



Online network use in schools

Social and educational opportunities

In banning students' access to online networks at school for safety reasons, are educators and policymakers denying young people access to the social and educational opportunities that these networks can afford? This issue is discussed in a paper written by Tanya Notley, which was published in the September 2008 edition of *Youth Studies Australia* (v.27, n.3, pp.20-29).

This paper raises the concern that the majority of empirical research into young people's use of online networks has focused on assessing the potential risks involved, including exposure to paedophilia, racism, and pornographic and violent materials and engagement in risk-taking behaviour. According to Notley, however, recent research from Australia and overseas highlights the range of civic, cultural, creative, educational, developmental and health-related benefits that young people can potentially gain from their participation in online networks.

To give an example of the restriction of young people's access to online networks in Australian schools, Notley examines the Queensland Education Department's approach. She says that the department based its decision to block access to popular web-based email, social networking, blogging and file-sharing sites (while allowing access to some managed online network spaces) on its duty of care to protect students from harm, but points out that this rationale was based on the problematic assumptions that a) all students had the opportunity to access these sites at home if they wanted to use them, and b) that 'the ability to use online networks should be dictated by parental decisions rather than mediated by formal education'.



Banning students' access to online networks may deny many social and educational benefits.

Rather than simply dwelling on the risks associated with young people's use of online social networks, Notley concludes that 'it is important that Australian policymakers consider the social and educational benefits of, first, allowing young people to use different online networks in schools and, second, discussing the use of online networks in the curriculum to ensure that both the benefits and risks of online networks are understood by young people from different ethnic, socioeconomic and geographical contexts'. She says that 'a government commitment to funding empirical research relating to the benefits of young people's internet use' is required to achieve this.

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Deferring rural students 'get hooked on earning'

The need for rural students to become financially independent before they can qualify for youth allowance is contributing to high tertiary deferral rates among rural students in Victoria, according to Georgie Ferrari, chief executive of the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria. At 13%, the deferral rate among rural Victorian students is around twice that of their metropolitan counterparts. In April, Ms Ferrari told a Victorian parliamentary inquiry into the geographical differences in higher education participation rates in Victoria that many deferring students 'get hooked on earning' while establishing themselves as independent and are unlikely to return to study. She said that rural students moving to Melbourne for university are by definition independent and should automatically qualify for youth allowance (*Age education section, 21/04/08, p.5*).

Is the writing on the wall for handwriting?

The ever-increasing use of computer technology in the classroom has prompted the New South Wales Board of Studies to explore the possibility of allowing students to use keyboards and computers to complete exams in the future. Earlier this year, the board convened a group of 80 educators to

Abstracts from recent education-related youth research papers

The problem of school bullies: What the research tells us

L.A. Beaty & E.B. Alexeyev, *Adolescence*, v.43, n.169, 2008, pp.1-11.

This overview of the history of research on school bullying and teachers' knowledge of and attitudes towards bullying includes a brief examination of two model interventions designed to reduce bullying in schools. The first is by J. Dillon and R. Lash whose 2005 strategies for an anti-bullying program begin with a student survey to determine which students bully and where they do it, so that a plan of action can be quickly developed. They also propose that teachers set aside class time for discussions about bullying and behaviour choices. The second is the more systemic approach of J. Dounay who, in 2005, provided a list of recommendations for developing a comprehensive anti-bullying program. This has been adopted by several US states, including Vermont, which recognises that the real solution 'depends on collaborative action from school officials, parents, students, and the community at large'.

We knew them then: Sixth grade characteristics that predict adolescent high school social identities

M.R. Stone, B.L. Barber & J.S. Eccles, *Journal of Early Adolescence*, v.28, n.2, 2008, pp.304-28.

The early characteristics that may predict the social identities adolescents claim in high school is the subject of this research based on data from the longitudinal Michigan Study of Life Transitions, which began in 1984 with 616 sixth grade students plus teachers and parents. Discriminant function analysis assessed the predictive relevance of nine characteristics (such as self-esteem, self-concepts of appearance and social skills) measured in sixth grade for differentiating among five social identities claimed four years later by the then high school students. The five social identities they could select from were based on the characters in the film *The Breakfast Club* and designated as Princesses, Jocks, Brains, Basketcases and Criminals. Among the authors' conclusions is that the findings 'inform us about what characteristics are important as adolescents differentiate one category of peers from another and about the development of identity as both a social and a personal construction'.

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discuss issues related to computer use in exams. 'It is unlikely computers would be suitable for exams in all subjects, but we anticipate that in five years we will see computers used for some parts of some exams,' said NSW Board of Studies general manager John Bennett. Aside from technical and practical concerns, senior educators say that the issue of computer use in exams also raises questions about how the physical acts of handwriting and word processing are related to communication and thought formation (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 28/07/08, p.2).

Booklet criticised for drug use advice

In June, the Sydney West Area Health Service was accused of promoting illegal drug use among high school students through an educational resource that it says was 'designed to provide young people and their families with information about risks associated with the use of alcohol and illicit drugs'. The booklet *Choosing to use ... but wanna keep your head together?* is aimed at students in Years 9 and 10 and advises young people not to experiment with drugs before the age of 18, and suggests that if students choose to experiment with drugs, they should be aware of their family medical history and should only use small amounts of drugs 'not too often'. Defending the booklet, the Sydney West Area Health Service said that it clearly stated 'that ideally no young person will turn to drug use and one key message [in the booklet] is [that] the best way to keep your head together is not to use drugs at all' (*Daily Telegraph*: 17/06/08, p.1; 18/06/08, p.27).



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