

Research summary

Teachers' and schools' interactions with students about their online lives

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Study overview

This report presents a summary of the findings from a qualitative study on how teachers and schools engage with students about their online lives. The overall aim was to explore teachers' experiences of how, in what contexts, and for what purpose they engage with students about the internet and social media, and their perceptions of the challenges, opportunities and benefits of the digital world for students' learning and wellbeing.

The scope included schools in England only, with a focus on secondary education (11-18-year olds), covering mainstream, independent, alternative provision (AP) providers and special schools. The rationale was to ensure a comparable population (adolescents), while including a sufficient range of schools ($n=38$) and respondents ($n=40$) to compare and contrast models of engagement within diverse settings. The fieldwork was carried out between May and July 2020 and comprised of semi-structured telephone interviews, which were analysed thematically.

The report is one of a series of outputs from the #FOOTPRINTS Digital Resilience and Schools Project, which is a collaboration between Ecorys and the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families.

Further information about the #FOOTPRINTS project is available at: www.schoolsdigital.com

Key findings

Teachers' and schools' everyday interactions with students about their online lives

- The research showed that teachers hold unique insights to students' internet and social media use, and the ways in which this plays out within classroom systems. The continuum between students' online and offline lives was evident throughout the report. From relationships with peers, to curricular and extracurricular activities, the points of overlap with the school were far more diverse than internet safety education alone.
- Schools noted changes in students' internet use collectively during the 11-18 phase, alongside individual choices and preferences. While Key Stage 3 was characterised by open experimentation and discussion of online activities with teachers, students generally had more confident, independent and guarded digital lives by Key Stage 5. This had implications for designing teaching, pastoral and classroom management strategies.
- While schools caught glimpses of young people's use of social media, it was also apparent that they were often relying on partial information. Teachers were aware that students would filter what they were willing to share, which did not always come to the school's attention directly. This was a particular challenge when assessing the prevalence of online risks and harms, and in determining how the school should respond.
- Parental mediation influenced young people's online conduct and content in ways that were sometimes constraining, and sometimes enabling, and which schools recognised to be diverse and multi-faceted. Schools had insights to students' online conduct that was not always visible to parents and carers, which transpired when they became aware of online disputes or content sharing of which parents were unaware.

Management and coordination of digital matters at a whole school level

- Decisions taken at a whole school level were fundamental in shaping all things digital. This included how schools perceived their responsibilities vis-à-vis those of parents and carers, the school climate and behavioural policies, and the leadership ethos. It was also guided by the extent to which schools had embraced digital technology; their IT infrastructure, and the extent to which digital topics were integrated to PSHE.
- The organisation of staffing responsibilities was also significant. Within mainstream schools in particular, knowledge was often compartmentalised due to the different types of interactions between students and teaching, pastoral and safeguarding staff. It sometimes fell to an individual manager to champion everything digital within the school, joining-up arrangements for internet safety, IT teaching, PSHE, and mental health and wellbeing provision. Without a coordinating role, these elements risked developing in a piecemeal way.
- The inclusion of independent, special and AP schools within the study brought systems, cultures and student populations into juxtaposition. It highlighted the challenges pertaining to these settings – from the transitory nature of AP placements and the heightened risks outside of school, to the challenges of supporting SEND students where difficulties relating to understanding, empathy and communication skills played out online.
- These settings also provide important examples and learning for mainstream schools. The models of parent partnership and close alignment of education and welfare within the special schools offered advantages in making these conversations part of everyday practice. The examples considered for the study also illustrated the importance of contact time, high quality PSHE, and healthy pastoral relationships for student engagement.

Home-school communication in the context of the digital world

- The relationship between home and school was a central theme in the research. As online issues crossed beyond the school's jurisdiction, there was a shared concern at the potential for mobile phones to bring out-of-school risks and harms on site. Schools were mindful of not undermining parents and carers, while being frustrated when parents and carers placed responsibility for their child's internet use at the door of the school.
- Schools highlighted the importance of clear and open communication with parents about internet matters to avoid these jurisdictional issues becoming problematic. However, there were variations in how schools perceived the limits of their role in this regard. The measures ranged from signposting to external sources of internet safety advice, to running parent education workshops or delivering family learning activities.
- As might be anticipated, the COVID-19 crisis had impacted upon all aspects of school life in fundamental ways. Schools were responding from different starting points regarding their infrastructure and the integration of digital technologies, and the pandemic had exposed gaps and inequalities at many levels. For some schools, however, the crisis had brought schools and parents closer together in partnership.

Teachers' views of their knowledge, skills and confidence regarding students' online lives

- The interviews highlighted wide variations in teachers' digital knowledge, skills and confidence, as well as their attitudes towards the educational value of the internet and social media. Those staff with little or no direct personal experience of the online platforms used by students were less likely to perceive their relevance than their more tech-savvy counterparts. These differences often, but not always, had a generational dimension.
- Topics relating to young people's use of the internet and social media featured only peripherally within teacher professional development, beyond safeguarding awareness training. In many schools, provision was supplementary, delivered internally, and tended to take place infrequently and / or out-of-hours. Schools had mixed experiences of using external providers, with concerns about costs and sustainability.
- Teachers and schools were aware that students were the real experts in their online lives, and even the most tech-aware staff found it difficult to keep pace with youth media trends and terminology. It was clear that students could and should have a more substantial role in developing schools' responses to the digital world, beyond awareness raising – from the co-creation of PSHE resources, to peer mentoring and advice.

Overall, the research illustrates that a holistic and integrated approach towards engagement with the digital world is needed now more than ever, beyond a narrow focus on 'internet safety' on the one hand and online teaching on the other. This report provides examples and insights and draws out key features of a whole school approach.

Recommendations

The first set of recommendations relate to actions extending beyond the individual school level, which would require the involvement of policy-makers or commissioners on behalf of schools. These are further explained in the body of the report (Chapter Seven), and can be summarised as follows:

- a) To review Government-supported PSHE guidance and materials, ensuring that the internet and social media-related content is sufficient to meet the needs of different school types and settings.
- b) To strengthen the focus on the internet and social media within Government-funded mental health and wellbeing programmes for schools, including the mental health Green Paper measures.
- c) To review existing coverage of internet and social media themes within Initial Teacher Education (ITE), and within Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes for teachers and school leaders.
- d) To develop a self-evaluation tool and checklist, to assist schools in reviewing their provision relating to the digital world as part of a whole school approach, and to facilitate benchmarking and comparison.
- e) To develop more effective and standardised data collection methodologies, to better understand students' online lives and their support needs, to inform school development planning.
- f) To establish and support communities of practice for schools, to share resources, case studies and experiences relating to their engagement with young people on digital themes.

The study identified the types of measures that teachers and schools found to be useful as part of a whole school approach towards the digital world. The research team distilled these into a checklist, which is presented overleaf.

Key features of a whole school approach towards the digital world

The study identified a number of measures that teachers and schools found to be useful as part of a whole school approach towards engaging with students about their digital lives. They include the following:

- a) Engage staff and students in creating and updating a whole school digital strategy, outlining the schools' aspirations for realising the potential of the digital world for students, and presenting the overall offer – from IT and digital skills, to PSHE, citizenship, safeguarding, and mental health and wellbeing provision.
- b) Appoint students to take a lead role in awareness raising and needs assessment, setting and reviewing objectives, and sourcing or co-creating materials. Consider establishing a peer support programme as a central strand of the schools' digital offer and build other measures around this.
- c) Utilise this group of students alongside other sources to provide regular updates on the apps, platforms and terminology that students are using, to complement other e-safety information used by the school.
- d) Review staffing arrangements to ensure that roles are clear, and to facilitate communication between heads of IT, PSHE coordinators and other staff with a responsibility for internet awareness. Consider allocating a single lead at a management level to consolidate these arrangements, reporting to the SMT.
- e) Create regular opportunities for dialogue between students, teachers and parents and carers and governors about students' online lives, to debunk myths about the digital world and to maintain open home-school communication. Consider offering parent education or family learning as appropriate.
- f) Seek anonymous feedback from students, staff, parents and carers and governors to better understand the challenges and opportunities of the digital world that are specific to the school, and how these differ according to year groups, gender, ethnicity, and other relevant characteristics. To explore as a minimum:
 - types of potentially harmful content or conduct encountered online
 - confidence in managing different types of risks, and
 - positive aspects of the internet for learning and wellbeing.
- g) Review the involvement of external providers to ensure that the school is sourcing the best quality and most appropriate expertise and CPD opportunities, and tailor content to reflect needs and issues that are specific to the school. Consider using collegiate or collaborative approaches to make this cost effective.
- h) Periodically ensure that internet matters form an agenda item on whole staff briefings, so that there are opportunities to share and review intel. Consider adding these topics to training needs analysis and appraisals for staff, to better understand and respond to gaps in skills, knowledge and confidence.
- i) Seek anonymous feedback periodically on the quality, relevance and coherence of the schools' digital offer, and share the results with students, staff, parents and carers, and identify any follow-up actions.

Methodology

Schools and respondents were sampled purposively to ensure a mix of school types and characteristics, and balanced coverage of local authorities and English regions¹. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed with respondents' consent. The data was coded and analysed thematically, to compare and contrast responses by theme and according to school and respondent type.

The fieldwork took place during the first lockdown of the COVID-19 public health crisis. This allowed for a reflection on how schools were adapting their modes of engagement during the shift to home schooling. The research was not exclusively focussed on responses to COVID-19, however, and also considered how schools' provision has evolved over time. As with any qualitative study, the findings are not intended as nationally representative, but rather to provide insights and to explain and contextualise the work of teachers and schools on this subject.

Background context

Schools have an important role to play in young people's social and emotional development, as well as their academic learning. This is apparent at policy and practice levels, with student wellbeing now recognised as a criterion in the national inspection framework, and new investment in Government-funded mental health and wellbeing programmes in schools following the publication of the Green Paper². Despite rising mobile phone ownership and social media use, however, the role of schools in supporting young people in relation to their online lives remains comparatively under-researched. Previous studies have shown that teachers often lack the knowledge and understanding needed to engage with students on these topics, as they are not covered within teacher training to any significant extent, and because young people's online activities are not directly visible to them³⁴. This can make it difficult to assess students' needs and to target school-based interventions effectively⁵.

Although there are now a number of long-running surveys exploring trends in young people's individual internet use within the UK and internationally⁶⁷, there is a lack of comparable research addressing these phenomena within schools. These challenges are given extra urgency by the COVID-19 public health crisis. With missed periods of education and young people spending greater amounts of time online, there is now a widespread recognition of the need for schools to adapt to the digital turn. It was in this context that the Ecorys and the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families initiated the #FOOTPRINTS Digital Resilience and Schools Project.

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1. Recruitment quotas were set, to ensure a minimum of five schools from each of mainstream, independent, and alternative education settings (AP providers and special schools). The sample also attended to socio-economic characteristics (% FSM eligibility), and geographical distribution (representation of the North, Central and Southern England). The recruitment involved three stages. Schools were first invited to express an interest using a combination of online and telephone recruitment. The resulting longlist was cross-matched with an extract from the Get Information About Schools (GIAS) database, to populate the sampling framework. Additional targeted recruitment was undertaken where necessary, to ensure that quotas were met, and to avoid potential skewing.
 2. DHSC and DfE (2017) *Transforming children and young people's mental health provision: a green paper*. London: Department of Health and Social Care, and Department for Education.
 3. Day, L. (2016) *Resilience for the Digital World: Research into children and young people's social and emotional wellbeing online*. Ecorys on behalf of Young Minds.
 4. Fellows, T., Cottrill, R., Humphreys, A., Llewellyn, J., and Day, L. (2020) *Navigating the digital world: a synthesis of the evidence*. Birmingham: Ecorys UK.
 5. Day, L., Campbell-Jack, D., and Bertolotto, E., (2020) *Evaluation of the Peer Support for Mental Health and Wellbeing Pilots: Research report*. London: Department for Education.
 6. Stoilova, M., Khazbak, R., and Livingstone, S. (2020) *Setting the agenda for future research and analysis: Building on the Global Kids Online comparative research, and a review of the existing evidence*. Global Kids Online.
 7. Helsper, Ellen J., van Deursen, Alexander J. A. M. and Eynon, R. (2015) *Tangible outcomes of Internet use: from digital skills to tangible outcomes project report*. Oxford: Oxford Internet Institute.



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