Virtual Schools: The Context of Socialization

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Almost immediately after the development of the public internet in 1993, the development of online courses, starting in 1995, were being offered (Roblyer & Hughes, 2019). Online learning was further promoted by large universities like MIT, which offered free course materials, and massive open online courses (MOOCs) (Roblyer & Hughes, 2019). Many MOOCs are open access, while some are proprietary (Roblyer & Hughes, 2019). This trend has dramatically grown with nearly 2.7 million online learners in 2005, with 260,000 full time students in virtual K-12 schools (Roblyer & Hughes, 2019, p. 280). For online learning programs, or distance learning, there are many models often defined by the level of interaction and synchronicity. They include noninteractive online model, interactive, asynchronous model, interactive online synchronous events model, and MOOC. For virtual schools, often full time, these model are further delineated, often by the geography and students they cover (e.g. a school district), by the entity supporting the school (e.g. a state agency), the level of school (e.g. high-school), or the level of online interaction (e.g. blended) (Roblyer & Hughes, 2019). Like most technologies, virtual schools provide both benefits and challenges. These considerations can range from accessibility, academics, retention, and graduation rates. However, one pressing issue is that of socialization.

Socialization is the process of self and social awareness that people gain through human contact (Watson, & Gemin, 2008). For young people socialization is often gained through their contact with family, friends, sports, and schools. With a large amount of time spent within schools, it is often the place young people gain a strong understanding of social skills (Watson, & Gemin, 2008). Through classrooms, lunch, recess, clubs, and activities, student's gain self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship skills. However, in virtual

schools, some opponents, argue that socialization is diminished and therefore affect the development of the learner.

The primary concerns of virtual schools related to socialization, is that they do not offer enough personal connection throughout their curricula and program, since most of the learning is done individually often from home over the internet (California Virtual Academies, n.d.). At time educators may not be available unless the meeting is scheduled or during limited office hours (California Virtual Academies, n.d.). Especially for young learner, it is noted that recess and playtime, interactive social times, are extremely valuable for maturation. Furthermore, no matter how much online social programming exists, it cannot account for the countless interactions that can take between various educators and students, students and students, staff and students, parents and students, and through extra-curricula. While these facts are true, many virtual schools are offering a number of enhancements to ensure they integrate socialization within and throughout their program. This includes real-time class projects, offline discussion and chat groups, educator office hours, joint virtual field trips, and virtual clubs (Rogier, 2018). Additionally, many programs are offering local social and activity gathering, incorporating a level of blended-ness and offer real-world field trips, clubs, and camps, often in the summer (Rogier, 2018). In some instances, virtual classrooms might offer greater benefits at socialization. If a student does not fit in well socially within a traditional school a virtual school may offer them a safer space. With unlimited global access, a virtual school, may also offer unique cultural socialization options traditional classrooms may not. While it is known that humans do need socialization, it is not known whether it needs to be in-person, can be blended, or to what extent physical human contact is necessary (IlluminAge Communication Partners, n.d.). Additionally, regardless of the medium and frequency of contact, the nature of the

relationship developed and the level of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship development, are still the key factors in determining the quality of socialization and emotional development (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). As with so much on the internet, it is difficult to gauge the level of effectiveness without study. This itself can be challenging as information is changing at such an incredibly rapid pace.

With respects to this week's assignment, without knowing the specifics of the virtual school, it is impossible to determine whether the school will contribute positively or negatively to a student's socialization. If the virtual school has developed strong protocols to integrate the student into various social interactions whether online or in person and account for their individual learning style and emotional intelligence, then it has the potential to provide a strong level of socialization. At the same time, if the virtual school offers less social interactions than traditional schools and does not prioritize both the individualization and socialization necessary to promote self and social awareness, then it may not be a suitable substitute. Unfortunately, in the real world, options and choices are not always fair or available. If no other suitable or comparable options exists, then any education should be better than no option. However, given a choice, in determining the value of a virtual school all factors from accessibility, academics, interaction to graduation rates should be considered in the context of the individual learner.

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