Embracing Powerlessness in Pursuit of Digital Resilience: Managing Cyber-Literacy in Professional Talk

Aims
This paper examines how everyday conversations in children’s residential care homes foreground institutional concerns regarding online risks and adolescent vulnerability. Drawing on data from a 4-year long Digital Life Story Work (DLSW) programme, which explored how adolescents looked after by the state can use a range of digital technologies to reflect on their live experiences, we examine how social care professionals experienced a range of DLSW innovations.

Key Findings
- Concerns about monitoring and managing risks dominated social care professionals talk about adolescent’s use of various kinds of digital media.
- Settings undertook actions to limit professional risk, rather than being in the best interest of the adolescent’s longer-term digital resilience and independence.
- Organisations use of top-down cyber-safeguarding practices, solely reliant upon web filtering technologies, created barriers to pursing opportunities to develop digital resilience and encouraging stagnation in the practice at organisational and individual levels.
- These barriers limited organisational risk and put the onus on the individual.
- Social care professionals experienced a sense of powerlessness in relation to their inability to halt adolescent access to, and use of, digital technologies.
- Social care professionals constructed powerlessness differently. Some worked up an acceptance of powerlessness in ways that mediated personal accountability as a function of generation. Utilising widely available ideas of age, workers constructed digital incompetence as a function of generation and hence failures were not down to individual fault: “...I’m just an old fogy…”
- Social care professionals who embraced powerlessness accepted the inability to halt access and use of digital technologies, but instead of shutting down conversations due to risks, embraced opportunities to work with these risk in ways that celebrated the opportunities to learn with adolescents.
- Irrespective of digital proficiency, such spaces promoted strengths-based relational practices. This position enabled workers to facilitate opportunities to pursue digital resilience development in vulnerable adolescents by working in partnership with adolescents to help them learn from their mistakes.

Policy Context
By embracing powerlessness, institutions and practitioners can circumvent barriers and act on their duty of care in ways that position to support and empower the vulnerable to keep themselves safer online. This is a thorny task but one that must be pursued. It is, however, reassuring that, even in this digital age, the key facilitator remains sensitive, supportive, and caring relationships, the long-standing corner stone of social care practice.
Methodology

- Seven months of fieldwork across four residential care settings during a four-year Digital Life Story Work research programme was undertaken. Fieldwork visits involved lead researcher (Hammond) attending each location on a weekly basis to evaluate Digital Life Story Work interventions. It was during this work that the receptive context for the implemented DLSW innovations was discursively examined.
- Ten adolescents (six males and four females, mean age 15 years, age range 14-18 years) and thirty-five residential social care professionals from across the four homes were recruited.
- We used multiple qualitative data collection methods to gather in-depth data. These included reflective fieldnotes from observations and transcripts from conversations during observations, focus groups, semi-structured interviews and in-situ recordings of conversations stimulated by the implementation of DLSW innovations. These were analysed discursively to attend to how language was used to conceptualise DLSW innovations and digital technologies more broadly.

Background

The use of digital media by adolescents living in state care raises safeguarding and risk-management concerns, creating challenges for practitioners in how to control risk while promoting independence. The need to improve outcomes for and enhance the resilience of populations living in state care is well recognised. Residential care, which strives to provide a supportive environment, but is bound by regulation and the management of relationships, represents an important research context. Conversations about autonomy, responsibility, and risk management frequently occur, offering a research arena in which the risks and resources of digital media are magnified. Because of this populations propensity to share very little with those trying to help them, and too much with those who would seek to do them harm, the potential for offline vulnerabilities to transcend into online domains heightens concerns regarding digital media use. Being digitally autonomous is an increasingly important part of adolescents’ everyday life. This is the same for adolescents living in state care, in this way social care settings and professionals have a duty of care to support forays into digital independence and pursue opportunities for digital resilience development.

Source

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