Bridging the digital disconnect: Exploring the views of professionals on using technology to promote young people’s mental health

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Abstract
The increasing role of online technologies in young people’s lives has significant implications for professionals’ engagement with technologies to promote youth mental health and well-being. However, relatively little is known about professionals’ views on the role of technologies in supporting youth mental health. This article outlines key findings from a needs assessment survey carried out in Ireland that sought to determine the views of professionals working with young people on the use of online technologies in supporting young people’s mental health and well-being.

A total of 900 professionals from across the education, health, and mental health professions completed an online survey. The findings demonstrate the importance of the internet as a resource for professionals working with young people, with over 98% of those surveyed expressing a readiness to use online resources to support young people’s mental health. The nature of preferred online technologies differed according to professional groupings, however, 63% of overall respondents indicated they would look for help on a dedicated mental health website. Guidelines on working with young people and their parents on the promotion of positive mental were requested with the most frequency. Among the barriers identified were concerns about access to reliable information that was relevant to specific professional roles, and the need for

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organizational support of professionals’ use of online evidence-based resources. Concerns were also expressed that online resources could replace face-to-face support services for young people, and the need for training professionals in their appropriate use. The results highlight the potential role of technology in assisting professionals through the provision of online training, reliable information, and practical resources on the promotion of positive youth mental health.

**Keywords**

education professionals, eMental health, health professionals, mental health promotion, needs assessment, online technology, psychologists, young people

For most young people, online technologies are a part of their everyday lives. In Europe, young people aged 16- to 24-years-old are the most frequent users of the internet. Data from the European Commission highlight the steady increase in young people’s use of the internet across Europe. In 2006, 84% of young people aged 16- to 24-years-old reported having accessed the internet. In 2015, this figure rose to 97% (Eurostat, 2016). Regarding mental health, a survey conducted with 14,306 young people in Ireland highlights the role of technologies in supporting their mental health and well-being. For young people in post-primary school aged 12- to 19-years-old the internet was the third most frequently reported source of support after friends and parents. For young adults aged 17- to 25-years-old (post secondary level), the internet was the most frequently reported source of support for mental health and well-being, followed by friends and parents (Dooley & Fitzgerald, 2012). The findings from this study and related studies provide evidence that for young people the internet can be seen as a tool and a setting for action in improving their mental health and well-being (Blanchard, 2011).

The potential that online mental health interventions hold include direct, convenient access to resources that might not otherwise be accessible. Online interventions also offer individuals increased privacy and anonymity, personalization, tailoring options and can offer a cost-effective method that more readily addresses those living in isolated geographical areas, even reaching disenfranchised and minority populations (Ahern, Kreslate, & Phalen, 2006; Barak & Grohol, 2011). The opportunity to introduce online interventions in mental health comes at a time when traditional mental health services are under-resourced and struggling to meet demand in many jurisdictions. As a consequence of advances in information communication technology (ICT), Rickwood (2010) points out that ‘the role of ICT is growing rapidly and of increasing interest to policy makers, service providers, researchers, and young people and their families’ (p. 33).

In addition to research demonstrating the increasing role of online technologies in young people’s lives, recent years have witnessed an expansion of online mental health resources and an emerging evidence base (Clarke, Kuosmanen, & Barry, 2015; Griffiths, Farrer, & Christensen, 2010). A systematic review of online mental
health promotion and prevention interventions for young people aged 12- to 25-years-old provides evidence that skills-based promotion and prevention interventions can have a significant impact on youth mental health (Clarke et al., 2015). Implementation findings revealed that online interventions are more effective in terms of, less drop out, better completion rates, and more positive outcomes when delivered in a more structured manner through schools with face-to-face and/or web-based support. These results have significant implications for educational and health professionals and the role they play in supporting young people’s mental health, particularly regarding the more effective use of online mental health resources in school settings.

To date, there is a paucity of research examining professionals’ use of and views on the role of online mental health resources. The majority of research conducted in this area to date has been carried out in Australia (Blanchard, 2011; Inspire Foundation, 2012). Blanchard (2011) examined the capacity of the Australian youth health workforce to support young people’s engagement with technologies in ways that benefitted their mental health. Results from a survey conducted with 233 professionals including psychologists, psychiatrists, general medical practitioners (GPs), and health promotion officers revealed that information communication technologies have significant potential in improving young people’s mental health and well-being both as stand-alone resources and as an adjunct to traditional face-to-face interventions. However, a number of developments were recognized by school psychologists and other professionals as necessary to support professionals’ use of online resources including: Guidelines for their safe and effective use, investment in securing appropriate technology infrastructure in youth mental health services, and training staff to better understand young people’s use of technology and the range of strategies that can be applied to improve and promote young people’s well-being.

The research presented in this article builds on the Australian studies by conducting a needs assessment of youth workers, education, health and mental health professionals in Ireland to examine their views on the use of online technologies to support young people’s mental health. The research was carried out in collaboration with ReachOut Ireland (formerly Inspire Ireland) and the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre (YAW-CRC) in Australia. From 2011–2016 the YAW-CRC conducted international research exploring the role of technology in young people’s lives and how it can be used to improve their mental health and well-being. The research in Ireland was part of a three-year programme of work which sought to develop online mental health resources for parents and professionals working with young people aged 12- to 25-years-old.

The specific aims of this needs assessment study were to: (i) determine professionals’ current use of online technologies; (ii) their needs in relation to youth mental health; (iii) their views regarding the use of online resources to assist them in supporting young people’s mental health and well-being; and (iv) professionals’ needs in relation to using online resources to support young people’s mental health. This article will present key findings from this needs assessment.
survey and the practical implications of the findings will be considered for professionals working to support youth mental health.

**Methods**

**Study design and sample**

In 2013, a survey was administered online, using SurveyMonkey, to a range of professionals across the education, youth, and health sectors in Ireland. Mental health professionals selected to take part included psychologists (both educational psychologists and general psychologists), psychiatrists and resource officers for suicide prevention. Education professionals included post-primary school teachers, who teach the Social Personal and Health Education\(^1\) (SPHE) curriculum, and guidance counsellors. Youth workers selected to take part in the survey were recruited from a large national youth organization, Foroige. Health professionals included general medical practitioners (GPs), social workers, and health promotion officers. With the exception of SPHE teachers, the survey was distributed to professionals by email through their national professional bodies. For SPHE teachers, a postal questionnaire was distributed to the SPHE coordinator in 374 randomly selected secondary schools in Ireland (50% of all secondary schools). Table 1 indicates the number of professionals within each profession to whom the survey was distributed and the number and percentage of respondents.

**Measure**

A questionnaire consisting of both fixed-choice responses and open-ended questions was used to ascertain professionals’ views on the use of online technologies to support young people’s mental health and well-being. The questionnaire was informed by current literature and a similar questionnaire that had been used with mental health professionals in Australia (Blanchard, 2011). Measures included in the questionnaire were selected in consultation with YAW-CRC partners in keeping with a commitment to adopting standardized approaches to fieldwork across all YAW-CRC projects. The questionnaire consisted of three main sections: (i) professionals’ use of computers and the internet as part of their work, including frequency and their perceived level of confidence (ii) youth workers, education and health professionals’ needs in relation to youth mental health—their perceived confidence and use of resources in supporting young people’s mental health, awareness of online mental health websites, and preferred methods for receiving information on youth mental health; (iii) professionals’ views regarding the development of online resources to assist them in supporting young people’s mental health—levels of interest in particular resources, relevant topics to be included, willingness to use online resources if made available, open or restricted access across professional groupings, parents and young people, and perceived barriers. A sample copy of the questionnaire is available in the Online Supplemental Material.
## Table 1. Professions that took part in the survey and response rate.

| Professional sector | Profession                              | Means of survey distribution                  | Number distributed | Number of respondents | Response rate (%) |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Education           | SPHE Teacher                            | Postal survey to schools                      | 374                | 93                    | 25.5              |
|                     | Guidance Counsellor                    | Institute of Guidance Counsellors            | 1150               | 100                   | 8.7               |
| Youth work          | Youth Worker                            | Foróige                                        | 271                | 160                   | 59                |
| Health              | General Practitioner                    | Irish College of General Practitioners       | 500                | 107                   | 21.4              |
|                     | Social Worker                           | Irish Association of Social Workers           | 1051               | 138                   | 13.1              |
|                     | Health Promotion Officer               | Health Service Executive                      | 16                 | 16                    | 100               |
| Mental health       | Psychologist                            | Psychological Society of Ireland / National Educational Psychological Service | 800                | 217                   | 27.1              |
|                     | Psychiatrist                            | College of Psychiatrists in Ireland           | 451                | 61                    | 13.5              |
|                     | Resource Officer for Suicide Prevention | Health Service Executive                      | 8                  | 8                     | 100               |
| Total sample        |                                         |                                               | 4621               | 900                   | 19.5              |
Data analysis

Data from the questionnaire were entered into SPSS and a summary of descriptive statistics was produced. The data were subject to univariate analysis with some bivariate analysis carried out to determine the relationship between respondents' demographics and the respective variables. Open-ended questions were analysed using inductive thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clark (2006). With this method the themes identified emerge from the data thus providing a rich and detailed account of the data set. Each respondent was assigned a unique identifying number. The respondent’s number and profession are referenced in the results section.

Results

Demographics

A total of 900 professionals completed the questionnaire, representing 19.5% of the total sample that were invited to participate in the survey ($N = 4621$). Table 2 provides the sample details and demographic profile across the four professional groupings. The majority of the sample were female (79.1%), worked in an urban setting (84%), and the majority of respondents (55.4%) were aged between 36- and 55- years-old. Youth workers had a younger age profile, with 67.4% being aged 18- to 35-years-old, and had less experience working in their profession than the other professional groups, as shown in Table 3 (Online Supplemental Materials). The survey findings across the four professional groupings will now be presented.

Professionals’ use of computers and internet access

The level of internet use across the professions was high with 86.4% of respondents reporting use of the internet on a daily basis for professional use. Respondents were asked to indicate for what they had used the internet in the past month. Sending/receiving email and general Google searching were reported with the

| Professional grouping | Age groups | Location | Gender |
|-----------------------|------------|----------|--------|
|                       | 18–35 years (%) | 36–55 years (%) | 56+ years (%) | Urban (%) | Rural (%) | Male (%) | Female (%) |
| Education             | 31.9      | 60.2     | 7.8   | 72       | 28        | 12.7     | 87.3       |
| Youth work            | 67.4      | 32.6     | 0     | 83.6     | 16.4      | 20.1     | 79.9       |
| Health                | 26.3      | 57.1     | 16.6  | 86.2     | 13.8      | 25.3     | 74.7       |
| Mental health         | 22.7      | 63.6     | 13.6  | 91       | 9         | 25.6     | 74.4       |
| Total sample          | 33.8      | 55.4     | 10.7  | 84       | 16        | 20.9     | 79.1       |
most frequency. Searching for mental health information was the third most frequently reported use among youth workers, education professionals and mental health professionals. Psychologists were the most likely of all professions to use the internet to search for mental health information, as 84.3% reported searching for mental health information online in the previous month. A higher percentage of health and mental health professionals reported using e-learning in the previous month compared to youth workers and education professionals.

Youth mental health and respondents’ needs

Survey responses indicated that the preferred methods of receiving reliable youth mental health information for youth workers, health and mental health professionals were training workshops and receiving information through their own professional organization. Education professionals were most likely to select training workshops and receiving information through a website/electronic database. Receiving information through email/online newsletter was the third most requested method for youth workers and health professionals.

Youth workers, education and health professionals were asked to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with statements in relation to their perceived confidence in addressing young people’s mental health needs and the likely sources of support they would use to assist them in helping a young person who is experiencing mental health problems. Due to their specific expertise, the mental health professionals were not asked these questions.

**Statement 1: I feel equipped to promote well-being in young people’s lives.** As shown in Table 4 youth workers were significantly more likely to agree with this statement (89.3%) than education (80%) and health professionals (73.9%) \(\chi^2(4, N = 563) = 14.0, p < 0.01\). Within the education profession, SPHE teachers reported feeling significantly less equipped than guidance counsellors \(\chi^2 (4, N = 180) = 12.16, p < 0.05\).

**Statement 2: I feel equipped to determine if a young person needs mental health support.** Health professionals were significantly more likely to agree with this statement (81.2%) than youth workers (67.6%) and education professionals (63.9%) \(\chi^2 (4, N = 562) = 24.6, p < 0.001\). Guidance counsellors and GPs reported feeling the least equipped of all professions.

**Statement 3: I feel equipped to help a young person if they have a mental health problem.** Respondents reported feeling less equipped to help a young person with a mental health problem than determine if s/he had a problem or promote well-being. Health professionals were more likely to agree with the statement (65%) than youth workers (57.4%) or education professionals (51.4%).

Regarding sources of support professionals would use to help a young person that was experiencing a mental health problem, consulting a colleague was reported
as the most likely point of contact for youth workers and education professionals. For health professionals, consulting with another professional was reported with the most frequency. Almost two-thirds of respondents (62.6%) indicated they would look for help on a dedicated mental health website.

Respondents’ preferences for how they would like to receive youth mental health information are depicted in Figure 1. The most preferred methods for youth workers, health, and mental health professionals were training workshops and receiving information through their own professional organizations. Education professionals were most likely to select training workshops and receiving information through a website/electronic database.

Development of online youth mental health resources

The third and final section of the questionnaire explored respondents’ views on the development of online resources to assist them in supporting young people’s mental health. A list of online resources was provided and respondents were asked how interested they would be in their development. Table 5 (Online Supplemental Materials) presents the percentage of respondents that reported being interested/very interested in the suggested online resources. Results showed that psychologists’ needs differed slightly to the needs of youth workers, education, and health professions. There was considerable similarity in the responses across youth workers, education and health professionals, who expressed most interest in the following resources: (i) guidelines about how to promote positive mental health and well-being; (ii) directory of relevant local services available to support young people; (iii) guidelines about what to do if a young person is experiencing a mental health problem; (iv) reliable information on mental health issues concerning

| Statements                                                                 | Professional groupings | Strongly disagree/disagree | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree/strongly agree |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|
| I feel equipped to promote well-being in young people’s lives             | Youth work             | 4                           | 2.7                       | 12                  | 8.1                | 133                | 89.3               |
|                                                                           | Education              | 13                          | 7.2                       | 23                  | 12.8               | 144                | 80                 |
|                                                                           | Health                 | 8                           | 7.7                       | 43                  | 18.4               | 173                | 73.9               |
| I feel equipped to determine if a young person needs support              | Youth work             | 12                          | 8.1                       | 36                  | 24.3               | 100                | 67.6               |
|                                                                           | Education              | 31                          | 17.2                      | 34                  | 18.9               | 115                | 63.9               |
|                                                                           | Health                 | 19                          | 8.1                       | 25                  | 10.7               | 190                | 81.2               |
| I feel equipped to help a young person if they have a mental health problem | Youth work             | 22                          | 14.9                      | 41                  | 27.7               | 85                 | 57.4               |
|                                                                           | Education              | 52                          | 29.2                      | 34                  | 19.1               | 92                 | 51.7               |
|                                                                           | Health                 | 33                          | 14.1                      | 49                  | 20.9               | 152                | 65                 |
young people. The most requested resources among mental health professionals were guidelines your profession could use with young people and parents in relation to promoting positive mental health. A discussion forum for professionals to discuss youth well-being tips and concerns was the least popular resource (endorsed by 59%) across all professional groups.

Respondents were asked if they had any additional suggestions in relation to the development of other online resources to assist their profession in supporting young people’s mental health and well-being. Thematic analysis was used to analyse these data and five themes emerged:

**Information for parents:** All professions requested the provision of information for parents to assist them in supporting their children’s mental health and well-being. A psychologist commented: ‘I find parents are often told of a child’s diagnosis without being given accurate information they can understand. Information to give to parents on their child’s mental health would be useful’ (Psychologist, 79). A youth worker also expressed a desire for ‘guidelines on how to support or include parents in plan/interventions’ (Youth Worker, 68).

**Online tools for young people:** Responding to one of the suggestions provided in the questionnaire, several professionals referred to the need for reliable online resources and mental health information for young people themselves to access. Comments included: ‘More online tools for the young person themselves is a good resource. Many do not want to engage properly with the mental health services’ (Social Worker, 17). Likewise, a GP stated: ‘the idea of online courses for young people is
excellent—it’s a key way of reaching them’ (GP, 16). A psychologist suggested prioritizing the development of online resources for young people and their parents to access over professional resources; ‘Parents and young people almost always report “googling” difficulties and find all sorts of unreliable information. It would be great for them to have access to good information. I would prioritize that over information accessible for professionals’ (Psychologist, 179).

**Group work material:** A number of youth workers and education professionals requested the provision of mental health and well-being materials for working with young people. Video clips and lesson plans were requested with the most frequency. Teachers’ comments included: ‘Classroom resources to use with senior students. Many resources available for 13- to 16-year-olds. More difficult to source resources for young adults 16+’ (SPHE teacher, 30); ‘DVDs with topics such as bullying, anorexia, bulimia, stress, depression. Films are good, thought provoking and relaxing’ (SPHE teacher, 34).

**Information regarding other online resources:** Health and mental health professionals requested information on other useful websites and evidence-based online resources that they could use in their work with young people. A psychologist commented ‘I’d love to have a list of “good” blogs that would be relevant to young people on these issues’ (Psychologist, 56).

**Face-to-face services:** Several respondents raised concerns about online resources replacing face-to-face services. Some respondents suggested the need for face-to-face in combination with online services. One teacher stated ‘Online is great but when faced with a young person who has serious mental health issues, it is the one-to-one engagement that is so important at that time’ (SPHE Teacher, 47). A similar comment was made by a psychologist ‘Information technology is great for information, where young people are otherwise isolated and for educating parents. But drop in face-to-face services is fundamentally what’s most needed for young people in difficulty’ (Psychologist, 66).

As part of the questionnaire, respondents were asked about topics that were most relevant to youth mental health. From a list of 17 topics, the topics that were regarded as most relevant across the professions included: (i) developing coping skills; (ii) positive mental health; (iii) promoting positive peer relationships; (iv) bullying; and (v) developing communication skills.

**Professionals’ use of online resources**

Respondents were asked if they would consider using an online resource to support youth mental health if it was made available to their profession. The overwhelming majority of respondents (98%) reported that they would. Several comments were made in relation to the benefit of developing an online mental health resource which professionals could access; ‘Most definitely, I have had no training in how
to deal with mental health problems and such issues are steadily growing in numbers and type’ (SPHE teacher, 50).

In addition to highlighting the importance of the resource some concerns about their use were also raised: ‘as a source of information, not a replacement for human interactions’ (Guidance Counsellor, 9); ‘only in conjunction with talking face-to-face with vulnerable students’ (Guidance Counsellor, 81). Respondents also suggested specific requirements including:

Focus on Mental Health Promotion and Prevention: Youth workers and education professionals expressed an interest in the development of an online resource that is designed to enhance professionals’ competencies in relation to mental health promotion and prevention. One youth worker stated: ‘Particularly interested in ideas for promoting positive mental health and identifying mental health problems in young people’ (Youth Workers, 114).

Provision of Reliable Information: The need for reliable, evidence-based, culturally relevant information and resources, that were updated regularly, was emphasized repeatedly: ‘Information sites that have reliable evidence-based information to refer parents, young people and teachers to would be most helpful’ (Psychologist, 21). Related to this, a number of professionals raised concerns about online resources being used inappropriately: ‘I think an online resource could be very useful but that its scope should be limited to general, evidence-based guidelines on promoting mental health and factual information on mental health problems’ (Psychologist, 45); ‘I think that by making information available to all professions there is a danger that people step beyond the limits of their competence’ (Psychologist, 184); ‘I have a small concern about professionals that are not qualified in mental health drawing conclusions about a young person’s mental health. I am also concerned about young people self-diagnosing’ (Social Worker, 2).

Prior Training: Some respondents commented on the need for face-to-face training prior to engaging with the online resource. One youth worker stated: ‘I believe all professionals need to receive training prior to using this online resource, this may break down barriers’ (Youth Worker, 88).

Support from Management: Support from management was considered an important issue. Respondents emphasized the need for management to approve or certify the resource and to provide time to staff to engage with the resource.

Perceived barriers to using online youth mental health resources

Respondents were also asked about potential barriers that would prevent them from using an online youth mental health resource. Five main themes emerged including: (i) the provision of generic information that is not relevant to individual
professions; (ii) the provision of information that is not reliable or evidence-based; (iii) the development of an online resource that is difficult to navigate; (iv) lack of time to familiarize oneself with the materials provided through the online resource; and (v) the development of a resource that is designed to replace face-to-face contact with young people and their families. Teachers in particular, referred to the need for concrete practical resources that they could use with young people. The importance of a user-friendly resource was reported across the professions. Respondents stated they would not use the resource if: ‘Site was scattered, disorganized, and difficult to use’ (Health Promotion Officer, 5); ‘Site was not user-friendly and practical’ (Youth Worker, 128).

**Discussion**

This study is unique in exploring the views of a diverse range of professionals, including psychologists, youth workers, secondary school teachers, guidance counsellors, general medical practitioners, social workers, health promotion officers, psychiatrists and resource officers for suicide prevention, in relation to the use of technologies to improve young people’s mental health.

Use of the internet for professional use was high across all professions. Searching for mental health information was the third most frequently reported use of the internet among youth workers, education, and mental health professionals. Psychologists were the most likely of all professions to use the internet to search for mental health information. Furthermore, just under two-thirds of youth workers, education, and health professionals (62.6%) indicated they would search for help on a dedicated mental health website if a young person was going through a tough time. These findings demonstrate the importance of the internet as a source of mental health information for psychologists and related professionals working with young people. These results also highlight the potential to capitalize on professionals’ use of the internet through the provision of online evidence-based mental health information and resources.

The need to build the capacity of education professionals is apparent in participants’ response to questions regarding how equipped they felt to promote young people’s well-being and determine if a young person needs mental health support, with teachers feeling the least equipped of all professions. Given the important role frontline professionals such as teachers play in supporting young people, it is essential to develop their knowledge and skills in promoting positive youth mental health. Furthermore, results from this survey indicated that teachers and other professions working with young people responded positively to the potential use of technology as a means of receiving youth mental health information. These results have important implications for school psychologists and other mental health professionals who work directly with professionals in the provision of youth mental health training. Through the use of technology, psychologists can increase both the availability and accessibility of training, information, and resources for teachers and other professionals working with young people.
In turn, psychologists and other professionals can facilitate access to quality-assured online mental health information for large numbers of young people. In keeping with the model of help-seeking described by Rickwood, Deane, Wilson, and Ciarrochi (2005), online resources can provide young people with the opportunity to better understand any mental health difficulties they may be experiencing, which is a key step towards disclosing difficulties with a trusted adult. If professionals and young people can access quality online resources with consistent information on available services then the likelihood of accessing the most appropriate face-to-face supports can be greatly increased. However, the evidence base on the effective use of these resources in school and out-of-school settings needs to be developed further and communicated clearly (for example, through organizational endorsement of quality websites) in order to establish trust and confidence amongst both professionals and young people themselves.

The importance of the evidence base is further reflected in the resources requested by education professionals and youth workers which centered around the need for accurate information guidelines in relation to promoting positive youth mental health, identifying and dealing with mental health problems, and the provision of reliable information on supports that are available locally. Youth workers and education professionals repeatedly emphasized the need for practical resources including lesson plans, video clips, and group work materials for use with young people. The dearth of resources for use with young people aged 16 and older was highlighted by respondents and has been identified in previous international research (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnini, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). The need for reliable evidence-based resources for young people aged 15- to 18-years-old has also been identified as an international priority (Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015; OECD, 2015). The development of online resources for teachers and youth workers to use with young people, including interactive learning modules, evidence-based apps, and serious games has the potential to fill this resource gap and in turn positively influence young people’s mental health and well-being. In relation to the quality of such resources, some important initiatives have been undertaken recently including the development of The Information Standard, which has been adopted by the NHS in Britain in relation to online health information and the Mobile App Rating Scale developed through the YAW-CRC. In Ireland, ‘Technology, mental health and suicide prevention: A good practice guide’ was published recently in order to promote quality standards among disparate online mental health resource providers (Chambers & Murphy, 2015).

As expected, the needs of psychologists and other mental health professionals differed slightly from the other groups. Guidelines around working with young people and their parents in the promotion of positive mental health was requested with the most frequency. This was followed by information on locally available supports and services for young people and reliable information on mental health issues. Psychologists were particularly interested in the provision of self-help online material that young people could use to support their own mental health. In view
of the emerging evidence on the effectiveness of online youth mental health prevention and promotion interventions (Clarke et al., 2015), coupled with the readiness of professionals to engage with their use, there is a need for further research on how to maximize professionals’ effective use of online resources to support young people’s mental health and well-being. Related to this, all professionals in the current study commented on the role technology could potentially play in the provision of tools and resources for mental health promotion. Psychologists in particular cautioned against the provision of online treatment resources to professionals not equipped or trained to deal with young people’s mental health problems. A needs assessment survey conducted with the youth health workforce in Australia revealed similar findings with respondents identifying the field of mental health promotion as an area where technology has great potential in terms of reach and scale (Blanchard, 2011).

Additional suggestions that were common across all professions included the need for an online resource for parents that provided accurate information and guidelines in supporting young people’s mental health. These findings are supported by results from a needs assessment survey conducted with parents of young people aged 14- and 17-years-old in Ireland (N = 355), which highlighted parents’ need for information and support in relation to youth mental health (Clarke, Kuosmanen, Chambers, & Barry, 2013).

Three main concerns in relation to online mental health resources were repeatedly raised across all professions. Firstly, respondents emphasized the need for online resources to be relevant to their specific roles in working with young people and that a ‘one size fits all’ resource would be in danger of not meeting any profession’s needs sufficiently. Similar findings concerning the varying needs of different professional groups have also been reported in a needs assessment survey conducted in Australia (Inspire Foundation, 2011). Secondly, respondents reported concerns about an online resource being used to replace face-to-face services with young people. Youth workers, education, health and mental health professionals pointed to the necessity of face-to-face support services for young people and that a skilled and knowledgeable workforce should be the front-line approach. Thirdly, the need for face-to-face training in the use of online resources coupled with support from management and the provision of time during the working day to access these resources were considered necessary in order for professionals to fully engage with online mental health resources. Similar to previous research, these results highlight the importance of capacity development to enable professionals to better use technologies to improve young people’s mental health and well-being (Blanchard, Herrman, Frere, & Burns, 2012). In addition, organizational policies on ICT use should support the use of technology rather than curtail it, as is often the case for workers in youth services (Campbell & Robards, 2010).

In reviewing the findings from this needs assessment survey, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research. The results from the survey are limited by sampling method used, as all professionals, with the exception of teachers, were recruited from within from their professional bodies. In addition, the low response
rate from some professions such as guidance counsellors and social workers (<20%) limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized. Given the fact that the survey was an online questionnaire, it is possible that the study sample was biased in terms of professionals with higher computer literacy skills being more likely to complete this online survey. It would have been useful to have obtained information from a wider group of professionals, including those with low computer literacy skills, in order to understand their specific needs in relation to online technologies.

**Implications for policy and practice**

Participants in this study expressed positive views concerning the use of technologies in the promotion of positive mental health and well-being. In planning and developing online mental health resources, it is important to acknowledge that professionals working with young people are not a homogenous group. Future developments must focus on the tools and strategies that are going to add the most value to the specific nature of the work of psychologists, education and health professionals with young people. The findings from this study also demonstrate the need to build the capacity of professionals working with young people including teachers and youth workers. Technology can assist mental health professionals such as psychologists in supporting these professionals by increasing both the availability and accessibility of training, as well as the provision of information and evidence-based mental health promotion resources. In practical terms, there is an onus on professional bodies to develop clear policies on the use of online resources to enhance work in supporting young people’s mental health and well-being. The findings from this study yielded clear information on the challenges in this regard, including concerns over the reliability of online information and the need for organizational endorsement and promotion of reliable, evidence-based resources.

**Conclusion**

One of the biggest challenges in strengthening youth health and well-being is improving access to the information and services young people need. With the increasing availability of information and communication technology comes the opportunity for psychologists and other professionals to engage young people in a space where they are most comfortable, online (Anker, Reinhart, & Feeley, 2011). The findings from this survey demonstrate the desire among professionals to utilize technology in combination with face-to-face services to support young people. The results clearly indicate that whilst all professions were supportive of the development of online mental health resources, the real challenge is to design resources that are relevant to each profession, are practical and action-based, and focus on promoting positive mental health. In conclusion, the findings from this study provide important insights that can be used to inform strategies regarding professionals’ use of online technologies to support young people’s mental health and well-being.
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1. Social Personal and Health Education is a subject in secondary schools in Ireland which focuses on the development of a broad range of skills relevant to young people’s health and well-being.

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