



Introducing child safety in Romanian Schools: Does the existing primary and secondary curriculum address online safety?

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Abstract

This paper examines the idea of an online child safety policy for Romania, which would provide an initiative to encourage smart online behavior in young children, prepare them to surf the Internet, and educate them to avoid its dangers. As technology develops and more and more children spend time online, they are exposed to numerous threats, dangers and potential abuse. Children need to learn how to behave online, how to critically assess their activities online and act accordingly.

Against a backdrop of the 2010 report published by the Romanian Academic Society – *Escaping the Mediocrity in Schools* – this paper looks at the old plans for school curriculum (that have been in place up to 2010) and compares them with the new plans introduced after the report was published and reviewed by Ministry experts. Because any introduction of Internet safety elements would naturally fall under information technology, counseling, or civic education, these are the three areas examined in this paper. This paper focuses on an attempt to integrate online safety education in the Romanian school curriculum. It takes a critical look at the Romanian Educational System and how it correlates with the reality facing young people today.

Keywords: Romania; child safety; Internet safety; education curriculum; curriculum interventions

Introduction

At the present time, the only existing policy in Romania that is specifically dedicated to children aged six and up concerns the prevention and eradication of child pornography (a law passed in 2003). While this is an excellent start, it does not cover existing policy needs. As technology develops, and more and more children spend time online, they are exposed to numerous threats, dangers, and potential abuse. In order to ensure that children have a positive and enriching online experience, we must not only focus on recommendations that cater to the children during their online activities (such as content-filtering software), but also on preparing them before they go online, and for when problems arise once they are online. Children need to learn how to behave online, how to critically assess their activities online and act accordingly.

Therefore, introducing a policy in this sense would involve introducing an initiative that encourages being smart online and being prepared to surf the Internet and avoid its dangers.

Implementing such a policy initiative would involve four aspects:

1. Dedicating space in the school curriculum to online safety education.
2. Training teachers in how to teach the curriculum.
3. Finding funding for this supplementary education.
4. Encouraging initiatives that have educating children about safety online as their main goal.

This paper will focus on the first issue: an attempt to integrate online safety education into the Romanian school curriculum.

In March 2010, the Romanian Academic Society¹ published an educational report titled *Escaping the Mediocrity in Schools* (RAS, 2010). It had two aims: (1) to highlight the areas in which the current school curriculum is severely lacking and (2) to attempt to provide a definition for the key competencies pupils need to acquire during their schooling. The report makes clear suggestions for the next steps that should be taken in order to restructure the content and shape of the school curriculum in a way that allows pupils to derive maximum benefits from their schooling. It also specifies key competencies and abilities pupils should have in math, science, technology, and other learning areas. However, of particular interest is the lengthy space the report dedicates to the knowledge, abilities, and skills pupils need to have in information and communication technology (ICT) subjects.

Digital competencies form an essential part of the ICT skills in the Society's report, which states that pupils need to 'understand the opportunities and risks that the Internet provides' (RAS, 2010). In essence, the report suggests that there is need for specific training in such skills, and this training needs to be part of the school curriculum.

Since this report has been reviewed by the Romanian Ministry of Education and a new school curriculum has emerged since then (for the 2010/2011 academic year, specifically), the paper will look at the old plans for school curriculum (that have been in place up to 2010) and compare them with the new plans introduced after the report was published and reviewed by Ministry experts. This review will determine whether any actual changes have been made in three broad subject areas: information technology, counselling, and civic education. These areas have been chosen specifically for analysis because any introduction of Internet safety elements would naturally fall in one of these three categories.

1 The Romanian Academic Society is a think-tank which, according to its mission statement, aims to promote the notions of liberty, democracy, and good governance throughout Eastern Europe, while raising awareness about issues relating to public policies.

Current efforts and existing initiatives

Up until now, a number of initiatives that deal with child safety online have either taken place, or are still taking place in Romania. The first one is the European Summer School with the topic 'Child Safety Online', organised by Save the Children Romania in August 2010. Forty youth and children participated in the Summer School and identified instruction as the main priority on the agenda. As a consequence, they have collectively transmitted a proposal to the European Parliament for basic safety notions to be introduced in the school curriculum across the EU (Sigur.info, 2010).

The second initiative in this area also is also organised by Save the Children Romania. It consists of a team of volunteers who dedicate part of their free time to organising information and training sessions for teachers, children, and parents, on alternate weeks. According to Sigur.info (2010), from the start of the programme in 2008 and up until February 2009, around 2500 parents, teachers, and children have participated in these training sessions. However, the sessions have taken place only in a few select schools in the capital city and other six major cities in Romania.

The third major initiative that is connected to child safety online and Romania is Memo/10/200, put forward by the European Commission 19 May 2010 (EC, 2010). It draws out the plan for a so-called European Digital Agenda. Its purpose is to ensure that the EU is making full use of ITC in order to form the basis of a sustainable digital future. With this new plan of action, the European Commission wishes to eliminate the current obstacles that stand in the way of an efficient use of the power of information and communication, and also reduce future problems in this category. In essence, the Agenda identifies the aspects that the EU needs to focus in the future. Online safety ranks high on the list of the priority areas on the Agenda. However, the only mention of how this will be accomplished is the suggestion of collaboration between EU countries in order to organise courses in online safety (EC, 2010).

It is obvious that the existing initiatives are disjointed, and lack a clear focus and organisation. In addition, they should be more centralised, and offer the same content and opportunity for instruction and training to every school, not just a select few in the big cities. Current efforts are weak and dispersed: not all schools or educational institutions are being offered these courses (Save the Children Romania, 2010; Sigur.info, 2010) and the summer school offered a limited number of 40 students the chance to participate in a dialogue about online safety. In terms of the proposal put forth by the European Commission as part of the Digital Agenda (in Memo/10/199 and Memo/10/200), while the ideas are good in theory, it will be very difficult to put them in practice in a timely manner. The EU is formed of countries with their own individual style of teaching and educational system. Implementing a uniform system of teaching online safety across all countries will take place with glacial slowness. That is why it is important for Romania to take the initiative and introduce online safety as a mandatory part of the school curriculum across the country. In this way, all children will benefit from the training; they will all be taught the same content; and they will all have the opportunity to learn, regardless of how disadvantaged their background is.

The policy approach

The research will be based on Bardach's (2004) policy model, which was chosen as the most viable option, since it forces the researcher to think about other alternatives to the suggested plan of action (or policy solution) and does not allow the presentation of data that simply supports the suggested solution. The researcher must truly reflect on and present all the possible solutions (and their outcomes or feasibility) before reaching a conclusion. That is why the central model governing the research has following steps (Bardach, 2004):

1. Define the problem.
2. Assemble some evidence.
3. Construct the alternatives.
4. Select the criteria.

5. Project the outcome.
6. Confront the trade-offs.
7. Decide (on the best option).
8. Tell the story (i.e. report the results).

Subjects in the middle-school curriculum relevant to Internet safety training

Counselling and Orientation

According to the national guidelines for Counselling and Orientation, the goal of this compulsory subject is to introduce pupils to a number of key competencies set at a European level (Council of the European Union, 2005).

1. Interpersonal, intercultural, social and civic competencies.
2. Learning to learn.
3. Digital competencies.
4. Entrepreneurial competencies.

As a result, all four Counselling curriculum plans that were drawn out for the 2010/2011 school year – corresponding to the four years of middle school – incorporate a section titled 'Developing pupils' abilities to use information in the process of learning'.

- In grade 5 (the first year of middle school), this section specifies that teachers should discuss the different sources of information that pupils can access and how these can be explored.
- In grade 6, the section dedicated to digital competencies mentions that pupils need to practice selecting relevant information (out of all possible learning sources) for an efficient learning process.
- In grade 7, pupils' competencies in this field are centred on time management in selecting information from various printed and electronic resources.
- In grade 8, the curriculum finally mentions the teaching of 'IT&C', but only includes provisions for teaching its definition and how pupils should access websites pertaining to their future high school careers.

Civic Education

Civic Education is present as a compulsory subject in the fifth and sixth grade school curriculum. Its stated objective is to train pupils in deepening their knowledge about their development as individuals, as well as learning what values and acceptable social norms are. As a consequence, the objectives of both fifth and sixth grade curriculums are:

- Teaching the fundamental values of democracy and human rights.
- Developing pupils ability to engage in a positive dialogue about differences in human beings.
- Practicing accepting and positive attitudes towards oneself and others.
- Stimulating pupils' interest in participating in community life.

In terms of the fifth grade curriculum plans, the only guidelines related to communication that could also potentially be tied in with teach Internet safety are:

- A provision stating that pupils need to learn how to engage in civilised communication.
- Using role-playing games to solve 'What do I do when...?' situations.

Similarly, the sixth grade curriculum has very few guidelines that are even in the realm of using technology. The two lessons concerning this topic of discussion deal with:

1. Identifying institutions that promote and defend children's rights.
2. Teaching pupils about children's rights to protection against violence, abuse, and exploitation.

Subjects in the high-school curriculum relevant to internet safety training

Counselling and Orientation

This subject is part of the curriculum for all four years of high school education. According to the official papers released by the Department

of Education, 'Counselling and Orientation' seeks to train pupils in the following key competencies set at the European level:

1. Interpersonal, intercultural, social and civic competencies.
2. Learning to learn.
3. Digital competencies (based on skills in using technology for managing information and electronic communication and d. entrepreneurial competencies.

The allotted time for Counselling and Orientation is one hour per week.

It is very clear then, especially after an overview of the detailed curriculum for Counselling and Orientation that all provisions for training pupils in Internet safety would be found under the third heading – digital competencies. A close look at the grade-by-grade syllabi reveals that the specific competencies related to online safety are as follows.

- In grade 9, one goal of the curriculum is to train pupils in 'the adequate use of information to achieve success'. This translates into the key competency which states: pupils will learn about 'IT and communication resources that can be used in obtaining information concerning learning, the workplace and careers'.
- In grade 10, the goal remains the same as above, but the key competency is 'practicing using IT and communications technology for establishing a professional career path and choosing a future career'.
- In grade 11, the key competency related to the use of IT is kept, but a second competency is added: pupils now also learn about 'selection criteria for sources of information'.
- In grade 12, the key competency becomes 'practicing the efficient use of various resources in order to locate, select and evaluate information related to learning, work and career'.

Upon close analysis of provisions for key competencies in the curriculum in grades 9-12, it is clear that there is a lack of notions and specifications related specifically to the Internet and online safety. In grade 10, pupils are expected

to use IT and communications technology in order to find information about future careers. Furthermore, in grade 11, they are expected to differentiate between valuable and less valuable sources of information. But such decision-making abilities cannot be fully formed unless a pupil is equipped with a thorough knowledge not only of existing sources of information, but also of the dangers of using them.

A similar trend can be noticed in the Counselling and Orientation curriculum designed for grades 11 and 12 in vocational and technological schools (which aim to train students in specific occupations). Here, high school students are expected to access the Internet and 'explore the <http://go.ise.ro> website² as well as access the following sites: PLOTEUS, Fit for Europe, the Leonardo and Socrates programmes web-pages. Judging by the general specifications in the official curriculum, by grade-11 students are expected to know how to access these sites by themselves, and also look up information on their own (for example, details about the Socrates European Programme). The ability to surf the Internet is taken as fact, and not questioned by the creators of the curriculum.³ However, they are also trusting that the high school students can make their own decisions about what type of behaviour is considered appropriate online, and what potential dangers are waiting for them as they navigate these websites. A provision for Internet safety would be particularly welcome in the curriculum of vocational and technological schools: as most of them are in the outskirts or rural areas with a majority of low-income families, students find themselves with no help or guidance in how to use the Internet wisely. More often than not, this usually results in teenagers suffering abuse or emotional harm online.

Civic Education

Civic Education is an optional subject. This means that schools choose whether or not to include it in their educational offer, based on the interests of parents, pupils, and teach-

ers. The allotted time for Civic Education is one hour per week and the teachers' lesson plans need to follow the broad guidelines offered by the Department of Education.

For the past three school years (starting with 2008), these broad guidelines have included equipping students with knowledge of political elections, values of democracy, civil society, and tolerance among individuals. Because the subject is an optional one and the specifications are in place merely to guide towards a meaningful and useful discussion with pupils, Civic Education classes are an excellent opportunity to include training in online safety for children.

Up until now, however, a review of existing school plans in a number of schools across a county in Romania,⁴ as well as current debates in the media, has shown that teachers are content with rehashing the basic notions of democracy and what it means to be a citizen; they refuse to integrate newer material dedicated to online safety for children. Previous research by the author has shown the reasons numerous teachers offer for not including training on Internet safety are usually (1) the additional effort needed to prepare the lesson and (2) a lack of knowledge about the topic. This fits with the findings of report published by the Romanian Academic Society, *Escaping the Mediocrity in Schools* (RAD, 2010), which states that – although in principle efforts are made in Romania to reach a level where the school curriculum reflects the general contents of most EU countries – in practice, teachers are still reluctant to integrate newer notions (particularly related to the efficient and correct use of IT&C in schools).

A special case: Health Education

Health Education is an optional subject, present in the curriculum for primary middle and high school (grades 1 through 11). It is addressed primarily to teachers who wish to assume the role of trainer and coach in the growth of the pupils. The subject content is aimed at promoting

2 The website contains the National Guide to Occupations and Job Descriptions

3 Since there is no provision in the vocational school's curriculum for learning to navigate the Internet

4 Which I have discussed in a previous work, "School management in Romanian schools: aspects of evaluation and quality assurance" [unpublished MSc thesis] University of Oxford Department of Education, 2011.

knowledge about various aspects of health, life skills, and responsible behaviour – all of which are crucial elements to leading healthy lives. The presence of this subject in the curriculum – even if it is not mandatory – highlights the fact that the government is aware of the important role that schools plays in the emotional and personal growth of its pupils. Moreover, it translates into an awareness of the substantial contribution that teachers and schools can bring to the life skills that pupils will acquire during their school years.

According to the national guidelines for health education, the developers of the curriculum had four objectives:

1. Suggesting content that is relevant to the sociocultural context of Romania.
2. Coordinating the curriculum with similar curricula at a European level.
3. Introducing practical and useful notions for pupils that are closely connected to the planned contents.
4. Making provisions in the curriculum which could be associated with training in online safety are usually restricted to one specification (translating into one hour of that particular training component).

These provisions are as follows:

- Grades 1 and 2: pupils learn to recognise cases of violence and the feelings associated with these; they participate in decision-making exercises that help them deal with such situations.
- Grade 3: recognise cases of adults abusing children and forms of adult abuse; analyse examples of abuse; comment on such cases that appear in the media.
- Grade 4: recognise the distinction between playfulness and aggression in game playing; respond to others' aggressive behaviour; discuss adult abuse.
- Grade 5: evaluate factors which lead to abusive situations; discuss domestic abuse.
- Grade 6: the concept of self-esteem.
- Grade 7: prevent and solve aggressive and violent behaviour.
- Grade 8: discuss violence in mass-media and ways of preventing that violence.

- Grade 9: apply strategies to minimise potentially dangerous situations; the influence of pornography.
- Grade 10: legislation concerning child abuse, child pornography, and sexual harassment online.
- Grade 11: violence and abuse of teenagers: social and emotional consequences; learning the difference between aggressor and victim.

Looking closely at this list of provisions selected from the Health Education curriculum, it is noticeable that there is a good progression in what concerns teaching children basic notions related to violence and abuse. However, it is also clear that those who designed the contents of the curriculum did not adapt it to the developments in the use of the Internet over the past few years. There have been a number of reports (Save the Children Romania published comprehensive statistics in 2009 and 2010) which state that over 75% of young people aged 6 to 12 spend a significant time online (Save the Children Romania, 2009; Sigur.info, 2010), which means that they are usually online for more than one hour every day. What is more, 60% of them reported that they have at one point or another been contacted by adults with inappropriate messages, and 24% of these have received explicit sexual content in their mailboxes from these adults. The statistics are even higher for teenagers (13 to 17). Over 90% of young people in this age bracket use the Internet regularly, mostly for socialising and 18% admit to sending private, sensitive information to individuals they have met online, without knowing them personally. Given these statistics, it is worrying that the Government waits until a pupil is in grade 10 to inform him or her about topics related to child abuse, child pornography, and sexual harassment online. At the same time, a large amount of space in the Health Education curriculum is devoted to notions of aggression and aggressive behaviour. It is not to say that such notions are not important, but to spend three or four times as much on discussing aggressive behaviour seems a little hit-and-miss, when – according to the statistics – it is much more likely that these pupils will encounter abusive behaviour online rather than aggressive behaviour in their own backyards.

Making way for the future: final thoughts and further action

It is obvious from what concerns the Romanian school curriculum, that notions such as key competencies and skills have been treated superficially. Only in 2010 were these concepts introduced in the National Education Law, even if they had already (gradually) been present in the curriculum. It seems, however, that the introduction is merely a surface action, one that looks good on paper, but has no real connection with what is actually taught in schools or what the detailed provisions for teaching are. The broad goals in subjects such as Civic Education and Health Education include correlating the curriculum with the needs of the pupils and the socio-cultural context; but they bear little connection to the reality of the world outside the classroom: a world in which just knowing the theory behind human rights serves no purpose to a young child who is faced with an online predator and does not know it. If there is no fundamental change in the way the government approaches the restructuring of the curriculum to address the needs of the children (and especially the issue of teaching online safety), the situation will only become more confusing.

The restructuring of the school curriculum on a national level should take place in a way that first of all correlates the needs of the pupils with the contents of the subjects taught; secondly, includes a specific training component in online safety in at least one subject (Counselling, Civic Education, Health Education), and finally, seeks to correlate the curriculum with the provisions that exist in other EU countries.

How can the Romanian government do this? First, by taking a frank and honest look at the existing curriculum and subject specifications, for all grades; secondly, by assigning a team of consultants tasked with looking at examples of good practices in terms of introducing Internet safety training in their school curricula; thirdly, by analysing how these good practices can then be adapted to the Romanian context.⁵ Last but

not least, by redesigning the curriculum from top-to-bottom, implementing it, and obtaining feedback from all stakeholders in the educational process (pupils, parents, educators, principals, and government representatives) after it has been in a place for a reasonable period of time.

But until the Romanian government revamps the entire curriculum, teachers could have a bottom-up approach to redesigning the curriculum. This would involve taking individual steps to create a personalised training programme in online safety that pupils can benefit from immediately. For example:

- Participating in training sessions about the dangers of using Internet irresponsibly. Non-governmental organisations such as Save the Children have a strong presence in Romania and organise such training seminars frequently. In this way, teachers can deepen their knowledge about the issue and serve as trainers for pupils.
- Using media (clips, short movies, cartoons) to make education about Internet safety a pleasurable activity. Very few children will sit through long lectures which use complex terminology. What they need to see are examples and practical applications of how their actions online can affect their lives in the real world, if they do not learn the basics of responsible Web surfing.
- Installing parental-control-type software on all school computers. There are at least three filtering programs on the Romanian market offered for free by companies which are interested in promoting a safe Internet experience for children.
- Creating mentoring programmes, where older children (in grades 8 and up, for example) can lead informal sessions about their negative experiences online and what lessons they learned. This would complement the formal element of instruction and encourage children to listen and pay attention, since they can relate better to the speakers, especially in the case of sensitive notions such as cyberbullying and harassing.
- Forming partnerships between teachers and parents. There is only so much that a school

⁵ This step is usually the most flawed one in cases of adopting examples from other countries. Romania has a long-standing tradition of incorporating educational policies and methods without adapting them to the national context.

After all, no two countries are the same.

can teach. The knowledge that a student has about online safety will not be put into practice without the careful monitoring of parents at home. Therefore, it is crucial for parents to learn about the importance of online safety education and learn the basic elements necessary to supervise their children's behaviour on the Internet.

The experiences that children have on the Internet are present on a continuum, from traumatising to pleasurable and productive. Since the Romanian curriculum offers few – if any – provisions for training in online safety, it is up to parents and teachers to become actively involved in guiding and mentoring pupils. Teachers especially can take advantage of the opportunities offered by such subjects as Civic Education, Counselling, or the optional Health Education to construct a personalised and effective programme in child safety online. Only in this way will children be able to acquire the knowledge and skills that they need in order to guard themselves from the dangers that invariably come with being present online.

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