

E-Safety

Project Title	E-Safety: Strategies to enable rural schools, teachers, students and communities to develop awareness of the social, ethical and cognitive implications of cyberbullying and the safe usage of social software tools
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Funding Agency	SiMERR
Organisational Base	SiMERR ACT

Description

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Education in regional rural communities has undergone a technological shift in the last five years. One catalyst for this change has been the switching from analogue to digital telephony. A result of the next generation communication infrastructure is the availability of high speed broadband internet services in rural and regional areas. The introduction of these broadband access devices can and will have a positive impact on digital learning, but coupled with this exposure to convergent multi-media streaming is the potential for users to inflict harm and other negative social values onto digital learners. The incidence of cyberbullying is on the increase in Australia. For Australia's adolescents the problem of bullying in schools is one they are just becoming aware of – sometimes through painful personal experience (Rigby, 2002). Regional rural learners have embraced the new internet technologies with gusto and are able to participate in a "flat digital world" thus reshaping education and the need to teach students to use these technologies in safe and appropriate ways.

The project seeks to investigate students' perceptions of cyberbullying and their knowledge of e-safety strategies, teacher perceptions of the prevalence of cyberbullying in the schools selected and their perceived need for professional development in e-safety.

The project involved the development of a survey instrument and the interviewing of teachers and students on their perceptions of cyberbullying and e-safety. Focus group discussions were also conducted with teachers and students. Following analysis of the data activities were developed to assist schools to implement e-safety strategies and acceptable use policies for mobile phones, iPods, social networking sites, internet use and access.

Participants

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Staff and students from the following schools:

- St. Clare's Catholic College, Canberra
- St Edmunds Catholic College, Canberra
- Mt Carmel School Yass, NSW
- St Patricks College Cooma, NSW
- Trinity Catholic College Goulburn, NSW
- Wagga Wagga High School, NSW.

Findings

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To date the study has surveyed 714 students (Years 7-10) and 148 teachers (Years 7-10) with follow-up interviews undertaken with a small group of students and teachers in five schools. The study focuses upon four NSW rural schools and two Canberra urban schools. The study incorporates both single and mixed sex secondary schools (one all boys and one all girls urban schools and four co-educational schools).

Students in both the rural and urban interview groups believed that cyberbullying was not common in their school and that it was not a serious problem for them or their friends. Seventy-four percent of students from one rural school indicated that they had not been cyberbullied while 26% indicated that they had been cyberbullied. Of those who had experienced this form of bullying 10% indicated that they did not tell anyone else about the bullying while 20% told a friend, 4% told a teacher and 16% told a parent. When students witnessed another person being cyberbullied 34% indicated that they had told a friend, 2% told a teacher and 22% told a parent. These results were generally very similar in the urban school analysed to-

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date. However of those who had experienced this form of bullying only 2% indicated that they did not tell anyone else about the bullying while 32% told a friend, 14% told a teacher and 16% told a parent.

Outcomes

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Conference presentations

- Burgess, J., McLoughlin, C., & Yvanovich, T. (2008, September). Social inclusion: Perceptions, incidence and effects of cyberbullying on learners with diverse needs. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Australian Association of Special Education Inc., Freemantle, WA.
- McLoughlin, C & Burgess, J. (2009, February) Bullies in cyberspace: How rural and regional Australian youth perceive the problem of cyberbullying and its impact (Abstract). Paper to be presented at the First International Symposium of the National Centre of Science, Information and Communication Technology, and Mathematics Education for Rural and Regional Australia on innovation for equity in rural education, Armidale, NSW.

Impact

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This project has evoked a lot of interest and support at a local and national level. Schools have been very supportive of the project and have given access to students and staff for data collection. Pastoral care staff in each of the schools has expressed interest in being involved in follow-up e-safety strategies. One peer reviewed paper in press, and several others are in preparation.

The Catholic Education Office, Canberra & Goulburn is also intending to partner with the project coordinators in order to provide professional development to teachers on how to deal with cyberbullying and develop e-safety.

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