



# Parents and Carers workshop

12 December 2007

## Summary report

### 1. Overview

The session at Bristol Zoo on 12 December 2007 for parents and carers had three goals:

1. Identify which challenges from the Beyond Current Horizons programme they thought was most important to research further.
2. Identify other relevant challenges.
3. Discover what they as parents wanted from education in 2025.

To achieve this, the parents performed three tasks in small groups:

- Firstly, an icebreaker to identify their own technology usage and what they wanted to stop, start and keep in learning environments where their children would attend.
- Second, they were given a set of challenges, i.e. areas to investigate relating to the education system, and asked to identify the most important to investigate. That is, those that would *have* to be considered in order to create the learning environment they wanted to see.
- Finally, they were given modelling materials and asked to build their ideal, or worst, learning environment of 2025.

The key findings from the day were:

- Education should focus on the students and produce people capable of socialising and interacting
- Teachers are key to desirable education environments
- The most important challenge to investigate was how new technologies will influence our understanding of identity and community
- If we are asking for stakeholders to consider the challenges already identified they need to be concrete and easily understandable
- It is hard to think about the future – groups tend to focus on what they want now, rather than what should exist in 2025 and beyond, which may not be same

The rest of this report briefly details the workshop, participants and outputs. A more detailed analysis will be published in February.

### 2. Details of the workshop

#### 2.1 Participants

Twenty eight parents participated: two men and twenty six women. All of them had at least one child under three, many of which came to the workshop. Although nursery staff

looked after the children the parents were free to go to their children or bring them into the activity area.

The workshop was publicised at local SureStart centres, various nurseries, local libraries and through word of mouth. The participants knew in advance there would be childcare, lunch, access to the zoo, and a £10 Early Learning Centre voucher, and that transport costs would be reimbursed. The aim was to get a cross section of Bristol parents and carers to attend. However, many of the participants already knew each other as they belonged to the same antenatal group. They felt this to be an advantage as they already knew one another. The majority of participants came from a white educated middle class background.

The participants formed five groups of five or six and worked with the same moderator throughout.

## **2.2 Activities**

### **2.2.1 Stop, start and keep**

This first activity showed that those present were predominately technology literate. All of them used a computer, and many used other forms of technology for pleasure or part of their work. They had similar aspirations for education systems. The majority of parents wanted to keep time to play or to do sport; also popular was allowing children to be creative and to have staff – classroom assistants as well as teachers - passionate about education. In every group at least two parents wanted less focus on testing. There was also an issue about school access, they wished to stop the postcode lottery and the focus on buildings rather than what was going on inside. Finally, the activities to start were more diverse. They included smaller classes, having more parental involvement, more practical activities and cross curricular activities, a focus on social skills and how to be responsible for own learning, as well as ensuring *all* students could read and write.

### **2.2.2 Diamond 9**

The groups were given a set of challenges previously identified as key and asked to discuss them. They were then asked to place them in a diamond shape such that the one it was most important to answer in order to achieve their desired education system was at the top, the next two most important underneath, then three to consider underneath, and the size of row reducing down to the least important. They had 35 minutes to agree the order.

Combining the orders from each group, the order in which the challenges should be addressed was:

- How will new technologies influence our understanding of identity and community?
- What skills will we need to fully participate in increasingly virtual, visual and complex information societies?
- How might the balance between state and commercial delivery of education change in the context of technological development?
- How might all forms of work change in the context of developments in technology?
- How might childhood change over the next 18 years as a result of developments in technology?

- What sorts of education systems, methods and institution so we need to help people cope with increasing complexity?
- How might new technologies help education to meet the needs of a changing population?
- Which technological developments may be most important to society over the next 25 years?
- How will developments in technologies change the way we use physical and virtual spaces for learning?
- What will we need to know in 2025 and beyond?
- How might technologies help the education system respond to significant society changing events, e.g., pandemics, climate change, cyberterrorism and economic failure?

No challenge was ranked in two adjacent rows, ie felt to be of similar importance, by any group. The only challenge that was ranked in one of three adjacent rows was the first. It was ranked as being the most or second most important issue for three of the five groups, the others put it in the third row. The second and third challenges in this list were not included or ranked as the least important challenges by two different groups. Looking at the least important challenges four of the five groups did not include the final challenge about post crisis education (pandemics, economic failure etc) in their diamond at all, and the one that did put it in the third row. Also, three of the five groups felt: "What will we need to know in 2025 and beyond?" needed no investigation. The remaining groups put it in the third row.

The probable reason for these varying opinions, given the similarity of backgrounds and technology usage, is the difficulty in comprehending a range of challenges in such a short time. As one said:

"I think this phrase, like most of them here, can be interpreted in too many ways. Does the word 'skills' relate to learning about the technology; or learning about the complex information needed to access the technology? It's all way too ambiguous."

Examples of these differences can be found in the challenge considering population. The group comprising mainly of ethnic minorities placed it on the middle row considering it an important area. They viewed the challenge as finding answers to how to link diverse groups in different countries and what opportunities this would bring, the impact of translation systems, and how technology could make education more inclusive given that more children could have special needs or disabilities in the future. Another group felt that this was not worth investigating as it would be done anyway, even if it was by private businesses, and placed it at the bottom of the diamond. The group that felt that this was jointly most important argued that it was necessary to include everyone in education and therefore you had to know how technology could be used by everyone. These varying discussions show the different understanding of what the challenge means, indicating that a greater emphasis needs to be given on ensuring stakeholders have a shared understanding of what they are being asked to consider.

In addition to the confusion of what a challenge could be investigating some of the participants argued that future education environments would be dependent on things other than issues arising from new technology. For example: "I don't want too much technology, certainly not at the expense of social interaction", "using a computer is isolating and solitary. You don't work as a team or speak to people directly" or "You need more than technology, you need specialist teachers – and to keep the social side". Another group concluded that interpersonal skills are more important than technical skills which can be picked up at any age and relate to all aspects of life.

### **2.2.3 Models**

The groups were given a pack containing plasticine, coloured paper, pens, glitter, post-its and given around 35 minutes to create their ideal or worst learning environment. They then had to present it to another group. To assist them they were prompted to think about who was doing the teaching or learning, what subjects, what location, and how they were assessed.

#### ***Ideal learning environment***

The two ideal environments had the following in common:

- Beautiful environments (light, open spaces, colourful)
- An area for learning out of doors
- No formal desks
- Learning in small groups of similar ability or interest rather than by age
- Teachers would be facilitators and have the respect of their students

The goal was to produce a safe environment where children are happy and secure and assessment is formative and personal. The learners have a degree of choice in what they study. Other people would be involved in the education process, parents, meal supervisors etc.

#### ***Worst learning environment***

These three environments were also similar:

- The learner would be working alone
- The days would be long to enable the parents to work
- There would be lots of comparisons
- There would be no person teaching, advice and instructions would be textual or by an avatar

Two of the environments were for secondary education, the third for babies. In one of the secondary environments and that for babies commercial organisations were responsible for content.

Despite prompts the worst learning environments contained technology available now, for example laptops, avatars, online activities. The ideal learning environments did not focus on technology, concentrating more on the space; however mention was made of learning exercises on computers and in the other ideal area an inquiry area which contained undescribed technology. These models could describe an education system that could be implemented tomorrow.

The absence of teachers and working with other students in the worst environments, and their importance in ideal environments, suggests these aspects are key to creating an ideal learning environment in 2025. This contrasts with the technology focus of the challenges discussed in the diamond 9 exercise.

## **2.3 Discussion**

The workshop showed how difficult it is to focus on 2025 and beyond. Parents were concerned with technology available *now*; for example, the difficulties in policing internet

usage, the influence of television, the need to understand website production in order to find employment.

Another concern was the technology focus throughout the day. The parents wanted their children to develop social skills, this was echoed in what they wanted to keep in schools – in all the groups parents said they wanted to keep social activities, i.e., play times, fun lessons, sports, breakfast clubs, outside activities. It was reflected in the challenge identified as most important, understanding of identity and community. Finally, it was reflected in the negative use of existing technology shown in the model -the focus was on interpersonal and social skills. Possibly the challenges were too abstract and the fact they are tools rather than goals was not emphasised sufficiently, but the focus on what sort of skills and life they want for their children did not seem to link with how technology could be used to support these goals rather than being the only solution.

*This document has been commissioned as part of the UK Department for Children, Schools and Families' Beyond Current Horizons project, led by Futurelab. The views expressed do not represent the policy of any Government or organisation.*