Risks and opportunities in new emancipatory landscapes? On young people with intellectual disabilities, Internet use and identification processes

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Abstract

Although research on young peoples identity formation processes on the Internet is a growing field, there are few studies that illustrate conditions for pupils with intellectual disabilities (ID). Recent Scandinavian studies have indicated that there is a new generation of young people with ID who has developed alternative ways of relating to issues of participation and identity. It's about how they choose to present themselves and how they navigate the various social media. By presenting themselves through descriptions of their own interests and personal characteristics instead of exposing the disability so-called alternative identities can be developed, where disability is not necessarily put in focus. Young people with ID often have different degrees of communicative constraints, which on the one hand implicates that the value of new social arenas can be of great importance. On the other hand, the use of the Internet could also be problematic in different contexts. An on-going Swedish research project aims to investigate these processes based on the perspectives of young people with ID, school staff and parents. In a pilot study based on focus group interviews we found that professionals (teachers, n=8) expressed a concern that young people will get hurt and end up in undesirable situations (such as being cheated or abused), while parents (n=5) mainly consider the Internet as a possible future venue for the development of new and on-going social relations. This paper presentation will report preliminary findings from interviews conducted with young people in upper secondary special programme for pupils with ID (n=30). The experiences of the informants will be discussed in relation to results from the pilot study and relative to a conceptual framework of social identity, participation and emancipation.

Keywords: Intellectual disability, Internet, social participation, social media, identification processes

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