**CSSC Award for Excellence in Educational Research 2022**

**Introduction:**

Despite the many positive aspects of digital technology, the online world can be a dangerous place for those who do not understand it. In recent years, new popular/emerging social media apps have encouraged an array of E-Safety issues such as cyberbullying, grooming, receiving unsolicited media, scams and fraud amongst others (INQE, 2020; Saeed, 2020; SBNI, 2019; DE, 2017; OFCOM, 2016; SBNI, 2014). Therefore, the growing number of digital threats and the continued rise of emerging social media has become a complex issue which requires multi-faceted, up-to-date technical and pedagogical knowledge (Tomczyk, 2019). Children are at the forefront of these new popular/emerging social media and apps, with new apps such as TikTok to explore the world and express themselves digitally. Consequently, they are likely to also be exposed to and experience some of these E-Safety issues. This research explored the current E-Safety practice in primary schools across Northern Ireland and the confidence of teachers to deliver it as they work alongside the children who are using such technology.

**What intervention did you implement?**

I took a mixed methods approach incorporating semi-structured interviews with ICT/E-Safety Coordinators in Primary Schools within Northern Ireland and separate esurveys for teachers and student teachers. The esurvey was used to collate the views of teachers and student teachers, regarding their interpretation of good E-Safety practice, their confidence with safeguarding issues arising from popular/emerging social media apps and how their school currently communicates E-Safety messages to parents. The interviews explored the same aspects in greater detail with the coordinators within schools. Initially I expected some disconnect between Coordinator and teacher responses as well as greater confidence teaching about new/emerging apps from younger teachers. Although these thoughts were confirmed, a discourse in E-Safety practice across schools was also observed.

**What was the impact of the intervention?**

Overall the research revealed a lack of consistency in E-safety practices across primary schools in Northern Ireland as questions on the professional development of staff in E-Safety revealed that 45% of teachers had received some form of E-Safety training annually, though sometimes this was integrated within child protection training and not specifically E-safety. However, 42% reported they have either never received training or been trained once every two years. Significantly 26% of teachers have never had any form of E-Safety training.

62% of teachers rated their E-Safety practice as good or excellent however 38% rated only satisfactory or less. Three out of four of the coordinators rated their practice as satisfactory or less suggesting that work still needs to be carried out in schools to develop and continue E-Safety practice. Complementary questions used to ascertain the teachers’ concept of ‘good’ practice revealed that when an open response was requested, rather than supplying to the teachers appropriate vocabulary, some elements and associated vocabulary were not mentioned. While overall there is an awareness of ‘good’ practice this could highlight a lack of deeper understanding of E-Safety and E-Safety practice within schools as the ‘good’ practice may not be as prominent to staff.

Overall emerging apps such as Roblox and Discord received the lowest teaching confidence ratings with at least 75% reporting between 1 and 2 for some of the newer apps. As Roblox is a very popular emerging app for primary children, this highlights gaps in knowledge which unless addressed through professional development will mean knowledge of these apps is not consistent for teachers. Also data suggests that the younger teacher rated higher in knowledge of emerging/popular social media and apps than those teachers in the age range 26-60+.

When communicating E-Safety messages to parents, social media and the parental engagement apps (Seesaw and Google Classroom) were identified as a popular method, highlighted by 57% of teachers. However, when asked to comment on how effective these messages were, the open responses from teachers revealed 27% described them as effective, 23% were unsure and 50% thought more attention to how effective their messages need to be was required. Teachers expressed the thinking that the actions of parents remain an issue.

**Advice for implementing in schools**

The research highlights issues at a national, whole school and class level in regards to E-Safety practice. The development of effective E-Safety practice could be supported by establishing a specific E-Safety Coordinator in all schools, separate from the ICT and child protection coordinator roles. Schools should seek out consistent and up-to-date training on E-Safety separate to annual child protection training and the development of cluster groups for Coordinators to meet and discuss current issues, sharing of good practice and support for E-Safety would be a positive move forward. However, the research revealed a need for a national framework for ICT in schools to include the complex diversity of E-Safety issues that children face in primary schools across Northern Ireland.

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