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Addressing schools' needs to understand and convey the benefits and dangers of social media

This two-year project, develops a scheme of work and a set of teaching and training resources covering both the benefits and dangers of social media. The target age group is the Secondary sector, where there is usually an ICT curriculum which covers the technical and practical uses of ICT, but there is a shortfall in the coverage of social media.

This is now a fundamental aspect of the lives of almost all teenagers, however its use can be both beneficial and destructive. There is a lack of education on the use of social media, which this project aims to address.

There is ample research to show that the negative elements of social media can have a serious impact on mental health, with access to technology a major contributor. The European Commission has made promoting safer use of the internet a priority for young people and called for improvements in critical thinking, media literacy and developing the skills necessary for 'cyber hygiene'.

The objectives of the project are to:

- analyse and share existing strategies and resources for dealing with social media
- identify common areas of strength and priorities for development
- develop a structure for the work schemes and a set of training materials and sample lesson plans, based on needs, covering:
 - ✓ types of social media and their use by young people
 - ✓ communication benefits including language learning
 - ✓ dangers of social media
 - ✓ social media as a news source
 - ✓ online safety and school policy
- pilot, test, evaluate and refine the schemes of work and training resources in schools in 5 countries
- produce a report on the outcomes, sets of case studies and recommendations for school policy including a model school policy
- disseminate the outcomes widely

A survey and training event involving students and teachers from across Europe leads to a pilot scheme of work

A survey involving 262 teachers and 1391 students from Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Spain and the United Kingdom allowed the partnership to gather precious up-to-date information on the types of use, benefits and dangers of social media. We carefully analysed the data coming from students and teachers, identifying similar, as well as divergent views. Based on these findings, in a three day online training event involving students and teachers from all 5 countries, we drafted the outline of a scheme of work to be piloted and tested in schools.

The scheme of work will cover the 5 themes mentioned above, but the details stem directly from the research and surveys conducted in the first three months of 2021. Some of the interesting findings include the diverse preferences for one social media over another in different countries, high or low interest in news arriving through social media, as well as reports of various levels of risk and abuse online. Sometimes students are acquainted with more social media apps and communication channels than teachers. They seem to be aware of the possible dangers, but are more likely to focus on the benefits, whereas teachers expressed higher levels of scepticism than students.

Based on these variations, the partnership is able to identify priority areas and focus on the most relevant issues when developing the scheme of work. In the following months the partners will conduct further research and then design educational activities and tools to be piloted in schools.

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