

What Makes Greek Parents and Teachers Determine Safe Internet Use for Students in Elementary Schools

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ABSTRACT

Recognizing that schools have become the universal location where young people are learning about the Internet in a safe and responsible manner and are also an important conduit of information for parents- many of whom are not as technically literate as their children, this research investigates: a) teachers' and parents' education about the safe and responsible use of the Internet by elementary students, b) the differences in parents' and teachers' attitudes towards the students' use of the Internet in the family home and at school and, c) the kind of issues or concerns that emerge between parents and teachers as an acknowledgment of the web based technologies importance in the students' day-to-day social and educational activities. Interviews by 230 teachers and 1289 parents in 36 elementary schools in urban and rural provinces of Crete demonstrate that technologically sophisticated parents expressed more concern over their children's negative consequences of the Internet use and tended to provide more guidance and influence to which children may be more responsive compared to teachers' advice or assistance with technological efficacy. The implications of the findings are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that numerous children around the world are accessing the Internet from their homes and classrooms, internet safety concerns have become a contentious issue for both parents and teachers at the point of implementation and regulation over the past few years. Attitudes to whether, how and why the Internet should be used for teaching, learning and entertainment are much varied. For example, recent studies indicate that when the Internet use is characterized by a more sophisticated, meaning safer, household activity by children and parents, this can minimize the possible online risks a child may encounter on the Net ^[1-4]. Thus, similar parental attitudes do not preoccupy that the quality of closeness of adolescents to parents will increase especially when this is related to an extensive use and when this is not used for learning purposes which can lead to intergenerational conflicts (e.g. conflicts over privacy, computer time use, and gaps in expectations). On the other hand, the validity of Internet safety regulations within the school context are usually connected with the amplification of teachers' skilfulness and self-esteem for cultivating students' critical judgement when they are triggered off by doubtful information through the Net in less controlled settings ^[5-8]. Finally, other researchers agree that despite the effort of implementing various school-based interventions such as discussions between students and teachers about Internet safety matters ^[5] role play etc., although innovative, are considered to be "new" and as yet less effective to expect a direct impact on pupils' behavioural level of safe Internet use ^[6,9].

To analyze which factors determine safe internet use for primary students, this article explores the impact of the integration of the Internet in the Greek families and elementary schools. Differences between teachers' and parents' capacity to promote internet safety behaviors for the psychological well-being of primary students of the 5th and 6th grade were also investigated.

PARENTS, TEACHERS AND THE INTERNET

Theoretical Review

As, children's use of computers and the Internet in contexts inside and outside the family barriers has increased dramatically in the past decade, concerns have also emerged for both parents and educators for the safety of children when surfing unsupervised the Web for educational purposes inside and outside the school context ^[6,10].

Regarding parents' attitudes towards the Internet usage by children, research findings suggest that although many parents consider the introduction of home computer as an important educational tool for their children, they feel quite uncomfortable using the computer along with their children ^[11,12] as this may reflect their inflexibility of using ICT as temporary children do ^[12-14]. Thus, parents who desire to decrease the technological gap between them and their children by using the Internet as a positive and developmental tool for their family are more likely to use technology effectively ^[6,12,13,15]. So, the positive role of parent's -child interaction on the Internet usage may result to better decision making and agreement on which Internet activities may be considered as harmful or not and a higher control over children's behaviours especially before adolescence ^[1,15,16]. Thus, the quality of closeness or the amount of conflicts within the family depend on how parents evaluate the type of the Internet usage by children (for example, whether surfing the Net is done for education or amusement purposes) and in what way this parental consideration may affect children's perceived closeness to their parents in their early adolescence hood ^[3,17-19].

According to Wang et al., ^[1] there are various factors concerning Internet rule setting within a household, such as parents' gender, socio-cultural settings, technical knowledge and marital state. For example, parents from urban socio-cultural settings more than rural regions, with better computer and Internet knowledge ^[1,13,18,19], and married parents more than single ones ^[20], may feel better able to monitor their children's Internet usage and are more involved in their online activities for education and amusement ^[3,18,21]. Also, recent findings report that mothers are more likely to check their children's new learning and interpersonal experiences through Internet use than fathers due to the fact that mothers tend to be more communicative and spend more time with children at home than fathers do ^[13]. However, mothers seem less instructive and monitoring than fathers when children use the home computer given that fathers demonstrate better technological efficiency than mothers do ^[1,13,12]. Thus, the variables that characterize "effective parenting" are still to be verified especially when children demonstrate greater technological efficiency than parents and the discrepancy that might exist between parents and children when the first are faced with the opportunity to act as mentors for the decisions their children must take when surfing the Web ^[17,21,22].

So, as schools are considered to be an important factor to counter the negative side-effects of Internet use by students ^[6-8], one of the major issues that arises for teachers is if they are capable enough to promote and to support students' educational skills and interpersonal experiences through the use of ICT while monitoring the risk of individual children to face inappropriate content when surfing the Net for education or recreation ^[8].

Apparently, it appears for both parents and educators to be a "risky" task for novice pupils to search information effectively and efficiently through the Web, excluding the possibility of encountering sites with unsuitable material especially when they are not accompanied by adults. Nevertheless, training elementary students to use digital devices to collect information for various educational or interpersonal purposes is a challenging perspective for teachers too, as a significant number of them lack the skills for using such technological and pedagogical innovations in class ^[7,23,24]. Additional studies indicated that teachers often express anxiety symptoms when they have to be involved with their students in various digital educational or interpersonal activities ^[25], meaning that these online education appliances may often be ignored by them ^[23]. On the contrary, Chen ^[24] emphasizes that when teachers have positive attitudes toward using ICT due to their technological skills, beliefs, and their perceptions and motivation for integrating technology into their instructional practices, are more willing to keep up with the fast development of advanced technologies and to try out innovative methods in class ^[8,26].

Thus, regarding the impact of school based Internet safety interventions in developing pupils' safety attitudes when surfing the Web for various activities, Valcke et al., ^[6] concluded that there are limited evaluative studies focusing on such innovative ventures within the school context. For example, in a large-scale American study of 10, 800 participants between 12 and 18 years old, Berson, Ferron & Aftab ^[27] and Berson ^[5] found that although 36% of the sample had discussed Internet safety issues with their classroom teacher, children's participation in unsafe Internet use remained very large. It was also observed that there was a general tension among young users to consider unsafe Internet use as a normal part of their youth culture ^[5]. Thus, the need for providing teachers with higher technological competence and with innovative pedagogical guidance on Internet safety issues seems immense but it is only part of the story.

In sum, effective involvement of parents and teachers is mostly associated with positive attitudes and approaches to software, their flexibility to take an approach that is relative to students' developmental needs, beliefs and cognitive standards, to seek, to inspire, to support and facilitate children's critical thinking while setting the scene for an Internet safety pedagogical environment in and out the family and school context ^[8,19].

THE RESEARCH

Recognizing the importance of the families' and schools' involvement in children's safe and effective use of the Internet in

and out the school premises, this study tries to examine which factors contribute to children's regulated and pedagogical guidance of Internet safety issues regarding the parents' and teachers' behaviours and perceptions when children use the Internet for educational or interpersonal purposes. Three main perspectives were investigated: a) Parents' and teachers' acknowledgment of the web based technologies importance in the students' day-to-day social and educational activities regarding their technological level, b) the differences between parents' and teachers' attitudes regarding the students' use of the Internet as an educational and recreational tool and, c) the degree of parents' and teachers' capacity to control unsafe behaviours when pupils navigate the Web for various activities.

The research was carried out among 36 elementary schools from urban and rural provinces on the island of Crete with the participation of 230 teachers and 1289 parents in total. The school principals of the selected elementary schools recruited their teaching personnel of 5th to 6th grade (11 and 12 year-old pupils) to participate in the present research. The selected sample of parents and elementary teachers represent all geographic areas of Crete, and also different sizes of school populations, from big cities to small towns and villages.

Methodology and hypotheses

More specifically, for the needs of the present research questions were based on the following three main hypotheses:

1. Parents' and teachers' technological level is an important factor for their children's involvement with the web based technologies in and out the school barriers.

2. Parents and teachers who have a higher level of technological efficacy tend to encourage more the students' earlier access to the Internet for widening their cognitive skills. Additionally, these teachers believe more to the effectiveness of these technologies in their teaching practices than teachers with less technological backgrounds.

3. Finally, although teachers with more technological efficacy have a better concept of the possible dangers that students may encounter when surfing the Net for various educational or interpersonal activities, parents who also have good grasp of Web based technologies may exhibit more sophisticated actions in order to control any possible exposure to negative Internet content by their children.

Sample

The sample of this study covered a representative sample of 1519 participants, 1289 parents (84.9%) and 230 teachers (15.1%) of primary school students in urban, suburban and rural provinces of Crete. The sampling procedure began from the 4 main prefectures on the island of Crete with almost 25 primary schools in each prefecture. Then, according to the students' population in each school 36 schools were randomly selected. The selected schools recruited the students' parents and teachers of 4th, 5th, and 6th grade to participate in the present research. Regarding the whole sample's sex 572 (38%) were men and 932 women (62%). In particular, in the group of teachers 82 (36.4%) were men and 143 were women (63.6%) while in the group of parents 490 (38.3%) were men and 789 (61.7%) were women. Moreover, 136 teachers (60.2%) taught in urban schools, 35 (15.5%) in suburban schools and 55 (24.3%) in rural schools. In the group of parents, 814 (65.3%) came from urban areas, 280 (22.5%) from suburban areas and 152 (12.2%) from rural areas. So, out of the whole sample of parents and teachers, 950 (64.5%) taught or lived in urban schools, 315 (21.4%) in suburban areas and 207 (14.1%) in rural schools. The present sample of parents and teachers represents all geographic areas of Crete, and also different sized school populations, from big cities to small towns and villages. This study was supported by a grant from the Greek International Foundation of Scholarships.

Data analysis

The electronic data of the questionnaires were blueprinted and data analysis was performed right after the questionnaires were filled in by the parents and teachers. Statistical analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (IBM SPSS.20) software [28]. For questions collecting quantitative data, frequencies of the responses to each question were calculated and cross-tabulations of the results were made. Also, t test analyses were conducted to evaluate the differences between parents' and teachers' technological efficacy and their tendency to regard the Internet as a useful educational tool for students regarding their tendency to promote Internet safety issues with them. A two one way analysis of variance was conducted on the indicator parents' and teachers' evaluation of the children's involvement with the web based technologies. Independent variables consisted of parents' and teacher' ability to exhibit safety Internet actions for children when the last navigate the Web in and out the school premises too. Covariate was parents' and teachers' technological profile. Finally, regarding the extent of the internet use between parents and teachers and their place of origin, a one way analysis of variance was performed.

Results of Research

Concerning the parents' and teachers' technological knowledge, 361 (33.1%) indicated that had computer lessons at university, 648 (59.4%) were self-learners and only 82 (7.5%) were professional computer users. Moreover, 459 participants (30.4%) reported using the Internet to check their e-mail while no systematic differences were indicated about the use of it between the two groups parents and teachers ($\chi^2(1) = 3.03, p=0.09$). Finally, 412 parents and teachers (27.1%) used the Internet for educational purposes, 952 (62.9%) to gather various information and 466 (30.8%) used the internet in the context of their work.

As indicated by the χ^2 test, the responses to the question regarding the use of the Internet for educational purposes differ depending on whether the participants belong to the teachers' or parents' group ($\chi^2 (1) = 139.29, p = 0.001$). Specifically only 21.5% of the parents reported using the Internet for educational purposes versus to 59.1% of teachers. Also, 61.1% of parents reported using the Internet for information versus to 73% of teachers while χ^2 test analyses indicated a significant difference between the two groups ($\chi^2 (1) = 11.91, p = 0.001$) regarding their responses. Thus, responses concerning the use of the Internet in the context of their work did not reveal any systematic differences between the groups of teachers and parents ($\chi^2 (1) = 0.16, p = 0.69$).

Furthermore, independent samples t tests were conducted to compare differences between parents and teachers. T tests showed consistently higher averages than the group of parents in self-reported knowledge regarding the use of computers ($M_T=2.80, M_P=2.40, t (342.25) = 6.843= p < 0.001$), self-efficacy with respect to the use of word processing ($M_T=3.03, M_P=2.43, t (344.59) = 8.96 p < 0.001$) and use of the Internet ($M_T=2.60, M_P=2.23, t (346.58) = 5.88, p < 0.001$). Also, higher levels were indicated in the group of parents regarding their self-efficacy in the use of spreadsheets ($M_T=2.52, M_P=2.76, t (351.78) = -3.746, p < 0.001$) and presentation files ($M_T=2.43, M_P=3.14, t (1498) = -9.92, p < 0.001$). Finally, regarding the extent of the Internet use among parents and their place of origin, multiple comparisons with the Bonferroni criterion indicated that the samples from the urban regions ($M=2.18, SD=1.01$) tended to be more technologically involved than those from the rural ones ($M=2.40, SD=1.01$), $F (2.223) = 2.13 p = .121, \eta^2 = .019$. No statistical differences were indicated in the group of teachers regarding the Internet use and place of origin.

According to the parents' and teachers' attitudes about the students' appropriate age to engage in new educational and interpersonal activities through the Internet, more statistical differences were indicated between the two groups. Specifically, parents ($M=4.50, SD=0.84$) were found more cautious about their children's possible engagement in new educational and interpersonal activities through the computer and the Internet before the 6th grade than teachers ($M=3.70, SD=1.02$) ($t (259.47) = 10.89, p < 0.001$). In particular, parents were found to discuss more with their children about their possible exposure to various types of Internet hazards ($M=2.45, SD=0.91$) than teachers did with their students at school ($M=1.96, SD=0.85$) ($t (358.16) = -7.68, p < 0.001$). This final finding was stronger related to the parents and teachers from urban places ($F (2894) = 2.64 p = .072, \eta^2 = .006$) than to the groups from rural ones ($F (2.219) = 0.11 p = .895, \eta^2 = .001$).

Additionally, according to **Table 1**, from the correlations of teachers' and parents' technological level and their attitudes whether pupils can widen their cognitive skills through the Internet usage, the present data revealed that the more parents and teachers surfed the Internet the more inspective tended to be towards the students' opportunity to use the Internet as an educational and recreational tool at home and at school. Thus, both groups with higher technological profiles tended to encourage pupils' earlier involvement with the Internet navigation compared to parents and teachers with less technological efficacy. Finally, parents and teachers with higher technological backgrounds seemed to know better the Internet hazards and considered them more efficient to promote Internet safety issues with children at home and at school.

Table 1. Parents' and teachers' technological efficacy and their attitudes concerning internet usage by students.

	Internet usage	Internet usage Teachers	Internet usage Parents
Teachers' and parents' attitudes towards the students'	-0.21**	-0.11	-0.21**
opportunity to use the internet as an educational tool	-0.26**	-0.14*	-0.25**
Students' proper age to start surfing the internet	0.13**	-0.17*	-0.16**

In sum, regarding the teachers' and parents' attitudes about the students' possible engagement in various educational and interpersonal activities through the computer and the Internet at school and at home two multiple regressions (stepwise) were used in order to predict both groups' Internet use. The prediction model for teachers contained two of the four predictors and was reached in two steps. The model was statistically significant and the R^2 was 0.06. Specifically, teachers' evaluation of their students' educational needs through the Web was better ($\beta = -0.15, p = 0.001, \Delta R^2 = 0.21$) and applauded the earlier onset of the Internet usage by students ($\beta = -0.17, p = 0.012, \Delta R^2 = 0.03$). Respectively, the prediction model for parents contained four of the four predictors and was reached in four steps. The model was statistically significant and the R^2 was 0.21. The predicted main effect of the parents' Internet use and discussion with their children about the dangers they might face on the Web was significant too ($\beta = 0.17, p = 0.001, \Delta R^2 = 0.19$). Finally, the patterns in these relationships were similar for male and female teachers but not between fathers and mothers, as fathers tended to initiate a more Internet safety attitude towards their children than mothers did. So, fathers who evaluated the Internet as a useful educational and recreational tool seemed more controllable towards their children possibility to navigate the Web at home or at school. The results are summarized in **Table 2**.

One way analysis of variance regarding the place of work of teachers revealed significant differences in the teachers'

initiative to promote their students' cognitive skills and interpersonal experiences through their involvement with the Internet ($F(2,204)=5.36$, $p=0,005$, $\eta^2=.05$). According to the Bonferonni criterion, multiple comparisons showed that teachers in urban ($M=3.81$ $SD=.09$) and semi-urban schools ($M=3.88$ $SD=.18$) applauded the idea more than their colleagues did from rural schools ($M=3.29$ $SD=.14$).

Table 2. Internet use.

	Teachers		Parents	
	Step (ΔR^2)	β final	Step (ΔR^2)	β final
Gender	-	-	1 (0.10)	-0.30***
Students' proper age to start surfing the Net	2 (0.03)	-0.17*	2 (0.16)	-0.19***
Teachers' and parents' ability to discuss Internet safety issues with primary students	1 (0.04)	0.19**	3 (0.19)	0.17***
Teachers' and parents' attitudes towards the students' opportunity to use the internet as an educational tool	-	-	4 (0.21)	-0.15***
Total R^2	0.06***		0.21***	

DISCUSSION

In the present work, research questions and hypotheses have been conducted in order to investigate the parents' and teachers' level of Internet pedagogical and safety attitudes towards children. The results indicate that the parents' and teachers' technological profile is a determining factor for the participants' involvement and control towards primary students' pedagogical and Internet safety usage. In other words, parents' and teachers' "self-efficacy" [29] to use technology was found to have direct effects on their positive perceptions and attitudes toward primary students' opportunity to acquire new educational and interpersonal experiences through the Internet [24,26].

Specifically, parents' and teachers' socio-cultural settings and perceived technical features are crucial parameters for the people's adjustment to technology that recognize the liberate and empowering possibilities of the Internet for widening students' cognitive skills. So, urban students of this study were considered to be in a more technologically advantageous position than rural ones as their acquirement of technical features is consequently associated to the school's greater local infrastructure and their families' better physical availability of computers and higher education [30]. This finding may indicate the presence of social inequality and students' social background and educational settings might also play a crucial role in cultivating awareness of Internet safety [7,8,31,32].

The finding regarding teachers' effectiveness to work with the Internet for promoting their pupils' educational or interpersonal experiences indicates that the participants' knowledge, skills, beliefs, their attitudes and motivation for empowering students' access to the Internet are critical parameters for the implementation of technology in schools [33]. So, a further analysis of the technological profiles of the present sample reveals that teachers with better technological grasp seem more comfortable using the Internet with their students than teachers who express less confidence in their current technology/Internet skills [7,24].

On the other side, parents in the present study seemed less confident in managing a computer and Internet as an educational medium with their children than teachers [13,32]. Alternative hypotheses regarding teachers' choice more than parents for supporting students' cognitive skills through the Internet especially from early grades may be usability and pedagogical issues with software [22]. For example, various studies indicate that teachers' positive and moderate attitudes towards computers are determining factors for intergrading computers in their classroom activities and very "suitable" for students' early childhood education. These teachers enjoy their students' positive attitudes when they have the opportunity to use computers together with their peers and the process of learning improves regarding the students' various levels of cognitive capacity [6,8,32,34]. So, in contrast to computer savvy teachers who obviously have used to incorporate information and communication technology in every field of their daily and working experiences, it seems not yet an easy task for parents to encourage novice students to use computers and the Internet for various educational or interpersonal reasons on their own or with peers than teachers who look more confident to it [34,35]. There seems to be a generation gap between parents and children in terms of knowledge and skills in managing the Internet as a current educational and interpersonal medium, as the last seem more computer savvy [12,17,18,36].

Regarding teachers' and parents' safety attitudes towards the students' possibility to face various Internet hazards, parents' and teachers' social and educational background (place of origin and technological access) [8,12,18], plays an important role in children's online activities. So regarding the importance of supervision by parents and teachers, it was found that both parents and teachers from urban places and with higher technological backgrounds knew better the possible Internet risks and consequently felt confident enough to deal with potentially harmful situations that students may encounter on the Net. Thus, parents in the present study seemed more deeply concerned about how the web should be managed and controlled safely and pedagogically by primary students in and out the school barriers than teachers did. Possible reasons might be the parents' lack of skills and self-competence to control their children's Internet use that is needed [12,22,37] or their difficulty to spare time with their children due to their daily routines. Certainly, it is not an easy task for parents to make the Internet use with children a planned and scheduled educational and pedagogical household activity as for teachers who seem more committed to it regarding the present results [12,14,21].

Regardless teachers' gender, parents' gender was also a significant variable for the Internet parental behavior as fathers more than mothers regarded the Web a useful tool for research, getting information and learning by children. Additionally, these fathers were found more cautious about the extended and uncontrollable Internet use by children and probably tended to establish more rules in their family homes than mothers did. So, as children of this certain age may misuse and overuse the Internet, fathers in the present study seemed more controllable to their children's aims of the Internet use by observing it ^[12,21].

In conclusion, justified by the present results and previous studies, the present research confirms that when primary students have supporting parents and teachers with sufficient knowledge of safe Internet use, children have fewer possibilities to deal with harmful Internet situations, as a high level of Internet safety comes from the practice and use of technology. However, not all students have technologically efficient parents to support children's safe Internet use in and out the family home. So, here comes the school's crucial role in evening out differences and divides among primary students ^[4,6-8,12,14,21,32,38].

CONCLUSIONS

Summing up the results, the analysis of the present study has revealed significant differences between both parents and teachers from various urban and rural provinces of Crete regarding their level to guide and protect students' manipulation of Internet technology. Generally, parents' and teachers' backgrounds and understanding of technology can possibly explain the variation in students' Internet educational and interpersonal options. It seems that competent and confident parents and mostly teachers have a key role in founding primary students understanding and competence to deal with technology fruitfully. Furthermore, the empirical findings in this study showed a gap between families' and schools' attitudes regarding the primary students approach to Internet for educational and interpersonal reasons.

Regardless most parents beliefs that the Internet is an overwhelming educational tool in the students' learning process and an alternative form of human communication, in practice though, it was the technological interactivity with children that puzzled parents more than teachers who seemed more confident to support students' digital learning and interactive environments. This finding may reflect the teachers' greater involvement with children and their efficiency to assist productively to students' educational and interpersonal demands and the parents' lack of confidence due to their children's capability to lack of fear. Finally, consistent with previous studies, fathers in this research were more likely to be involved with their children's new learning and interpersonal experiences through the Internet than mothers who probably did not have that much experience with computer technology as fathers did. Nevertheless, parents who identify the costs and benefits of such technologies are computer savvy and have more firsthand knowledge of the dangers associated with the Internet, tend more to monitor and enforce Internet rules in their family homes. Schools on the other side can play an important role towards the development of primary students' Internet awareness when they establish a systematic approach to teaching Internet safety.

Therefore, it is proposed that: a) schools in general and teachers in particular can be important contributors in equalizing differences and divides among students by providing pupils with the required support aimed at developing Net literacy and safe surfing practice, b) the necessity for primary schools to start working more consciously with the students' Internet safety awareness on a standard- base curriculum and, c) to support families with trainings that can be jointly performed with teachers and parents within schools. Besides, teachers and schools have the responsibility to help parents becoming productively involved with their children's opportunity to reach and meet their competence aims through new learning and interactive environments in and out the school barriers.

This study is subject to several limitations: first, the present sample was tested in the island of Crete and not in other representative areas of Greece. So, useful generation of the present hypotheses would certainly derive from a sample tested in a larger scale. Also, a richer data set could be based on actual observation of both teachers' and students' Internet use in class and parents' focus groups regarding their attitudes and parental styles towards their children's Net behaviors. Despite these methodological constraints, the current work strongly emphasizes that additional action in Internet safety lines have to be developed and implemented in Greek primary schools. With no doubt parents should be included in the proposed attempts. Based on this study, future research in this area might include further examination of the factors influencing the parents' and teachers' level of involvement with pupils in the pedagogical and safe uses of the Internet in families and schools. Teachers' features such as communication style, teaching style and to what extend teachers try to assist students' development of Internet safety awareness should be analytically examined too. Finally, how parents and teachers evaluate their in between cooperation regarding their assistance to their pupils learning and Internet safety usage should be also considered in future research.

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