

Parental Engagement and Career-Related Learning (CRL) in primary schools

Evidence paper

Dr Deirdre Hughes OBE, Director, DMH Associates

Dr Aisling Murray Fleming, PhD student, Dublin City University

Lauren Croll, Special Outreach Projects Manager, Learn by Design

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Contact: Dr Deirdre Hughes OBE
8 Rose Duryard, Lower Argyll Road, Exeter, EX4 4PB
Telephone -0044(0) 7533 545057
Email: deirdre.hughes3@btinternet.com.
Visit: <http://deirdrehughes.org/>
Follow on twitter: @deirdretalks

Introduction

This short briefing paper is designed to inform and support headteachers, governors, senior leadership teams and teachers on a growing body of robust academic international evidence on the added-value of parental engagement in career-related learning (CRL) in primary schools.

In October 2021, North East Ambitions commissioned dmh associates and Learn by Design to undertake a rapid assessment of evidence on the above-mentioned topic. This involved a review of national and international academic literature building upon earlier national and international research that focuses primarily on children and career-related learning. For more information - visit:

- Education and Employers - <https://www.educationandemployers.org/research-type/taskforce-publications/>
- The Gatsby Foundation - <https://www.gatsby.org.uk/uploads/education/reports/pdf/talkingfuturespilotssummary2021.pdf>
- Little Ripples Today Can Change Children's lives – The Australian Government - <https://yourcareer.gov.au/littleripples>

The content builds upon models of good and/or interesting careers policies that already exist in the North East region e.g., <https://www.northeastambition.co.uk/news/five-north-east-primary-schools-recognised-outstanding-careers-guidance>

Various research studies have consistently highlighted parents as major influencers in childhood learning^{1 2 3 4}. It is possible to distinguish between two specific types of parental involvement:

- *school-based strategies*, such as communicating with the teacher or attending school events. Common operational definitions of school-based involvement also include participation in school activities such as volunteering in the classroom, going on class trips, and participation in school functions.
- *home-based strategies*, such as providing structure and support with regard to learning and education at home. Multiple researchers also considered parental expectations for their child's academic achievement as a form of involvement⁵

12 key themes emerged from the literature review to inform CRL policies and practices in North-East primary schools:

1. parental involvement indicators and academic achievement
2. parental self-efficacy
3. cultural sensitivity, socio-economic status of the family, ethnicity, parents' education and parents' attitudes matter
4. productive partnerships with parents
5. decisions about professions begin early in childhood
6. what parents do is pivotal for their children
7. a 'whole school approach – "a village to help raise a child"
8. introduce career education step by step
9. the importance of play and capturing parents' views on career-related learning
10. mediate the world of work to both children and parents in order to combat inaccurate (e.g., stereotypes) perceptions

11. staff should receive parental engagement training
12. use of digital technology can contribute to improved parental engagement.

What is career-related learning (CRL)?

- CRL is a process that starts early in childhood. This encompasses early childhood activities in primary schools designed to give children from an early age a wide range of experiences of and exposure to education, transitions and the world of work. See: <https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/research/career-related-learning-primary-what-works> and 2019 International literature review - https://www.teachfirst.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-01/edemp_careerprimary-report_jan2019_v5_indv.pdf and <https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/research/career-related-learning-primary-what-works>

Desired outcomes: (i) Developing knowledge about work-Learn and explore a number of careers, learning pathways and sectors; and (ii) Developing skills for work and life - specifically developing non-academic skills such as enterprise skills and social-emotional skills and behaviours that will benefit children's wellbeing and the wellbeing of others. Childhood experiences set a strong foundation, positively or negatively, for later educational, career, and life choices.

CRL is NOT about career decision-making. Primary schools often provide opportunities by inviting employer representatives into school. Reading and number partner schemes, alongside enterprise education, have been familiar in the United States of America, mainland Europe, and the UK for many years^{6 7}.

Why do this?

- **Globalisation and technological advancements** are rapidly changing the world of work, as well as education systems.
- Today's children more than ever before will need to "find their **own ways of being** in this world"⁸.
- Holding **biased assumptions** and having **narrow aspirations** can, and does, go on to influence the academic effort children exert in certain lessons^{9 10 11}, the subjects they choose to study^{12 13}, and the jobs they end up pursuing^{14 15}.
- Children as young as five years can express **occupational dreams**¹⁶, and career preferences are formed early¹⁷, it seems that valuable opportunities to influence the socialisation and career readiness of many children are being missed.
- The prevailing historical view maintained that children's ideas about careers are unrealistic and likely to change and, therefore, not worth paying attention to¹⁸. Yet, a body of literature continues to grow which demonstrates that children's ideas about careers are not only less 'magical' than thought previously, but also that the aspirations young people hold are often quite similar to those held in their teenage decision-making years^{19 20}. Recent research findings^{21 22} reveal that the differences between **children's career aspirations** from childhood to early adulthood are marginal.
- The character of **aspirations** is strongly rooted in a child or young person's sense of what is 'reasonable' and 'natural' for 'people like me' to pursue²³. Children enter schools with assumptions emerging out of their own day-to-day experiences. These are routinely shaped by ideas surrounding gender, ethnicity and social class, as well as role models^{24 25 26}. Research from the University of Houston (2021)²⁷ finds that **children from the age of six often rule out options for themselves**

because of the ingrained stereotypical views they have about the jobs people do based on their gender, ethnicity and socio-economic backgrounds. These aspirations are often based on their family's experiences and the people in their immediate surroundings.²⁸

- **Identity** - childhood experiences are foundational in the construction of identity²⁹, observations of attitudes towards work within families, cultural stereotypes, and influence of the media may influence children's meaning of work and, in turn their long-term occupational identities³⁰.
- **Gender** - Many children often do not know enough about the world of work to have realistic ideas of what jobs exist, but they have absorbed enough to believe there is 'men's work' and 'women's work'. For example, over 20,000 children aged 7 to 11 years old from the UK and internationally to draw and describe what they wanted to be when they grew up. Their free text descriptions were coded into one of 69 possible occupations. The results show by the age of seven it was clear that the jobs chosen reflected standard gendered ideas. Four times as many boys wanted to become engineers, as did girls. Twice as many boys as girls saw science as their chosen future, while girls were four times more likely than boys to want to be vets, and more than twice as likely to want to be doctors³¹. The 'orientation of sex roles' occurs at the age of 6-8 and children grasp the concept of a set of behaviours belonging to each sex and begin seeing jobs and future pathways as intrinsically gendered. By the age of age 9-13, this is where children begin to see their social value based on perceptions of social class and intelligence³². Fundamentally, children have started to become more aware of potential constraints on their occupational choice³³.
- **Schools and neighbourhood** - Influence children's early attitudes and assumptions about the world of work. There are calls for greater efforts to broaden learners' science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) aspirations to begin in primary schools³⁴. It is argued that there is a need to draw more readily on role models from local work places to challenge the stereotypical image of science careers as being 'only for the brainy' and for a limited cross section of society. Through CRL schools can challenge the assumptions developed by children, allowing them to draw richer, more informed connections between education and ultimate economic and wider success in adult life³⁵. Even very highly performing primary school pupils often struggle to see the meaning of academic learning, such as in Mathematics, to the real world³⁶.

Parental engagement^A

Parental involvement indicators and academic achievement

Researchers in the Netherlands³⁷, reviewed literature covering early childhood education (up to the age of 6), elementary school (ages 6-12), and middle, high school and beyond (ages 12 -18) and concluded results of prominent meta-analyses in the field indicate that in general statistically significant relationships exists between parental involvement and academic achievement^{38 39}. Policymakers and researchers generally agree that parental involvement is a critical ingredient for children's academic success^{40 41 42}. Parents who are active participants in their children's education are thought to promote children's social, emotional and academic growth⁴³. However, empirical research does not provide a clear picture about which specific types of parental involvement are predictive of achievement and not all forms of parental involvement are positively related to academic achievement. The Education Endowment Foundation (undated)⁴⁴ highlights parental engagement has a positive impact on average of 4 months' additional progress. It is crucial to consider how to engage with all parents to avoid widening attainment gaps.

^A Parents referred to in this paper also include carers and/or guardians.

Parental self-efficacy

A research study⁴⁵ of self-efficacy beliefs amongst children and parents tested with 272 children a structural model of the network of socio-cognitive influences that shape children's career aspirations and trajectories. Perceived occupational self-efficacy gives direction to the kinds of career pursuits children seriously consider for their life's work and those they disfavour. Children's perceived efficacy rather than their actual academic achievement is the key determinant of their perceived occupational self-efficacy and preferred choice of work-life. Familial socio-economic status is linked to children's career trajectories only indirectly through its effects on parents' perceived efficacy and academic aspirations. Parents who believe that they can affect their children's development are more proactive and successful in cultivating their children's competencies than parents who doubt they can do much to influence their children's developmental course. The developmental benefits of parent's beliefs in their efficacy have been verified across different socioeconomic statuses and family structures, under conditions of economic adversity that severely tax parental resilience, and in different cultural milieus.

Cultural sensitivity, socio-economic status of the family, ethnicity, parents' education and parents' attitudes matter

Career-related learning programmes and/or activities should be targeted at particular groups of parents, showing sensitivity to cultural norms and expectations, and including specific, detailed and directive advice and guidance. Children's occupational aspirations depend on individual differences and the social context⁴⁶. Amongst the various social factors, such as ethnicity, parents' education and parents' attitudes, the socioeconomic status of the family plays a very important role^{47 48}. Individual differences related to occupational aspirations include affective, cognitive and behavioural dispositions⁴⁹. Across the lifespan, both family structure variables (e.g., parents' occupations) and family process variables (e.g., warmth, support, attachment, autonomy) influence a host of career constructs⁵⁰; however, the process by which families influence career development is complex and is affected by many contextual factors such as race, gender, and age. An evidence-based model that looks to build relationships across the family, the school, and the community can improve outcomes for low-income, culturally marginalised families⁵¹.

Effective leadership

Effective leadership of parental engagement is essential to the success of programmes, strategies and/or activities⁵². Ofsted inspection guidelines (2021)⁵³ highlight "the leadership and management judgement is about how leaders, managers and those responsible for governance ensure that the education that the school provides has a positive impact on all its pupils." A parental engagement strategy is often led by a senior leader, although leadership may also be distributed in the context of a programme or cluster of schools and services working to a clear strategic direction. A parental engagement strategy should be the subject of ongoing support, monitoring and development. This will include strategic planning which embeds parental engagement in whole-school development plans, sustained support, resourcing and training, community involvement at all levels of management, and a continuous system of evidence-based development and review.

Open and productive partnerships with parents

Effective parent-teacher relationships can be described as a 'side by side and reciprocal' rather than 'hierarchical and primarily unidirectional'⁵⁴. The value of co-generative dialogues between teachers and parents is clear, that is, engagement in 'substantive conversations . . . while adopting an open disposition to the possibilities of learning from others' views and ideas'⁵⁵. A respectful and welcoming school environment is critical to effective parent engagement⁵⁶. When children are made particularly vulnerable, however, for reasons such as disability or English as a second language, working with parents might involve additional considerations. The role of teaching assistants can be powerful, though they need adequate training to play a significant role in working with parents.

Decisions about professions often begin early in childhood

There is increasing evidence in the research literature that career development is a lifelong process that begins in childhood^{57 58}. The importance of career-related decisions made during the elementary school^B age period has been supported both by studies of children and by retrospective studies of adults. One investigation found that half of a group of children aged 9 and 10 believed they had already made decisions that would impact their future careers⁵⁹. A retrospective study found that 23% of adults aged 40-55 had made decisions about their current professions in childhood⁶⁰.

What parents do is pivotal for their children

The OECD (2019 & 2020) report on Early Learning and Child Well-Being study sets out the evidence-base for what parents do as 'pivotal for their children. What parents do is pivotal for their children'⁶¹⁶² (p.12), and 'children from advantaged families, on average, have more learning opportunities' – for example, children from 'advantaged families' are four times as likely to live in families with more than 100 children's books. This again reiterates much previous work⁶³. Research has found that teachers rank dealing with parents as more difficult than maintaining discipline or dealing with endless testing. Researchers⁶⁴ examined the influence of parent education and family income on child achievement. Although poverty was considered a major threat for child development, a closer look at the underlying mechanisms may help explain why so many poor children perform well in school despite restricted material resources. It is argued that if parents are successful in providing an emotionally stable and stimulating environment, the negative effects of financial restrictions can be minimised.

It takes 'whole school approach - a village to help raise a child

Early insight is provided to studies on the complex nature of family relationships in the career development process⁶⁵. A "systems perspective" can help better understand the notion of parents and families^{66 67 68}. This American author indicates the need for a relational framework to help guide careers policies and practices. The complexities of describing "families" and insights to the actions of families who are not involved in career development is discussed and how to bring them into the conversation.⁶⁹ Attempts by schools to engage parents in their children's learning are unlikely to be successful if they represent a 'bolt-on' to mainstream activities. A parental engagement strategy, therefore, should be integrated into a whole school approach to parental engagement. And school-based family and parent support activities should have the improvement of children's learning as a clear and consistent goal⁷⁰.

Introduce career education step-by-step

A study of career education⁷¹: parents' attitudes toward the relevance of early career development, parents' attitudes toward the implementation of career education in pre-schools (including preferred subjects to be included in curricula), and the contribution of gender, socioeconomic status (SES), and education to these attitudes. Fifteen parents were interviewed, and an additional 140 parents (47 men, 93 women; ages 24–55 years) with at least one pre-schooler (4–6 years old) completed two attitude questionnaires developed for the study. Results indicated moderate positive agreement with the developmental approach and with preschool implementation of career education. Parents agreed that the curriculum in the preschool system should include some career education, but they wanted it introduced gradually, step-by-step. Almost all of them talked about the need to protect children from the complexity of work. Education and high SES correlated with positive attitudes.

There is a need to set aside designated school spaces for parents to engage in CRL conversations and/or activities. Create a whole-school 'career-related learning (CRL) culture'. Celebrate that everyone is learning

^B An elementary school is a primary school which is the main point of delivery of primary education in the United States, for children **between the ages of 5–11** and coming between pre-kindergarten and secondary education.

together - learn with and from each other. Ensure parents contribute to the governance of the school and to staff development (e.g., local support groups).

The importance of play and capturing parents' views on career-related learning

Researchers set out to determine what, if any, knowledge young children (ages three through eight years) had of career and work behaviours/concepts⁷². Children shared their worldviews through mini stories and artistic depictions. They engaged with parents and educators through focus groups and surveys and asked them what they thought about young children's awareness of career development concepts. Participants shared their observations of children regarding their interests, abilities, hopes and dreams, as well as their opinions on career development for young children. The ideas and information came from surveys completed by parents and educators, as well as from focus group meetings with children, educators, and parents. 1194 parents and 136 educators completed surveys. Focus groups were held with 436 children, ages three to eight years, with 41 parents and 51 educators of children, ages three to eight years. Through play, young children explore their environments as they move through various life roles (child, student, adolescent, worker, parent, and others) and adapt skills to cope with educational, career, and personal tasks. The roots of adaptability start early in children's development and play a large part throughout their life adjustment and career planning, and are ingredients of risk-taking, problem-solving, decision-making, planning, transitions and change, and overcoming obstacles and setbacks. From a very young age, children envision themselves in possible roles for future selves. Children talk about, express, and 'try on' their hopes and dreams for the future. These aspirations change often and are influenced by many personal and contextual factors, including: • *Relationships with family, educators, friends, peers, and significant others*; • *Self-knowledge, including, self-esteem and self-efficacy*; • *Interests, experiences, values, attitudes, hopes, and dreams*; • *Education/learning, knowledge, and skills*; • *Cultural and other contextual influences, for example, gender, ability level, and race or ethnicity*.

Mediate the world of work to both children and parents

A conceptualisation of children's knowledge about the world of work⁷³ - the basic assumption of the study is that, for children aged 3–8, passive and active occupational knowledge need to be differentiated. Children may know more about occupations but may be unable to express this knowledge without help. They produced a framework of three aspects of occupational knowledge: Identifying occupations from pictures (occupational picture naming); Naming and explaining occupations (occupational vocabulary); Explaining the essence of work (occupational comprehension). Participants were 101 Jewish Israeli children (53 girls, 48 boys) from middle-to-high Socio-Economic Status residential areas with an age range of 3–8 years. Since children under the age of 6 years are not always literate and do not all have the capacity to freely express their knowledge, it remains important to confront the challenge of distinguishing between their active and passive knowledge about the world of work and to develop methods that are relevant to young children, such as identifying occupations from pictures and describing their knowledge through mediating questions.

The role of parents and educators may be to seek opportunities to deliberately mediate the world of work to children in order to combat the creation of inaccurate (e.g., stereotypic) perceptions that may take time to rectify. Parents can speak with their young children and explain aspects of occupations they notice around them that are part of their life (e.g., the doctor they visit, the librarian, and actors in movies and performances). Parents can also tell them about occupations that are not visible, e.g., those who engineered the electronic devices that they use at home or those who designed their clothes or buildings in the neighbourhood. Such information may expand and increase children's passive and active occupational knowledge. See also: The Little Ripples initiative introduced by the Australian Government (November 2021) including a parental engagement toolkit -

<https://www.dese.gov.au/newsroom/articles/turning-little-ripples-big-waves-our-childrens-future>

Staff should receive parental engagement training through initial teacher training or continuing professional development

“The new relationships that teachers are having to form with parents is one of the greatest challenges to their professionalism in the postmodern age”⁷⁴. Fewer than 10% of teachers have participated in CPD on parental engagement⁷⁵ and although providers of initial teacher training are warm to the idea of family school partnerships, in practice they state that a lack of space in their curriculum restricts the ability to provide new teachers with the knowledge and experience to feel confident. “Even when teachers have the best of intentions, through their lack of true understanding of issues such as poverty, race and sexual orientation and subsequent deficit thinking, they can end up participating in practices that are counterproductive, or through making excuses they put limits on a child’s learning⁷⁶. See also: <https://www.schoolleaderstraining.co.uk/media/1640/parental-engagement-research-slt.pdf>

Use of digital technology can contribute to improved parental engagement by providing a convenient means for parents to access up-to-date information about their child’s learning

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF, op cit) has tested a number of interventions designed to improve pupils’ outcomes by engaging parents in different types of skills development. The consistent message from these has been that it is difficult to engage parents in programmes. By contrast, a trial which aimed to prompt greater parental engagement through text message alerts delivered a small positive impact, and at very low cost. EEF recommends consider what support you can give to parents to ensure home learning is of high quality. For example, providing practical strategies with tips, support, and resources to assist learning at home may be more beneficial to pupil outcomes than simply gifting a book to pupils or asking parents to provide generic help to their children.

Technology-based learning activities at home, as well as at school, can also support the child as a unique individual and encourage exploration, experimentation, risk taking, critical thinking, decision making and problem solving⁷⁷. A platform Digital Learning Playground (DLP) designed to solve real-life problems supported by robots has been tested and reported on⁷⁸. The results indicated better learning performance, engagement, and enjoyment of the learners. Use of technology in conventional classrooms can help create an authentic learning environment. Where employer visits are not feasible, worksite simulation may be effective in helping children to expand their list of possible future career choices and to understand the ramifications of those decisions⁷⁹.

What are the outcomes?

The evidence below sets out potential positive benefits of increased parental engagement:

- **Education outcomes**
 - Childhood proficiency in the skills of resilience, conscientiousness, self-awareness and motivation are found to be closely associated with *educational attainment*^{80 81}.
 - In a large trial of some 512 children aged eight to nine-years old⁸²—identified as being below average in reading ability and lacking confidence in reading—263 of which were randomly assigned to participate in weekly one-hour sessions with employee volunteers over a school year. When compared to a control group using statistical testing, the researchers found the programme to be ‘effective in improving a number of reading outcomes for pupils’ with impact strongest in relation to decoding, reading rate, and reading fluency. One way of involving parents in a child(ren)’s exposure to and experience of the world of work, as part of CRL, is to invite a parent(s) in as volunteers.
- **Social outcomes**

- There is widespread agreement about the importance of connectedness and the benefits of actively developing intra-and inter-personal skills for healthy relationships and well-being^{83 84}. This can lead to improved social and emotional skills. It also can enhance cultural understanding from an early age⁸⁵. These skills are sometimes captured by terms such as non-cognitive skills (non-academic skills), character, resilience and grit⁸⁶⁸⁷. Key aspects of these social and behavioural capabilities include: self-perceptions, self-awareness and self-direction (including self-esteem and the belief that one's own actions can make a difference); motivation; self-control/self-regulation (generally characterised as greater impulse control and fewer behavioural problems); social skills, including relationship skills and communication skills; and resilience and coping⁸⁸.
- **Economic outcomes**
 - **Long-term economic benefits** - A series of quantitative longitudinal studies have drawn compelling relationships between school-age aspirations and both engagement in education and the achievement of adult economic outcomes⁸⁹. Moreover, US and Australian studies have found links between the nature of occupational aspirations of primary school age learners and later educational outcomes, with higher aspirations being positively related to higher levels of attainment and lower dropout rates⁹⁰. Evidence from a longitudinal tracking study shows that learners who do not express STEM related aspirations at age 10 are unlikely to develop STEM aspirations by the age of 14. Consequently, they are less likely to pursue science subjects, achievement in which is related to higher adult earnings⁹¹. Data from a major British Cohort Study (BCS)⁹² found these social and emotional skills and behaviours are important for future outcomes. Compared with cognitive ability they find that social and emotional skills matter similarly for socio-economic and labour market outcomes (such as higher income and wealth and being employed).
 - There is compelling evidence that children who take part in social action initiatives, such as volunteering, develop some of the most critical skills for employment and adulthood in the process⁹³. Using a number of randomised control trials (RCTs) and one pre-post comparison in England, the researchers compared the outcomes for children who took part in these funded initiatives against the outcomes of children who did not. They found that social action initiatives consistently improved children's levels of empathy, and their sense of community involvement. Many primary school teachers engage their students in everyday social action learning that could be described as CRL. A major issue is how easily or otherwise this CRL social action learning approach can be accommodated within the curriculum.

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