School self-evaluation: a response to the Byron Review

This briefing note has been compiled in response to the request, in the Byron Review of e-safety in schools, for a short study of what schools are saying in their self-evaluation forms about e-safety. Ofsted conducted a small-scale study of 100 self-evaluation forms of schools that were being inspected in the summer term 2008. The study found considerable variation in how schools monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of their e-safety policies. A considerable proportion of schools do not indicate how they know whether their policies are effective or not in ensuring learners' e-safety.

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In September 2007, Dr Tanya Byron was asked by the Prime Minister to conduct an independent review to look at the risks to children from potentially harmful or inappropriate materials available through electronic means. In her report on the review, Dr Byron included the following recommendations to ensure that the system delivers better outcomes for children in this area:[1]

- 'that Ofsted takes steps to hold schools to account and provide Government with a detailed picture of schools' performance on e-safety.' In particular:
    - Ofsted to provide the Government with a snapshot report on school responses to question 4b of the self-evaluation form (regarding e-safety) by summer 2008.
    - Ofsted should comment on the state of internet safety training in schools as part of its forthcoming long report on information and communication technology (ICT) due for publication in 2008.
    - Ofsted to use its annual ICT school surveys to evaluate the extent to which schools teach learners to adopt safe and responsible practices in using new technology.

- Ofsted undertakes a thematic study on the teaching of e-safety and media literacy in all school curricula.

- 'if by 2011 evidence indicates widespread concerns in relation to school delivery of e-safety, I recommend that Ofsted considers making an assessment on performance in regard to e-safety in all school inspection reports.'

In September 2007, Ofsted introduced a new prompt into the self-evaluation form that schools are invited to complete prior to an inspection. Question 4b asked schools to comment on 'the extent to which learners adopt safe and responsible practices in using new technologies, including the internet.' The following report provides a snapshot of responses to that question, as requested by the Byron Review.

Key findings

- The analysis of the sample of schools' self-evaluation forms found that the proportion of schools providing sufficient evidence of their strategies for ensuring e-safety was low, especially in primary schools.

- The schools surveyed relied heavily on external bodies, such as their local authority or external contractors, to provide a degree of e-security. They rarely evaluated the quality of the support received.

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[1] *Safer children in a digital world: the report of the Byron review*, DCSF and DCMS, 2008; www.dcsf.gov.uk/byronreview/

- The schools were uncertain of their responsibilities when e-bullying extended beyond the school day.

- Some of the schools made clear public statements about the misuse of electronic means of communication, such as mobile phones, and a number had banned their use entirely; however, there was no clearly consistent pattern of control of the use of electronic communication.

- Few of the schools indicated how they obtained evidence about the extent of cyber-bullying in their school, which raises questions about whether they really recognise how extensive it is. Even fewer of the schools provided information about how they evaluate the effectiveness of their e-safety measures. Other schools said that they were aware that cyber-bullying was taking place but had little confidence in their ability to tackle the problem.

Recommendations

The Department for Children Schools and Families should:

- re-emphasise the duty of schools to ensure their pupils' e-safety

- issue brief guidance on how to evaluate the effectiveness of e-safety policies, providing examples of effective interventions

- work with Becta and local authorities to help develop and maintain schools' expertise in e-safety, including advising them on legal issues surrounding the use, or confiscation, of private electronic property on school sites [2]

- advise schools on how they might work with families and other agencies to help combat misuse of privately owned equipment outside school hours.

Ofsted will:

- retain references to e-safety in the current school self-evaluation form

- ensure that the training and guidance for inspectors include an appropriate focus on e-safety, for example within the evaluation of safeguarding and the care and support of pupils.

Evidence

In May and June 2008, Ofsted conducted a short survey of the recently updated self-evaluation forms of 50 primary and 50 secondary schools. This analysis showed that the schools concerned appeared to give insufficient priority to the safe use of new technology.
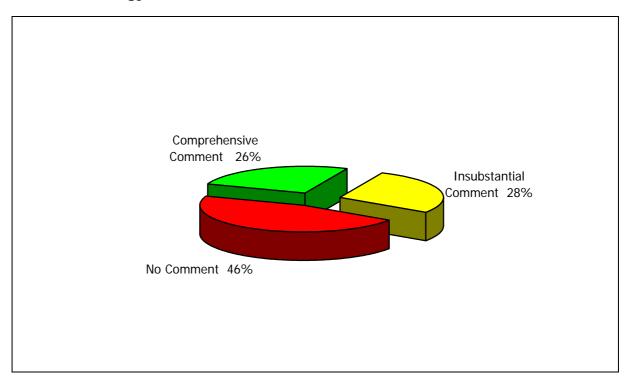
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[2] Becta is the government agency that promotes the innovative use of information technology in learning; www.becta.org.uk/.

In primary schools, just under half made no mention of e-safety in their response to question 4b in the self-evaluation form; 25% responded with some detailed comment, but the remainder made only a passing reference.
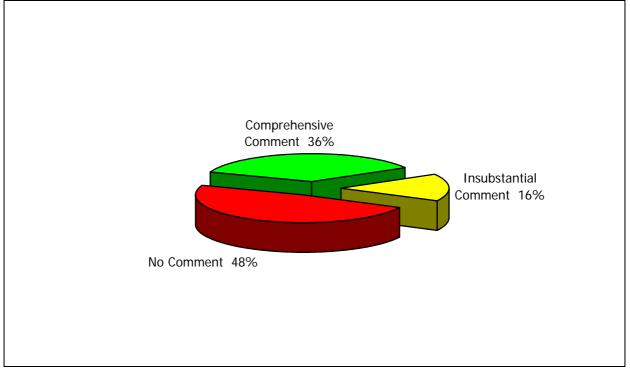
Figure 1: Primary schools' comments on self-evaluation form question 4b 'New technology'

In secondary schools, the results were slightly better, with over a third offering a comprehensive and thoughtful response to the question. However, it was still the case that almost half made no comment at all.

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Figure 2: Secondary schools' comments on self-evaluation question 4b 'New technology'

How do schools make their new technology safe?

The schools that did respond to question 4b indicated that they promoted e-safety through:

- technological restrictions and monitoring via filtering software and restricting access to some websites
- acceptable-use policies, often requiring parental support
- teaching pupils and parents about the dangers via internet safety sessions.

Most of the schools surveyed that evaluated their e-safety explained that their internet access was provided through a regional broadband consortium, which filters known problematic websites. A majority of the schools that responded to question 4b commented that they had blocked access to popular social networking websites and instant messaging clients in an attempt to stamp out cyber-bullying during school hours. They had put similar controls on email use, with one school mentioning a word tracker that flagged up words that might indicate an abuse of the system.

The use of mobile phones (particularly camera phones) for bullying was raised as an issue by several schools. As a result, a number of them had banned the use of such equipment during school time. Schools highlighted the problem that much of the ICT equipment in a school, including sophisticated types of camera phone, was brought to the site by the pupils.

Cyber-bullying was seen as a continuing problem by schools that were aware of it; many gave talks to parents and pupils on the dangers of internet misuse, and discussed the topic in ICT classes. Only one school mentioned setting aside time for further staff training around the subject of e-safety.

A common theme in schools' responses was the use of an ICT 'contract', signed by both parent and pupil, agreeing to terms and conditions regarding the responsible use of email and internet. Pupils without a signed contract were barred from using the internet or email at school.

To corroborate the evidence collected from the SEFs, Ofsted surveyed 50 school websites to see what information was provided to parents and others about e-safety, including whether or not camera phones were permitted at the school. Approximately half of the schools publish information about e-safety at the school, either directly on the website or by a link to the school's prospectus. However, in general, secondary schools provide more detailed coverage than primary schools. The best provided extensive information so that parents and pupils could be in no doubt as to their policy. Some were very specific about the policies and the reasons behind them, for example:

> 'The mobile phone policy has been reviewed recently and takes into account the potential of modern technology which allows us to make phone calls, send text messages, take photographs and access the internet. The policy also reflects national concern over the role of mobile phones in bullying and child abuse issues... as a result, all mobile phones are banned in school.'

Another school made detailed reference to the nature of mobile phone misuse:

> 'Camera phones...enable students to make still images of each other and send them to other phones, or post them on the internet. Sometimes these can be candid images that have been taken without the consent or even knowledge of the subjects...with malicious intent.'

Both of these examples are from secondary schools. Few of the primary school websites sampled made such detailed references to e-safety; fewer than half of the primary school websites included an internet safety statement. However, it is likely that many more schools do have e-safety policies, which are available in other formats.

How successful are these methods?

It is clear that relatively little is known about how effective e-safety is in schools. *Children on bullying,* by the Children's Rights Director, reported the views of a group of looked after children and young people and noted that 40% of them had experienced cyber-bullying and 31% thought it was a growing problem, connected to

the wider availability of camera phones.[3] However, most of the schools surveyed for this report suggested that occurrences of ICT misuse were quite rare. This raises questions about how the schools knew this, since few had put mechanisms in place to inform themselves accurately about it.

Some of the schools mentioned the distribution of potentially harmful material via social networking sites as a concern, although they did not quantify the problem or indicate whether it had now been brought under control. The schools did not have any clear evidence as to how effective filtering was and none of them mentioned the existence of websites that enable pupils to enter social networking sites by proxy, thus bypassing any filtering systems. Ofsted has established that a number of these websites make specific reference to young people being able to access 'blocked' social networking sites while at school.

The schools reported a perceived underlying concern about the lack of control outside school, with one secondary school stating that, in its view, there had been an undoubted increase in bullying by online messaging from home. This concern was also noted in the *Children on bullying* survey. Some of the schools appeared to be making an effort to try and counter this by educating pupils and parents about potential risks when using the internet. Some of the schools contacted parents when they became aware of inappropriate images being posted. However, these schools were in the minority.

Evidence is limited about whether relevant school policies have been monitored in the light of e-safety considerations, and their impact evaluated. Therefore, although the schools in the survey appeared generally aware of the potential risks involved in using electronic communications, the evidence suggests that only a minority have a clear focus on the extent of actual problems or whether their policies are having a measurable impact. This finding was supported by our review of school websites.

Why did so many schools fail to comment?

Around half of all schools surveyed failed to make any form of response on e-safety in their self-evaluation form and a further quarter made only passing reference to it. Further research by Ofsted should examine possible reasons for the inconsistent response to the self-evaluation form question.

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[3] *Children on bullying: a report by the Children's Rights Director for England* (070193), Ofsted, 2008; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070193.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects registered childcare and children's social care, including adoption and fostering agencies, residential schools, family centres and homes for children. It also inspects all state maintained schools, non-association independent schools, pupil referral units, further education, initial teacher education, and publicly funded adult skills and employment-based training, Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), and the overall level of services for children in local authority areas (through annual performance assessments and joint area reviews).