

Old Dominion University

ODU Digital Commons

STEMPS Faculty Publications

STEM Education & Professional Studies

4-2020

The Inclusive Educational Role of School Librarians: Supporting Safe Online Behaviors through a Community of Peers

Abigail Phillips

Amelia Anderson

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/stemps_fac_pubs



Part of the [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Information Literacy Commons](#), and the [Online and Distance Education Commons](#)

**THE INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL ROLE OF SCHOOL LIBRARIANS:
SUPPORTING SAFE ONLINE BEHAVIORS THROUGH A COMMUNITY OF PEERS**

Abigail L. Phillips
Assistant Professor
School of Information Studies
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
abileigh@uwm.edu

Amelia M. Anderson
Assistant Professor
Darden College of Education and Professional Studies
Old Dominion University
amanders@odu.edu

To develop and encourage information literacy skills needed to prevent cyberbullying, online aggression, and other forms of online victimization, teens are in need of digital citizenship instruction and similar digital literacy education in an inclusive and welcoming environment. This paper is supported by findings from two unique studies conducted by the researchers as well as a rigorous review of relevant scholarship of teacher education and disability studies.

First, semi-structured interviews with librarians working with youth (ages 12-18) were conducted and second, an online survey of youth with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) on the digital environment, experiences from engaging online, views of the positives and negatives of the internet, and managing internet use. For this paper, findings from both studies were used to support and inform this subsequent paper; leading to a cohesive exploration of school librarian and youth with ASD's perspectives and reflections on digital citizenship instruction.

INTRODUCTION

Information literacy instruction, whether in the library itself or as requested in a classroom, has long been one of the major roles of school librarians (Burns, Gross, & Latham, 2019; Merga, 2019; Wine, 2016). As information technology specialists, school librarians educate students, teachers, and administrators on new and emerging technology including supporting the digital literacy skills required. Much of this education takes place either in the school library, individual classrooms, or one-on-one, on demand tutorials (Phillips & Lee, 2019). Digital and media literacy instruction is of increasing importance for school librarians as youth, alongside the general population, continue to go online via discussion boards, smartphone apps, online gaming, and technology use in and outside the school (Chigwada, 2019).

PURPOSE

To develop and encourage information literacy skills needed to prevent and combat cyberbullying, online aggression, and online victimization, teens are in need of digital citizenship instruction and similar digital literacy education in an environment which encourages all students. School librarians frequently provide information literacy instruction that supports differently-abled children, encompassing those with sensory and motor disorders, physical disabilities, and cognitive impairments. However, library services often stop as these children become teens (Anderson & Phillips, 2019). Teens who still have the same level of need and support as before. This leaves an inequity in services that are not entirely inclusive of teens, particularly the focus of this article, those with ASD (Phillips, & Anderson, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

This paper is supported by findings from two unique studies conducted by the researchers as well as a rigorous review of relevant scholarship of teacher and librarian education and disability studies. The two studies reached out to specific different groups: librarians who work with youth and youth on the spectrum. When promoting the school library as an inclusive, equitable, and diverse environment, young patrons of different abilities must be a part of the conversation. In the first study, the researchers conducted interviews with nine librarians about tailored instruction and programming for youth with ASD, focusing largely on digital citizenship instruction. For the purposes of this paper, term ‘digital citizenship’, refers to “the continuously developing norms of appropriate, responsible, and empowered technology use” (Ribble, n.d., p1).

For the second study, the researchers posted a survey to an online forum for members of the autistic community. The survey’s open text questions probed how teenagers (who participated in this forum) engaged online, reflections about the online environment, social media use, and education regarding internet use. For this paper, findings from both studies were used to support and inform the findings of this paper, leading to a cohesive exploration of librarian and youth with ASD’s perspectives and reflections.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Below (Figure A) is an outtake of four questions that highlight the researchers’ inquiries into the teen participants’ understanding of privacy habits, and concerns. The 34-question survey was posted to the individuals with autism community.

Survey Sample Questions:

1. Let’s talk about privacy online. Do you use privacy settings on your social media accounts? (Choose one)
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. I don’t know
2. What’s one thing you would you never share online? ___

3. Do you have any rules in your house about technology? ____
 - a. Which ones do you find helpful? ____
 - b. Which are less helpful – and why? ____
4. If you could make one new technology policy that everyone had to follow, what would it be? _____

Figure A: Questions from Teens on the Spectrum Survey

While the findings from the questions are exploratory, they suggest a keen understanding by the youth of how privacy on the internet, particularly social media, functions and can be successfully and/or unsuccessfully applied. When looking at the two data sets, the researchers could see that librarians and youth on the spectrum both viewed social media as an environment in which clear boundaries are in need. Both for adults and teens.

LIBRARIANS SUPPORTING YOUTH WITH AUTISM

The librarians and youth in this study both share a common concern over use and abuse of the internet and social media. School librarians have tools available to them for this instruction and guidance; however, the best approach in which to offer this training is uncertain. Many of the resources school librarians use are geared towards classroom teachers with significantly more time to engage with students (Phillips & Lee, 2019).

Librarians make do with the resources and tools they have, along with an educational background in information literacy instruction. After analyzing the responses of the teens surveys and comparing those with librarian responses, it appears to the researchers what is truly needed is more clear and compassionate communication between both groups. Creating programming and materials that does not have the interests or attention of will do little to provide strong digital citizenship and digital literacy education.

YOUTH WITH AUTISM OFFERING INSIGHTS FOR LIBRARIANS

The wisdom and insights of youth on the spectrum provided through the survey responses demonstrate that this group reflects upon how, how much, and when they engage with the internet, as well as their family, parents, and peers. For school librarians, a takeaway from this discovery would be that youth on the spectrum are an exceptional source of feedback when conceptualizing and producing digital citizenship programs and instructional material. Involving youth on the spectrum in the process, alongside neurotypical youth, would be a help for enhancing the digital literacy of all youth. By encouraging youth with autism to take part in this instruction, librarians show that they are empathetic and compassionate towards the input and needs of youth. This is a critical component towards bringing all youth towards digital citizenship skills and improved digital equity.

TOWARDS INCLUSIVE INSTRUCTION

Drawing upon data collection from interviews with librarians across the United States regarding digital citizenship, information literacy, and library instruction, the researchers found that not only were librarians lacking in resources and other materials they could draw upon but

also an uncertainty about how to present the information (e.g. program, structured class). The materials frequently used by school librarians about digital citizenship and digital literacy instruction (Common Sense Media, n.d.; Ribble, 2012) are geared towards classroom teachers, not the one-shot instruction or programming taking place in libraries (Phillips & Lee, 2019).

Additionally, librarians expressed a need for continuing education and/or professional development on digital citizenship and overarching digital literacy including how to offer unique and tailored information literacy instruction approaches in the library. Instruction that is relevant and inclusive of all teens. The awareness of ‘othering’ youth with ASD, separating youth on the spectrum from their neurotypical peers during instruction or programming, appeared strongly among the interviewed librarians, followed by an expression of need for equitable and inclusive instruction and programming.

INSTRUCTION AS A COMMUNITY OF PEERS

A surprising finding from the interviews is the peer-to-peer mentorship occurring as part of library programming. One librarian has a program in her library where a youth with autism is paired with a neurotypical peer. Through this program, a teen with ASD has a friend when he/she/they are at the library, throughout the school day, or during other activities at (or not) the library. This peer mentorship creates a friendship that lasts long the program. Another librarian invites a local parent group of youth with autism to provide guidance and insight when developing programming specifically for these youth and for all youth.

The surveyed teens expressed a desire for structured rules for internet use for themselves and their parents. The parental element is of particular interest to note. These teens recognized their parents' phone use patterns, at times overuse, and developed rules that they would have for their family. These youths are observant, attentive, and, at times, critical of the ways in which their parents engage online. It appears that not only are these youth honest about their use of the internet, but they are also aware that rules and best practices for internet use should be applying to the entire family. Not simply the teens.

These teens were attuned to the complex issues of being a participant online from cyberbullying to trolling to overuse. The teens' awareness of the problematic side of the internet as well as the positive affordances of being digital suggests directions for digital citizenship and other digital literacy instruction. Teens clearly have an awareness of a need for guidance from adults as well as applying their contributions to the discussion. It is not a one-way road in which librarians are instructing youth, but youth have worthwhile advice and insight to provide librarians and other adults.

CONCLUSION

When discussing with teens online use and ethical, safe, and healthy behaviors, librarians are in need of more education regarding how to approach information literacy with youth on the spectrum. As indicated by the survey with youth with autism, these are savvy, reflective internet users. Developing an inclusive educational experience requires an understanding of the nature of autism, the learning preferences of youth on the spectrum, and the development of approaches that include both these youth and neurotypical teens. A one size fits all approach will not work for youth on the spectrum or other neurodiverse teens. It is through learning from these youth

about their needs and more specific wants from librarians and other adults that they can be better served.

An inclusive educational experience is possible. It requires listening to the needs of youth on the spectrum and the ways in which digital citizenship and digital literacy instruction can be offered in an inclusive, non-ableist way. This paper offers the beginnings of an investigation of the educational needs of both librarians and youth on the spectrum. Clearly there is additional room for further research and conversations between youth with autism and librarians about the different approaches to learning, particularly understanding how to include youth with autism within an inclusive, thoughtful learning environment.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, A., & Phillips, A. (2019). "Getting basic information isn't actually as helpful as the nuanced advice we can give each other": Teens with autism on digital citizenship education. *Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults*.
- Burns, E., Gross, M., & Latham, D. (2019). The information literacy continuum: Mapping the ACRL framework to the AASL School Library Standards. *School Libraries Worldwide*, 25(1).
- Chigwada, J. P. (2019). Supporting information literacy skills of students for a successful transition to higher education: Opportunities and challenges for libraries in the digital era. *International Journal of Library and Information Services (IJLIS)*, 8(1), 24-30.
- Common Sense Media. (n.d.). Digital citizenship curriculum & EdTech reviews. Retrieved from <https://www.commonsense.org/education/>
- Merga, M. K. (2019). School libraries fostering children's literacy and literature learning: Mitigating the barriers. *Literacy*.
- Phillips, A. L., & Lee, V. R. (2019). Whose responsibility is it? A statewide survey of school librarians on responsibilities and resources for teaching digital citizenship. *School Library Research*, 22.
- Phillips, A., & Anderson, A. (2020). Cyberbullying, digital citizenship, and youth with Autism: LIS education as a piece in the puzzle. *Library Quarterly*.
- Ribble, M. (2012). Digital citizenship for educational change. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 48(4), 148-151.
- Ribble, M. (2017). Nine elements: Nine themes of digital citizenship. *Digital Citizenship: Using Technology Appropriately*. Retrieved from <http://digitalcitizenship.net/nine-elements.htm>
- Wine, L. D. (2016). School librarians as technology leaders: An evolution in practice. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 57(2), 207-220.

