
Young Children Online: E-Learning in a Social Networking Context

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Abstract: SuperClubsPLUS is a supported social networking site for children aged 6-12. While it is evident that children in the 9-12 age group have embraced SuperClubsPLUS with enthusiasm, it is important to consider the 6-8 group working in the space. This age group is likely to become even more confident with the Web 2.0 tools than their older siblings and they are potentially more vulnerable to cyber-safety issues. On the other hand, these children are learning about cyber-safety and cyber citizenship at an earlier age. The present study investigated what young children did in SuperClubsPLUS, how they interacted with other children and what skills they were learning. In particular it examined cyber-safety skills in the context of transferability.

Keywords: SuperClubsPLUS, Web 2.0, Cyber-safety, Younger Children, Social Networking.

Biographical notes: Jennifer Masters is a senior lecturer in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Education and the Bachelor of Education Course Coordinator at Latrobe University, Bendigo. She has taught in schools at both Early Childhood and Primary levels and specializes in the integration of ICT in curriculum. Her research interest areas include informal learning, social networking, using ICT for “real” purposes, publishing and presenting with computers, and computer-based problem-solving opportunities. She completed her Ph. D thesis relating to young children using computers, with a focus on how teachers can “scaffold” or support children working with computers. Her thesis was published as a book in 2008 — *Teachers scaffolding children working with computers: An analysis of strategies*. Jennifer’s current research relates to the use of computers and associated technologies in informal contexts. She is particularly interested in children engaging in social networking, cyber-citizenship and the use technology for creative purposes, such as digital storytelling and animation.

Suzanne Barr is Senior Researcher for the social learning networks, SuperClubsPLUS Australia and Gold Star Cafe. She is a primary and secondary school teacher of 20 years and holds a Bachelor of Education, Bachelor of Arts, Post Graduate Diploma and Master of Education. Suzanne has recently completed a year-long major research project investigating the cyber-safety of young children and the value of social networks in primary schools. Focus areas for the study were online risks and opportunities and approaches to cyber-

safety education particularly in Social Learning networks. Cyber-safety was a major component of the research focusing on Cyber-bullying, as was the role of SuperClubsPLUS in meeting student learning outcomes including ICT, Cyber-safety, Literacy and Civics and Citizenship. The study also investigated, though to a lesser degree, teacher pedagogy in SuperClubsPLUS and the impact of SCPA on teacher use of ICT.

1. Introduction

Although online social networking environments such as “Bebo” and “Facebook” are very attractive to children, a major concern of parents and educators is that children may publish information or images about themselves or converse with people who may be a threat to them, either virtually or physically. Despite these concerns it appears that parents are giving in to pressure and allowing their children to use the Internet for social purposes. The National School Boards Association (2007), in a U.S. survey of 1,277 children aged 9-17, reported that almost all (96%) of children with Internet access used social networking technology.

In response to this scenario, the report, while acknowledging the need to set rules about cyber-safety, recommends that “students may learn these lessons better while they’re actually using social networking tools” and that social networking environments should be adjusted to be “explicitly educational in nature” (p. 8). Tynes (2007) also believes in a proactive approach. She suggests that strategies for keeping children safe online need to be based on the technological awareness and sophistication of the children involved. Rather than banning the use of social networking tools, the use of these tools needs to be harnessed to support the cognitive and social advantages that this type of environment can offer.

In Victoria, Australia, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) recognizes that cyber-safety and cyber-citizenship are key challenges for parents, teachers, and children in schools, and has thus responded to the challenges with a number of initiatives. One of these initiatives is their funding of all Years 3 and 4 students to participate in the SuperClubsPLUS Australia project for 2009 and 2010 (DEECD, 2009). “SuperClubsPLUS” has been highly successful since its Australian implementation in 2008, with almost 90,000 members by the end of 2009. The majority (60,000) of the students participating in this project are from 505 participating Victorian schools, largely as a result of the DEECD initiatives.

While it is evident from early evaluations (Intuitive Media, 2009) that the Years 3 and 4 students participating in SuperClubsPLUS have learned lots about cyber-safety and how to be cyber citizens, it is also apparent that many of these children have also already been participating in less safe online environments, such as “Club Penguin”, “Moshi Monsters”, “MSN messenger”, and even Facebook. Children in Years 3 and 4 are turning 9 and 10, which puts them on the beginning of the National School Boards Association scale (2007) for active online social networking activity. Would it be an advantage for children who are younger than Years 3 and 4 to begin their cyber-safety training in SuperClubsPLUS before they are tempted to join other less secure social networking sites?

This study profiles students from Years 1 and 2, aged between 6 and 8 who were participating in SuperClubsPLUS. While these students belonged to a marginal group, their patterns of involvement and activity can provide some useful insights into the possibilities of working with younger students.

2. What is SuperClubsPLUS?

SuperClubsPLUS is an online learning community for children aged 6-12 to participate in social networking. SuperClubsPLUS was an initiative of Intuitive Media, an organization that was founded in 1998 in England. SuperClubsPLUS, emerged in 2006 from a previous project known as “GridClubs: SuperClubs”, provides an online learning community for children to talk to current friends and meet new ones, publish and be creative, participate in forums and discussions, and learn new information and communication technology (ICT) skills. SuperClubsPLUS is a safe environment because: (a) All members are authenticated through their schools and only children and teachers from registered schools can access the environment; (b) highly trained mediators are rostered on to facilitate interactions, scaffold creative work, and actively protect the children; (c) teachers and mediators can see everything that their students write or create (children are alerted to this every time they construct an email); and (d) sophisticated content checking tools are used by the mediators to monitor all communications, protecting children from bullying or abuse.

The SuperClubsPLUS interface displays the range of activity provided for children in the environment (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The SuperClubsPLUS Australia Interface

In general terms, SuperClubsPLUS provides an opportunity for children to: (a) Communicate with their teachers, other children, and mediators via secure internal email; (b) create websites on their interests and favorite topics; (c) contribute to discussion forums, clubs and projects on a wide range of subjects; (d) develop ICT skills in areas such as web safety, publishing and page construction via the “Star Awards”; (e) participate in online polls, quizzes, and surveys; (f) talk with experts or guests in the “Hot Seat” forum events; and (g) play collaborative games such as rhyming words, counting on and role playing in make-believe settings.

SuperClubsPLUS provides a rich environment for personalized and social learning. While the program may be implemented by a teacher as a part of the school curriculum in a traditional sense, much of the interaction is informal with children (and teachers)

participating in their leisure time in out of school contexts. This type of use is supported by the extended opening hours, including weekends. The children have full access to all facilities during “Live Time”, usually from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. during the week and 11:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. on weekends, and “Build Time” when they can work on constructions such as articles, web pages or projects, but not communications.

3. Method

There are currently 505 schools in Victoria who have children subscribed to SuperClubsPLUS but most of them only offer SuperClubsPLUS to children from Years 3-6. The sample schools of this study were randomly selected from the schools that had children from Year 2 or Years 1 and 2 subscribed to SuperClubsPLUS and activated their accounts (some schools had registered children but the accounts had not been activated). Additionally the schools were required to have some of these children who were active users of SuperClubsPLUS. “Active” users were defined as those children who had performed at least 5 logins, had logged in at least once in the previous 2 months, had edited their homepages at least once, and had either sent at least one email or had earned at least one “star” (will be explained in later paragraphs).

This process identified 160 students (from seven schools) as “younger” SuperClubsPLUS members. Thirty-nine of these students were Year 1 students with an age ranged from 6 years and 7 months to 7 years and 4 months (average age = 7). One hundred and twenty one students were from Year 2 and their ages ranged from 7 years and 7 months to 8 years and 5 months (average age = 8).

The Intuitive Community Engine (ICE)¹ is a proprietary database that provides detailed information about SuperClubsPLUS activity, artefact development, and other statistical information. In this study ICE was used to develop a profile for each of the students in the sample. The profile included information about how often the student had logged in to SuperClubsPLUS, how many times they contributed to forum discussion, how many emails they had sent and received, and how many times they had edited their homepages. It also recorded how many stars and other awards (displays as badges on the homepage) the child had received since starting SuperClubsPLUS. Finally any “incidents”, where the child had received an email warning from a mediator was also noted. More information about any of these aspects was then available through email records and other artefacts created by the students.

The profiling of young SuperClubsPLUS members provided some interesting and sometimes surprising information about their preferences, engagement, and capabilities.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Participation

It is important to firstly identify that there are comparatively few Years 1 and 2 students in Victoria using SuperClubsPLUS actively. There are 505 Victorian schools currently registered in SuperClubsPLUS and most of them have all Year 3 and Year 4 students registered as a part of the Department of Education and Early Training’s funding

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initiative. In comparison, only 16 schools have registered Year 2 or Years 1 and 2 and this is usually as a part of a “whole school” registration. Some of the schools have established the accounts for the younger children but are yet to provide students with access to activate their accounts.

The seven schools in this study were selected from the 16 schools that had Year 2 or Years 1 and 2 registered and had given students access to their accounts. In these schools though, there were quite a few students in these year levels had not activated their accounts. Yet there were more who had activated their accounts and logged in a few times but had not started using SuperClubsPLUS in any significant way. The users who were included in this study were required to not only have activated their account but also be active users, as defined earlier in this study (Figures 2 and 3).

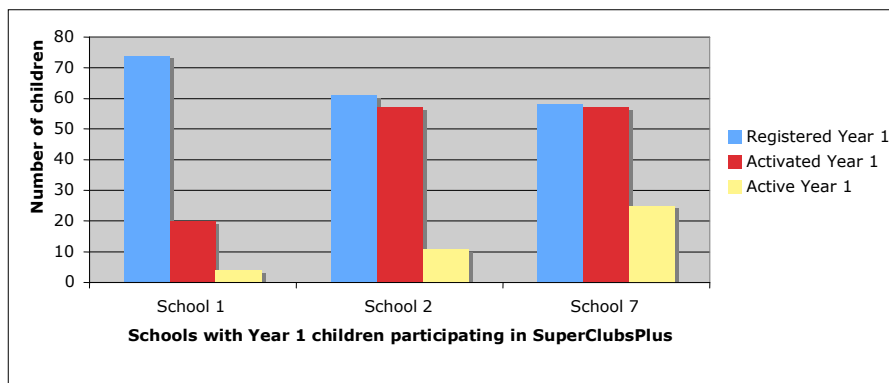


Figure 2. Status of Year 1 SuperClubsPLUS Members in Sample Schools

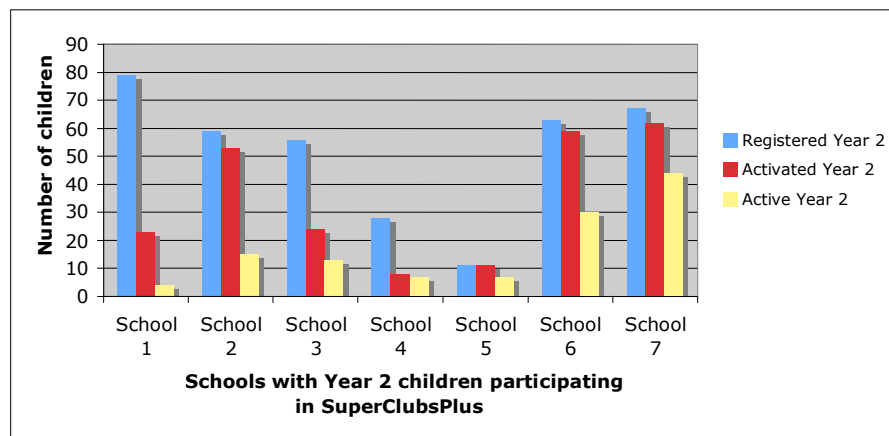


Figure 3. Status of Year 2 SuperClubsPLUS Members in Sample Schools

4.2. Patterns of Use

At a global level, there were obviously some differences in how the different schools worked with young children and SuperClubsPLUS. For example, in Schools 1, 4, and 5, there were less than 10 younger students who actively participated in SuperClubsPLUS.

In these circumstances the use was likely to be informal rather than guided by the schools. The time of access is a good indicator in this situation. In School 1, most of the activities took place between 2:45 p.m. and 5:00 p.m. This most probably indicates that the few Years 1 and 2 children actively participated in SuperClubsPLUS in this school accessed the online community informally as part of an Out of School Care program. In Schools 4 and 5, the numbers of active users were also low but these students accessed the SuperClubsPLUS environment mostly at home time and occasionally at lunchtime. Further, the absence of emails from teachers at these schools supports the notion that students were independent in their use of SuperClubsPLUS.

On the other hand, Schools 6 and 7 had many more students from Years 1 and 2 participated actively in SuperClubsPLUS and it is evident that the students were given access to the SuperClubsPLUS environment during class time. Students from Schools 6 and 7 created artefacts during the school day and sent emails to each other in a school context. It is interesting though that these students did not appear to receive emails from teachers either. This would indicate that although they got to use SuperClubsPLUS in class time, the use of SuperClubsPLUS was an independent activity and was perhaps one of several activities the students might do in “computer time”.

At a school level, the amount of activities and the sophistication of interactions varied tremendously. A useful general guide to the volume of use was the total number of transactions per user. Transactions occur when a user logs in, posts to a forum, sends an email, edits his or her homepage, or earns a badge or a star. Figure 4 represents the numbers of transactions of the least and the most active users of each group of participants.

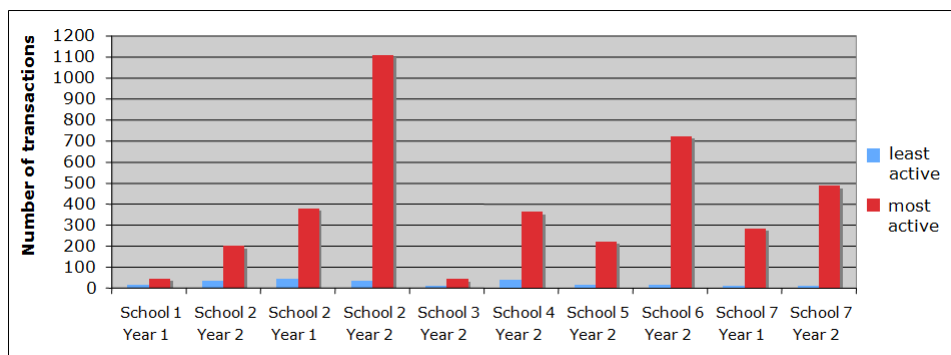


Figure 4. The Numbers of Transactions of the Least and the Most Active Users of Each Group of Participants

Although it might be reasonable to assume that the highest use would come from a group with the most active students or from the schools that allowed children to access SuperClubsPLUS during class times, it was interesting that the volume of use by individual users did not seem to correlate with these characteristics. Further, although Year 2 students were more active (average number of transactions = 130) than Year 1 (average number of transactions = 78), it was surprising that many of the Year 1 students were extremely active and some of their activities were quite comparable to the Year 2 students. For example, one Year 1 girl (6 years 10 months) whose account at the time of this study had only been activated for 2 months, logged on 68 times, edited her homepage 110 times, and sent 105 emails.

4.3. Choice of Activity

One of the advantages of the SuperClubsPLUS environment is that children have a wide range of activity that they can choose from. This is particularly important for children who have emerging literacies because it means that they can engage with the communication mechanisms that they feel most comfortable with. The students in this study used the principal communication devices in SuperClubsPLUS — forums, emails, and homepages (Figure 5). However, there was a distinct preference for the asynchronous forms of communication, i.e. editing a homepage or sending an email, rather than for synchronous forum posts. Most of the students in this study were yet to post in a forum. This is perhaps not surprising, as this type of communication requires students to read and write fairly quickly. On the other hand, the forums in SuperClubsPLUS were usually popular among the older students. It might perhaps be better for the younger children not to wade in straight away.

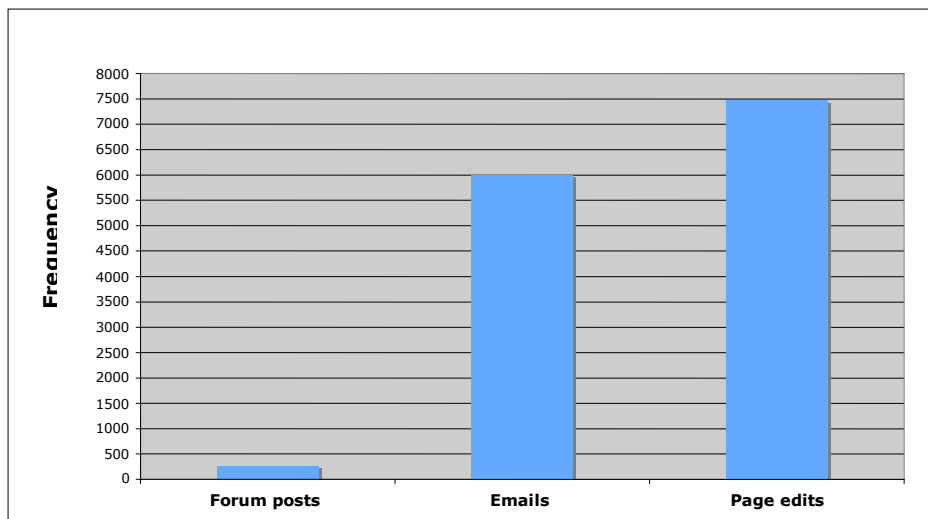


Figure 5. Total Number of Communication Activities of the Participants

The other pastime that holds significant focus in the SuperClubsPLUS environment is earning “stars” and other awards or badges. Stars are particularly important for SuperClubsPLUS users because they are a mechanism to teach them about aspects of cyber-safety, emailing, and webpage editing. Each star covers a different aspect or theme. One of the requirements for a student to be considered as “active” for this study was that he/ she should have reached at least the first star level (the white star, for *safety*) or, if he/ she had not achieved a star, he/ she should have at least sent an email. The majority of the students had earned the white star. In addition, 38 students had reached the second star level (red), themed *getting started*, and another 38 had obtained the third star (green) for *communication*. Only a few students had reached the fourth star level (blue) for *media* and the fifth star level (yellow) for *codes and links* (Figure 6).

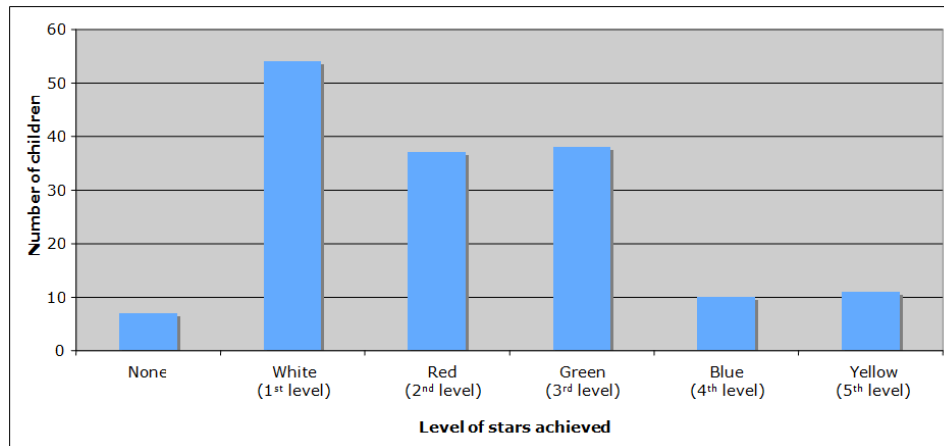


Figure 6. Star Achievements of Participants

It is interesting to note that a student could be prolific in one area but not the other. One student who had earned all five stars had only sent seven emails. On the other hand, another student had sent over 300 emails but earned only two stars. A student had sent 40 emails but was still to earn his first star.

Some of the students also earned extra awards for completing surveys or quizzes such as the maple leaf (a quiz about Canada), the RSPCA egg project, and the ACMA CyberSafety quiz. A few students were awarded badges by their teachers for things such as completing class projects or particular activities in SuperClubsPLUS (Figure 7).

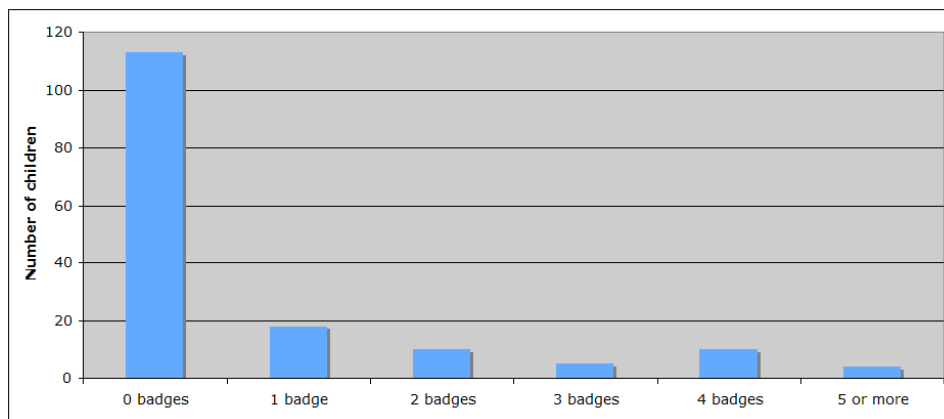


Figure 7. Badge Achievements of Participants

4.4. Community of Learners

There is really no evidence in the email records that shows any of the seven sampled schools used SuperClubsPLUS as a curriculum activity. As identified previously, it appears as if the participants only used SuperClubsPLUS in informal settings or as an unstructured activity during computer time. What was obvious, though, was that these children were strategic in asking for help from other SuperClubsPLUS users, most often students that they knew in higher grades or sometimes their older siblings. It is highly

possible that this characteristic was the key to why these students were active users of SuperClubsPLUS while some of their peers were not. Most of the students in the sample received more emails than they sent and the received emails were usually from older children at the same schools. Even some of the emails from older children were simply encouragement or requests, such as “please visit my page”, most of the older children were willing to help with a problem if required.

Emails from older children were also useful as templates for the younger children. This email was sent to a Year 1 girl from a Year 5 girl at the same school:

Hey Maja,

How are you? I really liked your site. Do you think you could visit mine and tell me what you liked the most about it and what you think could be improved.

Thanks heaps,

Jane

This email provided a good model of the activities that happened in SuperClubsPLUS and showed the younger child how to invite people to interact with her. While there was not a reply from the Year 1 girl it was possible she would visit the webpage as requested and consequently get to experience a sophisticated and well-developed SuperClubsPLUS webpage.

4.5. Warnings and Incidents

Warning emails are a key component of mediation in SuperClubsPLUS. If a child posts or emails something that breaches one of the SuperClubsPLUS rules, a mediator will send an email pointing out the problem and reminding the child of the rule. An “incident” is also recorded in the database. Considering that the participants in this study logged in 4,667 times, posted 260 times in the forums, sent 6,004 emails and edited their pages 7,467 times, it is quite amazing that only 17 incidents were recorded. Figure 8 shows the incident types logged.

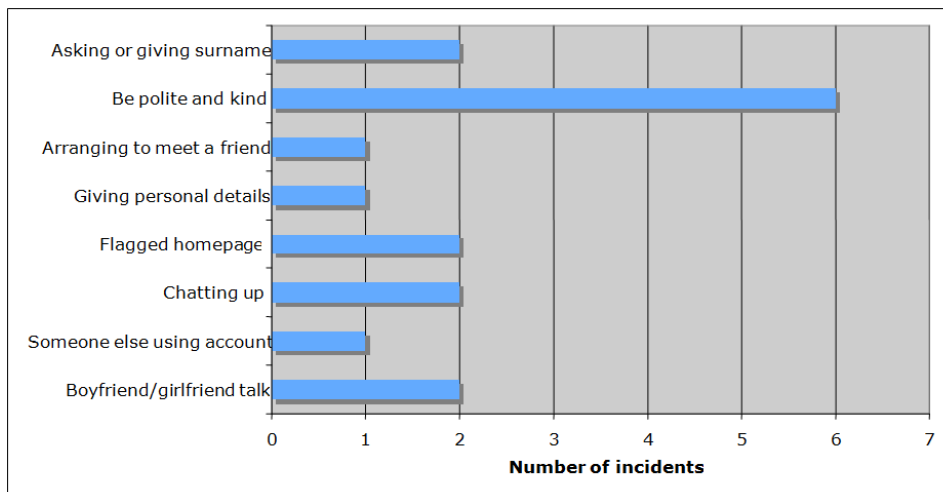


Figure 8. Incidents Recorded

A Year 2 student received seven out of the eight types of incidents depicted in Figure 8 and another three students received two incidents each. Most of these incidents were considered to be minor in SuperClubsPLUS, except for “someone else using account” in which the user was suspended from SuperClubsPLUS until the teacher sorted out why the account was used by someone else and changed the password. In this situation, it was an older sibling who thought it would be fine to send an email from the younger sibling’s account. Upon receiving the warning, the siblings were careful not to share the account again.

When a homepage is “flagged” it means that it contains something unsuitable and no other student can visit the website until it is rectified. Unfortunately, the two websites flagged in this sample were still not fixed several weeks after the incidents. It was likely that the two students did not understand the instructions from the mediator and might need more tangible help to solve their problems. It is interesting to note that none of the incidents were for “discussing unsafe websites — MSN, Facebook, etc.” This breach of rules is the most common incident for older children.

5. Conclusions

It is evident that young children are already participating in social networking and the age for participation is becoming younger all the time. Although the majority of students using the SuperClubsPLUS environment are 9- and 10-year-olds, it is evident that some younger students, aged between 6 and 8, can also be very confident and competent in the environment. Although it is feasible that many students of this age do not have the literacy or technical skills to navigate social networking effectively, some younger children are developmentally ready and can benefit greatly from early interactions in a supported online environment. There is logic in the argument that young children can benefit from supported programs that teach about cyber-safety in order to help to shape their cyber-safe practices before social networking becomes an integral part of their life.

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