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Counteracting e-bullying in Australian schools: Sustainable approaches and pedagogical issues

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Abstract

Around the world, episodes of e-bullying and online harassment are constantly in the headlines. As school violence escalates so too has public concern about child safety, positive school environments and measures to counteract these forms of social aggression among youth.

Though cyber violence is not a new phenomenon, it is attracting increased media attention due to the adverse affects it has on youth behaviour and academic achievement. Recently however, there has been research that explores the complexities of cyber violence from an educational perspective and recommendations as to how schools and communities can adopt sustainable and effective counter approaches. Attention to this area is necessary to inform and engage the teaching profession and to focus on pedagogical issues and e-safety. The goal of this paper is to review existing research and literature in Australian and internationally to document and present sustainable approaches being adopted to address the occurrence of cyberbullying. The paper begins with a synthesis of findings on the forms and characteristics of cyber bullying, using cases where empirical data is presented with a particular focus on the Australian context. The paper concludes with an overview of sustainable best practice solutions that are being adopted globally to address the growing problem of electronic bullying.

Keywords: cyberbullying, school environment, social networking, pedagogy, bullying, e-safety

Introduction: the prevalence of cyberbullying worldwide

With the availability of numerous social networking sites to adolescents today the communication and friendship patterns of young people have changed dramatically as the Internet and mobile devices are used to mediate social interactions and communication. Social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook are part of a larger suite of social computing tools that collectively fall under the label of Web 2.0. Extensive research indicates that these technologies are widely embraced by the younger generation, variously labelled Generation Y, Digital Natives and the Net Generation (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). SMS remains the most popular social messaging utility for adolescents between the ages of 14 – 17 years (Cross, 2007), and the majority of teenagers now carry a mobile phone. These technologies break down barriers at a number of levels, such as private and public space, learning spaces and social spaces. Along with the global uptake of social networking tools, there has been an increased focus on the rise of cyber misconduct and cyberbullying, and discussion of how to combat these problem behaviours is high on the agenda of educators, parents and school communities in Australia, the USA and UK (Sharif, 2009). Cyber expression can take many forms, and instances of online harassment by students using social networking sites that involves targeting teachers and school officials is less often reported than peer cyberbullying. Activities such as posting offensive jokes about teachers, modifying photographs and inviting abusive comments from other students and community are examples of cyberbullying by students. Among youth, other forms of cyberbullying are perhaps better documented in the literature, such as episodes that involve peer victimisation and abuse leading to depression and youth suicide (Shariff, 2009).

Multiple perspectives on cyberbullying: definitions and descriptors

Face-to face aggression and bullying between students, commonly occurs in schools when and where there is little adult supervision for example, in physical education classes, halls or bathrooms as well as during after school activities. Schoolyard bullying typically consists of a group of students isolating, ridiculing or intimidating an individual student. Extreme behaviours can include swearing, yelling, punching or pointing. Targets of bullying are often pupils who are considered outsiders, loners or inadequate by peers, making the situation difficult to deal with and the bullying behaviour may be instigated by groups of students or even by teachers. While bullying has several definitions that vary by culture and context, perhaps the most accepted and most cited definition is based on Olweus' (1993) original research on bullying programs in Norway. He states that there are particular features of bullying that appear to be universal across all types of bullying, including cyberbullying. First, the behaviour is not a onetime occurrence, but instead is a series of repeated aggressive actions; second, bullying may be an individual, collective or group action, and finally, there must be a power imbalance (whether physical or otherwise) between the bully and victim, and both must interpret the behaviour as unwanted, threatening or negative.

Historically, bullying has been seen as the scourge of the school yard, but has been tolerated as it has been seen as an unavoidable part of growing up (Campbell, 2005). More recently however, schoolyard and cyberbullying has become a serious issue for schools, educators and victims and is now the subject of extensive research worldwide (Campbell, 2005). More covert forms of bullying include excluding a person from the group, spreading malicious gossip, about a person, staring and teasing. To be defined as bullying in the traditional sense this behaviour would have to occur once only, regularly, or sporadically over a long period (Field, 2007).

The largest study conducted in Australia so far considers covert bullying and cyberbullying as similar but the term covert is wider. According to Cross, et al. (2009) covert bullying has been broadly defined as any form of aggressive behaviour that is repeated, intended to cause harm and characterised by an imbalance of power, and is 'hidden', out of sight of, or unacknowledged by, adults. Covert bullying includes behaviors linked to social aggression, relational aggression and indirect aggression, including bullying by means of technology where the bullying behaviour is either unwitnessed, or not addressed, by an adult" (Cross et al., 2009, p. 4). Similarly, cyberbullying is defined by McLoughlin, Burgess and Meyricke (2009) as harassment using technology such as emails, computers, mobile and camera phones, video cameras, chat rooms and social networks such as *MySpace*, *Facebook*, etc.

If one adopts this definition, it becomes clear that results of recent Australian studies of cyberbullying among youth that have been conducted recently indicate that Australian youth are at risk. Table 1 presents an overview of recent empirical studies into the prevalence of cyberbullying among Australian youth.

Table 1: Studies of cyberbullying in Australia

Year	Author(s)	Age	State	Main finding
2005	Campbell and Gardner (Campbell, 2005)	Yr 8	Qld	In this study of Brisbane students, 25% stated they knew somebody who had been cyberbullied. Eleven percent of the students indicated they had participated in cyberbullying and 14% revealed that they had been a victim. The students reported that they had been targeted most often by text messages, chat rooms and email. The majority of the students felt that cyberbullying was increasing.

Year	Author(s)	Age	State	Main finding
2007	Cross	unspecified	WA	Children who are bullied face-to-face are also likely (30%) to be victims of cyber bullying. In this study, of the children who reporting having been cyber bullied, half stated that they did not know who was bullying them. This anonymity is a strong factor, with 59% of the children revealing they had pretended to be someone else online. Seventeen percent of these children did this with the intention to be mean to someone online.
2009	Stacey	10-17 yr olds	Victoria	Social networking sites and synchronous chat sites where cyberbullying most commonly occurred, and email and texting on mobile phones also used for bullying. Grades 8 and 9 most often reported cyberbullying episodes.
2009	McLoughlin, Burgess and Meyricke	Yrs 7-10	ACT and regional NSW	This study investigated cyberbullying in both rural and urban schools. It was found that 24% of urban students surveyed had been victims of cyberbullying, whilst a slightly lower percentage (22%) of rural students had been targeted. Instant messaging, mobile phones and social networking sites are contexts where cyberbullying occurs, however email and chat rooms were reported to be the most frequent. Girls are more likely to be victims than boys and students are most likely to cyber bullied by their peers.
2009	Cross, Shaw, Hearn, Epstein, Monks, Lester and Thomas	Yrs 4-9	Australia	This large national survey found that cyber bullying was more prevalent in non-government schools compared to government schools. Age was found to be a prominent factor, the older the child, the more likely they are to engage in cyber bullying. However, victims of cyber bullying are most likely to be in year 5 and 8. Students in years 4, 6 and 8 are most likely to bully using MSN messenger or another form of instant message.
2010	Nichol & Fleming	13-17 yr olds	ACT	70% of participants in this study reported that they had cyberbullied others using mobile phones in the last six months. Fifty six percent of respondents indicated malicious gossiping, whilst 29.7% reporting engaging in this behaviour regularly. 38.7% of respondents had sent a rude message, 17.7% had used their camera phone at least once to make fun of another person and 9.9% had threatened a peer.

Year	Author(s)	Age	State	Main finding
2010	Price	Under 25	Australia	In 2009 a national online anonymous self-report questionnaire was conducted regarding experiences with cyberbullying. Results showed that the most common ages to experience cyberbullying were those of transition (49% for 10-12 year olds and 52% for 13-14 year olds). On average students were bullied through email, chat-rooms, social-networking sites and mobile phones. Social-networking sites and mobile phones as medium for cyberbullying increased with age.

Pedagogical issues arising from cyberbullying episodes

The widespread use of virtual classrooms, Internet exploration and chat rooms has stretched the concept of the traditional classroom, and the popularity of social networking sites (e.g. MySpace, Facebook) blogging and text messaging have affected the way students communicate with and about each other, their teachers, school administrators and their schools. Findings indicate that youth who are being harassed online report feeling unsafe and stressed at school, and this leads to disengagement and low achievement outcomes. Especially concerning is the finding that one in four youth targeted by rumours and threats online also report that they carried a weapon to school (Ybarra et al. 2007). Many experts say adults have been slow to respond to the problem, but awareness is increasing among teachers, parents and school communities (Kowalski & Limber, 2007). School administrators and politicians are trying to address cyberbullying by introducing policies and by providing filtering software to prevent it from happening. Given the concerns about virtual predators, cyber harassment and cyberbullying, it is no surprise that more research is being called for and that greater emphasis is being placed on the need to develop effective strategies to respond to such scenarios and to prevent cyberbullying (Kowalski & Limber, 2007).

In Australia, experiences of bullying and peer rejection within school environments have been shown to increase the risk of negative learning and health outcomes for youth (Smith & Ananaidu, 2003). Students who are persistently bullied are less connected to school and feel less cared for by people at their school (McNeely, Nonnemaker & Blum, 2002). According to McNeely and colleagues, students who feel cared for, respected and safe at their schools are far less likely to engage in violent, sexual, suicidal or substance abuse behaviors. Supportive classroom and school environments are essential for student wellbeing, engagement with school, motivation, academic skill development and general mental health (Shariff, 2008).

Only limited research has been done into the psychosocial effects of cyberbullying at this stage; however, Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007) report that so far, all studies in this area have shown negative effects similar to those of traditional bullying, including stress, fear, embarrassment and feelings of depression, hopelessness and powerlessness. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) identified a relationship between depressive symptoms and being a victim of cyberbullying, with the likelihood of a person being victimised increasing with the number of depressive symptoms present. Another study showed that anxiety and depression are six and eight times (respectively) more likely to be experienced by students who have been victims of bullying than those who have not been either victims or bullies (Dake, Price, Telljohan & Funk, 2003). Responses to cyberbullying typically reported are as follows (Cross et al. 2009, Fleming & Rickwood, 2004):

- Anger, sadness, rejection and fear
- Over 85% of respondents stated that cyberbullying had a negative impact on an aspect of their life, with confidence (67%) and self-esteem (60%) being the most affected aspects.

Schools and teachers face quite a challenge in addressing incidents of cyberbullying as many students do not report it. In Hoff and Mitchell (2009, p 660) it was found that only 16.7% of victims reported the incident to school officials and of this 16.7%, 70.7% indicated that school officials ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ did anything about it. This is further illustrated in Cassidy, Jackson and Brown (2009, p. 392) where it was found that victims were equally split over whether to tell (47%) or not to tell school officials (42%). Without the knowledge that the incidents are in fact occurring, the silence diminishes the schools’ chance to deal with the perpetrators, victims or cyberbullying episode.

Studies have also investigated why students do not seek the help of school officials. The primary reasons presented in Cassidy, Jackson and Brown (2009) were fear of retribution from the bully (30%), that it is not the school’s mandate (29%), that staff were unable to stop it (27%), that the student could get their friends in to trouble (26%), parents would restrict their access (24%) and other students would label them as ‘informers’ or ‘rats’ (20%). A further substantial issue impacting the effectiveness in which a teacher can deal with cyberbullying is anonymity of the perpetrator. In the previously cited study by Cross (2007) half of the children who reported having been cyber bullied stated that they did not know who was bullying them. This anonymity is a strong factor, with 59% of the children revealing they had pretended to be someone else online. Seventeen percent of these children did this with the intention to be mean to someone online. The misuse of technology by students is a further pedagogical issue as schools increasingly utilize the web to access resources and students have a degree of freedom in their use of online tool, particularly outside of the school environment. Cross et al. (2009, p.139) asked participants the question “How often have you bullied another student or students in the following ways in school this term?” Table 2 displays the responses by students, and this points to instant messaging as the preferred medium for covert bullying.

Table 2: Covert bullying using online tools

	Year 4 to 6			Year 7 to 8		
	Lots of times %	A few times %	Never	Lots of times %	A few times %	Never
Text message by mobile phone	0	3	97	0	12	88
Pictures, webcam or video clips	0	3	97	0	8	92
Phone calls	0	0	100	0	18	82
Email	0	0	100	8	16	76
Chat rooms	0	9	91	2	12	86
MSN messenger or another form of instant message	3	0	97	4	24	72
Social networking sites like MySpace	3	3	94	0	10	90
Internet game	3	0	97	0	10	90
Web log	0	3	97	0	8	92
Web page	0	0	100	0	6	94

In Australia, experiences of bullying and peer rejection within school environments have been shown to increase the risk of negative learning and health outcomes for youth (Sawyer et al., 2008). Students who are persistently bullied are less connected to school and feel less cared for by people at their school (McNeely, Nonnemaker & Blum, 2002). According to McNeely and colleagues, students who feel cared for, respected and safe at their schools are far less likely to engage in violent, sexual,

suicidal or substance abuse behaviors. Positive and risk free classroom and school environments are essential for student wellbeing, engagement with school, motivation, academic skill development and general mental health.

Strategies to address the problem of cyberbullying

Clearly, the development of new technologies along with ubiquitous access has brought about new challenges for the policies and programs already in schools and placed considerable pressures on schools to remain informed and vigilant to the developing phenomenon of cyberbullying. Across Australia, measures are being taken to counteract the negative effects of cyberbullying and to educate students, parents and teachers about preventive action and strategies to combat cyberbullying (Cross, 2007). Given the current escalation of the problem, the current goal is to develop anti-bullying awareness programs for parents, children, and school staff to communicate the desired message to children, to teach online protective behaviours and to develop pro-social behaviours among students.

Specific programs that focus upon teaching coping skills and cyber safety were implemented in a study conducted by Lam and Frydenberg (2009). In this study participants were divided into three separate groups: Best of Coping Program (BOC), the Cyber Savvy Teens program (CST) and the control group. The results demonstrate that both of these programs were effective in teaching the specific program content. Students who participated in the BOC program became more effective in employing productive coping strategies, while students who participated in the CST program became more aware of risks online. Such approaches can be embedded in curriculum subjects where students use ICT's for learning, and in SOSE programs.

Canadian anti-bullying educator Bill Belsey believes that restricting children's access to the internet, government laws and schools suspensions are not the solution to the issue of cyberbullying. Rather Belsey states that

Cyberbullying is about human behaviour and these behaviours are complex and require thoughtful, sophisticated responses and support. Most of our best efforts need to be focused on prevention through education and awareness (National Centre against Bullying, 2010).

In Australia another example is 'Teachtoday' which is an initiative of several major companies active in providing online services or access to them, such as Vodafone, Google and Facebook, plus European Schoolnet and Childnet International (Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) Teachtoday provides information to teachers regarding protection of privacy, online safety and reputation, maintaining professional boundaries and how to deal with cyberbullying incidents (ACMA, 2009).

Prevention through education, intervention monitoring and punitive action are the three strategies available to institutions to combat cyberbullying as identified by Hanewald (2008). At the local level a comprehensive school-wide educational program aimed at prevention would involve different stakeholders in schools. This might include the principal, teachers, students, parents, school counsellors and pastoral carers. All members of the school community need to be committed to a comprehensive approach in promoting a safe school environment. The main goals would be to integrate anti-bullying strategies across the school curriculum and to establish clear school anti-bullying rules, resource guidelines and policies that are regularly reviewed and up-dated. These rules, resource guidelines and policies need to be clearly understood, accessible and utilised by all stakeholders (Shariff, 2009).

Media coverage, education, and social marketing campaigns that can be used to support behavioural change and are all part of community level engagement with school to establish consistent strategies to curtail covert bullying. Internationally, there have been numerous programs and policies developed to reduce bullying in schools and a number have resulted in successful outcomes with reductions in bullying evidenced (Olweus, Limber & Mihalic, 1999; Smith & Ananiadou, 2003).

In the United Kingdom, the British Educational Communications and Technologies Agency (BECTA), the Government's primary agency for Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in education, has developed a number of e-safety resources for policy makers, schools and their teachers, teaching assistants and ICT support staff. As it is pointed out on BECTA's website, in today's world, 'protecting young people (and adults) properly means thinking beyond the traditional school environment. Where once the desktop computer was the only way to access the internet, now many mobile phones and games consoles offer broadband connections' (BECTA). BECTA provides information and recommendations for designing and implementing Acceptable Use Policies, effective use of firewalls and other technical controls, ways to minimise the incidence of cyberbullying and approaches for educating young people about safe online behaviours. They advocate a whole-school approach towards developing curricula, including awareness raising, effective policies and procedures for dealing with cyberbullying episodes and pedagogies to develop safe use of ICT, otherwise known as 'e-safety'.

In Australia ACMA have been active in developing online resources to combat cyberbullying and to develop awareness among youth about online risky behaviours (ACMA, Cybersmart Program). Launched in 2009, the "Cybersmart" program is about empowering Australian children and young people to avoid risky behaviours and to become good digital citizens. Clearly students need to know how to navigate the online world and this skill is an important element in the development of digital literacy.

A further Australian initiative that focuses on teaching coping skills and cyber safety was implemented in a study conducted by Lam & Frydenberg (2009). For example the *Cyber Savvy Teens* program (CST) which equipped youth with protective behaviours and strategies to deal with risks online. Use of web based environments, virtual worlds and online simulations have also been found to be effective in teaching about cyberskills and risk avoidance on the net. Other researchers emphasise the importance of listening to the experiences of youth who have been victims of cyberbullying and empowering students to become co-designers of e-safety programs (Price, 2010).

Future directions for Australian schools: sustainable approaches

School policy guidelines currently being circulated in the United Kingdom highlight considerations that would be worthy of consideration for Australian schools and educators. Already, several initiatives have been undertaken by The *Department of Broadband and Telecommunications* to ensure that teachers, students and parents are aware of risks associated with online communication and social networking tools (e.g., Net Alert). The development and adoption of e-safety means that schools must decide on how to supervise and control internet access while setting rules and educating students for responsible use of ICT applications and social media.

A number of approaches to develop cybersafety awareness and protective measures have been suggested by researchers and educators as follows (Olweus, 1993; Willard, 2007):

- Educating students in media literacy and in the skills of how to critique and evaluate social media may act as form of prevention guidance;
- Coordinated strategies that involve teachers, students, parents and communities, with flexible approaches that can tackle the varied forms of cyberbullying;
- Creating school policies and learning environments that have foster positive behaviours among children;
- Developing acceptable use policies that outline the ways in which technologies can and cannot be used by students, and the sanctions that might apply if these rules are broken.

The Alannah and Madeline Foundation's Cybersafety and e-Smart program aims to make cybersafety a normal part of every student's life by equipping them to use technologies in ways that protect them from the associated risks. The major focus of the initiative is to help schools to create a cultural norm of smart, safe and responsible use of communications technologies. The initiative aims to:

- help schools develop policies and practices encouraging students to use technology responsibly;
- point schools to teaching resources on cybersafety, but also to resources to help them create a safe, respectful and caring environment;
- encourage schools to embrace the positives of technology for teaching practice and enhance young people's learning;
- establish a system for schools to provide evidence that they are actively implementing these policies and practices;
- reduce the digital divide between adults and young people, so adults can become a credible source of advice on avoiding the risks of cyberspace.

Sustainable approaches demand that schools, teachers, parents and community work together and the e-Smart program is exemplary in this respect. All parties must recognise that technologies will continue to evolve into more interactive, mobile and ubiquitous applications, so it is pointless to restrict access to social computing tools that are part of the digital world of youth and are an essential part of the development of social and digital literacy skills. Nevertheless, due to the negative impact of cyberbullying on youth and the evidence of how it affects children's academic performance and self-efficacy, a national action plan is needed to mitigate and prevent occurrences of cyberbullying. Effective e-safety measures need to be integrated across the curriculum and aimed at developing digital skills, awareness and pro-social behaviours among youth, while utilising and modelling effective and supportive use of ICT's across the curriculum and learning environment. Above all we need evidence-based practice and more empirical studies in schools to optimise adolescents' capacity to learn, socialise and remain safe online.

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