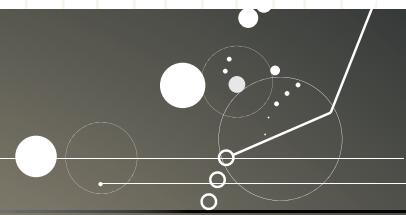




cyber chat



By **Dr. Barbara Spears**

Welcome to Cyberchat #2. For the past two days, I have been attending the National Centre Against Bullying (NCAB) conference in Melbourne – Navigating the Maze: Cybersafety and Wellbeing Solutions for Schools. The opening speaker at the NCAB conference was Bill Belsey, often referred to as the ‘Father of cyberbullying’, as he was the first to coin the phrase some years ago. Bill kept saying that he was “just a fifth grade teacher” who embraced the positive uses of technology in his classes, but who was also passionate about making it safe for kids, and helping them to ensure their own safety and wellbeing online.

In terms of cyberbullying, Bill stressed that it was a sophisticated problem, requiring sophisticated and thoughtful solutions. Simplistic solutions, such as removing the technology, simply won’t work. He also reiterated that teachers were not police, and that any consequence for inappropriate cyber behaviour needed formative consequences – those that teach our young people – not punitive ones. He encouraged all teachers to become part of the ‘always on’ generation and recommended sites such as seeinpeace.net and teachertube.com.

Professor Donna Cross also gave a keynote address on the second day, reporting on data from the Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study (ACBPS). She made a clear plea for giving youth a voice in anything schools do – from running seminars for parents, to conducting in-house surveys – and highlighted the need for schools to look at the transition years as ‘hot spots’ when cyberbullying can become particularly problematic. Cross

also reported that cyber victims felt disconnected from school; were lonely; never felt safe at school; and that there was real evidence of the intertwining of relationships between cyberbullying, face-to-face bullying, problematic peer relationships and wellbeing. The message: we need to start educating early and recognise that for young people, there is no divide between online and offline worlds, and that the factors which predict cyberbullying are complex societal factors incorporating individual, peer, school, and family factors.

One of the really interesting sessions concerned the nexus between cyberbullying and the law, raising the question: is the law part of the solution to the problem of cyberbullying occurring in school contexts? With no clear answers as yet, the notion of ‘criminalising’ our children is one that warrants much greater discussion. The scope of the school’s responsibility in and out of the yard when cyberbullying was concerned was also discussed. Another perspective that was raised concerned keeping teachers safe online, both in terms of one’s own digital footprint/reputation and practices, as well as in terms of being victimised by students.

The role that pre-service teachers can play in the prevention of cyberbullying was also raised, and my colleagues and I presented a workshop on the Net Gen: Preservice Teachers’ Understanding of Cyberbullying. It is interesting to reflect that those currently studying to be teachers were in schools less than four years ago, when anti-bullying policies were in place under the National Safe Schools Framework. They are also emergent users of technology, which

makes them uniquely positioned as tech-savvy young people, to comment on their understanding and knowledge of this form of behaviour, as well as their sense of capacity to deal with it. Interestingly, approximately two thirds reported feeling informed about bullying, with 10% reporting feeling very informed. Similarly, approximately two thirds indicated that they felt capable of dealing with it, with approximately 9% stating they felt very capable. Twenty-five per cent felt not very informed, with more female pre-service teachers reporting feeling not very capable of dealing with it (32%) compared with males (17.2%).

If we are advocating a whole school approach as an intervention strategy, then it stands to reason that those recently graduating will have a contribution to make. Society expects teachers to help stop any bullying. The Net Gen and our pre-service teachers are members of that group and have unique contributions to make because they are using the technology themselves – conducting relationships, friendships and much of their social lives online. Suddenly, our next generation of teachers may be well equipped to understand the parallel universe that is the cyberworld, in ways that have not been so before. This may be the generation of teachers who can make a difference. ●.....

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