

Međunarodna naučna konferencija
International scientific conference

Pedagogija – juče, danas, sutra
Pedagogy – yesterday, today, tomorrow

Zbornik radova
Book of proceedings



Novi Sad, 2023

UNIVERZITET U NOVOM SADU/UNIVERSITY OF NOVI SAD
FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET/FACULTY OF PHILOSOPHY
21000 Novi Sad
Dr Zorana Đinđića 2
www.ff.uns.ac.rs

Za izdavača/Representing the publisher
Prof. dr Ivana Živančević Sekeruš

Pedagogija – juče danas, sutra/Pedagogy – yesterday, today, tomorrow
Zbornik radova/Conference proceedings

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Štampa/Printed by
Futura
Novi Sad

ISBN
978-86-6065-817-5



Novi Sad, 2023

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Međunarodna naučna konferencija „Pedagogija – juče, danas, sutra“ održana 26.5.2023. godine na Filozofskom fakultetu u Novom Sadu

International scientific conference „Pedagogy – yesterday, today, tomorrow“ was held on the 26th of May, 2023. at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad, Serbia

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Svi radovi objavljeni u Zborniku radova sa međunarodnog naučnog skupa *Pedagogija – juče, danas, sutra* anonimno su recenzirani i dobili su po dve pozitivne recenzije.

All papers published in the Conference proceedings from the International Scientific Conference „Pedagogy – yesterday, today, tomorrow“ were reviewed anonymously and received two positive reviews each.

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REFLECTIONS OF THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT ON FAMILY EDUCATION - THE NEED FOR PARENT EMPOWERMENT¹

Abstract. The intensive use of digital technology by children affected already complicated parenting roles, resulting in new responsibilities and particularities in parent-child interaction. In contemporary literature, this is conceptualized through the phenomenon of digital parenting. With this research, we aimed to examine parents' perception of their empowerment to engage in digital parenting and mediate their children's use of digital technology. We examined parents' attitudes towards technology and the risks and potentials of using technology by children; how parents perceive children's digital literacy; and whether they recognize their role in the process of children's digital literacy development. Our focus was on their empowerment to "be parents" to children in the digital age, and how confident they feel to deal with the challenges brought by the digital environment. The findings indicate that while the majority of parents estimate that they are empowered enough to monitor and regulate their children's interactions with digital technology, some parents claim that they need additional support or training to manage and control their children's digital activities.

Keywords: parenting, digital technology, parental mediation, parent empowerment.

¹ This research was funded by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia (Contract No. 451-03-47/2023-01/ 200163).

Introduction

Digital technology has been an essential part of our daily lives, work, education, leisure, and family life for some time now. This is a “natural environment” for the new generations of children who are born and brought up with constant exposure to technology. For parents who grew up in a different environment, this represents a source of numerous parental concerns, challenges, and uncertainties regarding their empowerment to mediate children’s interactions with technology and new responsibilities in terms of developing the digital literacy of their children. Contemporary literature refers to this phenomenon as digital parenting and defines it as parental efforts and engagement in regulating and supporting children’s activities in the digital environment (parental mediation) (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Livingstone & Byrne, 2018).

Studies have found different parental mediation practices, which can be grouped into two broad categories: enabling and restrictive mediation (Livingstone et al., 2017; Smahelova et al., 2017; Symons et al., 2017). This distinction is based on different types of interactions between parents and children (Chen & Shi, 2019). Enabling parental mediation involves supporting children in using digital technology, whereas restrictive tends to set strict rules regarding their use. In addition to these two, there is a third type of mediation referred to as “participatory learning” (Clark, 2011), which implies that children teach their parents about technology. This challenges the model based on parental power, authority and expertise and emphasizes the need for parent empowerment (Nichols & Selim, 2022). Based on the empowerment theory (Zimmerman, 2000), the concept of empowerment involves both the process and the result of the achieved level of empowerment and refers to the processes by which individuals (parents) gain power, authority, access to resources, and control in the context of adequate mediation in children’s interactions with technology.

Research results indicate that restrictive measures can reduce opportunities for children to gain experiences with digital technology, and to learn, explore, and develop digital skills (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008, Livingstone et al., 2015). On the other hand, enabling mediation supports the development of digital literacy, but the results of the EU Kids Online research conducted in Serbia, show that children underestimate their parents’ digital skills in comparison to their own (Kuzmanović et al., 2019).

The knowledge provided by the scientific literature is becoming increasingly distant from what is needed to create evidence-based guidelines on the use of digital technology by children and on the appropriate response of

parents. Therefore, there is a need for research that would consider the specifics of the current state of digital technology development with an emphasis on the parents' empowerment to engage in mediating children's digital activities, in order to support children developing digital literacy.

Methodology

This research aimed to examine parents' perceptions of their empowerment to mediate children's digital activities. We examined parents' attitudes towards technology in general; the risks and potential of using digital technology by children; how parents perceive children's digital literacy; and whether they recognize their role in the process of children's digital literacy development. We focused on examining the extent to which parents feel empowered to mediate children's digital activities, and what kind of support they need in this context.

A descriptive method was used to describe in detail the empowerment of parents to engage in mediation. The data was collected through an online survey and analysed using descriptive statistics in SPSS. A total of 535 parents of children ages 10 to 15 from Serbia completed the survey, among which 475 were mothers (89%) and 60 fathers (11%). The sample consisted of parents of different levels of education (from primary school to a PhD level), aged 29 to 62, with the highest percentage of parents (60%) from the 40 to 49 age category.

Results and discussion

Collected data show that 51% of parents have a fairly positive attitude towards technology in general. The attitude was calculated as a composite score consisting of 7 items representing different advantages and disadvantages of using technology. Parents think that technology makes their lives easier, connects them with others and can help to learn new things. Parents regularly use social networks (63%), but only 38% of them feel safe on the Internet and freely browse all content. Since the parents recognize the benefits of technology on a personal level, the question arises whether it is reasonable to expect that parents will have a positive attitude towards children using digital technology. This assumption is supported by the data reflecting parents' perceptions of children's use of technology (Table 1).

Table 1. Parents' perceptions of children's use of technology (N = 535)

Items	M	SD
Technology can facilitate the learning process for children.	3.03	0.75
Using technology leads to the development of skills necessary for a digital age.	3.01	0.76
Technology takes up too much of children's time.	3.50	0.71
Children should start using technology as later as possible.	3.17	0.79
Parents should monitor how their children use digital technology.	2.94	0.98

Note. Parents provided their responses on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree).

The gathered data indicate a correlation between parents' positive attitude towards digital technology in general and their perception of children's interaction with technology. Parents did report that they see the potential of digital technology as a support for learning and developing the necessary skills for living in a digital society. The findings also show that parents are aware that their children spend too much time with technology. A noteworthy finding is that 72% of them recognised that it is important for parents to monitor their children's digital activities.

Although some parents recognize their role in developing children's digital literacy, most of them believe that school plays a primary role in this, or even that children develop digital literacy on their own (Table 2). It should be taken into account that the children of our respondents are in primary school, but the importance of parents' role in this process should not be underestimated. This calls for reflection on the reasons for such a distribution of answers, but also on the extent to which parents are aware of online challenges and dangers, and how empowered they are to mediate the child's interactions with technology.

Table 2. Parents' perceptions on digital literacy development (N = 535)

Items	M	SD
Children are more digitally literate than adults.	3.24	0.77
Children develop digital literacy on their own.	2.60	0.96
Children should develop digital literacy in school.	3.06	0.74
Developing digital literacy in children is primarily the parents' task.	2.54	0.82

Note. Parents provided their responses on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree).

The parents' perceptions of their empowerment to mediate children's digital activities are optimistic. The majority of parents (68%) are aware of their digital literacy and consider themselves competent enough to help their children

use digital technology (76%). They estimate that they are empowered to monitor and regulate (72%), but also to support children's digital activities (78%), i.e., for both restrictive and enabling mediation.

Despite this, some parents feel insecure (43%) and even afraid of being a parent in the digital age (42%). These data can be interpreted in two ways. It can be assumed that parents feel fear due to the experience of insufficient self-empowerment, or that fear positively correlates with increasing knowledge of online challenges and risks.

Some parents use the potential of technology for personal empowerment. They use information from the Internet on how to mediate their children's digital activities (51%), and some of them (23%) actively use forums and share experiences with other parents regarding children's use of technology.

Almost half of the surveyed parents (48%) estimate that they need some form of support concerning the ways of managing children's digital activities: 41% need professional help in blocking unacceptable content, 53% believe that they lack knowledge about different forms of child protection on the Internet, 47% need training on the proper use of technology by children, and 40% need training for using applications for monitoring children's activities on the Internet.

Pedagogical implications

As the digital world is still a new and not entirely familiar environment for parents, there is a justified need for parents' support both in terms of developing their digital literacy and in terms of mediating children's digital activities. In such a situation, parents often turn to informal forms of support, i.e., content created based on the experiences of parents and other individuals.

There are also formal forms of support related to expert recommendations, or training for parents, i.e., the content in question is supported by scientific literature, scientific facts and research results. It is precisely in providing such types of support that we recognize the importance of the role of pedagogists. Whether it is about their *scientific work* – conducting research, publishing results and pedagogical implications, and writing scientific literature; *theoretical work* – “pedagogical thinking”, i.e. answering key questions about the purpose and essence of upbringing and education today, values that should be nurtured, changes and achievements in society that necessarily affect changes in the field of upbringing and education; *educational work* – in the sense of educating future pedagogists and including in their initial education the considerations of the complexity of life in the digital age, the potential and risks of digital technology,

not only for education but for life in general; or their *practical work* – through the design and implementation of training for parents, raising parents' awareness through cooperation within the school or advisory work; the role of pedagogists is crucial for designing and implementing adequate support for parents.

Conclusion

It is indisputable that parents see the benefits of digital technology and show readiness to use it for their empowerment in various areas. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that some parents are afraid, and these fears are a consequence of accelerated digitalization and a feeling of insufficient readiness and empowerment for new parenting roles and responsibilities, which include mediating children's interaction with technology. In addition to the parents' perceptions, the children's perspective should be explored, whether and to what extent they need to involve their parents in interactions they have with technology. When these two sides oppose each other, one should also ask what is the true measure of respecting the child's autonomy in an online environment, where is the limit and where is the necessary influence of the parents. Are parents the child's first mediators with the digital as well as the immediate environment, and do they have the natural capacity to be so? Some of them claim to have quite sufficient or above-average capacities, but what about the rest? They can find support precisely in the digital environment, since verified knowledge of experts on digital parenting, as well as the experiences of other parents or individuals who share their impressions via the Internet, are mostly available there. The question is, should we leave parents on their own to search for the necessary support online, or rather recognize the importance of pedagogists in empowering them for digital parenting?

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REFLEKSIJE DIGITALNOG OKRUŽENJA NA PORODIČNO VASPITANJE – POTREBA ZA OSNAŽIVANJEM RODITELJA

Sažetak: Intenzivna upotreba digitalnih tehnologija od strane dece dovela je do usložnjavanja roditeljskih uloga i proizvela nove odgovornosti i specifičnosti u interakciji roditelja i deteta. U savremenoj literaturi, to je konceptualizovano kroz fenomen digitalnog roditeljstva. Ovim istraživanjem imali smo za cilj da ispitamo percepcije roditelja o sopstvenoj osnaženosti da se uključe u digitalno roditeljstvo i posreduju u korišćenju digitalne tehnologije od strane dece. Ispitali smo stavove roditelja prema tehnologiji uopšte, kao i rizicima i potencijalima korišćenja tehnologije od strane dece; kako roditelji

vide digitalnu pismenost dece i da li prepoznaju sopstvenu ulogu u procesu razvijanja digitalne pismenosti kod dece. Akcenat smo stavili na saznanje o percepcijama roditelja o njihovoj osnaženosti da „budu roditelji“ deci u digitalnom dobu i koliko se osećaju sigurnim da se izbore sa izazovima koje donosi digitalno okruženje. Dobijeni podaci ukazuju na to da iako većina roditelja procenjuje da su dovoljno osnaženi da prate i regulišu interakcije svoje dece sa digitalnom tehnologijom, postoje i oni kojima je potrebna dodatna podrška ili obuka u vezi sa načinima regulisanja i usmeravanja dečjih digitalnih aktivnosti.

Ključne reči: roditeljstvo, digitalne tehnologije, posredovanje, medijacija, osnaživanje roditelja.

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Elektronsko izdanje

CIP - Каталогизација у публикацији
Библиотека Матице српске, Нови Сад