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A conceptual framework of socio-emotional electronic mentoring

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Abstract

Electronic mentoring, which refers to a mentoring relationship conducted via computer-mediated communication, appears to be an accessible alternative for people with special needs. To date, few researchers have addressed the phenomenon of electronic mentoring from a socio-emotional perspective for people with special needs. In response to this challenge, we conducted a pilot study which explored the feasibility and relevance implications of computer-mediated support for youth with special needs. Based on our preliminary results and on a literature review, we developed a conceptual framework which delineates the socio-emotional support via an electronic mentoring program for people with special needs.
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1. Instruction

In recent years there has been a growing number of psychological interventions via the Internet (B arak, Hen, Boniel-Nissim, & Shapira, 2008), most of which target populations with mental health-related concerns. The present paper is one of the first to address the considerable potential of such interventions for individuals with special needs. Based on published theories and empirical evidence as well as the results of a pilot study (Shpigelman, Reiter, & Weiss, 2008), we present a conceptual framework characterizing the use of electronic socio-emotional support for people with a wide range of disabilities.

A related development of these online psychological interventions is the ever increasing number of support groups in which people with special needs meet, share interests, and exchange socio-emotional support via text-based messages on computer networks (Walther & Boyd, 2002). Although computer-mediated support (CMS) has been shown to be similar to FTF support (Mallen, Day, & Green, 2003), it has a number of unique communication features (Barak, et al., 2008). These include freedom from the restrictions of location and time, greater access to diverse sources of health information, and anonymity which appears to encourage frankness and intimacy and may lead to greater self-disclosure due to a lessening of the apprehension of stigma related to illness and disability (Wright & Bell, 2003). In addition, negative feelings related to one's physical appearance (e.g., overweight, disability) and vocal characteristics (e.g., stutter) as well as inept social skills are lessened in computer-mediated environments (Rhodes, Spencer, Saito, & Sipe, 2006). These unique features mean that health-related CMS may become a useful alternative for people with special needs.

An example of accessible CMS intervention for people with special needs may be electronic mentoring (e-mentoring) (McDonald, Balcazar, & Keys, 2005). E-mentoring refers to a dyadic relationship in which a mentor, a person senior in age or experience, provides guidance and support to a less experienced or younger person, the protégé via CMC (DuBois & Karcher, 2005). Numerous studies have indicated that well-established mentoring relationships may contribute positively to a youth's socio-emotional and cognitive status (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, Feldman, & McMaken, 2007). E-mentoring, which has been characterized by anonymity, asynchronicity, and lack of non-verbal communication cues, is considered to be a protective environment for the disclosure of personal information and the development of personal relationships by youth with special needs (Suler, 1996-2005).

A young person with special needs can be positively influenced by mentors, and especially mentors with special needs (McDonald et al., 2005). Mentors with special needs can identify with the difficulties experienced by protégés with special needs, and can support their personal growth through exploring career options, setting academic and career goals, examining different lifestyles, developing social and professional contacts, strengthening interpersonal competences, achieving higher levels of autonomy, and developing a vigorous sense of identity. Information, guidance and emotional support provided by such mentors can help protégés successfully make the transition from high school into the less structured environments of postsecondary education and employment (Burgstahler & Cronheim, 2001). To date, the literature has highlighted the potential of mentoring by and for individuals with special needs albeit in the absence of significant empirical evidence (McDonald, et al., 2005).

In response to this challenge, we conducted a pilot study which explored the feasibility and relevance of an e-mentoring intervention program for youth with special needs (Shpigelman et al., 2008). The three-month e-mentoring intervention was based on mutual self-disclosure and socio-emotional support for five mentor-protégé pairs with a wide range of impairments (physical, emotional, behavioral or intellectual impairments). The pairs were instructed to communicate via email and also to meet FTF on either one or two occasions at the protégé's school during the three-month e-mentoring intervention. Qualitative content analysis of the electronic correspondences showed that the development of the e-mentoring relationship paralleled the process typically seen during FTF mentoring; a rapport developed between the mentor-protégé pairs, becoming a positive and supportive relationship. In addition, communicating via email appeared to reduce the visibility of the participants' disability, which enabled them to speak about life experiences (e.g., family, friends, hobbies, studies) and to help them feel that they are more like typical youth. The findings provided support for the feasibility of CMS for youth with special needs.

Perreault LaCoursiere (2001) had previously developed a theory of social support in computer-mediated environments termed the Online Social Support (OSS) Theory, which provided a theoretical foundation for the design of the current pilot study (Shpigelman, et al., 2008). The OSS theory encompasses the factors effecting online social support, based initially on a nursing perspective but also integrating research findings from an open system, multidisciplinary perspective (e.g., anthropology, sociology, psychology, communication science, computer science and management). The OSS theory presents a dynamic process which occurs through three filters: perceptional filter – the feeling or emotional state of a person seeking social support; cognitive filter – the intellectual processing of information; and transactional filter – an evaluation of all information received through electronic support interchanges. Then, three processes -- support mediation, information processing and evaluation -- lead to a synthesis of an individual's experiences and result in changes of behaviors, thought, feelings and actions (Perreault LaCoursiere, 2001).

Based on our preliminary results and on a literature review, we developed a conceptual framework which delineates the electronic socio-emotional support (ESES) process for people with special needs. As illustrated in Figure 1, the drive for commencing the ESES process may emanate from intrinsic and/or extrinsic sources. An individual with special needs may seek electronic support on his own if he is sufficiently motivated and aware of its possibilities Due to decreased initiative by many people with special needs, caregivers, referred to as extrinsic sources, are encouraged to expose them to the new opportunities offered by CMC. According to the social model, caregivers must allow these individuals a free choice of participation in CMS interventions, such as participating in an e-mentoring program (Reiter, 2008). The relative contribution of the internal and external factors is dynamic, depending on the individual's personality and supports in his environment (Suler, 2001).
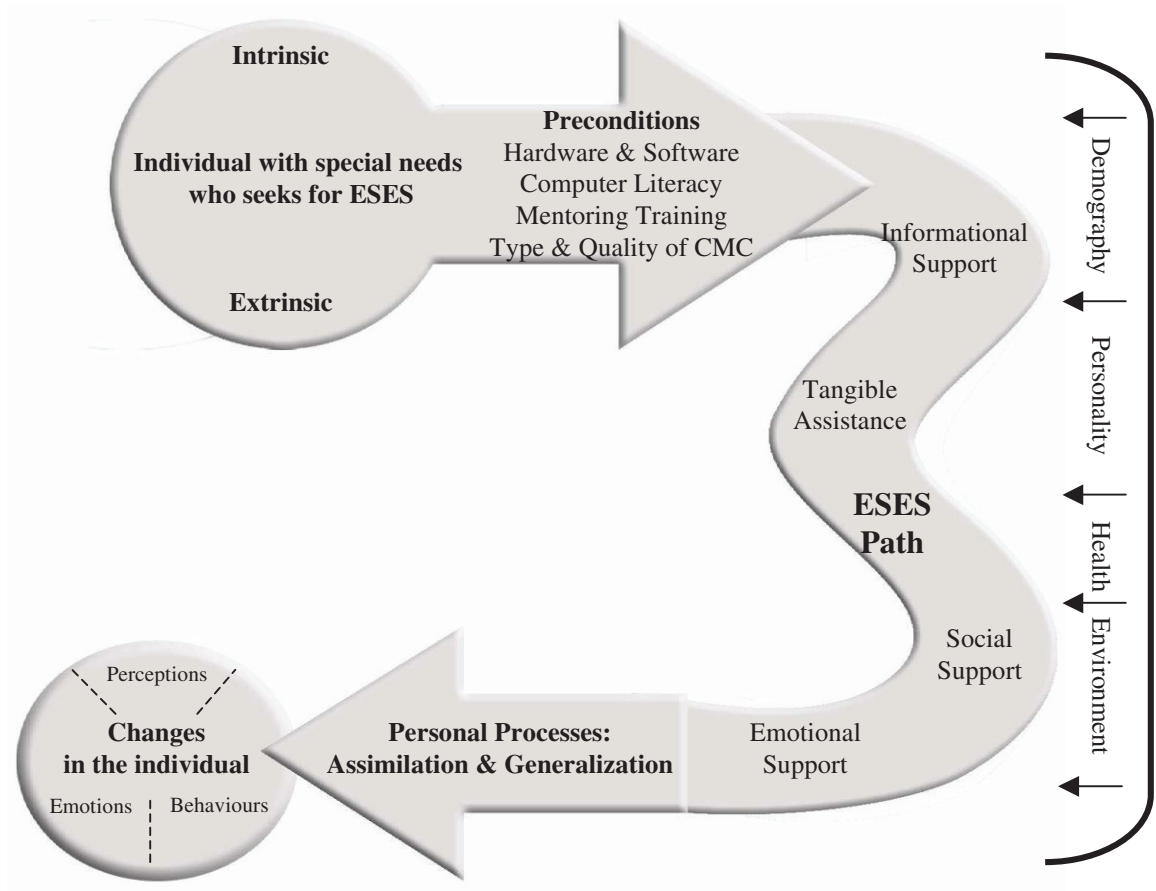
Figure 1. Electronic Socio-Emotional Support (ESES) Process

The next components, based on the results and implications of our pilot study (Shpigelman, et al., 2008), are preconditions which are needed to enable and facilitate the process. Preconditions consist of adapted hardware and software that make computer access possible for people with special needs, the availability of technical support and being computer literate (i.e., being adept at computer and Internet usage having sufficient communication skills to interact via the Internet such as reading comprehension, expressive written communication, and the ability to find, evaluate and use information technology) (Hoffman & Blake, 2003). Appropriate training for the mentors and the type and the quality of CMC (sufficiently frequent, two-way and task-based) are also crucial for this process. Indeed, the provision of such CMC elements to enhance "social presence" such as visual and auditory graphic icons (emoticons and earcons) designed to supplement a text message with emotional content is essential (Barak, 2007).

When sufficient preconditions are in place, the ESES path commences. Based on Cutrona and Suhr's (1992) framework of Social Support Behavior Code (SSBC), the ESES path needs to include informational support (providing information about a stressful event or how to deal with it), tangible assistance (providing or offering to provide goods or services needed in a stressful event), social support (communicating belonging to a group of persons with similar interests and concerns (disability and its implications) and emotional support (communicating caring, respect and confidence in abilities).

As a protégé progresses along the ESES path there are some mediating factors which influence and are also influenced by the process (Perreault LaCoursiere, 2001). The mediating factors encompass four categories: (1) Demographic factors – traditional descriptors such as age, gender, race, marital status, and socioeconomic status; (2) Personality factors – psychological dimensions of the personality such as stressfulness, shyness, coping ability, social isolation, self-awareness, and self-disclosure. The personality factors are affected also by internal (personal events) and external circumstances (national or cultural events); (3) Health factors – the complexity of the disability including the quantity (one or more disabilities), the type of the disability (physical, mental or intellectual disabilities), the degree of disability stability (stable / chronic or changeable / temporary), and functional status (dependent or interdependent areas); (4) Environmental factors - the social networks of the individual such as family members, caregivers, friends, acquaintances, neighbors, school staff persons, classmates, which provide multi-dimensional support (psychological, social, instructional, economic, medical, etc.).

The ESES path leads to two intertwined personal processes -- assimilation and generalization -- which are valuable beyond the computer-mediated environment. The transition from electronic communication to FTF communication is an essential step toward preparing individuals with special needs for independence and self-fulfillment (Reiter, 2008). At this stage, the protégé is encouraged to synthesize information, thoughts and feelings experienced via the electronic support, to make his own meaning of the support experience and to integrate this within the context of his life goals. Finally, the ESES process aims to lead to changes in the protégé's emotional, perceptual and behavioral states. Ultimately, the goal is for the protégé to become more self-aware and confident of his abilities. In addition, the protégé will become more adept at communicating with others within and beyond the Internet (including FTF communication).

The proposed ESES framework is based on humanistic philosophy and social model of disability which focuses on human rights and self-fulfillment of people with special needs (Reiter, 2008). It has implications for theory, research and practice for populations with special needs. For the first time, this framework, appears to provide an alternative means for transitioning youth with special needs to independent adults. However, it is essential to conduct a longer-term e-mentoring program accompanied by research in order to further explore the feasibility of the ESES process for people with special needs, in particular people with mobility and/or verbal communication impairments. In order to support the ESES framework, and, if warranted, further revision of its components, the next step will be to conduct a full e-mentoring intervention study over a one-year period in which the ESES framework will be implemented. These results should lead to better usage of CMS programs for people with special needs.

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