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Carrick-Davies & Associates
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Vulnerable young people, social media and e-safety

Aims

This research aimed to consider the risks that vulnerable young people taught in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) encounter online and ascertain what specific advice, support and training staff who work with excluded children and young people require with regard to social media and mobile technology.

Key Findings

Vulnerability

- 81% of PRU Professionals state that young people they work with are involved in risky behaviour online
- 62% of PRU Professionals said that these young people were 'more at risk' or 'slightly more at risk than other young people
- Six areas have been identified where offline vulnerability may exacerbate online risk taking:
    o Absence of supportive adults in their lives
    o More unsupervised time and less regular routines or directed activities
    o Staggered entry to learning environments, potentially missing out on e-safety advice
    o Tendency to crave group identity and to be viewed as 'outsiders' or 'risk takers'
    o Likely to experience abusive environments including being on the receiving end of anger and violence
    o Greater exposure to influences of alcohol, drugs, early sexual experience and gang culture

Mobile access

- For most young people consulted in the research, the mobile phone is the primary gateway to the internet. Mobiles can now be used to access, update and interact with social networking services
- Blackberry Messenger is very important to many young people. It is a free communication service on the BB, where users can send private messages to other users on their network, or 'ping' a message to all users on a network.

Risky situations

- There are risky online situations which vulnerable young people can access through their mobile phones such as offline crime, cyberbullying, unauthorised status updating and pranks.
- In talking to staff working with vulnerable young people, the online grooming of younger girls by older peers was raised as a concern, with the 'gifting' of expensive mobiles, phone credits or vouchers given in exchange for membership in a certain gang or for later abuse.

Positive social media use

- There are important lessons to be gained from policies and practices developed by youth workers outside the PRU system – many who work in this area feel the use of mobile phones for contacting and interacting with their clients in their own space is invaluable.

Consequences

- Vulnerable young people may have a lack of understanding of the consequences of risk taking online behaviour, and may be unable or unwilling to get help
- Vulnerable young people may be less likely to report cyber- bullying or online abuse as they are scared that their mobile phone will be confiscated

Policy Context

It is important that the specific experiences and needs of vulnerable young people in PRUs and professionals working in these settings are equipped with the knowledge and experience to effectively manage risk-taking behaviour.

Methodology

This was a small scale, qualitative mixed methods project:

(i)   A series of 5 half-day workshops over a 2 month period with seven young people in Southwark Inclusive Learning Service (SILS4), South London.
(ii)   An online survey of professionals. Responses were received from 61 professionals working in PRUs or NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) settings.
(iii)   Interviews and site visits, with specialist researchers, PRUs and practitioners.
(iv)   Literature review and workshops with academics.

Ethical considerations were paramount, with each young person providing their informed consent (and given the right to withdraw from the group at any point). Parental consent including consent to have the participants contributions audio-recorded was also obtained.

Background

A broad definition of 'vulnerability' has been adopted in this research to include young people who were excluded from mainstream education and who were, primarily but not exclusively, in Pupil Referral Units (PRU). Little research has been undertaken on the online risks for vulnerable learners taught in PRUs or community education settings. Many of these children and young people are vulnerable, and may not have a supportive or stable home environment. It was therefore vital to ascertain how the professionals who work with these young people are equipped to support them in the changing and fluid worlds of social media and mobile technology.

Source http://www.carrick-davies.com/downloads/Munch_Poke_Ping_-_E-Safety_and_Vulnerable_Young_People_FULL_REPORT.pdf
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