EXPERIENCES OF E-SAFETY WITHIN PRIMARY SCHOOL EDUCATION

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Abstract

This research aims to establish what the current e-safety teaching strategies are within primary schools in England in relation to the National Curriculum and current office for standards in education (OFSTED) guidelines. The project focuses on up to three primary schools in Northamptonshire and Buckinghamshire where relationships have been established to identify how e-safety is approached and where it is adequately addressed and/or taught. During the initial stage of the project teachers will be interviewed and observed at the heart of this environment within their primary school setting. The intention of the initial study is to inform and direct subsequent research involving children within each particular school. The second stage of the project will establish what impact the current teaching strategies have on the children and the messages that are being received, interpreted and understood by them. The results of both studies will establish how effective the current teaching strategies are and their impact on young children to provide the necessary evidence to influence key stakeholders and make recommendations and support for an improved strategy and consistent approach to e-safety in primary schools in England.

Keywords: E-safety, children and young people, education, research project, policy formation

1 INTRODUCTION

Evolution of technology means a steady flow of new and changing threats to young people (D'Arcy 2013). The need for education has never been more important as children and young people continue to explore the vast amount of internet sites presented to them. Ólafsson et al (2013) highlight how 'the rapidity with which children and young people are gaining access online is unprecedented in the history of technological innovation and diffusion.' These changes pose parents, teachers and children the significant task of acquiring, learning how to use, and finding a purpose for the internet within their daily lives (Ólafsson,2013). The research aims to explore the impact of current e-safety teaching strategies and approaches within a primary school setting with reference to office for standards in education (OFSTED) guidelines and the recently updated national curriculum framework. Specifically this research will focus on the e-safety guidelines within the national curriculum, which aim to provide an outline of core knowledge around which teachers can develop their lessons. There appears to be little research in this area that focuses on younger children with the majority of research focusing on children approaching their teenage years.

2 YOUNG CHILDREN AND THE INTERNET

Cranmer et al (2009) argue 'that official notions of 'e-safety' remain abstract and poorly understood concepts for many children,' they suggest that a meaningful and sustained dialogue between pupils, teachers and parents about safety and risk should be established when using Information and Communications Technology (ICT). The lives of children are becoming inextricably linked to their online lives and it is becoming increasingly more important for children to be educated from an early age. Research has so far focused more on older children, upwards of age 12 but there is an increasing need to focus research on much younger children in order to help to safeguard their experiences online. Ólafsson et al (2013) note that ' half (48%) of research concerns teenagers only (13+ years); 56% of research includes those aged 12 or under; only 12% of research addresses children under 7 years old. ' Ólafsson et al (2013) continue by identifying key research gaps including 'uneven coverage by age, especially very young children, despite the rapid rise in their access to internet and mobile technologies' and 'gaps regarding the role of parents and teachers, along with other forms of safety mediation, and lack of knowledge of their effectiveness.' Clearly there is a need for further research in this area that specifically focuses on younger children's knowledge and understanding of how to behave safely online. A recent survey by EU Kids Online that aimed to explore childrens' use of online technologies in Europe found that 55% of 9- 16 year olds think that

there are things online that bother children their age. Additionally, 12% of children (and 8% of their parents) say they have been bothered or upset by something online in the past year (Livingstone et al, 2013). Holloway et al (2013) highlight a critical need for information about the internet-related behaviours of 0-8 year olds by identifying research which shows that children are now going online at a younger and younger age, without appropriate technical, critical and social skills. Research from Ofcom (2012) shows that '91% of all 5-15 year olds used the internet in 2012' and breaks this down to show that this includes three in four 5-7 year olds (74%) gaining access to the internet during that time. Ranguelov (2010) refers to recent information from 30 European countries which recognises a 'striking rise amongst younger children in the use of technology and highlights how young people are among the first to take up new technologies.

2.1 E-safety

With specific reference to the United Kingdom, Ranguelov (2010) identifies that elements of online safety is included in some subjects within schools. But the problem that is emerging within the school community in England is the inconsistency of teaching approaches and strategies in relation to e-safety. The updated national curriculum for computing 2014 replaces the National Curriculum for ICT and identifies what pupils should be taught at each key stage. E-safety sits within this subject area and requires that pupils are able to use technology safely, respectfully and responsibly and are able to recognise acceptable/unacceptable behaviour (Department for Education, 2013). OFSTED, which inspect and regulate services which care for children and young people of all ages identify key features of good and outstanding practice. Within the subject of computing a number of features are identified including that all teaching and non-teaching staff have an awareness of e-safety issues, regular training of all staff, rigorous e-safety policies and an age appropriate e-safety curriculum (OFSTED, 2013). Despite this national curriculum and guidance from OFSTED, it appears that some schools are struggling to identify a robust and effective e-safety teaching strategy. The issue of e-safety in education appears to be an issue throughout Europe. Lorenz et al (2012) identifies how only a few schools in a study of Estonian schools have explicit policies which target e-safety issues and those schools that do have a policy seem to fail to address the key topics or experiences of the pupils. It is vital that the policies, strategies and solutions offered within schools address the core issues of children.

2.1.1 E-safety policy and guidance

A key report by Livingstone et al (2013) explores 'what bothers children online?', and highlights how the 'adult society (parents, teachers, policy makers and the media) has shaped the policy agenda for understanding online risk and managing internet safety' and discusses how most research has asked children about risks that worry adults rather than discovering what concerns children themselves. For children especially, the online/ offline distinction is ever less relevant and the challenge for policy makers in addressing this diversity of risks is considerable. Perhaps the fact that there has been little relevant input from children at the policy formation stage has meant that they are not being effectively safeguarded.

A number of organisations and agencies exist to educate and assist children, parents and schools in e-safety and provide advice that is widely available. Primarily the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) brings together over 150 stakeholders from across the internet safety spectrum who have come together to work in collaboration for the good of children and families to provide guidelines for using their advice. Other resources include The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre's (CEOP) 'Think U Know' resources and Think U Know for parents, Childnet International's 'Know IT All' for parents, Kidsmart and many more. However it appears that despite the wealth of information that exists, primary schools and their ICT teachers are struggling to find their way through all the information, which could effectively help to educate both themselves and their pupils. A survey conducted by Aston and Bernadetta (2012) found that many teachers acknowledged that technology can be useful to their pupils but found that technology is creating challenges for teachers. The continued rise in the development of technology, apps, mobile technologies and gaming will continue to test parents, teachers and policy makers until the issue of e-safety is managed consistently and comprehensibly. Atkinson, Furnell and Phippen (2009) argue that 'teachers can find themselves responsible for the delivery of the e-safety message throughout the school with little support elsewhere. The more children go online to gain the benefits both within school and outside of the school gates, the more they may encounter risks, inadvertently and, sometimes, knowingly. Unless teachers are prepared and equipped to deal with issues that rise up out of this, generations of children will be affected.

Establishing what is actually happening currently in schools in order to identify what children are being taught and what messages they are receiving within primary schools from an early age is a important trigger for research. Lorenz et al (2012) highlight how this problem does not lay at the feet of a single person or agency but it is a problem that belongs to everyone. Furnell et al (2008) proposed that vendors of online products and services have some responsibility to help educate, explain threats and advise.' Internet service providers, social networking sites and the UK Government have made some progress. The UK prime minister, for example has suggested a series of steps that requires the country's largest broadband ISPs to adopt strict network-level filtering blocks for adult websites and content. However, progress is slow and more needs to be done and further investment is necessary. Primary schools need to be supported and empowered to take more responsibility in supporting children in e-safety by increasing their confidence and knowledge of how to take control of the current known risks.

3 METHODOLOGY FOR COLLECTING DATA FROM CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

When collecting data from young children it is important to consider how they might respond within different environments and group settings. Shaw et al (2012) discusses participatory research in relation to children and young people and states that 'this approach to research also seeks to address some of the power imbalances between the researcher and the researched, which can be compounded for children and young people by the adult–child dynamic.' Involving children and young people in research can be beneficial to its dissemination by raising awareness of issues that affect them and enable them to share their own related experiences, which can have a powerful impact on audiences of all ages (Shaw et all, 2012). With particular reference to e-safety, a child's perspective is of paramount importance in order to identify their needs and provide an e-safety curriculum that is relevant and supports their current online experiences. Data will be evaluated to draw conclusions and make useful recommendations to schools around e-safety teaching strategies, approaches and policies. Recommendations will also enable the schools to assess the impact of their current strategies, approaches and policies. Within a wider context research involving children, if used for policy formation, for example developing a national curriculum for e-safety, is likely to lead to policies that reflect a young person's priorities and concerns.

Small groups of children, selected by the school within each year group will be offered the opportunity to participate in focus groups that will last no longer than 15 minutes. It will be requested that a teacher is present in the room at all times to ensure that children feel at ease within this situation. Focus groups will be used in place of one-to one interviews with young children as this will enhance the quality and quantity of data gathered (Grieg et al, 2007). It is more likely that children will feel at ease amongst their peers than with adult researchers. The age of children participating in the research has a significant impact on the methods chosen to collect data. All research tools will be piloted with children of the same age to ensure that the language is appropriate and time scales effective. A multi-method and flexible approach will be used which includes a range of creative methods, including drawing pictures, creating posters, storytelling and interacting with technology (Tisdall et al, 2009).

The focus group will be set within a very informal and relaxed atmosphere. The short attention span of children may require several short sessions rather than one long session in order to collect data that is meaningful and robust.

3.1 Focus group principles

Each focus group will include children of similar age and include a maximum of 6 participants per group. Advice will be sought from teachers with regards to whether focus groups should be single-sex groups or mixed. Each session will be age appropriate, using interactive, creative activities set at an appropriate level using language that the children can understand. Each session will last no longer than 15 minutes

4. ETHICS

Ethical approval of the proposed research will be gained from the University's Research Ethics Committee, before the study, following the institution's ethics code and procedures. All participants will be informed about the aim and nature of the study. The information sheet will include the title and purpose of the project and details of the research team. It will also explain what is expected of participants. For example, what is required of them, how the information will be used and for what purpose. The rights, safety and well-being of participants will be the key considerations in the design and conduct of the research. The majority of work will be carried out on participate schools premises.

4.1 Adults as research participants

Consent will be requested from schools, teachers, parents and the children themselves. Information sheets and consent forms will be sent to all adult parties involved in the study in order to gain permission from them to commence with the study. Interviews and observations with teachers will be recorded with their permission and all participants will be informed that they are not obliged to answer any question or respond to any statement unless they wish to do so. Participants will be made aware that they may stop the interview/observation at any time and in addition withdraw from the research.

4.1.1 *Children as research participants*

Children participating in the research will receive information about the project in a language that they can understand and in a format that is appropriate and attractive to them. Consultations may be required with parents and teachers at this stage in order to address any particular areas of concern. Consent from children will also be requested at every stage of the data collection process on a continuous basis both written and verbal. If at any time a child does not want to engage, answer a question or be involved in the focus group then they may decline at any stage without any negative consequences. If a child exhibits behaviour where they seem uncomfortable in a focus group setting then they may leave at any time without negative consequences. This will be explained to the children at every stage of the data collection process. All research will be conducted with integrity and there will be no element of deception.

Personal details will be kept confidential and separate from the data, and stored in a locked filing cabinet or password-protected computer. Participants will be informed that their personal details will only be kept for the sole purpose of the research and will be destroyed 3 months after the completion of the research.

All participants taking part in the interview study will be sent a copy of the transcript to check it is an accurate representation of their narrative. They will also be given the opportunity to receive feedback on the results of the studies. Feedback will also be given to children involved in the study in an appropriate format and in a language that they can understand.

4. PROJECT SUCCESS AND IMPACT

Critical success factors will be determined by an evaluation of the benefits to stakeholders; schools, teachers and parents and based on proof or evidence about the value and quality of the project. Evaluation will determine the success of the following:

- Impact primary schools practices by changing the way they develop policy and process
- Generate practice based evidence to support the need for support and resources for primary schools
- Provide benefit to primary schools by enabling them to actively engage in e-safety and exceeding OFSTED and government requirements
- Improved teacher and parents confidence of their children's online experience measured through feedback
- Disseminate findings and toolkits to stakeholders

• Establish a support networks by developing partnerships between researchers, policymakers and policy end-users

• Learn from the project to improve performance and/ or outcomes in the future

5 CONCLUSION

As more and more children join the online world and at an earlier and earlier age it is essential that schools, teachers and parents are equipped to respond appropriately to support young people. They need to be able to deal effectively with the issues and concerns that young people may have with regards to the content they may be accessing and provide them with the appropriate technical and social skills.

There are considerable amounts of data available in the area of individual accountability and e-safety however, the extent and range of data available can be overwhelming and schools have suggested that the extent of guidance available is inhibiting in providing online child protection. Conversely, the lack of research around young children and e-safety is alarming and unexpected. Guided by Livingstone et al (2013), who remarks that adult perspectives has limited the internet safety agendas, it would be impractical and unethical to effectively target and safeguard this vulnerable group without prior discussion and engagement with them. The first and most valuable stage in addressing this issue is through educating children from a young age. Ensuring young people not only have the knowledge to operate safely online but to develop their confidence through increased understanding of the online environment.

The project aims to establish what current teaching strategies are, with reference to the national curriculum for England and current OFSTED guidelines, in two local education authorities covering three primary schools in Northamptonshire and Buckinghamshire. These will include the perspective of both teachers and children in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding and establish the impact the current teaching strategies have. Drawn from the research it will be possible to make recommendations around the resources and support needed for primary schools, school policy, e-safety benchmarks and government guidelines and policy for an improved strategy and consistent approach to e-safety in primary schools in England.

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