

Young People's Health-Related Learning through Social Media: What do Teachers Need to Know?

Aims

The aim of this paper is to find ways to enhance young people's formal and informal learning, and support them to improve their health and wellbeing. This study provides evidence on school policies and practices that enrich, support and/or hinder young people's informal learning through social media, and considers the following:

- The value of social media as a health-related learning tool to bridge informal and formal learning contexts.
- How teachers can be supported to understand and respond to young people's dynamic learning needs.
- The school-based policies, expectations, and resources that will help teachers offer relevant support.

Key Findings

- Schools need to provide opportunities for teachers and young people to collaborate in order to develop shared understandings and skills about social media, and to co-construct relevant forms of support to optimise the positive learning potential of social media, and to mitigate any risks.
- School-based policies and practices need to be relatable to young people's informal engagements and experiences with social media.
- Teachers must determine how to support young people based *not* on the technology, but their students' learning needs.
- Teachers need to be empathetic rather than antagonistic toward young people's uses of social media.
- Teachers will be most effective when they are able to understand and engage with social media as a complex interaction between biological, psychological and social developmental changes.

Policy Context

The evidence from this study points toward the need for more support from education authorities, such as governments. There is a clear need to guarantee that practitioners and professionals have access to the most up-to-date evidence from a range of disciplines. The key challenge is to help schools and teachers better design social media policies and practices in ways that acknowledge the potential of social media to enrich learning across formal and informal contexts, and move beyond the positioning of social media as ubiquitously harmful and risky. The added value of this research study is that new empirical evidence is provided on how and why social media can be positioned as a positive health-related educational resource for young people, and the step changes that are required in schools in order to support teachers to use social media in pedagogically informed ways. The tendency for schools to ban mobile phones should be re-considered given educational and health-related benefits.

Methodology

This in-depth qualitative study examined health-related social media policies and practices in UK schools, and considered the perspectives of young people, teachers and key stakeholders in education and health (e.g., researchers, professionals and practitioners). There were 170 participants in total, including young people (n=135, age 13-18), teachers (n=9), community workers (n=6), and researchers (n=20). A multi-method approach (combining focus group interviews, workshops and seminars) was used to engage with multiple and varying groups of participants at different stages of the research. Data were collected in the UK between 2016 and 2017. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the data. The participants and data reported in this paper are part of a wider participatory action research project examining young people's uses of health-related social media.

Background

International regulatory bodies have argued that young people should be better supported to engage safely, responsibly and effectively with social media. Despite the perceived value of connecting informal and formal learning experiences, existing school policies and practices are not conducive to harnessing social media. Social media is embedded in young people's lives and is an effective educational and health-related medium. Young people's uses of social media are highly dynamic and complex, and in order to respond in ways that are empathetic and pedagogically informed, teachers need to collaborate with their learners in order to understand the subtlety of the rules of engagement.

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