policies. In the region where this study was conducted, the government's Better Schools for Our Kids: Technology Enabled Learning programme, provides laptops for all secondary school children (ACT Government 2021). For younger students and children in some other states, BYOD policies encourage parents to provide their child with a suitable device to bring to school to support their learning.

The Australian school system is characterised by high levels of choice, privatisation and competition (Perry and Southwell 2014). State of the art facilities and technologies have become a key selling point for schools wanting to attract the 'right' students (Buckingham 2007). Most schools now boast a ubiquitous state of access to digital technology, ensuring that personal technologies are on hand to support teaching and learning (Selwyn et al. 2017). It is not surprising therefore that Australian classrooms have the highest use of ICT and more school computers per student than other countries throughout the OECD (2015).

Who is responsible for facilitating this future?

School and educator perspectives

The implicit acknowledgement of the necessity and inevitability of digital technologies has raised questions about who is responsible for facilitating this future. As Buchanan, Southgate, and Smith (2019, 168) argue, 'the push for children to be educated with and about digital technologies, combined with the potential risks associated with these, puts those responsible for protecting them in a bind.' Students are perceived to lack the requisite skills and developmental maturity to sensibly manage the risks and opportunities of digital media themselves (Page Jeffery 2021b). However, little has been done legislatively and structurally to protect children's rights and online privacy, effectively devolving this responsibility to educators and parents (Buchanan, Southgate, and Smith 2019). The fact that many schools are effectively mandating device use, with little or no consultation with parents, might leave many to reasonably expect that it is the schools' responsibility to ensure reasonable, safe and beneficial use of digital media. Yet Buchanan, Southgate, and Smith (2019) report that educators were angry that parents expected them to deal with issues arising from students' socialising online, such as online bullying. This finding is echoed in the Growing Up Digital Report (Phase One) from the Gonski Institute for Education based at the University of New South Wales (Gonski Institute for Public Education 2020). The report, which examines school educators' attitudes towards technology use in the classroom, documents teachers effectively blaming parents for what they perceive to be a litany of negative consequences of technology in the classroom.

It is noteworthy that Phase 1 of the report does not distinguish between educational and personal uses of technology in the classroom. It documents that most teachers (84 per cent) thought that technologies were a growing distraction at school, and that students' ability to focus on educational

tasks had decreased. Educators' concerns about students' mental health, their apparent lack of school readiness, and arriving at school tired were also implicitly blamed on technology, as the following accounts from educators indicate:

> Students are more difficult to engage, lack self-regulation skills and are obsessed with gaming and social media. (Primary school teacher). (Gonski Institute for Public Education 2020, 16)

> I have a real concern about the ability of young people today to socialise effectively, and the prevalence of 'mental illness', mainly in the form of depression or anxiety, due to the pressure of trying to 'measure up' in the cyber world, and lack of participation in the real world. (Teacher). (Gonski Institute for Public Education 2020, 16)

These accounts highlight the porous boundaries between school and home, as personal devices, and the interpersonal communication that they facilitate, permeate learning environments. Many teachers blamed parents for some of the difficulties that they faced in the classroom for failing to effectively regulate or restrict digital media use in the home. The report notes that:

> Some teachers expressed frustration that the use of devices is regulated at school, but one teacher stated that she was 'surprised at the tolerance of parents in regard to how much time the students spend on devices, regardless of the activity'. One teacher commented that even her 'year 1/2 students were sneaking out of bed to play games during the night and their parents aren't even aware.' (Gonski Institute for Public Education 2020, 23)

Indeed, a quote from a school principal which adorns the title page of the report explicitly implicates parents: 'The addictive nature of technology and the lack of consistent community and parental guidance is seeing this valuable tool get a poor reputation' (Gonski Institute for Public Education 2020, 1). The message from the educators is loud and clear – parents need to do better at regulating their children's media use to ensure their optimal learning.

Parent perspectives

There is evidence that parents have, for a long time, tacitly accepted elements of the optimistic and future-focused discourse around educational uses of technology, as well as technology's perceived inevitability. Parents understandably want the best for their children, both in terms of their education as well as their future opportunities. Contemporary parents are guided by a vision of a 'digital future' (Livingstone and Blum-Ross 2020).

Shifts in middle-class parenting practices towards a more active cultivation of children's development to ensure that they reach their full potential (Page Jeffery 2021b) has further implicated the role of digital media technologies in the lives of young people. In a study of American families, Clark (2013), found that middle-class parents encouraged their children to use digital media specifically for educational achievement and self-development (and, conversely, discouraged uses of digital media which might be considered a distraction). For Singaporean parents in Lim's (2018) study of families, the various digital platforms utilised by schools allowed parents to be more heavily involved in their children's studies, and thus helped them to fulfil what many parents in Singapore consider to be one of their primary duties – guiding their children's academic career to optimise their chances of future success.

Parental attitudes towards digital media within the specific context of 'ed-tech', BYOD and related policies are still relatively underexplored. Rhetoric about the revolutionary potential and creative affordances of digital technologies tacitly accepted by many middle-class parents is one step removed from the realities and challenges of everyday family life in which parents grapple with the various practical, financial and educational challenges associated with managing device use in the home as well as being the custodians of their children's online presence (Buchanan, Southgate, and Smith 2019). The lived experiences of parents attempting to manage and mediate at-home *educational* uses of technology remains relatively under-examined, thus representing a critical gap within an increasingly relevant and important area of research.

A few studies do however provide some relevant insights into parents' attitudes. In a study of BYOD within two Australian primary schools, Maher and Twining (2017) found parents were largely supportive of schools' digital technology policies, as devices enabled children to share their work with their parents. As such, devices facilitated connection between school and home, and provided parents with greater oversight of their children's schoolwork. Yet, as Lim demonstrates in her study of Singaporean families, this was something of a double-edged sword for parents. Some respondents indicated that the various learning platforms utilised by their children's schools were a 'boon', as they helped parents monitor their children's schoolwork, ensuring that homework is done, and helping to prepare their children for their academic career. Still, many parents were also frustrated and sceptical of school use of digital learning platforms, as both parents and children reported that online learning was overly complicated, resulting in considerable time and effort in learning to use the platforms. Some parents strongly critiqued their children's schools for the extra pressure that various online learning had placed upon them, as teachers requested that parents use the platforms to extend their child's learning into the domestic realm. Ultimately, the incorporation of digital learning platforms created yet another responsibility that Singaporean parents must shoulder (Lim 2018).

In contrast, some studies have found that parents feel more excluded from their children's learning as a result of digital learning platforms. In the UK, Livingstone and Blum-Ross (2020) found that parental knowledge about their children's learning at school was limited. In New Zealand, Parsons and Adhikar (2016) found that while parents remained mostly positive about BYOD, especially in terms of their children's motivation to study, parents felt excluded from their children's online learning either due to the lack of visibility of their children's work, or their own perceived lack of digital skills. Parents have also expressed concern that the move to devices may be jeopardising the development of other skills, such as handwriting (Parsons and Adhikar 2016; Graham and Sahlberg 2021; Page Jeffery 2021b). Parents also complained that their children were 'glued' to their devices or were 'addicted' to their screens, which negatively affected family relationships (Parsons and Adhikar 2016). At the heart of parental concerns, Parsons and Adhikari argue, was a general perception that BYOD policies had undermined parental agency.

Parental ambivalence about ed-tech is further evidenced in Phase 2 of the Gonski Growing Up Digital Report (Graham and Sahlberg 2021), which examined parental perspectives about their children's digital media use. Parents recognised various benefits of ed-tech including remote learning[1], access to information, improving reading and maths skills, and independent learning and research skills. Yet many parents raised a number of concerns related to their children's use of digital media for online learning, including their child's lack of self-regulation when completing online schoolwork, the capacity for distraction as young people juggled various online tasks simultaneously, a concern about a lack of 'deep thinking' about learning tasks, and the lack of transparency in relation to children's online activities which compromised parents' ability to keep track of their children's homework. Like parents in Parsons and Adhikari's study, parents documented in the Gonski report felt that ed-tech undermined family rules and boundaries related to device use. Many parents struggled to guide their children to find a balance between using digital media for leisure and learning. The report highlights that parents are looking to teachers and schools to help support their children's digital media use (Graham and Sahlberg 2021).

These recent studies highlight that the increasing reliance on digital technologies for education delivery has the potential to affect families in significant ways. This article contributes to the existing literature by identifying some of these issues and further examining parents' anxieties, practices and concerns in relation to their teenage children's use of digital media for educational purposes.

Method

Focus groups and interviews were held with 40 Australian parents of at least one teenager aged 12–16 during 2016 and 2017 in Canberra, ACT to explore parents' anxieties about their children's use

of digital media. Thus, parental perspectives about their children's educational uses of digital media was not the specific focus of this study, but rather emerged as a major theme from the broader study. The primary research questions guiding the larger study were: (1) What are parents' anxieties and concerns in relation to their teenage children's use of digital technologies? and (2) How do parents address those concerns in relation to their children?

Five focus groups of between 4–6 participants were held with 27 participants. A schedule of questions based on the primary research questions guided the focus groups. The focus groups revealed a number of prominent themes, whereby concerns, experiences and practices were identified which were common to a significant portion of participants. These initial themes provided a provisional theoretical basis for more in-depth exploration of the issues via both subsequent focus groups as well as one-on-one interviews. Seven participants were asked to participate in follow-up interviews based on issues that they had raised in the focus groups. A further 13 participants participated in interviews only. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes.

Twenty-nine participants were mothers, 10 were fathers, and one was a grandmother who was the primary carer of two boys. Most participants were aged in their mid-40s, with a median age of 46. Participants had 90 children in total: 49 of those were aged between 12 and 16 – the target age range of study. Of these 49 children, 30 were female and 19 were male. The vast majority of participants were married (heterosexual), white, highly educated (60 per cent held post-graduate qualifications), and relatively wealthy (42 per cent had household incomes almost double the median household income for the area). Almost all participants were working professionals, representing mostly middle-class occupations such as academics, psychologists, and public servants. One participant was a stay-at-home parent.

Analysis

Transcripts from all focus groups and interviews totalled approximately 200,000 words. Data was initially structured according to a range of categories which covered general phenomena, concepts and constructs (Meyer 2008, 82). These categories included parental perspectives regarding discrete risks such as cyberbullying, sexting, and online predators. Such categories were typically the result of semantic analysis of the data (Braun and Clarke 2021), as participants provided direct responses to focus group and interview questions.

The entire data corpus was then analysed using qualitative thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), which is a method for systematically identifying, organising and offering insight into patterns of meanings across a dataset (Braun et al. 2019). An inductive and reflexive form of thematic analysis was adopted meaning that various categories and themes were derived from the data and evolved during the data analysis process, which also informed subsequent interviews and focus groups. To determine the key themes, data was analysed at a latent, interpretative level, rather than purely a semantic one, looking beyond what participants explicitly said to glean insight into their underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualizations (Braun and Clarke 2006). Clusters of categories that were similar and overlapping were grouped together and described according to broader overarching themes.

Somewhat surprisingly, parental anxieties did not neatly map onto the major risks that are routinely foregrounded in the cyber safety discourse in Australia – for example, online predators, pornography, sexting, and cyberbullying. Rather, parents' anxieties were complex, nuanced, and multifaceted, and didn't always fall within the traditional definitional parameters of risk at all. Indeed, as this article highlights, educational use of technologies was a major issue of concern for parents, despite dominant narratives which typically frame ed-tech as an opportunity. This dominant, overarching theme emerged from the first focus group and was articulated by numerous participants throughout the course of the study. A number of sub-themes related to this issue were also identified and are documented below.

The views and anecdotes expressed by participants in the remainder of this article have been selected because they were broadly representative of parental accounts that were shared by participants throughout the course of the research. All names have been changed to maintain participants' anonymity. Quotes have been lightly edited to enhance readability. The study was approved by the university's human research ethics committee, and informed consent was obtained from all study participants.

A note on the Australian school system

This study was conducted in Canberra, located in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) region of Australia. The Australian education system consists of primary school, starting at Foundation (kindergarten/pre-school) through to year 6; secondary or high school from years 7–10, and senior secondary school, typically referred to as College within the ACT from years 11–12 (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade n.d.). Australia has both government and non-government schools, and children of the participants attended a mix of these. While Australia's schooling system has historically ranked amongst the world's best, despite increasing marketisation of the education system (Perry and Southwell 2014) its performance has been steadily declining in recent years (Schleicher 2019; Sonnemann 2019, 5 December).

Findings

'Ed-tech' and BYOD prevalent across ACT schools

Parental accounts in this study revealed that the adoption – and in many cases apparent valorisation – of technologies within schools across the region was widespread, however policies did vary from school to school. Parents revealed that their children's schools had implemented a range of policies which were positioning digital media as a central pillar of their children's education, from the provision of Chromebooks for every student, to BYOD policies, to increasing incorporation of digital technologies in the curriculum (even, as one parent incredulously exclaimed, in physical education classes). Yet 40 per cent of parents in this study explicitly expressed some level of concern about the use of digital media in their children's educations, and one quarter of parents cited this issue as a major concern. (It should be noted at this point that only ten per cent of parents explicitly stated that they had no concerns at all about this issue, with the remaining participants not raising this issue when discussing their main anxieties and concerns about their children's digital media use). Many parents were sceptical of the apparent enthusiasm for technology expressed by school executives, and had some scathing criticisms of their children's schools' approach to digital technologies. Diane, for example, a 46-year-old post-graduate educated professional and mother of a 14-year-old daughter and 12-year- old-son, recounted 'registering her shock' with the school principal after it was announced that that school would be introducing BYOD for students as young as eight. According to Diane:

> The Principal had said, 'I'm very excited to announce that from next year, we're going to introduce a BYOD program for years three and above where we're going to encourage children to come to school with their own device, and all the parents are excited.' And I said, 'Can I just ask, what's wrong with the Chromebooks that they get out for various lessons? Why do they need to have their own device on them all the time?' Everyone recoiled in horror. And the principal responded, 'But Diane, we're all heading this way. And I'm proud that our school is one of the leading primary schools in the ACT to be doing this. This is a great step forward in the future for all our children who are digital natives who need to be ahead of the game.' And that was her response – about arming our children to be more digitally native than the school next door!

Diane's scepticism about the school's technology policy and her questioning of the principal were met with enthusiastic agreement by other focus group participants who were also critical

of their children's schools' perceived hasty adoption of digital media technologies. Such accounts suggest that the optimistic and future-focused rhetoric about computers and education remain alive and well in some schools, and indicate that some school principals continue to respond to pressure to remain innovative and 'ahead of the curve' when it comes to educational uses of technology.

Parental agency: decision-making, mediation and parental involvement

Many of the concerns about ed-tech and BYOD point to what parents perceive to be an undermining of their own parental agency. Several parents indicated that parental capacity to disallow or delay the introduction of digital media until they deemed their children to be developmentally ready to negotiate the risks and effectively manage appropriate use had been jeopardised by schools. Most participants in this study had teenage children, and almost all of them already had devices such as mobile phones, laptop computers and tablets.[2] The decreasing age for which many schools are introducing BYOD, however, highlights this as a potential issue for parents of younger children. Florence, a post-graduate educated 48-year-old mother to 12- and 18-year old sons, found herself in this position in relation to her younger son:

> He didn't have a device until we had to get one for school and now he's got this Chromebook that I've got to try to control … I had no intention of him having a device at this stage. I mean because he has to do all his homework on it, then I've got to creep into his room and say 'oh, that doesn't look like homework, it looks like another bloody YouTube video'. It's just another nightmare to manage.

One of the most significant issues raised by the majority of participants, and which is confirmed by other studies (Parsons and Adhikar 2016; Graham and Sahlberg 2021) was that parental attempts at parental mediation were undermined by the requirement that schoolwork be completed on a device. As I have argued elsewhere (Page Jeffery 2021a), parents find mediation of their children's digital media use difficult for a variety of reasons. Parents highlighted the difficulty of policing the boundaries between what they considered to be appropriate use of digital media (i.e., schoolwork), and inappropriate uses of digital media (everything else when they're supposed to be doing their schoolwork). This difficulty was expressed by Kendall and Kora.

> You may set limits, you may say they can only be on that [device] for an hour, but what if they've got four assignments and each subject requires them to be there for 20 to 40 minutes? (Kendall, 47-year-old stay-at-home mother to a 15-year-old son and 7-year-old daughter).

> This whole, them having to have a device takes away all of my ability to set limits. I feel that the school and the Department of Education is actively destroying my family relationships. (Kora, 45-year-old post-graduate educated professional and mother to four teenage children).

Unlike the parents in the studies undertaken by Maher and Twining (2017) and Lim (2018), who found that ed-tech afforded them greater involvement in their children's learning, several parents in this study indicated that they felt that their capacity to be involved in their children's schoolwork was effectively diminished by schools' ed-tech policies. Kendall, quoted above, and Felicity, a 42-year-old professional and mother to sons aged 3, 11 and 14, indicated that the shift to online homework left them feeling excluded from their children's schoolwork:

> I feel really resentful that that element of control's been taken out of my hands. I'm not saying that we should go back to the old-fashioned way of doing everything by hand. But the reality is if he was doing his homework by hand, I can have a look at his book, and go 'is this what you've done in an hour?' Whereas, he can easily pull up a word doc that he's had done for three days. (Kendall)

> Well everything's about the homework this year, but all the homework is done on the device. But I don't see it, whereas last year he brought it home, every week, I could see it, we could do it, I'd know what he had to do. (Felicity).

Devices as distraction

Parental concern about ed-tech was also framed in terms of their children's perceived inability to manage the boundaries between work and play, and their lack of capacity to juggle competing tasks on one device. Participants thought that their children were less productive using devices to complete their homework and were easily distracted by more attractive online activities. Parents were well aware of the appeal of devices as an entertainment and socialising tool – as one parent noted, 'the work tool is the distraction tool'. However, this invariably created challenges for the completion of more mundane tasks such as schoolwork. The following parental accounts demonstrate parents' experiences in relation to this issue:

> My daughter is 14 and she had to have an iPad for school … . That's where the whole thing started to go a bit out of control, because she's expected to do her homework but I'm just not sure how much homework is actually getting done, with this Snapchat thing constantly popping up. I go in and say after half an hour, 'Is that all you've done?' 'Well, my friends keep chatting,' … She doesn't want to be left out of the conversation. It's really difficult for her. (Margaret, 47-year-old professional and mother to 14-year-old girl).

> My main concern, I think, is that distraction issue … . Now that music, homework and social media all are on the one thing and they need it for their homework, we're really struggling to work out the boundaries there. (Kathryn, 45 year-old professional and mother to daughters aged 12 and 15).

Parents' concerns about the distraction of digital media illustrate the dilemma faced by middle-class parents who encouraged 'appropriate' uses of digital media, such as schoolwork and creative tasks, but discouraged 'inappropriate' uses of digital media, such as unproductive activities considered to be a distraction.

Schools' management of digital devices – the risks and practicalities

Many parents were not satisfied with the ways in which their children's schools were managing technology use. Two issues were evident here: the schools' approaches to managing the risks of digital media; and the more practical, operational management of online learning and device use in the home. One participant, Richard, a post-graduate educated senior executive who was father to a 14-year-old girl, suggested that schools, in their apparent haste to adopt digital media and exploit its purported educational benefits, had failed to protect students from the risks:

> The facilitation of everything good and bad that's out there through the way schools now do business … you've got to have an iPad, you've got to have a computer to function. I'm quite confident in saying that the extent to which education is facilitated has far and away outstripped the educational fraternity's ability to create the protections for kids. They've really been thrown to the wolves I think.

While it was evident that many schools had rules and guidelines governing digital media use, parents suggested that these were tokenistic in the sense that it 'ticked a box' so that schools could be seen to be addressing the risks. Yet parents felt that the primary burden for managing the risks – many of which they felt had been forced upon them by schools – fell to them. Samantha, for example, a 48-year-old professional and mother to a 12-year-old daughter and 10-year-old son, spoke of attending school open nights in her search for a suitable high school for her daughter, and asking each school about their digital technology policies, specifically in relation to managing social networking sites:

> My question at every school we went to last year was, 'How do you handle social media or the rest of it?' And I wasn't happy with any of the schools, public or private. I totally feel that they do not know how to handle it. And they talk about trusting our daughters or they've signed a policy. So that is just pathetic.

According to parents in this study, one approach to mitigating technology related risks adopted by schools was to outsource cyber safety education to third party providers such as the Australian Federal Police, who deliver a series of cyber safety programmes called Think U Know to children and their parents. Many parents reported attending these sessions, and indicated that they were helpful.

However, by seeking to equip parents with the skills to manage the risk through the provision of information sessions, and outsourcing this to third parties, schools were, in the eyes of parents at least, absolving themselves of much of the responsibility for managing the risks posed by digital media that they were partly responsible for exposing students to.

Parents also felt that schools, in their apparent haste to adopt digital media, had not sufficiently thought through nor planned for all the practical implications of online learning. This included some of the more practical aspects of digital media use for managing school tasks and assessments, as the following accounts demonstrate:

> At the school that my son is at they use a program called Canvas and [that's] how they communicate with the students. All the parents get their own log-in so that you can see your child's profile and you can see the work they're doing. But they haven't actually taught us how to use it. (Naomi, 42-year-old professional and mother to 12-year-old boy).

> We have Google Drive and we've never been taught how to use it. So as a parent … I had to work it out. I can see all my daughter's classes and I go in and see homework. But the school never took parents through that. (Diane).

Parents' concerns about educational uses of digital media also spanned many other issues. Within the context of this broader study about parents' concerns about their children's digital media use, the most prominent and widely-held concern amongst parents was the amount of time that their children spent on devices. As such, the requirement that their children complete their homework on a screen exacerbated pre-existing parental concerns about their children's screen time.

The perceived inevitability of digital technology, and its benefits

The accounts documented above demonstrate that many parents were highly critical of schools' ed-tech policies and approaches, evidently because they had experienced first-hand the many challenges associated with online learning. They did not, however, dismiss out of hand the benefits and opportunities afforded by digital media. Parents' intense expressions of negativity and concern existed alongside acknowledgement of what they considered to be some advantages of digital media, reflecting an apparent ambivalence about their children's use of digital media for education.

Diane, who had challenged the school principal about their BYOD policy beginning in year three, implicitly acknowledged the inevitability of digital media, conceding that it was preparing her daughter for the future:

> My daughter's at high school. They have had BYOD in place for about three years and the positive thing I see about it is when my daughter's doing her homework, and her teacher's set the homework all via the email system … I feel like she's learning her skills for university study down the line.

Several other parents thought that online learning might provide opportunities for their children to develop their multi-tasking skills. Theresa was hopeful that this might be the case, but didn't sound entirely convinced:

> I've read reports and studies that say these kids are able to multi task.Maybe that being constantly online, constantly having lots of different little bits of information coming at you, maybe they have learned to actually focus really, really well so that they can look at something and then come back to this and be immediately focused again. I don't know, maybe.

Other parents were less positive, yet pragmatic. Despite their serious concerns about ed-tech, parents tacitly acknowledged that technology was an essential ingredient of contemporary education and that opting out was no longer a realistic option. Even Samantha, who labelled the schools' responses to digital media and social networking as 'pathetic', acknowledged that the answer wasn't to simply reject digital media altogether. She conceded:

> I don't know what the alternative is, other than the equivalent number of hours they do English or Maths or whatever, dedicated to a subject educating them about this sort of stuff. And even then, I don't think half the staff would have a clue what to say.

Other parents expressed a sense of resignation in the face of the inevitability of technology. Rebecca – a 47-year-old teacher and mother to two daughters aged 14 and 22 – said, 'I'm pretty pragmatic. I figure we're in the twenty-first century now and that's where life is, so learn to live with it, learn to manage it, learn to manage it sensibly.'

Who's responsible?

The parental accounts documented above indicate that for the most part, many parents are not happy with their children's schools' approaches to educational uses of digital media. The attitudes and perspectives from parents in this study stand in stark opposition to the accounts from educators documented in Phase 1 of the Growing Up Digital Australia report. Educators effectively blame parents for their perceived lack of regulation of digital devices, the presence creep of technology into the classroom, and 'potentially undermining teacher/school authority' (Gonski Institute for Public Education 2020, 24). In Phase 2 of the Growing Up Digital Australia report, most parents thought that the responsibility for supporting children to develop the necessary digital skills and habits to use technology effectively should be shared equally between parents and schools. Parents in this study, on the other hand, blamed their children's schools for undermining their authority, burdening them with managing the risks, contributing to their children's screen time, and ultimately adding to their already heavy parenting load. What is clear is that digital technologies blur the boundaries between school and home, and that the 'creep' of personal devices into the classroom, lamented by educators in the Growing Up Digital Report, does indeed go both ways. These accounts raise the question: if schools are mandating digital media use amongst students, and parents have little choice in the matter, who does bear primary responsibility for managing the risks and challenges posed by these technologies?

Marwick and boyd (2011, 2014) use the phrase 'context collapse' to describe the coming together of various identities via social media, and the way in which social media collapse together different contexts and audiences. This is a useful theoretical concept to apply here if we can broaden its application beyond thinking about social media, identities and audiences, to considering the different contexts of teenage children's lives – including their mediated social interactions, entertainment, and school related tasks such as homework. As demonstrated by the parental accounts above, these different aspects of teenagers' lives are merging spatially and temporally via digital technologies. Young people's leisure time is becoming more 'curricularised' (Livingstone and Sefton-Green 2016). The merging of these previously separate elements blurs the boundaries between home and school and work and leisure.

The accounts documented above highlight tension, and outright debate, about who is responsible for facilitating children's digital futures, and ensuring reasonable, safe and beneficial use of digital media. Parents in this study felt that schools need to do more to address the risks and challenges of digital media within educational settings, as parents indicated that they were bearing most of the burden in this regard. The educator accounts documented in the Gonski report explicitly responsibilise parents for mediating their children's digital media use to optimise their learning both at school and at home. The obligations placed upon parents to minimise risk (but also maximise opportunity) draws on Beck's (1992) notion of individualisation which privileges the individual over the collective and holds the individual as ultimately responsible for minimising risk. And while it is clear that some efforts are made to prepare young people for managing these risks and opportunities themselves – through, for example, cyber safety education programmes – ultimately young people are not yet deemed developmentally capable of doing this. As such, responsibility ultimately falls to the parents (Livingstone et al. 2017), who are expected to simultaneously reduce the risks of digital media (cyber bullying, accessing inappropriate

content, etc.) while maximising the opportunities (ensuring that their children complete their homework).

Additionally, parental accounts highlight a dilemma faced by middle-class parents, who encouraged use of digital media in ways which advances their children's educations, while minimising use which might be considered a distraction. That both types of uses occur on small, portable, and private devices makes it extremely difficult for parents to police this boundary, even for parents who, like Lim's (2018) Singaporean parents, had a keen interest in their children's schooling and academic achievement.

Conclusion

This article has documented the concerns, perspectives and experiences of parents in relation to their children's educational uses of technology. In doing so, it has revealed that contrary to discourses of opportunity and progress and the rhetoric deployed by educational institutions, the reality of ed-tech from a domestic perspective is much more fraught. There are, however, some limitations of this study that should be taken into account. Participants were relatively homogenous in terms of their race and class, with the vast majority being highly educated, white, middle-class professionals. This is important to note, as studies have indicated that class shapes not only parenting style, but also approaches to digital media (Clark 2013). Further, this article has not considered any potential differences between government and non-government schools' approaches to 'ed-tech' and BYOD. As such, these findings cannot be generalised to the entire population. Nonetheless, the experiences and concerns documented in this paper point towards a number of issues with educational uses of technology in the domestic sphere from the perspective of parents.

Consistent with other studies, parents in this study felt that their agency and decision-making capabilities were being undermined by ed-tech policies. Some parents reported feeling excluded from their children's education as a result of digital learning platforms. Many noted their children's capacity for distraction, and their own impotence in trying to mediate their children's device use to police the boundaries between schoolwork and play. Parents felt that their children's schools had rushed to embrace digital media, but had not developed the necessary policies or procedures for both minimising the risks, as well as including parents in their children's online learning processes. The accounts by parents and educators indicate a struggle over questions of responsibility, with each blaming the other for making their respective jobs more difficult.

The parental accounts documented in this study also highlight a tension between optimistic and future-focused narratives about ed-tech and the everyday reality experienced by Australian families. While most parents acknowledge the various benefits of technologies for learning and accept the inevitability of technologies, managing devices at home in such a way so as to fully realise these benefits while minimising the various negative outcomes documented by parents was a significant challenge.

There are important practical implications of these findings. Australian schools continue to roll-out various iterations of their ed-tech policies, whether that be providing Chromebooks for all students or instituting a BYOD policy. Yet while these policies impact Australian families in various ways, there is little evidence that schools are consulting parents in their development of policies, nor providing them with adequate support. The findings documented in this paper could be used to help schools take into account the concerns, perspectives and experiences of parents when developing ed-tech policies and support mechansims. Further, while these findings have implications within the Australian context, they may provide important lessons and insights as other developed nations develop and roll-out various ed-tech policies and programmes. At the very least, it demonstrates the importance of involving parents in decisions and policies which affect them now, and into the future.

Notes

1. This report was released during the COVID-19 pandemic during which many Australian students were engaged in 'remote learning' from home.
2. It was common for parents to provide their children with a mobile phone once children were starting high school (approximately aged 12). A few parents, however, indicated that they were 'holding off as long as possible' buying their children a phone.

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