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LISTENING TO EXCLUDED YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES ON HOW DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES SUPPORT AND CHALLENGE THEIR LIVES

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ABSTRACT

Listening to excluded young people's perspectives on how digital technologies support and challenge their lives

This article reports on the perspectives of young people who have been excluded from school on how ICTs support and challenge them in their everyday lives. Qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with 13 young people at a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). The analysis provides a nuanced account of young people's online activities for those who are already

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experiencing an offline “participation gap” in the form of exclusion from mainstream schooling. It will show that whilst most of the young people interviewed had good access to a range of digital technologies, their attitudes towards different technologies varied greatly, as did their online activities, digital literacy competence – especially regarding risky behaviour – and the support that they could rely on from friends and family when needing help with ICTs. It will argue that interventions should continue which provide access to ICTs – particularly the internet – at home and school for young people whose families cannot otherwise afford them. Nevertheless, digital literacy programs which run alongside such initiatives are essential if excluded young people are really to benefit from the opportunities that ICTs can offer.

Keywords

Digital technologies, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), social exclusion, marginalized young people, digital literacy

SAMENVATTING

Luisteren naar de perspectieven van gemarginaliseerde jongen op de toegevoegde waarde én uitdagingen van digitale technologieën in hun dagelijks leven

Dit artikel beschrijft het perspectief van jongeren op de betekenis van ICT in hun dagelijks leven. Het artikel is gebaseerd op semi-gestructureerde diepte-interviews onder 13 jongeren die een *Pupil Referral Unit* bezoeken, een schooltype dat wordt bezocht door kinderen die (tijdelijk of permanent) niet deel kunnen nemen aan het reguliere onderwijs. De analyse biedt een genuanceerd inzicht in de online activiteiten van deze jongeren, die reeds geconfronteerd worden met een “participatiekloof” omdat zij niet deelnemen aan regulier onderwijs. De interviews brachten aan het licht dat deze gemarginaliseerde jongeren vaak redelijk goede toegang hebben tot digitale technologie, maar dat zij desondanks erg verschillen: in hun opvattingen over de waarde van deze technologie; in hun online activiteiten; in hun digitale competenties – vooral met betrekking tot risicovol gedrag; en in de hulp die zij daarbij in kunnen schakelen. De auteur betoogt dat interventies die de toegang tot ICT – en dan vooral het internet – thuis en op school stimuleren, gecontinueerd moeten worden, vooral voor kinderen en families die zich deze toegang zelf niet kunnen veroorloven. Programma's die een bijdrage leveren aan het ontwikkelen van de digitale competenties van deze doelgroep zijn echter eveneens cruciaal om gemarginaliseerde jongeren daadwerkelijk te kunnen laten profiteren van de voordelen die ICT te bieden heeft.

Trefwoorden

Informatie- en communicatietechnologie, digitale technologie, sociale exclusie, kansarme jongeren

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INTRODUCTION

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) – such as computers, the internet, mobile telephones and games consoles – are seen to have a wide range of potential benefits for young people. These can include the facility to enhance formal and informal learning, creativity, networked participation, civic engagement and work. For this purpose, researchers have sought to understand how young people use these technologies and consider what these activities mean for young people and how they value them. Recognizing the opportunities offered by ICTs is considered to be crucial for policy makers, educationalists and parents in order to help young people make the most of these technologies whilst also limiting the possible drawbacks, such as safety concerns.

Much useful research has been carried out with young people who attend mainstream schools (Livingstone & Bober, 2003; Livingstone, 2009; Selwyn, Potter & Cranmer, 2010). Whilst this may include children and young people from low income and disadvantaged backgrounds, very little research has been carried out which specifically examines how distinct groups of young people – such as those excluded from school – are using ICTs. This article has worth, therefore, by reporting on research carried out with a group of excluded young people whose perspectives are very often “silenced” in educational technology research.

The findings for this article are taken from a larger study, which sought to understand how young people in schools, colleges and universities learn using ICTs outside of formal educational settings.

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As a part of this, themes emerged around the meanings that ICTs have for young people more generally and how these influence the ways in which young people integrate ICTs into their lives outside of school. This article will look specifically at the perspectives of a group of excluded young people attending a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) on how ICTs support and challenge them in their everyday lives: their appropriation of the potential benefits offered by digital technologies and the difficulties they experience when using them. It will closely examine the complexity of what has been referred to as the "participation gap" (Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigale & Robinson, 2006) in order to provide a nuanced account of young people's activities for those who are already experiencing an offline "participation gap" in the form of exclusion from mainstream schooling.

THE "PARTICIPATION GAP"

Authors such as Jenkins *et al.* (2006) have highlighted the importance of digital participation for young people as a means of involving themselves in social and civic activities, learning and work. Derived from this therefore, comes due concern that some young people may not be able to leverage the potential benefits due to "the fundamental inequalities in young people's access to new media technologies and the opportunities for participation they represent" (Jenkins *et al.*, 2006, p. 14). These anxieties extend beyond more traditional concerns about the so-called "digital divide" which tended to focus on material access to ICTs. Selwyn & Facer, e.g. have called for more nuanced accounts of digital inclusion to be provided beyond what they refer to as "a simple case of 'technology haves' and 'technology have-nots'" (2007, p. 12).

For this reason, researchers such as Selwyn (2004) have drawn on Bourdieu's concept of different forms of capital to explain relationships to ICTs (Bourdieu, 1997). Bourdieu outlined how groups and individuals are able to deploy at least three different kinds of resources: cultural capital (embodied in the form of knowledge), economic capital (material wealth) and social capital (networks of family, friends and acquaintances). Selwyn applies this approach to show how different forms of capital can influence individuals and groups to make use of ICTs. He argues that whilst economic resources can play a role in determining whether people own and have access to a technology, social resources determine the networks that people have access to for advice and support, and cultural resources determine how they engage and make meaningful use of technologies. The role of these different resources has more recently been emphasized by Watkins who argues that: "access" in the context of digital participation is not just about the material, economic differences between young people that can influence their ability to pay for particular products and services. It is also about having the social networks and cultural competences: the

skills, the interests and life experiences that can shape the online environment that young people make for themselves (Watkins, 2010). Peter and Valkenburg (2006) have referred to this as the “emerging digital differentiation approach” which predicts that differential use patterns will occur even if all young people have access to the internet. As they aptly describe it: “If gaps close at one stage, they open at another. For example, if internet gaps are bridged, internet skill gaps or internet usage gaps occur” (Peter & Valkenburg, 2006, p. 297). Moreover, these differential use patterns result from unequal socio-economic, cognitive and cultural resources (Peter & Valkenburg, 2006). This suggests therefore, that even given reasonable access to the internet and other ICTs, some groups of young people may not be able to access the potential benefits for learning and education, social and civic engagement, that their contemporaries can.

These concerns have implications for social policy and social intervention. Recent initiatives in the UK by the previous Government sought to ensure that young people have access to ICTs – particularly the internet – both at school and, more recently, at home. Since 1997 the UK government is estimated to have spent nearly £6 billion through sustained education technology policy-making (Selwyn *et al.*, 2010) aimed at providing learners of all ages with digital opportunities for education in schools, colleges and universities. Alongside this, programmes introduced by the then Prime Minister Gordon Brown aimed to complement these schemes by providing home access to households with children in them that did not have internet access. The Home Access Program was rolled out nationally in 2010 and has provided 270,000 households with computer and internet access alongside comprehensive how-to guides and other support.

A further and related issue for policy makers is the development of young people's digital literacy skills. In recent years, high profile initiatives in the UK have tended to focus on online safety such as the Byron Review (2008). This report provided a number of recommendations aimed at limiting children's access to online risk and increasing their “resilience” to potentially harmful material. Nevertheless, there was growing recognition that a wider set of skills, knowledge and understanding – termed “digital literacy” in the UK – was an important entitlement if young people were to take full advantage of the opportunities ICTs could offer. These skills are seen to go beyond functional practices which enable ICTs simply to be used and instead offer young people the ability to enable: “critical, creative, discerning and safe practices when engaging with digital technologies in all areas of life” (Hague & Payton, 2010, p. 19). Similarly, it has been reported that digital literacy is emerging as high on the agenda of other countries such as Slovenia, the Netherlands, Norway and Austria (De Haan, 2009).

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As noted earlier, there is a paucity of research carried out with excluded young people to understand how they use digital technologies. It is often assumed that marginalized young people simply do not have access to technology at home or the skills to use it (Blanchard, Metcalf, Deaney, Herrman & Burns, 2008). Moreover, debates are caught between those who advocate ICT programs for the re-engagement of disengaged youth; and those who argue that the "technology revolution has broadened the gap between the engaged and disengaged and created a further divide for young people already experiencing significant marginalization" (Blanchard, Metcalf & Burns, 2008, p. 3). Even so, there are studies which have focused on how young people in lower socio-economic groups use ICTs – particularly the internet – outside of school which may be helpful for contextualizing the present study. As noted by Bradbrook *et al.* (2008), 61% of excluded young people come from unemployed households (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998) whilst high proportions are from households termed "disturbed or disrupted", including family breakup, bereavement, illness, alcoholism and abuse (Ofsted, 1996). It is likely therefore, that the sample of excluded young people in this present study will be from low socio-economic backgrounds with some of them possibly having experienced personal trauma.

Relevant to these young people then, is work carried out by Lee (2008) which considered the impact of young people's use of the internet on class membership and on determining the opportunities made available to individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds both in the present and in the future. Between 2000–2001, she surveyed young people between the ages of 13–19 years old from diverse socio-economic backgrounds through the selection of different types of schools. These included a comprehensive secondary school in an area of social deprivation and two independent schools one of which was renowned for "attracting an international elite". She found that class membership was a clear indicator of digital inequality. Even so, having access to the internet was unlikely to impact on established cycles of class reproduction through facilitating social mobility. The socio-economic background of the young people created differences between the groups in terms of access, the level of support and training they received, types of uses and cultural practices which she concluded reflected "the impact and interrelationship between economic, cultural and social capital" (Lee, 2008, p. 150).

The UK Children Go Online Study (UKCGO) was carried out by Livingstone & Bober (2003) with children between the ages of 9–17 years old and within a wider set of research questions, provided specific analysis of the gradations in children's internet use according to young people's socio-economic background. The project included both qualitative interviews and a survey of

1511 young people and 906 of their parents between 2003 and 2005. The following findings are pertinent to the current study: 1) non-users are more likely to be from working-class households and from the 9 to 11 or 18 to 19-year-old groups. Many of these young people claim to have little interest in using the internet; 2) occasional users are more likely to be working class. They have less access to broadband and access in their bedrooms, they spend less time online and explain their low use in terms of lack of access and interest; 3) weekly users are spread across the socio-economic status categories and spend longer online than the occasional users. They consider their skills to be "average"; 4) the daily users come from more middle-class homes and have better quality internet access including access in their bedroom (one in three) and broadband (50%). They consider their skills to be "advanced" (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). As Livingstone emphasizes, "For some, the internet is an increasingly rich, diverse, engaging and stimulating resource of growing importance in their life; for others, it remains a narrow and relatively unengaging if occasionally useful resource" (Livingstone, 2009, 57/58). Livingstone also draws on Bourdieu's (1984) theories of cultural and social capital to explain how family differences mediate children's internet uses. She asserts that well-educated parents are more likely to have high educational aspirations for their children, have gained experience of using computers and the internet at work and may well be able to guide their children to use the internet more constructively. Similarly, middle-class families are often helped in terms of "social capital" in the form of a family member who can help fix problems and help the young person get started (Livingstone, 2009).

The EU Kids Online project involved 60 researchers across 21 European countries to identify, evaluate and compare existing research conducted across Europe (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009a). The researchers found that in almost all countries in the study, a correlation existed between households' socio-economic status and children's access to the internet. Moreover, data on parents' occupation showed that children living in higher-status families are likely to use the internet more. Interestingly, in Spain, France, the Netherlands, the UK and Sweden, most studies suggest that while children from working-class families use the internet more for leisure, downloading content and entertainment, children in middle-class families are more likely to also use it for education, information and civic participation reasons (Hasebrink, Livingstone, Haddon & Olafsson, 2009). In relation to risk and safety, the project has found that despite lower-class children having relatively less access than higher socio-economic status groups, those from lower-class families are more exposed to online risk. A contributory factor to this appears to be that higher socio-economic status families have more rules and monitor their children's internet use to a higher extent than parents in lower groups (Hasebrink *et al.*, 2009).

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The researchers conclude that persistent socio-economic differences enable middle-class families to benefit from online opportunities more generally than children from lower-class families are able to do even given equal online access (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009b).

With these issues in mind, this article will now consider how the issues and arguments outlined above emerge specifically in relation to excluded young people and how ICTs are integrated into, and support and challenge them in their everyday lives.

DATA COLLECTION

This paper is based on data drawn from the first year of a larger study, the "Learner and their Context" carried out at the Department of Education, University of Oxford. The wider research project combined qualitative and quantitative data collection methods in three phases: a) semi-structured interviews with 100 children and young people from age 8 upwards based in school, college and university; b) 40 case study visits carried out in the homes of the young people interviewed for a); c) a survey of 1000 children and young people carried out in homes by a commercial social survey company. This paper is drawn from qualitative data collected from one specific strand of the project, in-depth interviews carried out with 13 permanently and temporarily excluded young people in a Pupil Referral Unit. The Pupil Referral Unit was chosen as a means of identifying a comparative group of young people to those attending mainstream educational institutions. Table 1 shows the age and gender of the sample.

Table 1: Description of sample of excluded young people.

Age group	Boys	Girls	Total number
12–13	3	0	3
13–14	2	4	6
14–15	3	1	4

Pupil Referral Units are set up and run by UK Local Authorities to provide education for children who cannot attend school. They tend to be thought of as places where disruptive young people are sent, however they also cater for youngsters who cannot attend mainstream schools because of medical problems, teenage mothers and pregnant schoolgirls, pupils who have been assessed as being school phobic and pupils awaiting a school place (Daniels, Cole, Sellman & Sutton, 2003).

Four of the youngsters within the sample for the present study were referred to by tutors as "school refusers", the remainder were said by tutors to have been excluded from school due to behavioural problems. One of the boys, for example, had reportedly been excluded from school for looking at pornographic images on a teacher's laptop. Interview questions were focused on ownership of and preferences for particular technologies and activities, skills, risk and safety. Interviews needed some flexibility in the Pupil Referral Unit: some of the youngsters were reticent and unforthcoming in their responses, others were provocative and challenging, several were accommodating and talkative. It was decided to hold interviews rather than using other methods to enable comparison with the mainstream groups. However, given the difficulties of engaging some of the youngsters in an interview, it would be worth exploring other methods in future research. Data was analyzed according to what Strauss (1987) refers to as "constant comparison". All texts were read to get an overall sense of the data and an initial code list developed and refined to directly relate to the research questions outlined above. The data were then coded in terms of these categories.

RESULTS

How do digital technologies support these young people?

Nearly all of the young people interviewed had access to a computer or laptop with an internet connection at home (although the quality of internet access was not established). The exceptions were Malcolm, a 14-year-old boy who said that having the internet "cost too much money" and Julia, a 14-year-old girl who mostly lived with her grandparents and only had internet access once a week when she visited her mother. Nevertheless, at her grandparent's home she had a games console, a mobile phone and a music player in common with most of the other youngsters.

In line with studies of mainstream children's behaviour, the main activities that the young people described were focused on pleasure and entertainment, enhancing hobbies and interests and keeping in touch with friends and family. Many of the youngsters said that they spent a good deal of time playing computer games. These examples included Andrew (male, 14) who said that he spent about four hours a day currently playing Grand Theft Auto; Julia (female, 14) who said that she played around seven hours a day, mainly war games including Call of Duty and Tom Clancy's Advanced Warfighter. Given the ages of both Andrew and Julia, it is worth noting that Call of Duty and Grand Theft Auto are recommended for adults above the age of 18, whilst Tom Clancy's Advanced Warfighter has an age 16 certificate. At the other end of the spectrum, Harry (male, 13)

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is allowed to play computer games for one hour only at a sitting although he does admit that he loses track of time and will sometimes spend longer when his mother is out.

Some of the young people talked of using the internet in particular to support their hobbies and interests. Michael (male, 14), for example, is learning to play the guitar and has searched for particular songs, lyrics and chords online; he also tracked down a book on railways that he could not buy in the local shops. Most of the young people said that they used the internet to download music to their computers which they then transferred to music players. Elizabeth (female, 14) said listening to music was essential unless a conversation was possible:

Elizabeth Yeah, when I'm on the train going to London or going to the seaside or on like long car trips, things like that. Because I can't sit in silence, I have to have a conversation or something.

A couple of the boys admitted that the internet was useful for pursuing their interest in pornography and, one of them said that he did not see why he should deny this:

Andrew I ain't gonna say that I don't like porn because I do like porn so I don't care about it.
(male, 14)

Accounts given by the young people suggested that many placed high value on and made extensive use of their mobile phones and the internet for keeping in touch with family and friends. Julia (female, 14) said that her mobile phone was "part of my family". Chris (male, 15) said about his mobile phone that: "I'm always on that". Some of the young people also referred to having Facebook and Bebo pages alongside chatting on MSN to help maintain their social networks. Two of the youngsters also talked about how these technologies helped them to cope with difficult circumstances in their lives. Harry (male, 13) talked of how he was allowed to bring his mobile phone into school (exceptionally) because he needed to support his mother who has panic attacks:

Harry No, we're not allowed to bring our phones to school, but I bring it because my mum has panic attacks so I bring it just in case she needs me. [...] And I said to her, if you ever need me just ring me and I'll come... I'll see if I can come home to sit with you for a bit and then come back to school.

Elizabeth (female, 14) talked at length about using the internet in different ways to support trauma in her own life. She had set up what has been referred to as a "Memorial Site" on Facebook

(Watkins, 2010) to help remember and cope with the death of a friend who had been killed. She talked of how this had helped her:

Elizabeth Yeah. Yeah it's helped me... it's like it's helped me a lot because when he died I was like really upset. Yeah, so...

She also talked quite nostalgically about missing a time in her life when her family had owned a car and boat and how she continues to look at Google Earth to see these captured images of this previous time:

Elizabeth Yeah. And I type in my house address and see if they've got like a picture of my house and I used to have my boat in my garden, you know back garden, but...

Whilst these young people are using digital technologies to support them, they are also encountering challenges alongside the benefits and these will be considered in the next section.

How do digital technologies challenge these young people?

Previous studies of mainstream young people suggest that they use digital technologies to support their education and learning. The young people in the PRU however tended to reject the idea of using ICTs for formal learning based on the notion that "learning" referred only to the kinds of socially-approved knowledge that might be taught in schools. As Andrew (male, 14) put it when asked about homework: "I won't do it anyway. They know that I hate it". Some youngsters – although not all as we saw above – also rejected the idea of using ICTs for informal learning to enhance hobbies and interests due to a denial of having hobbies in the first place. Nevertheless, as in this example, Louise (female, 15), does use the internet to pursue an interest in "shopping":

Louise All my life's boring at the minute. [...] I ain't got no hobbies, I don't do nothing. Actually shopping is a hobby. When my mum's spending, spending lots of money on me.

Some of the youngsters seemed content with the level of their skills for what they wanted to do as Janine (female, 14) reported:

Janine I just do what – do I know what I can do. I just do what I know I can do and that so.

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From interviews, it is difficult to know what level of skill Janine and the other young people are capable of. Julia (female, 14) was able to articulate carrying out what sounded like a Google search:

Julia Yeah, you know you've got the big long bar, and then you've got this like little square bar at the top where you just type in something like how old is, I don't know, Meatloaf or Cher.

Nevertheless, several of the young people admitted that they were overwhelmed by the content on the internet, and using computers in general. Chris (male, 15) talked about how he somehow failed to learn to use a computer despite having access to one, and he has this in common with his friends:

Chris They're like me they never got the hang of it.
Interviewer Do you mind not using it? You know, your mates don't say...?
Chris No most of them don't use them anyway. They've all got them... it's like me, I've got it I just don't use it.

Interestingly, he admits that he would like to improve his digital literacy skills but when he is offered support at the Pupil Referral Unit, his motivation is lacking. Of course, this could be an issue of self-efficacy whereby Chris is convinced he is never going to learn so finds it difficult to take the opportunity when it presents itself. Perhaps being "bored" is a means of hiding what he believes he cannot grasp.

Interviewer No I'm just wondering whether having decided that you're not interested and you don't do it you sometimes wish you had, you know.
Chris Yeah, sometimes I wish I was like better at it, yeah, but...[...]
Interviewer And there's nobody trying to teach you to here? Nobody saying, come on...?
Chris Yeah, they try like when I do ICT, they try and get me like... But I just get bored with it.

The words "bored" and "boring" feature often in the interviews and the use of these terms appears to be shorthand for something that the youngster does not like or does not want to talk about. For instance, Julia (female, 14) says that she no longer uses Bebo and MSN because they became "boring". Further questions suggested that she stopped using these sites having received

disturbing sexually abusive comments. She said that she has only been able to set her Bebo account to private sometimes which suggested that she did not fully understand the settings. She was able to turn to her 21-year-old cousin for help and her cousin suggested that she delete both accounts which she then did, not using either again. She said that she also felt more protected given that the conversation was online rather than in person:

Julia It's in between really because if a person is far away from you and you was on MSN speaking to him or her then if they said what they was going to do to you they wouldn't be able to find you. But if it was in person they could do it to you there and then.

Another of the girls, Elizabeth (14) had also had negative experiences online however, whereas Julia's were online only, Elizabeth's difficulties were an extension of her off-line life. She said that she had been left death threats on her Facebook page by an ex-boyfriend who had said that he was planning to kill both of them:

Elizabeth And now he's sending me horrible comments on Bebo saying if you don't get back with me I'm going to kill you and myself.

More positively, several of the young people were able to articulate safety advice – such as do not talk to strangers, do not meet people off-line that you do not already know, do not reveal personal details – although whether or not they follow this guidance is unclear. Several youngsters said that they did chat with people – usually on Instant Messenger and Facebook – who they had first met online.

How well are these young people supported to use digital technologies?

As in the case of Julia above when she received support from her cousin after she was upset by sexually abusive comments online, it is important to consider the context within which these young people use ICTs and the support they can elicit. For example, Julia said that her cousin recommended that Julia remove herself from these communities as a way of avoiding further distress. Nevertheless, she could have helped Julia to understand the privacy settings better and to better manage her relationships online, if indeed she possessed and was able to pass on these skills herself.

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Similarly, in the example above of Chris (male, 15) being offered support to develop digital literacy skills at the Pupil Referral Unit, he is somehow not able to take up this opportunity and begin to learn even though he admits he would like to be "better". The reasons are likely to be complex and may relate to Chris' previous experiences of learning in general, previous failed attempts to learn to use a computer, lack of confidence that he will be able to learn and the seeming lack of motivation he feels to use a computer with internet.

When asked in the interviews who the young people would turn to for help when experiencing difficulties with ICTs at home, most gave the names of family members, for instance, an uncle who is a computer "wizard" (Chris, 15); a Dad who helps his son to use the computer and internet (Andrew, 14); a stepdad who sets up and maintains the computer at home (Elizabeth, 14). Similarly, there are cases where family members have introduced the young people to particular applications such as Microsoft Word (Harry, 13) by his mother; Facebook (Andrew, 14) by his sister. There are also several examples of young people talking about playing computer games with older and younger siblings including those who do not share the same household but come to visit. Most of the youngsters who used computers could not remember how they learnt to use the computer in the first place. Some noted that they currently develop their skills through interest-driven experimentation particularly when learning to use new mobile phones.

These findings that family members were mentioned as providing the main support seems surprising in light of other studies which show the importance of peers for the development of young people's practices and digital literacy skills (Ito *et al.*, 2008). Two suggestions emerged from the data which may cast light on this. Firstly, in the example given above of Chris (15) struggling to use a computer, he noted that his peers were also not very motivated to use a computer and internet. Therefore, it is unlikely that his friends would have the knowledge to share that he needs to help him. Also, one of the youngsters, Julia (14) said that she did not make friends very easily:

Julia Yeah. My family mostly. I don't know why but I don't get on with friends. It's like if I'm in a group of people, people tend to start arguing and stuff and I don't like it.

It seems likely, of course, that not having a good circle of friends would influence whether you could draw on their help or not for support with using digital technologies.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has reported on findings drawn from qualitative interviews carried out with 13 excluded young people in a Pupil Referral Unit. It has allowed young people experiencing an offline “participation gap” a voice – often missing in educational technology research – to talk about how ICTs both benefit and challenge them in their everyday lives. The results are nuanced and show great variation within this small group in relation to the activities carried out, extent of use and particularly in the abilities, skills and confidence that the young people possess. Whilst, for the most part, the young people had good access to a range of digital technologies, their attitudes towards different technologies varied as did their online activities, digital literacy competence – especially regarding risky behaviour – and the support that they could rely on from friends and family when needing help with ICTs. Most of the young people used digital technologies for entertainment and pleasure and for keeping in touch with friends and family. A small number also talked about using the internet to enhance hobbies and interests. Some of the youngsters rejected the idea of using digital technologies to support formal learning. These findings reflect those of the EU Kids Online project which found that children from working class families are less likely to use the internet for education and searching for information (Hasebrink *et al.*, 2009). It was interesting that a number of the young people talked also about using ICTs to help them cope with difficult and disturbing situations in their lives such as illness, bereavement and family breakdown.

In relation to digital literacy, findings were mixed. At one end of the spectrum, some of the young people were confident that they had the skills they needed to use ICTs whilst at the other, some of the youngsters said that they lacked even the most basic functional skills to use the computer with internet. These findings both reflect and differ from those of the UK Children Go Online Study (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007) which found a correlation between coming from a lower socio-economic background and young people’s lack of skill. Of particular concern was the finding that whilst some of the youngsters could articulate information reasonably well about how to keep themselves safe online, there were worrying examples of the youngsters experiencing disturbing events such as receiving sexually abusive or threatening comments, seemingly extensive searches for pornography and apparent excessive playing of games intended for adult participants. Again, these findings could reflect the EU Kids Online study which found that young people from lower-class families are more exposed to online risk (Hasebrink *et al.*, 2009). In terms of support for using the internet, again the evidence was varied. Some of the youngsters appeared to have access to family members in particular who could help support their online activities through their own

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knowledge and skills with ICTs, whilst others, such as Julia (female, 14) received emotional rather than technical support from her cousin after receiving threatening comments.

Given these findings, recommendations for social policy and social intervention are challenging. Clearly it is important that initiatives should continue which prevent ICTs becoming a further means through which social inequalities are reinforced. These include initiatives which provide good access to digital technologies – particularly the internet – at home and at school so that children from families without the economic means do not lose out. Nevertheless, the present study, building on previous work, has shown that initiatives which address economic issues only are limited in impact given that some families lack the cultural and social capital to adequately guide their children so that they may be able to enjoy the same opportunities online as mainstream young people from higher status families. Clearly, digital literacy programs have something to offer here in their emphasis on the critical, creative, more discerning, constructive and safer practices that they support which could help excluded young people who are attending a Pupil Referral Unit to take better advantage of ICTs such as the internet. However, the findings in this study suggest that some young people are not motivated to use the internet as they are not convinced of the benefits of doing so. Finding meaningful activities for these young people to engage with will be an enduring challenge.

This study has produced interesting findings that raise a number of further questions that would be useful for exploration. Future studies would benefit from a larger sample and a longer term study would enable researchers to build trust and confidence with excluded young people. In particular, wider data collection methods would be useful as not all young people are comfortable with interview situations – particularly excluded young people – and may be more relaxed with other strategies which take some focus from them, for instance, asking them to talk around their mobile phone or other methods they feel more comfortable with.

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