Review Paper:

Relation between the Internet and Social and School Functioning of Children and Adolescents: A Review

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Abstract

This paper depicts a review of research into the different views on the relations between the Internet activity of children and adolescents and their social and school functioning. The paper also presents the research of educationists, psychologists and sociologists who studied the subject. This paper focuses on the types of threats and dangers which are perceived in the virtual world and which can have a negative influence on young people's lives.

The paper also describes examples of research providing information regarding the consequences of the active use of the Internet and their influence on the development of social competences in adolescents and children.

Keywords: Internet, children and youth, education, social functioning.

Introduction

Internet is becoming more and more popular area of scientific investigation in education. The researchers recognise the benefits stemming from the exploitation of the virtual space. The Internet analyses may concern a wide range of areas, topics and subjects connected with education. The research may be conducted in a great number of different ways. It may include both quantitative and qualitative research. The choice of strategy and the research focus depends solely on the researcher.

The present work aims at answering the following question: what are the subjects connected with functioning on the Internet especially interesting in education research? The paper also analyses the ways in which educationists' approach conducting research into the Internet in the context of education. The paper also attempts to distinguish the main subject areas by conducting a detailed analysis of literature regarding the education research of the Internet.

The social environment has a major influence on the development of an individual. Nowadays, Internet is a highly significant factor influencing individuals and social groups. It especially affects the younger generations which have functioned on the Internet from an early age. A new term, digital natives, has been coined to refer to these young people.

The virtual reality is both a medium and a channel of communication and the place where particular societies develop. Transposing a major part of one's life into the virtual area must have an influence on the form of education. It necessitates changes in children's upbringing and education. The internet may be a medium of positive change in education. However, we must not forget about the "dark side" of the virtual world where young people may face a wide range of risks. This fact has been noticed by educationists who study the virtual world to obtain a comprehensive picture of the contemporary world.

The present article also depicts the positive and the negative opinions about the relation between the internet and the lives of young people. It analyses the results of research regarding the development of social competences in children and adolescents with respect to their participation in virtual life. The paper also describes research which presents the influence of Internet activity on school performance. What constitutes a significant element of the review is the interpretation of research into the major threats of the virtual world.

Review of Literature

Information education is an important area of pedagogical research connected with the analysis of the Internet. Nowadays, the Internet plays a crucial role in the process of searching, gathering and processing information. A 2015 study entitled World Internet Project[0] showed that for children aged 15-19 the Internet is the most important medium. That is why so much education research is focused on information literacy of the youngest generations.

An interesting study is an analysis conducted in 2008 by Information Systems Committee[0] (JISC). The project pertained to the information competences of young people born after 1993. The authors of the report presented several interesting conclusions.

According to the researchers,[7] young people can use modern technologies, but they have problems with using the vast amount of available information. Young people, called the "Google generation", are not able to understand the gist of information transmitted over the Internet. Young users of the Internet are not aware of their own information needs. An important issue which was underscored by the authors of the study is the illegal use of the Internet resources. It involves mainly downloading files from illegal sources.

This is the place where Internet educators can act. Teachers should reinforce the information competences of young people. They can do it by, for example, indicating the legal Internet sources which young people can use without any limits. The education standards created within the scope of information literacy pinpoint the role of libraries and librarians in the process of educating young people. The libraries' aim is to conduct varied classes which are adjusted to the current developmental requirements of students. According to Bruce[0], these may involve either courses which are independent from university subjects or classes integrated with a specific subject, co-conducted by teachers and librarians.

The studies conducted by Broszkiewicz[3] depict how the information society in Poland has developed. The author analysed the digital competences of over 100 students aged 15-17. The results of the research show that having a computer improves one's self-esteem regarding digital competences. Students who have computers connected to the Internet at home evaluate their skills better and have better results in IT-related subjects at school. Moreover, these students pay a greater attention to having skills to use modern technologies.

Tapscott[14] has analysed how children and adolescents function on the Internet. The author presented his own reflections which he formulated as a result of a long-term observation of the virtual world in his book entitled Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World. According to Tapscott[14], young people become specialists in new technologies and that they are eager to use the knowledge they acquired on the Internet. The author notices the threats connected with the Internet which have a negative influence on the process of education and upbringing.

Tapscott[14] believes that the force with which the internet attracts, is becoming more and more difficult to resist. The Internet increases the distance between family members. Parents are not able to exercise control over the types of Internet sources their children use.

A number of research is connected with pathologic phenomena on the Internet which have a negative influence on children and adolescents. Vernhagen[0] enumerates such threats which children may face as, among others, the possibility to be exposed to Internet violence and inappropriate content on websites, as well as to be exposed to sexual molestation.

Interesting research was presented in a 2008 British report entitled Behind the Screen. The hidden life of youth online[19]. The authors of the study discern the major tendencies in using the Internet by young people. The tendencies have a major influence on social functioning. They primarily include an increased access to multimedia devices and a greater amount of time devoted to them including time with

no supervision of parents or guardians. Withers and Sheldon[0] also say that young people have a distanced attitude towards privacy and security on the Internet. What is also interesting is the fact that cyberbullying is not a term which young people understand. They frequently do not consider cyberbullying to be dangerous or harmful behaviour.

The virtual world is developing rapidly. It favours the emergence of new threats to which children and adolescents are exposed. The active participation of young people on the internet, which is an expanding phenomenon, should become a subject of interest for teachers. The researchers notice the great number of risks to which adolescents are exposed to on the Internet.

Kotomska[0] distinguishes several main forms of virtual violence which young people can face. These include compromising an email account, creating ridiculing websites, offending, scolding, making fun of others on forums, identity theft, blackmailing or threatening. The author presents in her paper the results of research prepared by the Nobody's Children Foundation[8] which show the scale of peer violence on the Internet.

The research[8] showed that over a half (52%) of the respondents aged 12-17 had experienced verbal violence on the Internet or via mobile phones. The aforementioned research also indicates that children and adolescents who experience virtual violence do not see how adults can help them when it happens. Only one child in ten informs parents or teachers about suffering virtual violence. According to other striking results of research from a study conducted by Aftab[18], as many as 85% children aged 12-13 have had contact with cyber violence.

Pyżalski[0] investigated the digital aggression in children and adolescents. The author of the study noticed a relationship between aggression on the Internet and a child's family structure. Pyżalski[0] noticed that young people who are cyberbullies come from families in which adults do not control how their children spend their free time. They also more frequently experience physical or sexual violence by adults. Students who are aggressive on the Internet perform worse at school. The author of the study also analysed the causes of Internet mobbing. He primarily discerns the desire to boast, abusing for fun and the desire to get back on their peers. According to the research by Pyżalski[0], cyberbullying may result in depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and poor performance at school.

Another issue raised in research into the youth activity on the internet are computer games. They constitute an important element of entertainment for young people nowadays. Computer games can be a factor which favours the development of a child in many areas. The development of skills in the use of computer software may serve as an example of such development.

From the point of view of a researcher of educational measures, it is important to pay attention to the way computer games influence young people. The research published by Uflik-Jaworska[0] shows that only 16% of the 50 most popular computer games do not contain any scenes of violence. Researchers analyse whether playing violent computer games has an influence on attitudes, values and the level of empathy in children and adolescents.

Numerous educationists try to obtain an answer to the question whether there is any relation between the time young people devote to computer games and an increase of violent behaviours in everyday life. The researchers do not agree as to the real influence of violent computer games on the functioning in real life.

Some research indicates that there is a positive correlation between playing violent computer games and the level of violence among gamers,[5] whereas others do not see the influence of violent computer games on the behaviour of children and adolescents.[1] Some interesting conclusions were presented by Przybylski, Ryan and Rigby[0].

Their research from 2009 indicates that people who have aggressive traits are more interested in violent computer games than less violent people. The researchers also see the fact that perception changes due to playing violent games. The activity of young people in this field may also lead to a false image of reality and methods of conflict resolution.

In 2010, M. Szpringer[13] conducted detailed research with regard to computer games as a potential source of risk. The author studied middle-school students and their attitude towards playing computer games. The basic conclusions pertain to the frequency of playing games and their influence on school and social functioning of students. M. Szpringer[13] states that young people are frequently allowed to spend an unlimited amount of time in front of the computer. It results from a low level of control from parents or guardians. The figures show that an average teenager spends from 2 to 4 hours in front of the computer.

The most popular games are the ones which are full of violence and aggression. Playing computer games frequently, in the author's opinion, negatively influences the functioning of children and adolescents. In consequence of playing games, they have problems with sleep, they neglect their school duties and exhibit aggression towards their families and peers at school.

Another worrisome sphere is children's and adolescents' risky behaviour on the Internet. Young people do not see the possible risks which result from their foolhardy attitude. Children and adolescents share their image and private information. Eliza Mazur and Edyta Laurman-Jarząbek[0] conducted their research project on this very subject. In 2011, the researchers had conversations with 100 students of youth clubs. The respondents were aged 10-16.

The authors[9] analysed the social functioning of young people and its relationship with the Internet use. What is especially interesting is the results connected with risky behaviour. For instance, they frequently disclose their personal data to strangers. 76% of them gave their email address to a stranger, 41% gave their true age and 15% gave their home address. The aforementioned data shows the scale of the phenomenon under discussion. This is the area where adults (teachers and parents) should pay more attention to the children's and adolescents' activity online.

The aforementioned examples of risks resulting from the use of the Internet show the enormous role which the schools must face. It is the teachers' obligation to take care of their students' safety and proper development. More and more often, schools are equipped with modern technologies. The internet may constitute an important source of developing students' academic competences. It also constitutes an important element of developing social and psychological competences. A large amount of research bears out this statement.

Artymiak[2] conducted interesting research between 2003 and 2008. The researcher analysed the possibilities of using online help in the case of psychological problems of young people. She conducted a number of interviews with adolescents (487 students) to obtain answers to her questions. These included: What advantages and disadvantages of online psychological help can be distinguished? What are the possibilities of using this type of help? How can the forms of online help be improved?

Artymiak[2] made several basic conclusions which can be drawn from the analysis of the gathered material. The researcher believes that with each year, the number of people who have contacted online psychological help is increasing. The students' attitudes are also becoming more and more positive towards this type of help. As the advantages of this form of help they indicate the ease and convenience of access, ease of sharing private information and the possibility to overcome their reluctance and embarrassment before making a contact. The respondents also enumerate the limitations of the help available online. These comprise of the difficulty with establishing a personal contact and the possibility to consciously falsify one's own personal information.

According to the author[2] of the research, the number of people who declare the willingness to offer psychological help online is increasing. The studies analysed above indicate that online psychological help may become an important source of work with students and adolescents. Young people often feel lost in the world which surrounds them. As a result, they require support which they can reach more easily via the Internet.

Internet can also be used in the context of teaching a subject. One of such areas is foreign language teaching. Some

interesting research has been conducted by Ciganotto[6]. The researcher has analysed the influence of the use of modern Internet technologies in the process of comprehensive foreign language teaching. The author has analysed the use of modern technologies by 165 teachers. The research shows that using Internet resources positively influences the perspective on the development of contemporary education. Teachers are becoming more and more conscious of the types of internet tools they can use at work.

Internet can influence the level of development of social and psychological competences of young people. The influence can be both positive and negative. The fact is underscored by a large number of researchers in their research of the virtual world. Free access to the internet and the ease of online communication constitutes for many researchers a good source of information.

In 2012, Porzak[10] conducted studies concerning the relation between Internet addiction and personality traits of children and adolescents. The conclusions that he drew are extremely interesting. Porzak[10] believes that the risk of internet addiction is visibly connected with the level of self-esteem. Middle-school students with low self-esteem are more likely to be addicted to the internet. Such students are also more aggressive online. They act aggressively more often towards other users. However, as a result of their own activity, they also become victims of verbal aggression on the internet.

Conclusion

By analysing research regarding the Internet in the context of education and social functioning of children and adolescents, I wanted to indicate several important issues. First and foremost, it is necessary to pay attention to problematic issues which are connected with the development of the internet. These difficulties may have an influence on the education and upbringing of students. We cannot assume that the development of modern technologies will solve all of our educational problems.

This is corroborated by a large amount of research which indicates that new risks are emerging. Parents and teachers are responsible for shaping an appropriate virtual environment. It is the adults who should teach children how to use virtual sources so that they have an educational value. Teachers should remember that a mixture of good and evil can be faced everywhere on the internet. It creates some educational problems with which contemporary educators have to deal with.

Most of all, the analysis of the research leads me to one important reflection. Teachers who shape the attitudes of growing children and adolescents should stimulate their reflection on the use of the internet. They should also show how children and adolescents should use the information resources made available online. Nowadays, people who grow up have an unlimited access to the virtual world which

is not controlled by anyone and for which nobody is responsible. That is why teachers face a difficult task. They have to become authorities and a support in the area of education about the functioning of the internet.

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