Short Research Report:
Cyberbullying levels of impact in a special school setting

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Cyberbullying is defined as "an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or her-self" (Smith et al., 2008, p. 376). There are many quantitative studies on cyberbullying, but now researchers argue that we need to develop understanding of the contextual determinants of cyberbullying and the actors involved (Bastiaensens et al, 2014; Shultz, Heilman & Hart, 2014). More research is needed to better understand the complexities of bystander behaviours (Jones, Mitchell & Turner, 2015) and about cyberbullying reported by individuals with autism (Zeedyk et al, 2014) and students in special educational provision (Heiman, Olenik-Shemesh & Eden, 2015; Kowalski, 2016). In response, this study offers an analysis of 'real world' cyberbullying between members of a special school community.

Whilst relatively few studies have examined cyberbullying among youth with disabilities (e.g. Heiman, Olenik-Shemesh & Eden, 2015; Kowalski et al., 2014; Lazuras et al. 2013), those that do address this field highlight the extent to which students with special educational needs are at a higher risk of cyberbullying than their mainstream counterparts. In some cases, the focus has been around the impact of cyber victimisation (Didden et al. 2009; Heiman, Olenik- Shemesh & Eden, 2015; Lazuras et al. 2013) and in others, greater attention has been paid to the fact that "individuals with disabilities may be more likely than those without to engage in retaliatory bullying, perhaps due to the perception of fewer response alternatives" (Kowalski, et al, 2016: 424).

Case studies provide a nuanced view of a real context and situation from which learning can take place (Flyvbjerg, 2004). This case study reports on a case which Flyvbjerg (2004) classifies as 'extreme',

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providing a description of bystander intervention and subsequent cyberbullying victimisation within a special educational needs context. The school is co-educational, catering for 4–18 year olds and providing education for those who have a range of complex, social, emotional and behaviour difficulties, often linked with Autism Spectrum Disorder, learning difficulties, attachment disorder and communication problems. Residential facilities are available for students as required. A detailed interview was held with a senior member of staff responsible for safeguarding whose remit was to review and analyse behaviours of concern across the school. Our aim is to begin to understand the socio-cultural factors at play via the lens of a teacher / observer.

There were three principal actors within the incident:

Child A - ten year old victim who was videoed while having a 'meltdown' at school but was unaware of the cyberbullying incident;

Child B - fifteen year old perpetrator who videoed the incident and uploaded it to YouTube, who is described as 'a bright lad with a good sense of humour'; and

Child C – eighteen year old bystander of the online video, who is described as having 'mental health problems, autism and moderate learning difficulties, which means that her written English isn't particularly good'

Child C quickly responded to the video and negative comments being posted by the group demanding that the video be taken down. Child C then became a cybervictim as Child B retaliated with a direct attack on her special need, "Ah ha you can't even spell this that is just stupid". Arguing on-line, in a written form, exposed her vulnerability. In addition, she appears to have violated a mutually understood code that children outside of the friendship group are 'fair game' for criticism or ridicule. Five other students joined the attack on Child C. Another bystander from a different school eventually brought the cyberbullying to an end, telling the group to stop.

Analysis of the interview identified different levels of impact, which were felt as a result of the incidents:

Level 1 - *Internal/Identity* whereby the relative power of individuals is a factor in determining outcomes, such as the impact of a special educational need and the resultant vulnerabilities which can be exposed and exploited;

Level 2 - *Relationship/bystander, on-line behaviour* which considers the group dynamics of friendship, peripheral status of individuals, unwritten codes of conduct and the status of online/ offline communications; and

Level 3 - *Community* is the impact of incidents on the whole school community, including parents and teachers. In this case the school responded with intervention meetings with students and parents, as well as an assembly on cyberbullying.

Kowalski, et al, (2016) suggest that children with special needs perceive fewer response alternatives than to retaliate to bullying. This appears to be the situation that Child B found himself in as faced with being criticised for his own on-line bullying behaviour he retaliates rather than discussing the incident or admitting wrong-doing. A wider repertoire of responses could be provided through social stories. Child C is placed in a

very vulnerable position as she has no allies to call upon until the start of the school day, highlighting the lower levels of social support available (Kowalski et al., 2014).

'Upstander' behaviour has been associated with high self-efficacy (Gini, 2008; Shultz, Heilman & Hart, 2014), so this case study presents a contrasting case whereby Child C, who is autistic and has mental health issues, exhibits self-less 'upstander' behaviour despite risk to herself. The second 'upstander' intervenes after a time; the delay can be explained by the "pressure to conform to group norms" (Myers & Cowie, 2013: 255).

Quantitative studies have established cyberbullying as a risk for all children, but particularly those with special educational needs. However, statistics may not shed light upon the contextual determinants of cyberbullying and further research which examines these across a range of settings is required.

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