

Behind the Scenes: Insights into the Human Dimension of Covert Bullying

Hawke Research Institute for Sustainable Societies

Centre for the Analysis of Educational Futures



In Partnership with:

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This Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) funded research project was a collaboration between:

- *The University of South Australia* (Barbara Spears and Bruce Johnson) and
- *The Flinders University, South Australia* (Phillip Slee and Larry Owens)

In partnership with:

- *The Coalition to Decrease Bullying, Harassment and Violence in South Australian Schools* (Janine Harvey (Department of Education and Children's Services), Greg Cox (DECS), Linda Moran (Catholic Education of South Australia), Jenn Trantor (Association of Independent Schools of South Australia) and
- *Learning Technologies: DECS* (Paul Doherty and Jim Edson)

Project Website

The Insights into the Human Dimension of Covert Bullying website can be found at <http://www.cyberbullyingstories.org.au>

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1. Executive Summary

1.1 Introduction

The purpose of this final report is to summarise the research project: *Insights into the Human Dimension¹ of Covert Bullying* and to report findings and make recommendations arising from those findings.

The definition of bullying is a contested one. However, it is generally agreed that bullying is a sub-set of aggressive behaviour in which there is not only a *deliberate intent to harm*, but also an *imbalance of power*, where the behaviour is *typically repeated* and experienced by the target of the aggression as unwanted, and by the perpetrator, as enjoyable. Current understandings of bullying further suggest that bullying is not only a group-related behaviour, but is a “relationship problem – because it is a form of aggression that unfolds in the context of a relationship, in which the child asserts interpersonal power through aggression” (Pepler, Craig, Connolly, Yule, McMaster and Jiang, 2006, p376; See also Slee, 2001 Murray-Harvey & Slee, 2007).

Previous national and international research highlights the quest to understand the various sub-types of aggression and bullying, and it is these which underpin and inform this study. To establish the parameters for this investigation into the *Human Dimension of Covert Bullying*, it is necessary to determine how the term “covert bullying” may have been used, defined and interpreted. A search of the research literature reveals that the term “covert” is rarely employed as an operational research term, but is used instead as a broad over-arching behavioural descriptor, and in particular, as the antonym of “overt” behaviours. This binary classification (overt-covert) is one of several categorisations which have emerged at different times in the literature, with examples of others being *physical/verbal and direct/indirect*.

The term “covert” is synonymous with such terms as: *secret, clandestine, stealthy, underground, concealed, and hidden* (*on-line thesaurus*) and is found in the literature when employed in association with but not restricted to, other well recognised and defined sub-types of aggression preferred by girls, which reflect *less obvious, more subtle forms of aggressive behaviour*: viz

- *indirect* (See Lagerspetz, Björkqvist and Peltonen (1988); Owens, Daly and Slee, 2005)
- *relational* (See Crick and Grotpeter, 1995) and
- *social* (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson and Garipey, 1989 and Galen & Underwood, 1997).

However there is considerable debate regarding the nature and use of these various terms (Underwood, Galen and Paquette, 2001).

¹ The singular term “dimension” has been employed throughout rather than the plural, as this report seeks insight into the collective experience overall

The distinction between aggression and bullying also needs acknowledgement. If these more hidden and clandestine behaviours are to be considered bullying, they *must not only involve a deliberate intent to harm but also involve a systematic abuse of power, and typically be repeated over time.*

For the purposes of this project, *covert bullying* is defined as:

Typically repeated behaviours which are concealed, secret or clandestine, that inflict psychological/emotional harm through indirect/ relational or social means.

Spears, (2004b²) in reviewing the early literature on sub-types of aggression and bullying, reported that the Hostility Inventory (Buss and Durkee, 1957), had seven subscales to identify aggression. “Covert” was not mentioned, but “Indirect” aggression was listed and defined as: “both roundabout and undirected aggression. Roundabout behaviour, like malicious gossip or practical jokes is indirect in the sense that the hated person is not attacked directly but by devious means” (p169). In 1961, Buss (p 8) used the term indirect aggression to denote behaviour that was deemed to be about “practical jokes, taking and breaking things and spreading gossip”. He further elaborated that “identifying the aggressor is rendered difficult,” citing “gossip” as an example whereby the victim is not present and the “noxious stimuli are delivered via the negative actions of others”. In a different vein, Sears (1961, cited in Rule, 1974, p 132) suggested that a type of pro-social aggression existed, which was: “aggression used in a socially approved way for purposes that are acceptable to the moral standards of the group” and that such aggression included socially acceptable controls and discipline. In 1969, Feshbach examined sex differences in aggression, and reported that there was little data available regarding the “indirect social means of inflicting pain” (p249) stating that indirect aggression was comprised of: “responses which result in pain to a stimulus person through rejecting and excluding” (p250). Feshbach’s notion of indirect aggression was operationalised as “active rejection involving: ignoring, avoiding and excluding” (1969, p 252). Nearly a decade later, Frodi, Macaulay and Thome (1977, pp 635-636) identified three binaries, *Physical: Verbal; Direct: Indirect; Provoked: Unprovoked* indicating the wealth of research that had been undertaken in determining the various sub-types of aggression since Buss and Durkee’s research in 1957.

Eagly and Steffen (1986) further drew a distinction between physical and *psychological* aggression, premised upon the type of harm caused and encompassing non-verbal behaviours as well. Lagerspetz, Björkqvist and Peltonen (1988) in their studies of gender differences in aggression, revisited the direct/indirect dichotomy, further articulating that with indirect aggression “the aggressor may remain unidentified, thereby avoiding both counter attack from the target and disapproval from others (p404) [and includes]: circumventory behaviours that exploits social relations among peers in order to harm the person at whom the anger is directed (p 409). Clearly this relates to Buss’s earlier assertions regarding roundabout behaviour. Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson and Garipey (1989) proposed that social aggression described behaviours that girls were

² Unpublished PhD Thesis: South Australian Middle-school Girls’ Perceptions, Understandings and Experiences of Peer Relationships, Bullying and Aggression in Single-Sex and Co-Educational Settings: (2004,pp 106-148)

using, defining it as the “manipulation of group acceptance through alienation, ostracism and character defamation”. Likewise, Crick and Grotpeter (1995) argued that relationally destructive behaviours were more typical of girls; with Galen and Underwood (1997) expanding the definition of social aggression to include “actions directed at damaging another’s self esteem, social status” or both, and includes such behaviours as “facial expression of disdain, cruel gossiping and the manipulation of friendship patterns”.

There have now been many international studies which have explored the various forms of aggression referred to above, which involve subtle manipulation of the peer group and friendships to achieve a socially desirable end. There have also been Australian studies by the authors of this study which have specifically examined gender differences in aggression: (Owens, Shute and Slee, 2007; Shute, Owens and Slee, 2008) and girls’ bullying behaviours in schools (for example: Leckie³, 1996; Leckie, 1997a; Leckie, 1997b; Spears, 2006). This body of work has contributed to our understanding of indirect forms of aggression and bullying in an Australian context and provides a sound basis from which to explore the broader notion of “covert” bullying.

It is important to note the most recent shift that bullying has taken: into cyber space. In the last few years there has been a growth in reports of this type of bullying from around the world (e.g. Belsey, 2005; Campbell, 2005a & b; Fleming & Rickwood, 2004; Hinduja & Patchin, 2006; Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, Fisher, Russell & Tippett (2008; Wolak, Mitchell and Finkelhor, 2008). In exploring the human dimension of covert bullying, it was anticipated that there would be an emergence of stories related to cyber bullying. If covert bullying occurs behind the scenes, cyber bullying happens behind *screens*, where anonymity and concealment of identity are easily manipulated to inflict harm on others.

The research project: *Insights into the Human Dimension of Covert Bullying* was designed to capture the voices of stakeholders in our schools to provide an authentic resource. By creating an on-line “book” of brief stories using digital audio and making them available as media files from a purpose built website, individuals could share their knowledge and experiences of *covert*, and the most recently emerging *cyber* bullying. Through this compilation of brief stories, an on-line resource for schools and communities would be available, and the above definition of covert bullying would subsequently be clarified. By exploring the experiences of students, teachers, parents, counsellors and principals, their experiences, understandings and knowledge of *covert* and *cyber* bullying would illustrate the human dimension of the nature and impact of these forms of bullying.

This qualitative research has been undertaken in different phases:

- **Phase One:** involved the initial digital audio recording of stories from diverse groups of stakeholders, and then making them available as media files from a dedicated project website.
 - Students and teachers invited to participate were trained in the use of audio recording and pod casting technology;
 - Counsellors and

³ Leckie reverted to her Family name Spears, in 2000

- Parents recounted their stories concerning covert and cyber bullying.
- Principals' experiences and strategies for intervening are to be recorded in the early part of 2009.
- **Phase Two:** involved the construction of a dedicated project website so that the stories can be listened to directly from the web interface, or downloaded as a resource for schools and communities to use for: Staff Professional Development; parent information, student awareness raising and pre-service teacher education.
- **Phase Three:** involved the narrative and thematic analysis of the stories.
- **Phase Four:** involves gathering stories on-line from the global community about covert and cyber bullying. Individuals can lodge their stories which will then be assessed by the project team for inclusion on the *cyberbullyingstories* website. These will extend the data base and capture the nature of covert bullying as it changes over time.

***Recommendation 1:** That continued analysis of new stories be funded to contribute to the understanding of the impact of cyber bullying as it continues to evolve across the next few years, particularly in light of changing technologies.*

1.2 Conceptual Findings

This study employs purposeful sampling, using the *maximum variation technique* described by Patton (1987). According to Patton, the logic of purposeful sampling is to get "*information-rich cases...from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance*" as opposed to "*gathering little information from a large, statistically significant sample*" (Patton, 1987, p. 52). Maximum variation sampling is a type of purposeful sampling that describes, "central themes...that cut across a great deal of participant...variation" (Patton, 1987, p. 53).

Using a purposive and convenience sample of participants drawn from many diverse school settings, ensures that the common patterns and themes which have emerged in this study are not the voices of just a few, but rather, through the mechanism of maximum variation sampling (Patton, 1990) are revealed to be central, core experiences of covert and cyber bullying. The variations for constructing the sample population are: school type (government, independent, catholic); gender; age of students (11-18); location of school (semi-rural and metropolitan); and adults from school communities (teachers, counsellors, principals*⁴ and parents of children with special needs (Asperger's Syndrome**)).

Narrative and thematic analysis of the stories collected from these groups in South Australia concerning covert bullying has revealed that:

- **There is widespread understanding of the concept of**
 - **covert and**
 - **cyber bullying;**
- **It is occurring**
 - **in various ways,**
 - **across all sectors, genders and age groups and**
- **It is having a negative impact generally on those being victimised.**

The overriding themes emerging from the stories revolve around the important role of:

- **Same/cross-sex friendships and peer relationships in bullying and**
- **The use of technology in changing the face of bullying: from face-to-face, and behind the scenes, to covert and overt cyber bullying, behind the screens**

Clearly, reputation and status amongst the peer group and relationships with friends is vitally important, and covert bullying, that which is done behind the scenes, is one weapon in the repertoire that enables manipulation of reputations, and denigration or

⁴ * Principals have yet to record their stories. We invite those with stories to tell regarding strategies they have used to deal with covert and cyber bullying, to contact us via the website: www.cyberbullyingstories.org.au

** Children with Asperger's Syndrome represent some of our most vulnerable students in schools. (See Australian Advisory Board on Autism Spectrum Disorders <http://autismaus.com.au/aca/>) The parents of these children have unique stories to tell which conveys the human dimension of covert bullying amongst not only the group of children with disabilities but also their parents.

elevation of status. The advent of technology to enable new ways of operating, either covertly or overtly on-line, has exacerbated the impact of this form of bullying.

Findings are reported extensively and in detail in the major report and are summarised as follows for this Executive Summary.

1.2.1 The Concept of Covert Bullying

Participants in this study have revealed that **covert bullying**:

- Is both **explicitly and implicitly understood** as a construct, and
 - Reflects the over-arching behavioural descriptors referred to in the literature, where behaviours are:
 - **secret, hidden, less obvious and subtle** and
 - Also reflects
 - recognised and defined sub-types of aggression and bullying, such as: *indirect, social and relational* involving such behaviours as:
 - **exclusion, isolation, humiliation, denigration of reputation, and manipulation of the peer group.**
- Occurs *across* **gender, age and school settings,**
- Covers **a diversity of behaviours across those settings, genders and ages** and
- Is **often represented by stories of cyber bullying and manipulations in cyber space** (See Appendices A & B for details)

1.2.2 Definition: Covert and Cyber

Covert

Participants in this study have independently defined **covert bullying** as a range of *behaviours* and *feelings* which reflect the definition created to guide this study:

Typically repeated behaviours which are concealed, secret or clandestine, that inflict psychological/emotional harm through indirect/ relational or social means.

According to discussions generated by and recorded in “Y” Charts⁵: Covert Bullying:

- “**Looks** like”: *ostracism, exclusion, manipulation, and intimidation.*
- “**Sounds** like”: *spreading rumours, fragmented whispering, payouts and put downs.*
- “**Feels** like”: *sharks circling; talking behind backs, and interrupted dialogues (See Appendix B).*

The feelings that have also been expressed of: *helplessness, powerlessness, bewilderment and hurt (See Appendix B)*, capture the **power differential** required for these behaviours to be considered **bullying**, and not simply acts of aggression between two parties of equal

⁵ Using “Y” Chart Quotes from participants: Each section of the Y directs one way of describing the phenomenon: Looks Like, Sounds Like, Feels Like:

power. Clearly, *covert* bullying employs indirect, relational and social means, to inflict harm, and is occurring “*behind the scenes*”.

Cyber

According to the discussions generated by the participants and recorded in Y charts, *Cyber Bullying* reflects behaviours and feelings which:

- “**Look[s] Like**”: *texting; emails shut down quickly; faceless; hate pages; hidden gangs; anonymous; instant; premeditated; manipulated; altered images*
- “**Sound[s] Like**”: *verbal; cruel; torture; soft, urgent chatter around screens; vicious; obscene; silent; powerful*
- “**Feel[s] Like**”: *invasion of privacy; unnerving; trapped; alone; demeaning; inescapable; unsafe; vulnerable; betrayed; huge power imbalance.*

It is evident from this, that the participants understood *cyber bullying* to be *bullying using technology*: that it was hurtful and harmful, with feelings of powerlessness and issues of safety. The definition of *cyber* bullying then, must *not only* address the issues usually associated with bullying generally: the *power* differential, the *repetition* of the behaviours and the deliberate *intent* to harm **but also the medium which is employed**: via electronic communication devices, such as computers and mobile phones. The notion of repetition with regard to cyber bullying, will be discussed further in the document, as it is not simply a matter of repeatedly sending messages, for example (See 1.28).

The indirect, relational and social elements of *covert* bullying are certainly present when *cyber* bullying was described by these participants as “looking” faceless; ...[like] hidden gangs; ...manipulated...and anonymous.

If covert bullying occurs *behind the scenes*, then cyber bullying can be said to occur ***behind the screens***: *texting... emails...hate pages...altered images...*

Some indication of the impact is also evident when feelings are described for both covert and cyber bullying, with those feelings expressed for cyber bullying suggesting that the impact may be greater for victims of *cyber* than *covert* bullying (See 1.23 below).

In light of these findings, what is urgently needed, is a review of school anti-bullying policies in Australia to determine whether they address the issues of covert and cyber bullying (see the United Kingdom study by Smith, Smith, & Samara (2008) where their study showed that cyber bullying was not generally highlighted in school policies).

<p><i>Recommendation 2: That a national study be conducted to review school anti-bullying policies to examine whether they specifically include covert and cyber bullying</i></p>
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1.2.3 Impact

In this study, covert and cyber bullying have had a negative impact on all stakeholders: across schooling communities; and in different ways, as indicated by participants who used the following descriptors to describe how covert and cyber bullying made them *feel*:

<i>isolated</i> <i>excluded</i> <i>challenged</i> <i>unsafe</i>	<i>Vulnerable</i> <i>Rejected</i> <i>Bewildered</i> <i>Violated</i>	<i>lonely</i> <i>powerless</i> <i>depressed</i> <i>threatened</i>
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(See Appendices A &B)

Clearly these are feelings which capture the power differential between protagonist and victim: with victims expressing feelings of having that power exercised *over* them.

The following phrases are drawn from the stories and clearly indicate that **victims suffered the following impacts** (See Appendix A):

Damage to self esteem Anger Sadness and depression Rejection Increased aggression Chose to leave the town Chose to leave boyfriend Loss of face Chose to leave/change school Fear of going to school	Being upset Anxiety Fear/invasion of Privacy Reputation damage Stayed away from school Moved house Avoidance of others Stress and distress Being blamed for the incidents Fear of going out,	Physical aggression Threats & blackmail Embarrassment Unhappiness Public humiliation Impact on schoolwork Loneliness Being set up Exclusion/isolation/frozen out Fear of leaving home,
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The range of negative experiences and impacts associated with both covert and cyber victimization are of concern. The *psychological* impact is clearly evident, as is the *physical* impact of not attending school or changing schools.

Recommendation 3: *That a review of the National Safe Schools Framework and the Bullying No Way website be undertaken to address and include more on the issues of covert and cyber bullying.*

The plight of parenting children with special needs, in this case those children with Asperger’s Syndrome, has not been given voice before in the bullying literature.

The data collected from parents of children with special needs as part of this project makes a unique contribution to existing understanding about the impact of bullying in our schooling system.

Particularly poignant, and unexpected then, were **parents' experiences** of covert bullying in our schooling system (see Appendix A).

It was not the stories of their children's victimization which came through, though that was certainly evident, but rather their *own* perceptions of exclusion, isolation and rejection as experienced from *other parents, staff and at times, principals in our school system*. This is not to say that there were not any positive experiences with schools, but that the negative impacts and effects did seem to outweigh them for this group of parents. In a general sense, schooling was a difficult time for both parents and child and relief was expressed when the child no longer had to attend. Some examples follow to illustrate:

"The teachers tended to exclude me from family picnics and what not. I felt that before my son started school that I had a very good self esteem but after a few years into school I'd go to school and just feel physically ill" (Parent A).

"But I feel bullied in a way... that I don't talk to them,... they avoid me, ... they walk across the yard so that they don't have to talk to me" (Parent B).

"You do feel isolated andI guess in a way bullied yourself becauseoften you are ignored. The teachers are trying to ...in a way ... bully you ... to do what they want you to do.... whether it be going to specialists or just to agree with what they are getting you to doand because you are trying to help the child.... you will often go along with that because you want the best for themso therefore you are willing to give it a go. Sometimes it is not always the best thing to do.... unfortunately.....Isolation ..yes..because... once again, as the others have said....nobody wants to know you"(Parent C).

Recommendation 4: *That a review of the literature and research be undertaken regarding the vulnerability of special needs children and their families, to covert and cyber bullying in the school system.*

1.2.4 Discounting and Coping

Whilst recounting stories which demonstrated covert and cyber bullying, there was also an indication that **some students were discounting or denying the impact of these behaviours:**

I found it funny...

I didn't want to give them the satisfaction....so I laughed at it all.

I didn't take it seriously...

She just wanted the attention (See Appendix A).

At one level, this might be interpreted as trivializing the impact or significance of covert and cyber bullying. However, it might also be understood as a **coping** strategy, where the target tries to conceal the impact of the bullying from the perpetrator.

It would seem then that this could be a type of “face saving” mechanism. This needs further exploration.

1.2.5 Cyber Bullying

When inviting participants to recount stories about *covert* bullying, incidents involving the use of *technology* were also described. Most students, teachers and counsellors reported on an incident involving technology, where something was *filmed, sent, recorded, or typed*, that was *then* used to bully the other person, rendering him/her powerless to do anything about it in the process (See examples below). Through the stories, the participants identified behaviours, incidents, practices and those involved in cyber bullying.

It is important to note that if two individuals of similar power/status have a fight in real life⁶, then they are not necessarily involved in bullying. The same applies to cyber space. All three components of the definition: a power imbalance; deliberate intent to harm and repetition must be present for the interaction to be deemed to be bullying, otherwise it may be thought of as an on-line argument or fight, rather than bullying.

To revisit the working definition employed for this project, *covert bullying concerns: Typically repeated behaviours which are concealed, secret or clandestine, that inflict psychological/emotional harm through indirect/ relational or social means* and participants have indicated through their stories, that information and communication technologies provide a conduit or platform for this form of bullying to occur.

It is apparent from this study that bullying using technology is becoming increasingly regular and meaningful in young people’s lives, and is perceived by these participants to be a form of *covert* bullying: something that has hidden or concealed elements to it, is manipulative or secretive and manages to interfere with and damage relationships.

The use of technology has enabled covert bullying to shift from *behind the scenes*, to *behind the screens*, where, through technology, identity can be concealed and individuals can be excluded and isolated, manipulated and humiliated.

However, even though all stories were given as examples of covert bullying, and most involved some concealment of identity, or secretive and hidden behaviours, *some did not*, as this example suggests:

[My] Friend broke up with her boyfriend...[he] abused her on MSN, then Pixo.... [he]sent her hate mail...[he] stalked her across different sites and [her] phone....

Acts such as deliberately *stalking*, or abusing someone over social networking sites or email for example (see boxed text below), when the person does *not* try to remain hidden

⁶ Real life is coined as a term to convey the world of traditional bullying, as opposed to cyber world or cyber space, that exists in the virtual world.

are deliberate, overtly aggressive acts designed to intimidate and to exercise power over another. That stalking is undertaken in a *virtual* environment rather than a *real* one, is of little matter when the behaviour, intent and impact are considered.

Sending overt hate mail, when the receiver knows (or suspects) who the sender is, or *visibly* following or pursuing the individual from one site to another, are not *covert* acts. Neither is direct abuse using technology, if the identity is not concealed or hidden, or indirect, social or relational means are not employed.

This raises the issue that cyber bullying behaviours can be either covert or overt in their presentation.

Covert cyber bullying behaviours, such as exclusion, isolation, and the manipulation of friendships and relationships are evident when: individuals are shut out of chat groups; or when text rumours are spread from phone to phone without the targeted person knowing; or when strangers intimidate from the security of anonymity, as these next examples demonstrate. (See Appendix A for full text).

[A] Family went away...[they]left someone to look after the house. They had a party...strangers used the computer....then a random person contacted the daughter on MSN...described the house in detail...feelings of threat and violation...

Girls, parties and the clandestine use of mobile cameras ... to record inappropriate drunken and sexual behaviour,which were then uploaded to password protected websites for some to access, whilst excluding others.

Overt cyber bullying behaviours, where identity is not concealed, but technology is used, such as the actual setting up of a fight so it can be openly filmed, with a view of then loading it up to the internet for anyone to view; or the deliberate taking of intimate photographs are explicit, overt acts using technology, which subsequently enable the targeted person to suffer. Examples from the transcripts follow:

[There are]Significant problem with fights...[this is a]new element...[the] use of digital cameras in mobile phones to record fights...sometimes fights are set up so a film can be taken and uploaded onto the internet...increases stress for victim, and the use of technology adds to injury.... someone needs to be on the lookout for them.

They were on camp and the toilets were full so the girl got undressed in a cupboard in her dorm and the other girls in the dorm kept opening the door while she was in there getting changedwhich was quite disgusting and rude.Then they got out a camera and every time they would open the door they would take a photo of this girl who was getting changed.

Further examples of cyber stories follow, and it is apparent from them, that the *behaviours, incidents, practices and people* involved, are diverse, often reflecting *covert* acts of bullying (manipulation *behind the screens*) yet there are clearly some which involve *overt* bullying.

It is the use of technology, which seemingly draws together covert and overt bullying behaviours.

Student stories

.....Boy was subtly bullied at schooland then on MSNpurely to get a reaction from him back at school,... as he was easily angered...

Posted views about Emos on chatrooms...massive argument erupted with people she didn't know....One guy even said he would slice my eyes out...

Two boys have an argument...escalates into physical fight...filmed using mobile phone, uploaded...the loser was subsequently harassed and humiliated...isolated himself to avoid taunts...left the school.

Shout out box created about girl at school....people posted comments about one person....slut, all the people she had had sex with....spreading rumours...people from any school contributed....police became involved...

One boy...friends with 2 girls...one was his old friend's girlfriend...the mate got jealous...so he posted rumours on MySpace about her...made her seem like a two timing slut...

Girl who wanted to be popular...stripped for a guy over webcam...recorded via mobile phone...posted on Youtube...She became embarrassed and isolated herself...then started hanging out with the "wrong" crowd.

Bullying was occurring through MSN, MySpace, Pixa...calling mean names and ganging up on me...kept bringing in my family...I went offline...it didn't stop...reported it to my parents...feeling sad and depressed...Mum went and spoke to the other parents...they thought it was a huge joke and didn't take it seriously.

Boy was harassed by girl...on phone and MSN...invasion of privacy...stressful...wanted to be left alone,...she made a threat to my current girlfriend with a knife...told my parents...blocked her

Teachers' and Counsellors' Stories

She was dumped by his best friend just before the formal..., via text message, and called a slut and a bitch. She was distressed, so hadn't studied for a test, ...worried her parents would be angry if she didn't perform at school and would take her mobile phone away,.. she was so upset she had to go home...

Group of 3 girls... bullied others, ...leader bought things for the other two, supported their school work and social activities.... but the leader began seeing other girls, ...widening her circle. Her group was then angry with her and turned on her, excluding her...

A boy claimed he was being picked on,and then they used a mobile phone to rally others...

Girls played "Spice Girls", and took erotic pictures of each other. Later, one girl cheats with her friend's boyfriend, to then discover that her "friend" has taken revenge ... posted the erotic pictures they had taken when playing for all to see...

A group of girls would send really nasty emails to those they didn't like (You shouldn't be alive...)or ring in the middle of the night with their phones on private...

2 girls, on-off friendship/hateship..amenable lately..but one has been sms-ing the other, pretending to be a boy who is interested in her... led to the girl stealing money to pay for the "boy" to get extra credit on the sim card

Year 7 girls and friendship issues...fluctuating relationships...attractive, very bright, involved, ...parents also very involved with school ...One girl approached counsellor,... upset at being left out,.... and receiving messages on MSN...Later discovered she had spoken with her mother and her mother had been on the MSN chat line and had sent messages back to the other girls, pretending to be her daughter.

It is evident from the stories gathered, that the participants construed cyber bullying to be a *type* of covert bullying: where identity is hidden, where harm is inflicted via social, relational and indirect means and where one feels powerless to respond (See Appendix A). Closer examination of the narratives, however, suggests that cyber bullying: bullying using technology, **can be enacted both covertly and overtly**.

The full transcripts of these stories (See Appendix A) clearly reveal the nuances of *covert* and *cyber* bullying where both concern a *power* differential but:

- *covert* bullying involved more *hidden, circuitous and stealthy* behaviours, and
- *cyber* bullying involved both *covert* and *overt* behaviours, *manifesting itself through new and emerging technologies*.

These stories clearly indicate the shifting face of bullying with the advent of technology: from *face-to-face* (overt) and *behind the scenes*(covert) to *behind the screens* (cyber).

Had this study of covert bullying been undertaken several years ago, before the rapid uptake of new technologies such as mobile phones, internet chat rooms, and social networking sites, cyber bullying stories would not have been told. Covert bullying would have remained “behind the scenes” and it is likely that only person-to-person forms of bullying, such as talking behind one’s back, or revealing secrets would have been exposed. This would have been consistent with that which has been reported in the early studies into indirect aggression and bullying (See Introduction).

This transition to “behind the screens” tells us something else about today’s youth. Their modes of negative interactions have not changed: boys and girls still bully each other, but in cyber space, there seem to be some changes in how this is done. What has changed are the boundaries between home and school (See 1.27); between genders (See 1.29) and between what is acceptable behaviour and what is not (See 1.2.10). With the blurring of those boundaries, where, for example, gender-related bullying behaviours are not as clear cut as they have been in the past, have come other changes, such as: a seeming shift in socially accepted moral codes; a readiness to engage in voyeuristic behaviours; and a need to forge identity through technology to gain infamy and status via the internet.

This shifting of their social environment to cyber space, is also an indication of transformational youth culture at work, ready to adapt to the latest mode of communication and turn it into a vehicle for social interaction, whether positive or negative. Initially, only computers could host chat and blogs [for example], but now they are being overtaken by such initiatives as smart phone technology, which makes every phone a live, on-line device, capable of everything a desk or laptop computer can do, and more. Adults and parents who worried when the computer was not in a public room where usage could be monitored, also have had to contend with mobile phones with cameras and the intrusion they bring to an individual’s personal space. Now, they are increasingly trying to parent when the computers are actually in the pockets of their young people, where supervision brings new challenges.

As technology rapidly changes over the next five years, it will become increasingly important to monitor the parallel changes which could possibly occur with regard to bullying using technology. Already, bullying has moved from the schoolyard where it was “face-to-face” and “behind the scenes” to “behind the screens”, with the advent of technologies that enable bullying to occur in cyber space. Where will it go next?

Recommendation 5: *That a team or consultative group of young people be convened: to inform school communities, government and policy developers about cyber space; and to help to develop their own codes of conduct and contracts of acceptable behaviour.*

Not only the students need to be considered here, but how we are preparing **the next cohort of teachers warrants investigation in terms of their understandings and preparedness to deal with cyber and covert bullying issues in schools.**

Recommendation 6: *That a review of teacher education programs be conducted to audit the extent to which they provide some under-graduate and post-graduate education in relation to bullying generally and covert and cyber bullying in particular*

1.2.6 Bystanders

If an audience can gather in cyberspace to watch, participate in and or perpetuate the denigration and humiliation of a victim, can it also do something to intervene, just as bystanders in real life can do? There may be no innocent bystanders in cyber space, if everyone forwards messages, or visits websites. These actions do nothing to stop the spread of images and text designed to harm. Whilst they may not have created the text or filmed the image, individuals are complicit in spreading it to ever widening audiences, when they choose to “send it on”.

The issue of bystanders is one which is yet to be researched in cyber space. Where are the “white knights” who spring into action to support victims of cyber bullying? Who are they? How can they be motivated and what do we need to motivate them to do?

With regard to social, indirect and relational behaviours, individuals in real life choose to participate by spreading gossip, or talking behind backs, or choose to ignore what is happening and do nothing to try to stop it, believing that it does not concern them. In real life, choosing to pass on gossip and stories actively contributes to the problem. Likewise, doing nothing to prevent or intervene can tacitly support and reinforce any bullying, empowering the bully whilst disempowering the target. This makes bystanders or witnesses, part of the problem in real life, *unless* they actively do something to intervene, such as report what is happening. Previous research on traditional bullying indicates that when individuals actively intervene, the bullying stops (Pepler and Craig, 1995)

But what of bystanders in cyber space? Deliberately choosing to visit denigratory websites and or contribute to such things as nasty blogs and on-line slam books certainly relate to the same choices individuals have in real life when engaging in indirect, social or relational bullying. Here, as in real life, forwarding on of the cyber versions of gossip and talking behind others’ backs, such as nasty SMS texts, images or visiting on-line denigratory websites and polling booths, contribute to problem.

However, in cyber space, unlike in real life, choosing to: *not* pass/forward on; to *delete* nasty messages; and to decide *not* to visit websites or watch videos, makes individuals in cyber space part of the *solution*, as their decision entails some moral engagement with what is occurring, and a clear decision to *not* be part of the problem.

In both real life and cyber space, a decision to engage with the notion of stopping what is occurring leads to bystanders becoming part of the solution, but this seems to operate in

different ways in each environment. In real life, individuals must actively *do* something to intervene. In cyber space, individuals must actively choose *not* do something.

Recommendation 7: *That research into the practices of bystanders in cyber space be undertaken, with regard to intervening against cyber bullying in safe ways.*

1.2.7 Cyclical & Boundary-Less Nature of Covert & Cyber Bullying

The other issue evident from this study, is that **the use of technology is enabling the transference and continuation of bullying behaviours from one environment to another, with no clear starting or end point:** either starting at school, then continuing at home via technology and returning back to school again the next day, or vice versa: starting at home via technology, being continued at school and returning back home again. The opportunities for escalation are also exacerbated as this cycle continues.

Whilst the notion of cyber bullying occurring 24/7 is well understood in the emerging literature, this notion of it being cyclical is slightly different. 24/7 relates to the idea that the technology is always on, that you can be reached at any time, and that you cannot escape it when you leave the school yard.

The term *cyclical* is used to highlight the sequence of transference and continuation of bullying behaviours across different media and locations: from school, to home to school and back again. In cycling between home and school, the method employed is changed: what may be on-line at home possibly emerges as physical, or social bullying in the school yard, only to change again back home to overt or covert cyber bullying.

It also allows for complete strangers to participate in any public humiliation and denigration of reputation, thereby making the impact of this possibly much greater than what happened in school alone, and at a particularly vulnerable time in development. Adolescence is a period of change, identity formation and experimentation. It is also a time of questioning authority and knowing who to trust is fundamental to any and all adolescent relationships.

The line between the two environments now seems quite blurred, as what has occurred within relationships whilst at school, can be continued on-line at home or on the weekend and any fallout in those relationships during the time on-line, recurs back at school the next day or after the weekend.

This *cyclical, sequential* nature of the behaviours suggests that the jurisdiction between home and school will need to be rethought, as well as previous understandings of bullying as being discrete, different types of behaviour (physical, verbal, social, psychological; .indirect, relational) associated with gender or place or time. This *cycle of abuse* across the jurisdictions and time zones, will require different and specific strategies, and clear processes from school leadership

Legal Issues

The boundary-less nature of cyber bullying then, suggests that the problem is a community one, and not the sole jurisdiction of any one school or family. This also has implications for the legal responsibilities of both.

Recommendation 8: *That an examination be undertaken in relation to the legal responsibilities of schools and communities in regard to covert and cyber bullying.*

International Issues

On a larger scale, the boundary-less nature of cyber space means that this is in fact a global problem that crosses national and international boundaries. By way of evidence of this, there are a number of significant international organisations that are actively involved in addressing issues raised by cyber bullying (e.g. International Observatory on School Violence: <http://ijvs.org/> and Bullying Prevention Network in North America: <http://prevnet.ca/>). Further evidence of this, is the recently announced (December 2008) international research project into cyber bullying being co-ordinated at Goldsmith's College, University of London. This project will feature contributions from 21 countries and will run over four years.

If bullying in real life is an acknowledged relationship problem, requiring relationship solutions, then cyber bullying requires national and global communities to work towards solutions.

Recommendation 9: *That a review be conducted of research programs – jurisdictions/organisations that are currently addressing the issue of cyber bullying, with a view to providing a co-ordinated National response to the issue.*

Recommendation 10: *That consideration be given at a national level to consolidating or strengthening international linkages with government and advisory groups addressing cyber bullying. E.g. through the 'Bullying No Way' web site.*

1.2.8 Repetition and Cyber Bullying

As is evidenced from this study, *cyber* bullying was understood as operating within the framework of *bullying overall*, where firstly, there is a deliberate intent to hurt or harm. Secondly, a power differential is explicit, in that the perpetrator exercises power *over* the target and through technology, has the power to *do* all manner of things: to embarrass, humiliate, intimidate, exclude, and impersonate. Clearly, evidence from this study suggests that *bullying via technology can have both covert and overt dimensions to it.*

When bullying is done secretly, clandestinely, and often circuitously through others, making the identification of the perpetrator difficult to uncover, the bullying can be said to be *covert* in manner. When this is done via technology, then it can be said that it is

covert bullying using technological means. Clearly, there is evidence for this from the current study.

However, when there are open, deliberate acts employing technology for the express purpose of harming, intimidating and denigrating another, it can be construed as *overt bullying, using technological means*.

The definition of bullying also prescribes that it must be a repeated act. This seems not so straightforward when applied to cyber behaviours. Unlike face to face or traditional bullying, repetition is not *only* concerned with behaviours recurring on a daily or weekly basis, though this can certainly occur if someone is sent continuous nasty SMS text messages or emails, for example.

The material employed to harm [text, film or image] may *also* be spread from person to person via phones, in ever increasing numbers in the same way a virus is spread, or made available on the internet, for anyone to see, at any time, or else available with password privileges, which make the site an exclusive club for those who are engaging in the denigration.

Already a shift from email to social networking sites as the preferred medium for cyber bullying is evident in the stories. This use of technology means the text/image can remain, waiting to be discovered at any time in the future, by anyone, unless manually deleted from every machine/phone. This adds to the notion of repetition in cyber terms: repetition can keep occurring long after the original incident. Consider the private photograph which turns up years later and is used to humiliate, blackmail or extort the target yet again.

Another interpretation of repetition as applied to *cyber* bullying, can be to do with the cyclical movement of the forms of bullying that can now occur between home (online) and school (physical and direct verbal and indirect). No matter where it begins, at home or at school, it can transform from on-line at home to traditional (face-to-face or indirect) at school, and vice versa. Cyber bullying crosses the boundaries of home and school and this cyclical repetition adds a new dimension to understanding cyber bullying.

1.2.9 Gender: Covert and Cyber Bullying

The shift from *behind the scenes* to *behind the screens*, has also highlighted that covert bullying is a *useful contemporary strategy for either gender*, and that it is not the domain of either one. Boys in this study were engaging in manipulation, exclusion and isolation of others, in the same ways that girls were, but were using different activities. Boys were using exclusion in sport for example. Technology has seemingly enabled boys to up-skill in the use of these behaviours which have more often been associated with girls in the past: employing patterns of acceptance and rejection, exclusion and isolation, where they manipulate the peer group and friendships through verbal and psychological means.

A boy claimed he was being picked on,and then they used a mobile phone to rally others...

This is also recognised in the extant literature (Shute, Owens & Slee (2008). The changing nature and emphases in our schools' behaviour management policies could offer some insight here. Boys are sanctioned for overt, physical acts of aggression, and may well have witnessed girls avoiding such sanctions due to the difficulty adults have in decoding the more indirect incidents and establishing who and how it may have started.

There has also been the perception until quite recently, that these indirect behaviours are not as hurtful, and therefore teachers and schools have been less vigilant about dealing with them. Indeed, they have long been somewhat trivialised as “just girls being bitchy”.

It stands to reason that boys would seek to operate more covertly to avoid punishments under such circumstances. Certainly the research overseas has indicated that boys are employing relational forms of aggression (Tomada and Schneider, 1997) .

What is of interest here, is that whilst boys are appearing to use covert forms of bullying involving friendship and peer group manipulation, isolation and exclusion, the shift to cyber space has certainly highlighted this shift as a useful strategy, as harassment and bullying in cyberspace *must* be non-physical, verbal and visual because of the technological medium. It allows for anonymity, for identities to be hidden behind different profiles (age, gender), and for acts of pay-out, pay-back and or revenge without seeming repercussions. The way boys are manipulating fights however, draws the overt, physical directly into the cyber environment.

Recommendation 11: *That a review be made of research regarding gender and covert and cyber bullying*

1.2.10 Decision Making and Citizenship in Cyber Space

The need to belong and be accepted, let alone be popular, is a fundamental group need, particularly important in adolescence and one which requires recognition amongst teachers and parents alike. **Because of the new technologies available, there is now a wealth of opportunity to be creative in one's quest for popularity, and simultaneously, a wealth of ways in which to be persecuted for one's poor judgement.**

Strategies to educate students regarding the dangers of creating something on-line that will “live” forever in cyber space, is paramount. The now ubiquitous mobile phone camera and web cams open doorways into classrooms and homes alike. New ways of thinking about privacy and respect, values and morals, ethical action and social responsibility must be addressed by all partners across the community (See Appendix C for Guiding Questions to consider).

Students also understand that cyber bullying enables *stalking* in a way that has not been possible before: strangers or former friends can pursue them through the various social networking sites, interfering with current and new relationships.

[A] Boy was harassed by [a] girl...on phone and MSN...[real] invasion of privacy...stressful...wanted to be left alone,...she made a threat to my current girlfriend with a knife...told my parents...[eventually] blocked her

Students need support in making decisions about reporting this form of bullying, so that they feel safe.

Home is no longer private or safe unless adequate steps are taken to inform appropriate authorities, particularly if “strangers” have access to the “real” space of the individuals.

[A] Family went away...[they]left someone to look after the house. They had a party...strangers used the computer....then a random person contacted the daughter on MSN...described the house in detail...feelings of threat and violation...

Adolescents may have a view that they should be able to deal with these issues themselves instead of asking for help. This could relate to the discounting and denial coping mechanisms previously mentioned (See 1.24).

Yet students may need help to be able to safely report what could be occurring in their parallel universe of cyber space, but this requires trust: trust in teachers and trust in parents. Building those real-world relationships whilst our students inhabit cyber space is a challenge, particularly if adults are to remain important in adolescent lives. Schools and parents need ways of communicating that will not threaten students with loss of the technology, and therefore cut them off from their social world.

Recommendation 12: *That values and citizenship education be reviewed in terms of the contribution it can make to decision making and intervening against covert and cyber bullying.*

1.2.11 School Counsellors and Covert and Cyber Bullying

School Counsellors deal directly with managing all forms of behaviours including bullying, so are well versed in the dynamics of covert behaviours, and are just beginning to understand cyber bullying in school contexts.

It is apparent that they are grappling with the relationship fallout first hand, and form a strategic link between parents, student and the school.

Year 7 girls and friendship issues...fluctuating relationships...attractive, very bright, involved, ...parents also very involved with school ...One girl approached counsellor,... upset at being left out,... and receiving messages on MSN...Later discovered she had spoken with her mother and her mother had been on the MSN chat line and had sent messages back to the other girls, pretending to be her daughter.

She was dumped by his best friend just before the formal..., via text message, and called a slut and a bitch. She was distressed, so hadn't studied for a test,worried her parents would be angry if she didn't perform at school and would take her mobile phone away,.. she was so upset she had to go home

Their narratives revealed ideas for practical strategies such as:

- Educating parents about normative behaviour in friendship groups and the family unit so they can ask the question “Who has the power?” and differentiate between conflict and bullying
- Recognising the needs of students in the transition years, where they shift from one dedicated teacher to many across the curriculum. This is particularly important for reporting, where definite processes and policies to support students who report situations are needed.
- Helping parents to actually take back some control and set boundaries and time frames. By taking the responsibility re boundaries and banning cyber chat groups, one counsellor/parent found that she could relieve the child of the responsibility of *having* to be on-line. It is often stated that the biggest fear teenagers have is that they will lose the technology and be socially isolated from their friends. Here is one example of ‘tough love’ and support, where parents can free their child from the demands of the peer group and cyber world and take the weight and responsibility of *having* to be on-line, from them.
- Educating parents that assuming their child’s identity and behaving like one of the group in cyber space is not productive and can actually do more damage in terms of exclusion

1.2.12 Summary of Major Findings and Conclusions:

What Insights into the Human Dimension of Covert Bullying can be drawn from this study?

This study did not intend to convey the *prevalence* of covert bullying.

Its prime focus was to explore real stories of real individuals and draw insights from them about the human dimension of this form of bullying: *its impact on those in schools: the students, teachers, parents and principals.*

In doing so, clarity has been attained concerning: the

- definition and the range of behaviours employed;
- emerging role of cyber bullying and its cyclical nature;
- the nature of overt and covert cyber bullying
- discounting strategies employed by young people;
- role of bystanders;
- possible legal concerns
- international implications and the
- importance that friendships and relationships play in young people's lives, both in the real world and in the cyber world.

If bullying is a relationship problem, requiring relationship solutions, then the recommendations draw heavily on that understanding.

Some Conceptual Challenges:

As previously suggested, *cyber* bullying presents a conceptual challenge, highlighting the complexity that technology brings to our attempts to understand covert and overt bullying behaviours. Challenges to be considered here are: How is cyber bullying related to face-to-face bullying? How does physical bullying move into cyberspace? What is the role of the bystander in cyberspace?

Cyber Bullying as related to face-to-face Bullying

In this study, cyber bullying has arisen in the context of *covert* bullying and the previous discussion highlighted that there are indeed covert cyber bullying behaviours. It seems reasonable to think then, that cyber bullying may be a sub-set of covert bullying, given such hidden, secretive and manipulative behaviours as sending anonymous emails and using someone else's phone to send text messages, thereby concealing identity.

A quick perusal of the literature gives some insight into *cyber* bullying if viewed from a *covert*: indirect, relational or social, perspective. In Buss' terms (1961, p6) "the target can be attacked, though not directly....but by devious means". Using someone else's mobile phone, or setting the number to private, so it can not be identified and then sending threatening text messages is an example of this. Sears (1961, cited in Rule, 1974, p 132) reported that aggression could be used in a "socially approved way for purposes that are

acceptable to the moral standards of the group”, and that such aggression used socially acceptable controls and disciplines. The increased use of technology, and therefore the increased use of technology to bully someone covertly, would suggest that this form of behaviour (denigratory websites; altering images; uploading intimate pictures; forwarding on films of fights for example) is more than acceptable to young people and their group norms. It is not apparent however, where the socially acceptable controls and disciplines in cyber space *are* as yet. This could be the domain of the bystanders and future research should explore this notion. Feshbach (1969) operationalised indirect aggression, as “active rejection, ignoring, avoiding and excluding” and clearly these behaviours are evident when individuals are deliberately blocked in chat rooms for example. Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist & Peltonen (1988) reported that indirect aggression included “circumventory behaviours that exploited social relationships among peers, in order to harm the person at whom the anger is directed” and where the “aggressor may remain unidentified, thereby avoiding counter attack and disapproval from others”. The use of password protected, denigratory websites are examples of this.

It is also evident from this study that not all cyber bullying behaviours are indirect and some perpetrators are readily identified, particularly if they openly film something and control who has access to it. Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman and Garipey (1989) suggested that social aggression involved “manipulation of peer group acceptance through alienation, ostracism and character defamation” and Crick and Grotpeter (1995) reported that girls were “relationally destructive”. Galen and Underwood (1997) further indicated that social aggression involved actions directed at “damaging self esteem and social status”. Character defamation, damaging relationships and manipulating social status are clearly evident through the stories from this study, and, *whilst they may occur behind the screens, are not always necessarily hidden behaviours.*

In a similar way that friendships have been deemed to be the *vehicle* which enable indirect, relational and social forms of aggression and bullying to occur, *technology*, is the new *medium* which enables this form of bullying to occur in the parallel universe known as cyber space: where perpetrators *can* be anonymous, *can* impersonate someone else, and send emails/text/images from someone else’s computer for example to manipulate or denigrate.

If **cyber** bullying means taking these indirect, socially and relationally aggressive behaviours and shifting them “behind the screens” where ***anonymity and concealment of identity are easily manipulated to inflict harm on others***, then it **can** be construed to be either a sub-set or an extension of ***covert*** bullying.

On the other hand, if cyber bullying means that operating *behind the screens* is just another dimension to their real life bullying interactions, and anonymity is *not* required and the intimidation is *direct*, then it can be construed to be either a sub-set or an extension of ***overt*** bullying.

Cyber bullying then, is neither uniquely covert nor overt, but both, depending on the strategy adopted. Where the goal is to be circuitous, cyber bullying takes on the mantle of

covert behaviours: hidden, secretive, concealed. Where the goal is to raise an individual's status and gain infamy, forging a sense of identity linked to both of these notions, then cyber bullying takes on the mantle of overt bullying: open, deliberate behaviours. The role that physical bullying plays in this is of interest, as bullying in cyberspace must be either verbal [spoken] or non-verbal [text/written/visual] because of the technological medium.

The Role of Physical Bullying in Cyber Space

If it is to be believed that cyber space is indeed a parallel universe, then the full spectrum of bullying behaviour becomes available through the medium of technology. What then, of *physical* bullying in this medium?

Two boys have an argument...escalates into physical fight...filmed using mobile phone, uploaded...the loser was subsequently harassed and humiliated...isolated himself to avoid taunts...left the school.

As per this example, what began as a fight, subsequently morphed into cyber bullying, and transcended the boundaries between school and elsewhere. The interplay between real life and cyber space is noted here, as the targeted individual must attend school each day, knowing what has occurred in another space and time, exacerbating the impact.

The crowd still gathers, in the same way it does in the school yard, only now it is in cyber space. A crowd has always gathered around bullying and school yard fights, and particularly around girls if they engage in physical fights due to the traditional social mores, norms and taboos surrounding this sort of behaviour. With the advent of mobile phones with cameras in every pocket, what used to be done by adolescents in private or in the company of one or two friends, is now able to be filmed by others, who seem to have morally disengaged from the situation and are ready to actively, and openly film it, or even set it up in order to do so. Now, a broader audience is linked through technological means, and elevates the physical humiliation of the target to new heights. Increased peer status and infamy for the bully are now associated with a broader audience than ever before, hence anonymity may expressly *not* be desired.

The Role of Bystanders in Cyber Space

If bullying is occurring in cyber space, as it is evidently doing, then encouraging bystanders to support victims and engage in pro-social behaviours which disempower the bully is one concept from the traditional bullying literature which needs consideration.

The challenge here, is that most bystanders remain unseen in cyber space. There are many who visit chat rooms, and who watch and “listen/read” but who never indicate their presence. These silent visitors need encouragement to break the cycles of abuse that do occur, by not visiting, by not forwarding on inappropriate material, be it a text message or a photo/image and by actively deleting it.

Conclusions

Covert bullying is generally understood as bullying which is hidden, subtle and not obvious, and stands in direct contrast to that which is overt: open, visible, and obvious.

One of the conceptual findings from exploring the stories provided by the participants is that *covert bullying is readily transferred to cyberspace*. This is not surprising, given the ability to hide behind screens: both computers and mobile phones.

This does not mean that all cyber bullying is covert in nature, for this study has demonstrated that cyber bullying can also be overt,

Whilst bullying is a deliberate act designed to harm, the reality of overtly denigrating someone whilst simultaneously being anonymous or hidden “behind the screen” is one of contrasting tensions not dissimilar to the notions of social, relational and indirect aggression. Cyber bullying then seems to involve *both* overt and covert behaviours.

It is also apparent from the narratives that the experiences and impact of covert bullying expressed in this study, are not the domain of any one group of stakeholders (students, parents, teachers or counsellors); are also not specific to either gender or confined to either the city or rural communities. The boundary-less nature of cyber bullying highlights the fact that no school or family has a unique jurisdiction, as the cyclical nature of it shifts seamlessly between the two. This also serves to draw attention the national and global nature of this form of bullying: boundaries need to be rethought.

All groups: students of both genders ranging from pre-adolescent to final year students, parents, teachers and counsellors have been affected by this form of bullying and are able to tell stories about it. For some, there was the inevitable discounting of any impact upon them. For others, it meant being unable to face attending and even changing schools. For some families, the exclusion and isolation has had significant emotional and financial costs. For teachers and counsellors, the frustration of knowing it occurs, but not being able to control it emerges through their stories of students they have tried to help. For some parents, particularly those of special needs children, it is not only the child who experiences this form of bullying. Their experiences in our schooling system require acknowledgement and attention too.

The nature of covert bullying takes many forms, as evidenced by the stories; their titles, and the Looks Like/Sounds Like sections of the “Y” chart exercises, **but seems to be predominantly driven by the power vested in friendships and relationships**. Indeed, the assertion that bullying is a relationship problem requiring relationship solutions has been clearly evident when exploring covert bullying in this study. Many of the stories revolved around emerging cross-gender relationships; manipulation of friendships, isolation, exclusion, ridicule, humiliation.

Some disturbing themes which are emerging in relation to the cyber aspects of covert bullying, are those around stalking, blackmail and sexual risk-taking using web-cameras.

The participants' understanding of covert bullying, reflected many of the indirect, relational and social bullying behaviours already recognised in the literature. However, their understanding of cyber bullying and what it feels like to be cyber-bullied implied greater harm.

In the context of the National Safe Schools Framework (2005) the findings from the current research project have a number of significant implications: they

- highlight the intensity of covert bullying,
- draw attention to the newly emerging role of cyber bullying
- emphasise the wide-ranging impact of this form of bullying

Power is at the heart of all bullying, and *who* exercises that power and *how* it is exercised is of import for all to understand. These narratives provide clear evidence that students understand that:

- a *power differential exists* in these relationships, enabling some to victimise others
- it is *exercised* and they know *how*: It can be
 - face-to-face (overt),
 - behind the scenes (covert) and
 - behind the screens (cyber) and
- there is a cycle of abuse moving from school to home (on-line) and back again, but with no clear beginning: it could be on-line to school and back again, thus blurring the lines of jurisdiction for schools and parents and highlighting the repetition of the engagements
- they know *who* is exercising the power viz:
 - those who have access to the technology
 - and that the need to be popular, accepted and belong, together with group status, are driving forces behind it

What our research has demonstrated is that the effects of bullying reach well beyond the bounds of the school to touch in very significant ways the lives of families. Our qualitative research complements the quantitative Australian research and calls attention to the need to provide additional support and services for all: the students, their families and those vulnerable to manipulation, such as those with disability.

Using the practical strategies proposed below and on the website, (See Appendix D) are ways of generating discussion to begin to clarify understandings of covert and cyber bullying.

1.3 Practical Strategies and Implications for Reducing Covert and Cyber Bullying

The *practical strategies* which have emerged from analysis include the need to alert students, teachers and parents to the singular importance of establishing and developing relationships at a home, school and community level that support the development of positive initiatives to address the issues of covert and cyber bullying.

1.31 STUDENTS

Supporting adolescents through their normal relationship development in a cyber-enhanced world that seemingly thrives on covert bullying techniques to achieve and maintain status at the expense of someone else, would seem extremely important.

What once took place within the confines of the peer group, within a defined school and home context, now can engage countless others to ridicule in the parallel universe of cyber space.

That young people now have to navigate their relationships almost simultaneously in both the schooling context as well as the on-line context, creates a double degree of difficulty for them. That the newly created on-line environment is an extension of their in-school social world, means that they have to engage with it 24/7, or suffer the impact on their status in the peer group.

The long term impact of this remains to be seen: however, the knowledge that the audience has been increased exponentially, that cyber space knows no boundaries and that once out there, any “story” or photograph is difficult to retrieve, must impact emotionally and psychologically on the most vulnerable. Some evidence of this is available through the stories received, where, for example students have refused to attend school, or have left because of the covert or cyber bullying experienced.

Cyber space may even serve to connect those who struggle with face-to-face relationships in the real world, with on-line communities which may develop their social interaction skills in ways that face-to-face encounters can not. This may be particularly valid for those with Asperger’s Syndrome, who may discover friendships amongst those with similar interests, when person-to-person communications are fraught with difficulties.

Students need assistance in making sound decisions about their engagement with cyber space. They do not want to be isolated from their peers by the total removal of the technology: prohibition is not a useful way forward, as their social world is increasingly tied to the very technology that is creating the issues for them. **Students need adults to guide them in ethical and responsible, developmentally appropriate decision making about their engagement in cyber space.**

Practical Strategy for STUDENTS:

A simple message:

STAY CALM; **THINK CLEARLY;** **TELL SOMEONE**

- Safely tell someone about what is happening to them
- Develop sound decision making processes about their own behaviours
- Foster resilience
- Employ productive coping skills which can be used for covert and cyber-driven situations

1.32 PARENTS

Parents need support via education and awareness raising so that they can engage with and support their children through the demands of contemporary communications.

In particular, parents need to know that parenting in cyber space, is the same as parenting in the real world: **children need moral and ethical guidance and clear, developmentally appropriate boundaries to be responsible, competent cyber citizens.**

Practical Strategies for PARENTS:

Engage with cyber world positively:

- Parent in the same way you do in the real world
 - Set developmentally appropriate boundaries; time limits
 - Monitor and Supervise use
 - Have conversations with children concerning how they make decisions about their *behaviour* in cyber space
 - Install security filters, keystroke logging software, if desired
- Develop an understanding about their own parenting style
 - Authoritative; Authoritarian; Laissez Faire
- Develop an understanding about contemporary adolescent friendships and peer relationships generally, but particularly in cyber world
- Learn alongside students about cyber space

1.33 TEACHERS

Teachers are working at the interface of home and school. Their understanding of the complexity and diversity of the relationships within and across those domains means that they are called upon to work with parents and students regularly when conflict arises, or when bullying at school occurs, and consequently, they constantly seek improved ways of doing this.

It is important to recognise however, that students are also citizens in a cyber world: a parallel universe which exists courtesy of technological achievements which were unheard of during previous generations. *It is within and across this parallel world, as well as that of the school, that students are now conducting their friendships and peer relationships.*

Teachers' prime concern is to educate our young people for successful citizenship in our current and future contexts. The national agenda for a literate society is one which is clearly focused on improving academic outcomes to support students to move successfully into the future. Teachers' work, however, also involves managing the learning environment around a social dynamic of relationships that are fluid and rarely static. In order to achieve the required academic goals they also have to support students to navigate the demands of their social, emotional and thus their peer relationships.

Strategies should:

- Empower victims
- Empower others (bystanders) to support those victims
- Understand young people's internet use and behaviours
- Help the perpetrators understand the impact of their behaviour

Practical Strategies for TEACHERS

1 Know your students:

- **Recognise** the cyber skills of students and the possible level of risk or vulnerability they may have in terms of victimisation.
- **Develop** methods of working with young people that recognise the intricacy of the group nature of relationships, particularly as they shift from school, to home/on-line and back again.

2 Establish understandings of these existing evidence based approaches to dealing with bullying and consider how they can be used for cyber and covert bullying:

- Shared Concern (Pikas /Empathy raising: How can the parties co-exist in schools each day?
- No Blame and Problem Solving: How can each party address and manage the situation without laying blame? How can each party offer solutions to the problem?
- Whole School Approach: How can you really adopt a whole school approach?
- Restorative Justice: How can you work to restore the relationships?

3 How Do I help my students be good cyber citizens?

Understanding how young people engage with cyber space will assist us to help them to become independent, safe internet users.

Use these guiding questions to frame any discussions you may have with them around how they engage in such social networking sites as: My Space; Facebook; Habbo; Teen Second Life or even Club Penguin. Ask students to think about the following when they are actively involved on-line:

- How do I make decisions about my behaviour when online?
- What message am I giving the world with my photos online?
- How am I portraying myself to others and why?
- What is the impact on me? My family and friends?

4 What is the role of *bystanders* in cyber space?

The advent of: internet ready phones; social networking sites; and shared video sites, has changed the social world of our young people.

Imagine the humiliation of discovering a website filled with hateful gossip and abusive statements directed at you; the fear when reading an sms text message with a death threat or the pain of having a private photo posted on the internet.

In terms of bullying, much is now known about the role that those standing by, or witnessing the behaviours, play in tackling bullying in schools.

Where are those bystanders in cyber space? Who are the “white knights” who come to the rescue of those being cyber bullied

Challenge your students to think about these issues.
Consider starting a “*Don’t send on*” campaign.

Getting students to reflect on what they have done, have not done or are about to do will help them to morally engage and take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. **Bystanders may make a difference in cyber space if they actively do not support or contribute to negative websites and do not send messages and photos on to others.**

Stopping the spread of cyber bullying by *not* participating in “*forwarding on*”, could be a powerful way to be a “white knight” in cyber space.

5 Use the curriculum to support an investigation into cyber bullying.

Adopt a critical literacy perspective: to question and challenge attitudes, values and beliefs that lie beneath the surface. This involves an analysis and critique of the relationships among texts, language, power, social groups and social practices.

Ask students to reflect on the behaviours captured in the stories and ask such key questions as:

- **In whose interest is this to:** Put up such a website? Send such a text message? Post such photos?
- **What purpose will it serve if:** I contribute to the website? Send on the SMS; Send the photo link to others?
- **Who benefits if I do this?**

6 Use the Discount Model to assist in challenging attitudes:

Flandreau West, P. (1984). *Protective Behaviours - An Anti-victimisation Program*. Madison, WI: Protective Behaviours, Inc.

Flandreau West, P. (1989). *The Basic Essentials: Protective Behaviours Anti-victimisation and Empowerment Process*. Adelaide: Essence Publications

Students and parents may not realize that cyber bullying is a problem, and may discount the significant impact it has on those targeted. In order to assist in challenging those attitudes, consider using the **Discount Model** as a strategy. Ask students to reflect on their attitudes to covert and cyber bullying.

Do they discount the problem by thinking.....

There is no problem? *This is an issue of Existence. Gather information to dispute this attitude e.g visit the following sites: Bullying No Way; NetAlert; Netsafe*

Well there might be,but it is not that serious.... *This is an issue of Significance. Listen to some stories and discuss the impact.*

Ok, well there might be....but there is nothing we can do about it. *This is an issue of Solvability. Look at these sites for ideas on what we can do about it: Bullying No Way; NetAlert; Netsafe*

I can't do anything...leave it up to the experts *This is an issue related to Self. Find out about the power of bystanders to help.*

There is an issue and I can do something about it *This is the issue of Acceptance and Recognition of the problem. Formulate specific ways that your school can do something about it. Eg establish a "Don't Forward On" campaign*

7 Engage in a healthy resistance to Covert and Cyber Bullying

See Jordan, J. (2006, p86) Relational Resilience in Girls. In S. Goldstein and R. Brooks (Eds.) (2006) *Handbook of Resilience in Children*. New York: Springer.

Once students and parents have recognized that there is a problem and that they can do something about it, encourage a healthy, active resistance to cyber bullying.

- **READ IT:** What is the message from the narratives?
- **NAME IT:** What are these stories about? What is cyber bullying really?
- **OPPOSE IT:** What action can you personally take to defy or circumvent it?
- **REPLACE IT:** With what? How can we support students to stand up for their fellow students? Can you be an active bystander in cyber space? How
- What can your school do to actively demonstrate a healthy resistance to covert and cyber bullying?
 - Have a “Stand Up To Bullying Day”
 - Use the stories and transcripts to explore the messages they send and find ways your school could engage in active resistance to covert and cyber bullying

1.34 SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

As a whole school community, comprised of parents, neighbours and community partners what are the issues for you around covert and cyber bullying?

- 1 **Work together** to inform each other
 - Use school computing facilities for parent and staff professional development, convened by the school IT person and the counsellor
- 2 **Use students** to inform the community about what matters to them and ways of keeping them safe
- 3 **Explore and examine**
 - any legal and accountability ramifications of covert and cyber behaviours together
- 4 **Update policies** to include covert and cyber bullying
- 5 **Develop clear processes** for all to follow when activating any policy
- 6 **Include** active buttons on the school homepage, with links to such sites as KidsHelpline; Bullying Now Way; NetAlert

Additional resources include:

The Website: <http://www.cyberbullyingstories.org.au> which has:

- The Stories and Transcripts for use with staff, student and parent education (See Appendix A)
- Media files of many of the stories
- Links to web resources
- Video highlights

1.4 Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1: *That continued analysis of new stories be funded to contribute to the understanding of the impact of cyber bullying as it continues to evolve across the next few years, particularly in light of changing technologies.*

Recommendation 2: *That a national study be conducted to review school anti-bullying policies to examine whether they specifically include covert and cyber bullying*

Recommendation 3: *That a review of the National Safe Schools Framework and the Bullying No Way website be undertaken to address and include more on the issues of covert and cyber bullying.*

Recommendation 4: *That a review of the literature and research be undertaken regarding the vulnerability of special needs children and their families, to covert and cyber bullying in the school system.*

Recommendation 5: *That a team or consultative group of young people be convened: to inform school communities, government and policy developers about cyber space; and to help to develop their own codes of conduct and contracts of acceptable behaviour.*

Recommendation 6: *That a review of teacher education programs be conducted to audit the extent to which they provide some under-graduate and post-graduate education in relation to bullying generally and covert and cyber bullying in particular*

Recommendation 7: *That research into the practices of bystanders in cyber space be undertaken, with regard to intervening against cyber bullying in safe ways.*

Recommendation 8: *That an examination be undertaken of the legal responsibilities of schools and communities in regard to covert and cyber bullying.*

Recommendation 9: *That a review be conducted of research programs – jurisdictions/organisations that are currently addressing the issue of cyber bullying, with a view to providing a co-ordinated National response to the issue.*

Recommendation 10: *That consideration be given at a national level to consolidating or strengthening international linkages with government and advisory groups addressing cyber bullying. E.g. through the 'Bullying No Way' website..*

Recommendation 11. *That a review be made of research regarding gender and covert and cyber bullying*

Recommendation 12: *That values and citizenship education be reviewed in terms of the contribution it can make to decision making and intervening against covert and cyber bullying.*

This report summarises the stories gathered during the term of this project and **therefore provides a reliable qualitative evidence base, demonstrating the *Insights into the Human Dimension of Covert Bullying*.**

Triangulated across students, teachers, counsellors and parents, there is considerable variation and a significant number of stories, which ensure that the findings do provide ***collective experiences*** of the impact of covert and cyber bullying on all stakeholders.

This study did not set out to determine prevalence, but to explore the impact and experiences of covert bullying, and in doing so, it has determined that this form of bullying is seemingly ubiquitous, and now occupies cyber-space. With that shift, it has enabled covert bullying to cycle between home and school and for individuals to combine traditional ways of intimidating, humiliating and denigrating those who are socially vulnerable in our school systems, with the new and emerging media practices of cyber bullying.

The recommendations explicitly call for reviews of existing policy and practices, consideration of the legal responsibilities of schools, together with the need for shared educative responsibilities and positive partnerships between parents and schools. As our young people simultaneously dwell in the parallel universe of cyberspace and the real world of our schools, conducting their social lives in and around both, finding ways of encouraging them to exercise sound decision making skills about their behaviour is more imperative than ever. This surely rests with us all.

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