Home learning and the educational marketplace

Margaret Scanlon & David Buckingham*
University of London, UK

UK government policy has increasingly emphasised the importance of learning in the home; and commercial companies have not been slow to respond. There is now a growing demand for out-of-school learning products and services, including study guides, early learning materials, educational web sites and private tuition. However the commercialisation of out-of-school learning seems bound to exacerbate educational inequalities. Drawing on interviews with industry representatives, we examine how and why the educational market for home learning has developed in recent years. Through a series of case study interviews we look at what motivates parents to provide educational resources at home and at how they feel about their role as 'educational consumers'. Finally we examine a government initiative which is designed to promote parental involvement in out-of-school learning.

Introduction

The British government's evangelistic emphasis on education now extends well beyond its efforts to raise 'standards' in schools. In the past few years, there has been a growing insistence on the importance of out-of-school learning and parental involvement in children's education. New Labour is keen to involve all its education 'partners'—including parents—in what McNamara *et al.* (2000, p. 474) have labelled 'the Blairite project of Total Schooling'. The government has repeatedly emphasised the value of homework, and funded a whole range of new initiatives that seek to extend the reach of schooling into children's leisure time, such as 'summer universities' and homework clubs. Meanwhile, the continuing expansion of national testing has created an atmosphere of growing competition, not only between schools but also among parents and children themselves. Education, it would seem, is the *work* of childhood, and it cannot be allowed to stop once children walk out of the classroom door.

 Commercial companies have not been slow to grasp the new opportunities that have arisen here. Parents are being placed under increasing pressure to 'invest' in their children's education by providing additional resources at home. This is most transparently the case with the marketing of home computers, which frequently

*Corresponding author: Institute of Education, University of London, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL, UK. Email: d.buckingham@ioe.ac.uk

involves claims about how they can 'help your child to get ahead' in the educational race (Nixon, 1998; Buckingham *et al.*, 2001). Likewise, there is currently a boom in the sales of educational materials designed for domestic use, for example in the form of study guides and early learning materials. Private home tutoring is now becoming available for children at an ever-younger age; while there has been a marked increase in the commercial provision of supplementary classes, not just in 'extras' such as the arts but also in 'basics' such as mathematics and literacy. The marketing of such goods and services often seeks to appeal to parents' 'better nature'—their sense of what they *should* be doing in order to qualify as Good Parents.

On one level, commercial involvement in out-of-school learning is nothing new: there is a long history of parents providing educational resources at home. As Carmen Luke (1989) and others have pointed out, the modern 'invention' of childhood was accompanied by a whole range of pedagogic initiatives aimed at parents and children, including primers, advice manuals and instructional books and playthings. However, the nature and scale of the operation have significantly changed in recent years. Furthermore, the demand for parental involvement in education has arisen just at a time when both parents are increasingly working outside the home, and when the form of family life is changing (via the rise in divorce and single parenthood). For those in employment, working hours appear to be rising, and are well above the European average. There is accordingly a premium on 'quality time'. Particularly for parents who lead pressured lives, one solution is to throw money at the problem: paying for educational goods and services offers the promise of educational advantage which they may feel unable to secure on their own behalf or in their own time.

For those who have fewer economic resources, this option is less available, and to pursue it may require some difficult choices. Despite the government's commitment to 'social inclusion', it is arguable that educational inequalities between homes have never been greater. The so-called 'digital divide'—between those who have access to home computers and those who do not—has been well documented (see BECTA, 2001), although such a divide has always existed in relation to books. Meanwhile, others are concerned about the 'invisible' purchasing of educational privilege through home tutoring (Russell, 2002). As such, there are growing concerns that the commercialisation of out-of-school learning may exacerbate educational inequalities.

The link between home background and educational achievement has, of course, been the subject of educational research and policy making for decades. Research in the sociology of education has found that most of the variation in levels of educational achievement can be traced to the influence of family background—and particularly to the role of social class. Obviously, schools make a difference too; but despite decades of comprehensive schooling and intensive government reform of education, overall inequalities in achievement between social classes have remained largely unchanged (Douglas, 1967; Halsey *et al.*, 1980; Jones & Hatcher, 1996; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Mortimore & Whitty, 1997).

The growing emphasis on parental involvement in schooling over the past thirty years has arisen at least partly in response to this situation (David *et al.*, 1993). The

recognition of 'cycles of disadvantage' in children's home circumstances, and of the dissonance between working-class children's home cultures and the culture of schools, has led to a series of initiatives that have sought to compensate for inequalities and involve parents as 'partners' in education (see Buckingham & Scanlon, 2003). However, the fundamental problem with such initiatives is that parental involvement tends to favour parents who are already confident in their relations with the school, and comfortable with seeing themselves as educators at home. A range of research studies have suggested that working-class parents feel less confident in their dealings with schools, and in their ability to support their children's school work; and as a result, are less likely to benefit from initiatives that promote parental involvement (see Lareau, 1989; Toomey, 1989; David *et al.*, 1993; Reay, 1998). Obviously, parenting styles can differ quite widely within particular social groups; but research and experience consistently confirm that working-class and middle-class parents generally have very different orientations towards teachers and schools.

It is important to note, however, that these differences do not arise because working-class parents are necessarily any less interested in, or committed to, schooling or education. On the contrary, as Lareau (1989) argues, such parents often feel *excluded* from participation: the way the school defines and positions them leads them to feel that they lack the necessary understanding and competence to respond to teachers' requests for support and involvement. Broadly speaking, many initiatives in parental involvement have tended to operate in terms of the *school's* definitions of what counts as learning and as 'good parenting' (Merttens & Vass, 1992; Brown, 1993). The forms of parental involvement that are seen as legitimate are often those that are characteristic of the educated middle classes (David *et al.*, 1993).

Research has also highlighted some of the psychological implications of increased parental involvement in education, particularly stress, which affects both parents and children. In her research on the relationship between parents and schools, Lareau (1989) found that stress arose particularly in her middle-class sample. These parents' 'educationalising' of the home environment led to increasing levels of competitiveness, both between siblings and with other children, in a manifestation of what has been called the 'hurried child' syndrome (cf. Elkind, 1981). However, as Reay (1998) suggests, stress of this kind may not be confined to middle-class homes: all the mothers in her study, regardless of class, spoke of the pressures that arose from the expectation that they should support their children's school work at home—although these pressures were most strongly felt by single parents and working mothers. In Reay's terms, assuming a teacherly role requires a degree of 'emotional capital'—an ability to persuade and support children, and to handle feelings of guilt and inadequacy.

Although there are a number of ways in which parents can support their child's learning (see McNamara *et al.*, 2000), in this article we focus on their role as 'educational consumers'. We look at how and why the market for home learning has developed in recent years, focusing on three areas: print media, digital media, and private tuition. Drawing on a series of family case studies, we look in more detail at

what motivates parents to provide educational resources at home and at how they feel about their role as educational consumers. Finally, we examine a current government initiative ('The Learning Journey') which is designed to promote parental involvement in out-of-school learning. Our analysis is based on a wider research project looking at the production, characteristics and uses of 'educational' media designed for the domestic market (Buckingham & Scanlon, 2003).

The material presented here draws on an extensive reading of the trade press and industry reports; 20 interviews with some of the main UK publishers, software producers and retailers; an interview with civil servants from the DfES and 20 in-depth case study interviews with parents and children who were all users of these kinds of home learning materials. The case study families were selected from a survey which we carried out on media ownership and use in the home. Parents and children were interviewed in their homes during 2001. The sample was divided equally between boys and girls and the majority of the children were aged between eight and eleven. We were most likely to be interested in families whose responses suggested that they were at least moderate users of educational media; and while we did attempt to achieve some balance here in terms of social class and family composition, we did not expect or intend that this qualitative sample would be demographically representative.

Print media

The market for out-of-school learning materials has undergone significant change over the last decade. Developments in educational policy, the advent of new technologies and increasing commercial competition have had very different implications for different sectors of the publishing business. According to several publishers whom we interviewed, the market for hardback non-fiction books is now stagnant or even declining. Competition from the Internet, deregulation in the retail trade, a drop in library funding and an over-crowded market were the main reasons given for this. On the other hand, the growing pressure of national testing is fuelling demand for out-of-school learning materials which claim to support the national curriculum or initiatives like the numeracy and literacy hour. The fact that children are now starting formal learning at an ever-younger age has also opened up a lucrative new market for publishers.

Unlike school textbooks, educational books designed for the home need to target a dual market. They have to satisfy parents' expectations about what counts as valid education, and hence as a worthwhile way for their children to spend their time; and yet, if children are to be persuaded to use them in their leisure time, they also have to qualify as pleasurable and entertaining. To some extent, this accounts for the emergence of 'edu-tainment', a hybrid mix of education and entertainment that relies heavily on visual material, on narrative or game-like formats, and on more informal, less didactic styles of address. The sales pitches for such material rely on an obsessive insistence that learning can be 'fun'. These new forms of edu-tainment are therefore offered both as an acceptable leisure-time pursuit, and as an appealing alternative to the apparent tedium of much schoolwork. Children, it is typically

argued, will gain a competitive edge on their peers—and yet they will not even know that they are learning.

The most obvious manifestation of this tendency over the past decade has been the proliferation of books, CD-ROMs and magazines which are targeted at the pre-school/primary school age group. These early learning materials are mostly based on media tie-ins and licensed characters, but they often incorporate explicitly educational activities, which are frequently reinforced by assessment and testing. Although the words 'fun' and (in the case of software) 'interactive' seem to be obligatory, these materials generally have quite narrowly defined educational goals. 'Fun learning' is predominantly identified (and indeed assessed) in terms of mastering 'skills' in reading, writing, basic mathematics and science. These materials usually claim to support the National Curriculum literacy or numeracy objectives: linking content directly to school work (however tenuously) has become an important marketing strategy for materials designed for use in the home.

The expansion of this market is partly a response to changes in government policy on education; but it is also a consequence of economic changes in publishing and retailing. The increasing use of 'non-traditional' retailers (such as supermarkets) has offered significant new opportunities to reach consumers who might not be inclined to use more traditional bookshops. Meanwhile, pre-school children have been seen as an increasingly significant market for a wide range of media-related products. Thus, one of the most successful 'fun learning' products in recent years has been the pre-school magazine. Most of the titles in this field are based on children's television programmes and licensed characters (such as the Teletubbies) and so appeal directly to children. At the same time, they address parental concerns about education by providing guidance for parents, in the form of messages explaining the educational value of the activities and separate pages offering pedagogic advice (see Buckingham & Scanlon, 2001).

The success of these early learning materials even surprised some of those working in the industry. As one leading publisher told us:

> Those early years books got started as a kind of supplementary publishing exercise. We were going to try with one alphabet book. We already had material in-house and we were going to put an alphabet book together as a kind of supplementary book and it really took off. So that we then created a series and went into counting, numbers, shapes, colours. We started off with just paperbacks, we're now doing big books as well, then we had a spin off, we did them in board books recently. So there was a market there we didn't expect at the beginning.

The other area of the market that has seen considerable growth in recent years is that of 'study guides' or revision aids. Such publications have been on the market for decades, but the extension of national testing has created significant new market opportunities. Traditionally, this type of material was developed for students in the 14–16 age group studying for national examinations, but in recent years a new type of study aid—often referred to as 'home learning' or 'home study'—has emerged which is aimed at a much younger age group. Dorling Kindersley, for example, produces a range of mathematics workbooks for pre-school and for Key Stages 1 and 2 (age 5–11). Whilst in the past the sale of home study material was mainly in two

periods (back to school and before examinations), now there is demand throughout the school year. One publisher—Letts Educational—has even produced study guides which are designed to be used by primary age children over the summer holidays. According to the cover blurb for one of these series, *Holiday Extras* 'bridges the holiday learning gap and ensures school success'. And the learning does not have to stop when children finish the workbook: a number of series make suggestions on how everyday activities (such as setting the table) can be turned into 'learning opportunities'. The marketing blurb in these kinds of publications often appeals to parents' anxieties about their children's education, for example: 'Are you concerned about your child's education?' (Hodder, *Times Tables*) 'Remember you can never practice Maths enough' (Dorling Kindersley, *Maths Made Easy*).

Publishers have attributed the development of this market to the culture of assessment and testing in schools, initiatives like the numeracy and literacy strategies, and growing parental concerns about children's education. The introduction of Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) and other regular testing in schools have been particularly significant in this respect. As one leading publisher (quoted in Sanderson, 1999, p. 14) explained:

> Study guides are riding the crest of a wave. The British government's emphasis on standards means that at the moment, the market is growing to such an extent that there's room for everyone.

The retailers whom we interviewed reiterated this point. One independent retailer claimed that she could fill her shop with these kinds of publications, such was the demand. According to a major high-street chain, teachers are now far more likely to recommend study guides than they were in the past, and parents appear to be more susceptible to these recommendations:

> We get an awful lot of parents who come in clutching the back of an envelope with something they've scribbled down at parents' evening and they don't want anything else, because they only want the particular product recommended by the teacher. And that has become increasingly important.

In this respect, the 'logic' of the market is bound to reinforce dominant tendencies in educational policy—not least because government policy appears to offer a degree of predictability and security in an increasingly competitive commercial environment. As another publisher suggested:

> Parents began to supplement areas of the curriculum they felt were being neglected. They looked for workbooks on tables and spelling, phonics and handwriting, and this accelerated into the whole 'back to basics' movement. Publishers and book sellers were not slow to pursue the opportunity here: we all produced home learning workbooks, with straightforward text and no-nonsense design, to reinforce traditional values. (Bookseller Publications, 2000, p. 20)

However, whilst government policy has helped to boost some areas of educational publishing, it may also have contributed to a narrowing in the range of general non-fiction books. The National Curriculum, introduced in 1990, laid down very specific requirements on subject content, narrowing the range of topics covered and in turn making the market in particular areas more competitive. Publishers now have

to work hard to distinguish their products from those of their competitors, whereas in the past they had a much freer rein over content. In this respect, the effects of government policy combined with commercial logic have resulted in a significant shift in the balance between different sectors of the market. Our interviews with publishers and retailers suggest that whilst there is a healthy market for materials which focus specifically on the National Curriculum, the demand for general non-fiction and reference books is in decline. This in turn suggests that the nature of home learning itself may have become narrower and more prescribed.

Digital media

However, these changes have also been accentuated by competition from the Internet. In our survey and interviews, we found that parents were still buying non-fiction books—particularly for younger children—but that 'new' digital media were gradually replacing 'older' media. Computers (and in some cases home tutors) were families' main item of educational expenditure. The number of homes with computers and Internet access has increased steadily over the last few years, and households with children are significantly more likely to possess a PC than those without (Livingstone & Bovill, 1999). Computers have also been heavily marketed as an educational resource, and lack of access to the Internet at home is now seen as a serious disadvantage in educational terms. During the 1990s, these developments led to a rapid expansion in the home market for educational software. Initially, most CD-ROMs were designed for children over the age of five—since it was generally believed that younger children would be unable to use them—but by the end of the decade leading companies like The Learning Company (TLC) and Havas were producing software for children as young as nine months.

Yet the idea—promoted by some enthusiasts for educational computing—that new technology will automatically result in new styles of learning seems somewhat questionable. Here again, our research on the market in educational software suggests that the titles which sell most effectively are those which make the strongest educational claims, particularly if they relate to testing and other government policies such as the National Literacy Strategy. Titles which represent learning as a matter of open-ended 'discovery' are less likely to succeed. Indeed, according to one manufacturer, simply changing the packaging in order to emphasise such traditionally educational claims—'covers the whole Key Stage 1 Maths curriculum'—resulted in significant increases in sales. Here again, there is an interesting coincidence between market strategies and educational policies, which contrives to sustain a highly reductive conception of what *counts* as 'education'.

Our interviews with software producers suggest, however, that in the last few years the market for educational CD-ROMs has started to slow down, largely due to competition from the Internet. In its place, we are now seeing the emergence of a significant new market in interactive 'e-learning'. This is an industry which is only just beginning to take shape, with many different players jostling for position in what is becoming a very competitive market. At present, a mix of free, commercially sponsored and subscription sites is available to parents and children.

Amongst our sample of families, economic considerations were a major determinant both in whether a family owned a computer and in the quality of the computer. However, parents' attitudes to computers and other media also played a role. In almost all cases, education was cited as one of the reasons for buying the computer in the first place; yet there were mixed feelings about whether it was being used in the manner originally intended. Some parents found that their children were only willing to use the computer for games; while others were concerned because their children seemed to be abandoning books.

In our analysis, we identified three distinct types of computer buyers: the 'enthusiasts', the 'resisters' and the 'followers'. The enthusiasts believed strongly in the educational potential of computers. Mr Heshmat, for example, bought his son his first computer when he was five. He felt that the computer had lived up to his expectations in educational terms, and that computers made learning easier and more enjoyable. Interestingly, some enthusiasts seemed to know little about computers themselves, but were nevertheless very keen that their children should learn early. These parents seemed to feel that although it was too late for them to learn about computers, they did not want their children to 'miss out'. Mrs Klenowski, for example, had recently bought a home computer, mainly for educational purposes, and had one of the largest collections of educational software amongst the interview sample. Her youngest son had been bought his first educational CD-ROM when he was only four. Mrs Klenowski pointed out that he was learning not just from the content of the CD-ROM but also by developing 'mouse control'. Personally, however, she said that she knew very little about computers and even felt intimidated by them; and she also confessed that her children used the computer largely for games, and rarely used the educational packages. Yet despite her ignorance about computers, she remained absolutely convinced that her children needed to have them at home.

At the opposite end of the spectrum were the 'resisters'. The Lynches, for example, seemed to have reluctantly given in to the need for a home computer. Despite being one of the most affluent families in our sample, they had only bought their computer in the last few years. They were determined to have only one computer in the house, and that their children would never have a television or computer in their bedrooms. They said they had bought their computer for a number of reasons, including education, work and the desire to 'keep up with the twenty-first century'. Mrs Lynch spoke of their purchase with resignation rather than enthusiasm ('And it's the way it's going to go, isn't it?'). She also expressed a degree of resentment that marketers were 'blackmailing' parents into buying computers by appealing to anxieties about their children's education:

> Actually I kind of resent that sort of advertising … You know, actually it does annoy me that there is this pressure that each child should have their own computer in their own room—they're not cheap. I know they're cheap compared to what they used to be. But I feel that I resent that the parents feel that they're inadequate as parents or not providing their children with the best educational start if they don't have their own computer … A lot of people are worried—they want to give their children the best start in life and this thing about jobs, you know, good education, so it's an easy pressure

point to push. You know, 'If you do this, your child will stand a better chance; and if you don't, others will get ahead and your child will be left behind'.

Other 'computer resisters' were concerned about their children's declining use of books, and were holding out against the pressure to invest in new and better equipment for that reason.

The majority of parents could be described as 'followers', who were somewhere between the two positions outlined above. Although they had some reservations about computers, they also accepted the idea that they were a valuable aid to learning. These parents seemed to feel that computers were something that everyone had, and therefore they had to get one too. For example:

> I suppose it's just everyone's getting a PC, you've just got to go along with it, haven't you? You've got to get in, you know. And I think, yes, probably with the Internet it was really for, you know, looking up information for Peter with his homework.

For this parent, having a computer also compensated for the fact that she did not have sufficient time to help with homework. As a working single parent, she was unable to take her son to the library in the evenings, and the Internet served as a useful substitute. McNamara *et al.* (2000) have described how some parents have become 'surrogate teachers', helping children with homework and adding value to the work which they do in school. Our research suggests that for those parents who cannot support their children's learning in this way (due to lack of time or knowledge of the subject) the Internet represents a means of compensation. In some respects the Internet is taking on the role of surrogate teacher—indeed there are now a number of sites which allow children to email teachers with their homework and revision inquiries, for example 4Learning's 'Homework High' and the BBC's 'SOS Teacher'. Again with this group (the 'followers') there was a sense that some parents had very little experience or knowledge of computers but were being swept along in this tide of home computing.

Having bought a computer, however, a few of the parents in our sample found that it was not being used in the way they had hoped. These parents reported that their children were unwilling to use educational software packages more than once because they found them repetitive and simplistic. Certainly, research would suggest that children's uses of computers in the home are massively dominated by games, and that the use of specifically educational software remains relatively limited (Livingstone & Bovill, 1999; Papadakis, 2001). Nonetheless, even if children were not using it for strictly 'educational' purposes, some parents felt that it was useful for their children to become familiar with how a computer works. As one mother pointed out: 'The mere fact that John is confident to go into the computer, knows his way around it, these days seems to me to be a very good step in the right direction, because I was about 38 when I [first] used one'. Parents' lack of familiarity with computers does not seem to discourage them from buying computers for their children; indeed, if anything, it seems to encourage them further. In this respect, the home computer could be seen as one of the indispensable 'symbolic goods' of contemporary parenting (Cawson *et al.*, 1995): its value lies not just in what it can be used for, but in what it represents.

Buying teaching

Home tutoring is a further dimension of the general commercialisation of out-of-school learning. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that the use of private tutors to provide additional coaching for secondary school entrance examinations has significantly increased in recent years: leading agencies have reported an annual rise in inquiries of more than 50% (Moorhead, 2001). Although little research has been undertaken on this subject, press reports and a recent study carried out in eight London primary schools suggest that private tutoring has grown exponentially in London and other big cities (see Russell, 2002). According to these reports, private tutoring is booming in the capital and has become an important, yet also unacknowl-edged, factor in a child's school performance. The situation has been likened to a public–private partnership, whereby state-funded education is supplemented by private provision—albeit only for those who can afford it. The increase in private tutoring has given rise to concerns that working-class children are being disadvan-taged: in some primary schools over half of the pupils have private tutors, whilst in others none are privately tutored. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the use of private tuition for examination preparation may distort the league tables of test and examination performances which are supposed to reflect the quality of teaching in schools.

The full extent of this phenomenon is hard to gauge, not least because it is an unregulated market: there is no requirement that tutors should be qualified, and no system of inspection. Parents may be reluctant to admit that they send their children to private tutors (see below). Even schools may prefer to overlook the extent of private tutoring and take the credit for their pupils' results themselves. Our case studies seem to add weight to the view that private tuition is becoming an increas-ingly common feature of children's education in London. We did not originally set out to collect data on this subject, but as the interviews progressed it became clear that private tuition was a focal point for parents' aspirations and anxieties. Accord-ing to one parent, 'huge amounts' of children at her daughter's school had tutors. Several of the families in our sample employed tutors themselves, while others said that they would like to employ a private tutor but could not afford the fees.

The desire to secure a place in the 'right' secondary school was a key concern for most parents, and one of the main reasons why some resorted to private tuition. Parental views of education are obviously likely to depend upon the nature of local 'education markets' (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995). The publication of league tables of schools' examination results, combined with the rhetoric of 'parental choice', means that there is now considerable competition for places at the 'best' schools. In the part of West London where our families lived, there was a range of secondary schools, including private schools, selective and non-selective state schools and denomina-tional schools. Several of the parents of primary age children were already experienc-ing considerable anxiety about their children's forthcoming transfer to secondary school (even when this was several years away). One parent described her situation as follows:

> The competition to get into [the local selective grammar school] is horrendous. I mean,

> like 1500 girls sit the exam and they have 80 places. So if you want any chance whatever of getting in, you have to do this coaching. [The tutors] obviously saw that there was a niche in the market, parents who wanted their children to have a chance to get into grammar school, and they do these test papers. They have one for homework and they do one during the actual class. And they take cash in a brown paper envelope and I think they must be doing very nicely, thank you.

According to this mother, the tutors concerned also tested the children *before* they were accepted for their classes, and would refuse to take on children who were unlikely to pass (and would therefore adversely affect their advertised pass rates). Other parents confirmed that there was competition to gain admission to the 'right' tutorial classes.

As Gewirtz *et al.* (1995) suggest, middle-class parents' discussion of secondary school choice is often characterised by coded (but not directly stated) concerns to do with ethnicity and social class. Thus, one parent described the local comprehensive as 'a school of epic proportion' where there was too much 'noise and disruption in the classroom'; and cited this as the major reason for seeking private tutoring. Apparently the tutor she had chosen had told her that 'every independent school these days expects the child at the age of 11, when they're going in, to have an academic standard of a 14-year-old'. Even where parents were committed (or resigned) to the local comprehensive, they saw private tutoring as a way of ensuring that their child would be placed in a 'higher stream' on entry.

This sense of growing competitiveness was explicitly noted by several parents. One mother, for example, was concerned that her daughter Ruth (aged eight) was 'falling behind' in primary school, but had then been surprised to discover that many of her classmates had private tutors. Another parent, Rachel Lynch, commented on the contagious nature of home tutoring in more detail:

> You know, you usually say 'I'm not going to go the tutor route, if they're falling behind, I'll give them a bit of extra help'. And then you hear that two or three people in the class have got a tutor, and then a couple of parents say 'well, maybe we should do that, just to make sure they keep in the upper group'. And then suddenly, it's like tutors everywhere and then you discover that people that you thought were like minds to you, they've actually had their children tutored for the last two years, you know.

According to Rachel, the rise of home tutoring was symptomatic of a general rise in anxiety and competitiveness, which was manifesting itself at a younger and younger age. She also noted the gradual drift of middle-class parents towards private schooling, a phenomenon which also resulted in a form of moral and social pressure:

> And then suddenly there's this mass exodus and it pulls the school level down, which is a shame because I think if everybody held steady it'd be fine. But there is this thing that 'well, they're doing that for their child, so maybe we should be doing it, you know, maybe we're not doing enough as parents ourselves'. So there's peer pressure amongst children for the right kind of kit to wear and toys to have but there's pressure on parents about, you know, quite how much you're putting in to your child's education. Or how you're being seen to do it.

As one of our more affluent parents, Rachel presented herself as critical of—or at least comparatively distanced from—these concerns; and she claimed that she was

currently holding out against the tide of parents seeking private tutors. Yet even one of the parents who had employed a private tutor seemed to regret and even resent the fact. Several expressed concern that the overall level of competition was much higher than it had been for them as children, and that it was affecting children at an ever-younger age. But even where parents were ambivalent about the benefits of selective schools, it seemed to be hard for them to resist the emerging sense of educational panic. As another mother put it:

> I think perhaps parents get too wound up about, you know, where their child's going to go to secondary school. And I can feel myself getting a bit sort of washed along in the flow of worry and stress and tension—which is one reason that I wish the grammar school didn't exist, and that Sarah would simply go to the local comprehensive school.

Predictably, several of the children too were resentful of additional tutoring, although principally because they saw it as eroding their leisure time. In most cases, the tutor also set homework: in the case of eight-year-old Ruth Watkins, for example, this amounted to an extra 20 minutes per night. In a couple of instances, this additional demand was a source of friction between parents and children. On the other hand, two mothers said that they would like to employ private tutors because helping their children with homework was a source of stress for both parent and child. Both of these parents wanted to make a clear distinction between the role of a parent and the role of a teacher. As one pointed out: 'I'm not a teacher, I'm a parent'.

A role for government?

In each of the areas we have discussed, commercial forces appear to be playing an increasing role in home learning; and they also seem to be widening the divisions between the 'education rich' and the 'education poor'. To what extent might government intervention in this field begin to address this situation? The government's 'Learning Journey' initiative provides an illuminating case study of the limitations and possibilities of government intervention. We therefore conclude this article with a brief discussion of this initiative and how the parents in our interview sample responded to it.

   Launched in September 2000, the 'Learning Journey' involves a parents' web site, a free termly magazine, a set of booklets outlining the National Curriculum for various stages of schooling and a collection of leaflets covering key curriculum topics. The launch was backed by extensive television advertising and promoted in the national press. Writing in the *Guardian*, then Secretary of State for Education David Blunkett (2000, p. 6) proclaimed that the 'Learning Journey' would 'fill the gap' in parents' understanding about 'what is actually being taught to youngsters' in schools. Opinion polls had apparently found that parents lacked confidence in talking to teachers and in supporting their children's homework; but that they wanted to play a more important role. Blunkett was keen to forestall the criticism that the initiative was 'preaching' or 'nannying' parents. The guides were described as 'only advisory' and 'not orders' (Ahmed, 2000), and the initiative as a whole was

presented as an extension of 'parent power'. Speaking at the Institute for Public Policy Research Conference in September 2000, Schools minister Jacqui Smith even went so far as to claim that it was 'putting the National Curriculum into the hands of parents' (Department of Education and Employment, 2000). At the same time, the 'Learning Journey' was also seen as part of the government's broader policy agenda on 'social exclusion'. As Blunkett wrote:

> Arming parents with the facts about what's happening in their children's school not only gives them the chance to play a part at home, it empowers them to play a supportive role at school with teachers, too; and it narrows the gap between 'those in the know' and those unfamiliar with the complexities of the education system. (Blunkett, 2000, p. 6)

At the time of writing, there have been 23 curriculum topic leaflets, covering a range of areas (geography, history, music, science, religious education, and so on). Each leaflet takes a specific topic—so in the case of science, for example, there are currently leaflets on electricity, light and sound, materials and plants. All the leaflets are aimed at parents of primary school children, in some instances across the whole range (5–11-year-olds), in others for each key stage (5–7 or 7–11). Each leaflet is four A4 pages in length, and is headed 'Help Your Child Discover'. At present, the leaflets are only available via the DfES's parents' web site, where they can be downloaded, either as complete laid-out documents or as files which can be edited by teachers and then distributed to parents.

The front page of each leaflet also contains a bullet-point summary of what and why the child is learning about the topic (as specified by the National Curriculum); and the leaflet itself then contains a series of suggested activities, covering things to do 'out and about' and 'at home', and a final section on 'finding out more' (for instance from libraries, bookshops or web sites). The leaflet is illustrated with cartoon-style images of parents and children engaged in the activities described.

In terms of the government's 'social inclusion' agenda, the suggested activities have clearly been designed with some care. While there are some suggestions that parents might purchase books or other commodities, they are urged to buy carefully. In the leaflet on 'Music from around the world', for instance, it is suggested that they might look for 'reasonably priced' tapes or CDs; but they are urged to make sure that they will 'enjoy and make the most of what [they] are buying'. There is much greater emphasis on using public libraries, museums and visitor centres (although of course some of these will charge admission); and most of the domestic activities do not require special equipment. Likewise, while there is reference to the Internet, it is not automatically assumed that families will have access—although of course at present the leaflets are only available via the Internet (unless schools choose to download and distribute them).

On the other hand, as Reay (1998) makes clear, supporting children's learning at home requires resources other than material ones, particularly those of knowledge and time. The leaflets do not consistently provide parents with the information they might need to 'explain' things to their children. Indeed, in some instances, they make some surprising assumptions about this. The leaflets on the Victorians and the

Tudors, for example, clearly presume that parents have studied these periods in history; while those on scientific topics invite questions (for example, about electrical circuits or the spectrum of light) that many parents might find difficult to answer. Meanwhile, elaborate craft skills would clearly be required by parents venturing to make a Roman mosaic, a Tudor maze or a papier-mâché model of a river landscape with their children.

The demands on parental *time* of such activities are also frequently striking; and it is here in particular that the booklets' implicit image of family life seems (to say the least) somewhat idealised. Thus, the leaflet on ancient Romans suggests that parents and children might dress up in togas made of old sheets; while the one on Victorians suggests that the family might organise a 'Victorian games day' for their school. Similarly, the leaflet on religious buildings suggests that parents compile an 'I-spy' book in an exercise book for their children to complete; while the one on 'music from around the world' suggests that they assemble their own gamelan orchestra made from everyday objects. The implicit assumptions about family life that inform the materials seem to derive from an idealised earlier era. It is as if the writers envisage the child arriving home from school to find mum waiting expectantly to engage them in worthwhile, fun learning activities.

The parents whom we interviewed were disinclined to identify with this image of family life. Although most parents seemed to think that the 'Learning Journey' initiative was a good idea in principle, they said they were unlikely to try the activities with their children. There were a number of reasons for this. One of the main constraints was the lack of time, particularly for working parents. In addition, many parents argued that the activities would feel alien or uncomfortable. The Ancient Rome leaflet that we sent out, for example, suggested that parents should dress up in togas, make sweet wine cakes with their children or play a Roman game called 'knucklebones'. Several parents clearly found such suggestions laughable. They thought that, while some of the 'tips' in these leaflets might be helpful for 'other people', they were not necessary for them.

Nevertheless, as with other such parental involvement initiatives, there appears to be little evidence that the materials are in fact being used by these 'other' parents. Indeed, this was a possibility that the DfES civil servants responsible for the initiative (whom we interviewed) implicitly accepted. Despite David Blunkett's rhetoric about 'narrowing the gap', they recognised that the initiative might not make much difference to the children who were 'trailing behind', and that it might only be taken up by those 'at the top end [whose] parents are going to buy all this stuff for them anyway'. As one of them pointed out, this was 'not very consistent with the [social] inclusion agenda'; although the fact that some children might do better than they would otherwise have done was still positive in terms of 'the overall standards agenda'.

There is something of a contrast here with some other elements of the 'Learning Journey' initiative, particularly the termly magazine *Parents and Schools*. A glossy, full-colour publication, this is distributed free via supermarkets, and is aimed at parents of children at all stages of education. Like the DfES's parents' web site, the magazine contains advice relating to broadly 'pastoral' aspects of education: for

example, there are 'survival guides' on the pressures of returning to school after the summer break, or about problems such as bullying and truanting, as well as information about issues such as special needs, youth training and parent governors. There is less specific advice about home learning of the kind found in the curriculum topic leaflets, although there are features on literacy and mathematics which include suggestions for 'home help', such as number games to play at home or guidance on reading with your child.

However, what is most striking about the magazine—particularly in comparison with the topic leaflets—is its 'modern', popular appeal. The busy design resembles that of a mass-market women's magazine, with large, full-colour photographs, short articles, 'tips' and 'hints', graphics and 'sidebars'; and there are competitions, 'give aways', problem pages, quizzes and readers' letters. Several articles feature 'true life' stories of ordinary parents and children; although media celebrities—including the ubiquitous television presenter Carol Vorderman—are also featured. In seeking to appeal to a wide readership in this way, the magazine is very clearly attempting to narrow David Blunkett's 'gap'. Yet there is also a strong commercial dimension here. The magazine carries full-page advertisements for products such as mobile phones, cars and financial services, as well as covert advertising in the form of competitions and give-away prizes, and frequent reminders of its commercial sponsors, distributors and partners. In issue one, for example, books by the information book publisher Dorling Kindersley were offered in three separate 'give aways', as well as being featured on the front cover; and there was extensive promotion of the government's 'parents online week'—'in association with BT'—and a positive review of the Sainsbury's Bookstart scheme (Sainsbury's also distribute the magazine, as do a growing range of other high street outlets featured on the back cover). Likewise, the DfES web site contains links to a range of commercial companies, most notably the Disney site. These magazines seem to further illustrate how the boundaries between the public sector and the commercial market are becoming significantly blurred.

Conclusion

The impression communicated by the majority of the parents whom we interviewed was one of increasing stress and pressure over their children's education. Education seemed to be perceived as an area of intense and growing competition; and while this was most acutely experienced in relation to the transfer to secondary schools, it seemed to be felt at an ever younger age. Some of the parents whom we interviewed—particularly the more affluent parents—seemed able to resist (and in some cases, to criticise) this pressure. Nevertheless, most appeared distinctly vulnerable to it.

In this context, investing in educational resources and services would seem to provide at least a potential means of dealing with that pressure. As we have described in this article, this has led to a flourishing market for curriculum-related publications, computers and private tuition. The logic of the home learning market is that this will continue to escalate: educational competition seems likely to

intensify, and pressured parents are bound to resort to throwing money at the problem. Buying these educational goods and services offers parents a way of satisfying themselves that they have fulfilled their pedagogic responsibilities—or at least, it may do so for those who are able to afford them. Whether or not they actually get what they pay for is, however, another matter.

Nevertheless, the commercialisation of out-of-school learning seems bound to exacerbate educational inequalities. The so-called 'digital divide' has become a focal point for this debate; although, as we have seen, there are several other dimensions to the issue. Whether or not government policy might provide a way of addressing these inequalities—or whether it might widen them yet further—is something that remains to be seen. As we have suggested in this article, the extent to which initiatives like the 'Learning Journey' help to 'narrow the gap' between the educational 'haves' and 'have nots' is certainly debatable.

Notes on contributors

Margaret Scanlon is a Research Officer in the School of Culture, Language and Communication at the Institute of Education, University of London. She has worked on two ESRC-funded projects on children's educational media and out-of-school learning. The project on which she is currently working looks at the production, characteristics and uses of educational web sites designed for use in the home.

David Buckingham is Professor of Education at the Institute of Education, where he directs the Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media. He has conducted a number of research projects on children's interactions with electronic media and on media education.

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