

# Digital Home-school Cooperation by Parents' Perspectives

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## Abstract

*The objective of home-school cooperation is to support student growth and development through a collaborative partnership between parents and teachers [1]. In this context, digital tools have the potential to facilitate communication between parents and teachers, promoting effective collaboration in achieving common goals. However, there are still challenges related to technology, attitudes, and teacher competence that hinder the meaningful use of digital tools in home-school communication [2]. Additionally, the role of digital communication in facilitating clear communication remains relatively unexplored [3]. To address these gaps in knowledge, the present study focuses on enhancing digital home-school cooperation through an action research project, with a specific emphasis on parents' perspectives. Our findings demonstrate that digital communication can indeed play a vital role in facilitating effective home-school cooperation. By promoting flexibility in the implementation of digital cooperation, the partnership between parents and teachers can be strengthened, leading to better understanding of pupils' learning and development. Overall, this study highlights the importance of leveraging digital tools in home-school cooperation and underscores the need for continuous exploration and adaptation to overcome the existing obstacles.*

## 1. Introduction

Digital home-school interaction is a relatively new phenomenon in teacher-parent collaboration. Its success seems to depend on parents' and teachers' digital literacy, as well as their access to computers and smartphones. However, digital channels can also give rise to problems and communication failures, such as misunderstandings, digital footprints, and insufficient digital competence [4]. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought new dimensions to the relationship between school professionals and pupils' families [5]. For example, parents are now increasingly involved in discussing teaching methods and learning strategies that teachers have traditionally excluded them from. This shows that effective communication between schools and homes is now more than just teachers summarising pupils' achievements or announcing upcoming events. It also requires a shared understanding of the goals and expectations of home-school cooperation, as well as a recognition of the diverse needs and preferences of

parents and teachers. Moreover, digital home-school interaction can offer new opportunities for enhancing parental engagement and involvement in their children's learning and development.

However, according to Kaarakainen [6], developing home-school communication is not an easy task for teachers. While teachers are proficient in using student administration systems, they use other technological software or social media tools very uncommonly for cooperation. Previous studies often describe digital home-school cooperation as a mere information delivery rather than a partnership. Furthermore, little is known about how digital communication serves partnership, feedback, and clear communication [3]. Therefore, more empirical research on digital home-school collaboration is needed to find ways in which both teachers and parents can benefit from digital communication. Our contribution to filling this gap is to explore digital home-school collaboration from parents' perspectives, specifically when specific actions have been taken to promote digital communication between home and school in a new way.

The research questions are as follows:

1. What are parents' experiences of the new digital communication practices between home and school?
2. What are parents' expectations of digital communication between home and school?

## 2. Rationale for the Action research

Dusi and Addi-Racciah [5] suggest that considering sustainable factors in supporting home-school cooperation is vital. To explore these sustainable factors, we have chosen action research as the approach to investigate key aspects of digital home-school collaboration. Action research is an inquiry method characterized by collaboration and learning through practical implementation [7]. Aligned with the cyclical nature and core principles of action research, which encompasses the collaboration between class teachers and researchers, we assessed that progressing through a continuous process of reflection, discussion, and experimentation would be an effective method for finding solutions to enhance digital home-school communication and to empower parents and teachers as co-learners. We also aimed to create a culture of

trust and openness among the participants and to respect their diverse perspectives and experiences.

### 3. Goal, Objectives and Action Plan

Through our action research project, conducted between 2017 and 2019, we aimed to improve digital home-school communication practices in two primary school classrooms. Our objectives were twofold. Firstly, we sought to develop innovative approaches that would foster an open formative assessment culture supporting students' learning, utilizing digital platforms, and enhancing home-school cooperation. Secondly, we aimed to gain insights into digital home-school communication from parents' perspectives, specifically identifying the aspects of digital practices that were most meaningful to them.

In order to achieve these goals, we followed the steps of execution process outlined below, emphasizing the essential nature of continuous reflection, discussion, and experimentation throughout:

1. We carefully selected the ePortfolio application (Seesaw) as the online platform to be utilized in the classroom, enabling transparent communication and supporting pupils' learning.
2. We actively fostered the students' digital competence, ensuring their proficiency in using the ePortfolio application.
3. We consistently created and implemented digital learning activities that enriched subject content learning. These activities were documented within the ePortfolio application.
4. The class teacher embraced open formative assessment practices, providing personalised, future-oriented feedback for each student in the ePortfolio.
5. We provided comprehensive support to parents, enabling them to access the ePortfolio application, review and comment on their child's schoolwork, and engage in meaningful discussions by responding to the teacher's feedback. In face-to-face meetings technical instructions were supplemented with discussions on the nature and significance of formative assessment practices.
6. We actively encouraged parents to participate in digital home-school communication according to their preferences. Parents had the freedom to use the ePortfolio application independently, with the teacher available to offer assistance whenever needed.

It is important to note that the execution process was not linear. Specifically, steps 3, 4, and 6 involved continuous processes. New digital learning

activities were created and introduced as the project progressed. The teacher systematically but not in every digital activity provided future-oriented feedback as pupils completed digital activities. Parents were granted the flexibility to begin using the ePortfolio application at any time and seek guidance from the teacher as required.

### 5. Data collection and participants

The data for this study were collected during the initial years of the action research project, which aimed to strengthen home-school cooperation by systematically developing new approaches in digital home-school collaboration. The primary research material consisted of focus group discussions conducted during parents' evenings. These discussions were recorded during the autumn of 2018 (with 16 guardians), spring of 2019 (with 14 guardians), and autumn of 2019 (with 9 guardians). The focus group interviews emphasized the importance of the group dynamic as a means of gathering information, with the researcher intentionally taking a background role [8]. In each parents' evening, three groups (g1, g2, and g3) were formed, consisting of two to five participants. Guardians were invited to freely discuss the following topics: their own experiences with assessment in schools, their usage of digital tools in home-school cooperation, and their experiences of using digital tools to follow implementation of an open assessment culture in the class. Given the diverse and novel nature of the discussed topics, it was assumed that group discussions among guardians would facilitate the emergence of rich and innovative thought patterns, more so than individual interviews led by the researcher. The focus group discussions also provided an opportunity for guardians to share their views and concerns with each other and to learn from different perspectives.

### 6. Analysis and Findings

The data were analysed using a data-driven content analysis approach to identify themes discussed by parents, following the guidelines proposed by Braun and Clarke [9] and Elo and Kyngäs [10]. The analysis involved several steps. Firstly, the transcribed group discussions were carefully read, and relevant expressions from the guardians were identified and encoded, resulting in a total of 161 reduced expressions. Secondly, expressions with similar meanings were grouped together, resulting in the formation of 15 sub-themes. Thirdly, the interrelated sub-themes were organized to create three main themes that encapsulated the key findings. The analysis process was conducted collaboratively by the first and second authors of this

article, who had primary responsibility for the data analysis. They worked together, discussing the content of the data and critically assessing the emerging sub-themes and main themes. This collaborative analysis process spanned several months and involved various negotiations to refine and clarify the themes.

The results revealed that parents engaged in discussions covering various important aspects of home-school cooperation. They reflected on their individual roles in digital home-school collaboration, the significance of the information received from the school, and the nature of the school's involvement in home-school collaboration. Additionally, the focus group discussions highlighted the positive effects of using digital tools on parents' experiences of digital home-school collaboration.

Firstly, when reflecting on their own roles in digital home-school cooperation, parents recognized the vital importance of their active involvement in fostering effective home-school collaboration. However, they also acknowledged the value of voluntary participation, understanding that the demands of busy family lives can vary, making it challenging for all families to engage in the partnership at the same pace. Additionally, the discussions shed light on technical issues, revealing that parents had varying levels of technical competency. While many parents felt confident in using digital applications for home-school cooperation, there was an awareness that a lack of technical skills could hinder their digital participation.

One notable finding was that voluntary participation provided families with the freedom to find their own ways of utilizing the ePortfolio application. However, some expressed concerns about potential monitoring of their online activity. This result highlights the importance of establishing trust and transparency in the use of digital platforms. The following data extracts clearly show that on the one hand families had found their own ways of using ePortfolio although on the other hand trust building in using online platforms was not perceived as self-evident by the parents.

“- We have the same that when I have got the notification I have gone to see and react with a heart. Comments I haven't left much. To see the work.

- We have it kind of like that my husband comments...

- And I, um, check the content, and then it says that this has arrived, and I that show them here and we wonder them.

- I also sometimes think that are people checking in this page that hmm, whose mom has been watching, your mom... (laughter)” (spring2019\_g1) ...”

Secondly, parents expressed a strong belief that the new digital interaction methods provided them with a meaningful, clear, and relevant channel to access important information and monitor their children's growth and development. Upon further investigation, it was revealed that certain types of media content had a greater impact in making school activities more accessible to families. The parents clearly articulated that digital photos, audio recordings and video recordings created by their children themselves were seen as authentic and informative.

While digital interaction between school and home held significance for parents, they also recognized the continued importance of traditional methods of communication. Digital communication was found to be helpful in notifying parents about the need for face-to-face meetings, especially when discussing difficult or complex issues. However, the potential of digital communication to fully support personal communication was perceived as incomplete, with concerns about the clarity of communication and the ability to address all the relevant issues.

The following data extracts exemplify the dual function of digital information in home-school cooperation. It serves as a clear and meaningful tool, while traditional modes of communication are still valued by parents for their unique benefits.

“-... when I watch the video, I stop for a while, concentrate. By watching the video, I do register it...

“I have noticed that now, for example with regard to Lisa, that the development of writing and reading can be noticed very well through Seesaw. They need to, there has been for example something, that they have needed to read, something like this, so that can be noticed in a different way from there. She does read at home also always, but rarely I really do pay attention then. And the progress can be seen through it kind of, those video clips and all stay there.

- Yes, true. Yeah, awesome, yes.

- You can go back to them.” (spring2019\_g2)

“- But then there are some that kind of things. I still prefer to grab my phone and call. That sometimes I don't maybe trust even my own skills of interacting that I would be understood as I wanted to.” (autumn2019\_g3)

Thirdly, the parents emphasized the critical nature of the school's role in facilitating digital home-school cooperation. They placed their trust in the school to take the lead in developing and guiding collaborative practices. On the other hand, their own willingness or ability to initiate new digital home-school practices was found to be low. One possible reason for this could be their satisfaction with the current state of affairs. If existing practices were perceived

to be working well, they questioned the need for change.

Furthermore, some parents expressed a lack of confidence in their online communication skills specifically within the context of home-school collaboration. They admitted to having no ideas on how to further develop digital practices. Despite these perceived shortcomings, the parents acknowledged that their engagement in digital home-school collaboration had allowed them to learn something new and valuable. The following data extracts exemplify the parents' discussions regarding the school's active role in guiding and steering the development of digital home-school cooperation.

“- How would you like Seesaw to be used in the future? New ideas yes.

- I don't know, I think it has been quite good like this, and especially when I receive an email notification or a reminder that some posts have been added there.

- Yeah.

- And, maybe there could be a little bit more about these different lessons, more content, that in the beginning there was not much yet, that ...

- Yes, the progress is always, that in a way, does the platform always be such that it needs to be improved, that if it just functions such that parents know that ...” (spring2019\_g3)

## 7. Conclusion

The analysis of parents' focus group discussions provides clear evidence that digital communication can play a vital role in home-school cooperation. However, it is crucial to consider various aspects of digital communication that are important to parents. Respecting diverse family situations and providing inspiring and attractive opportunities for parents to engage in home-school partnerships at their own pace and convenience is essential for building trust and rapport.

Digital applications can make teaching and learning processes transparent to homes, allowing parents to have a firsthand view of their child's progress and achievements. Incorporating digital photos, audio recordings, and video recordings produced by the pupils themselves, along with future-oriented feedback provided by the teacher, offers a powerful means for parents to actively engage in their child's growth and development. By having access to such digital content, parents can gain valuable insights into their child's learning journey and actively participate in their educational experiences. This transparency strengthens the connection between home and school, fostering a collaborative and supportive environment for the child's overall development.

In line with previous suggestions [11, 12], we recommend that schools remain open to combining digital and traditional interaction methods. Instead of relying solely on digital interaction, a diverse and mutually supportive mix of digital and face-to-face methods can foster cooperation between home and school. By leveraging digital tools, home-school cooperation becomes more interactive, providing parents with new ways to observe and monitor their child's growth and development and to communicate with teachers more effectively. Digital tools can also enhance the quality and frequency of feedback and recognition that parents and teachers exchange.

Ultimately, improving partnership between parents and teachers requires arranging digital cooperation that emphasizes flexibility of actions and mutual respect. By adopting a flexible approach to digital interaction, schools can enhance collaboration and strengthen the bond between home and school, leading to better understanding of pupils' learning and development and their individual needs.

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