

# Beyond THE BAN

Supporting excluded young people can be challenging, especially when it comes to the use and misuse of social media and mobile phones. **Stephen Carrick-Davies** shares what mainstream schools can learn from the work being done in PRUs...

**C**urrently there are an estimated 37,000 pupils being taught by alternative education providers such as PRUs. Many of these children lack supportive adults in their lives, come from homes which could be described as 'chaotic', and may have experienced severe anxiety and depression as well as other mental health and/or medical needs. In addition some will be pregnant, school-aged mothers and fathers, school refusers or phobics. The first statistical release for children with special educational needs stated that in fact 79 per cent of these pupils in PRUs have a SEN.

All of this can sound alarming, but what you may not know is that proportionally more PRUs are rated as 'Good' or 'Outstanding' than their mainstream school cousins. Where there is effective practice, PRUs are doing an extraordinary job of turning children's lives around. For many of these pupils, the PRU staff are their last real advocates before they leave the education system and find a job or end up contributing to the NEET statistics.

For the last two years I have been developing a collaborative learning project called Munch Poke Ping funded by social investor Nominet Trust. Working directly with young people and staff from eight PRUs, I have reviewed how the staff deal with children's use and misuse of social media. In addition, I also looked at how students survive in the online 'system' of the internet – or as I call it in the Munch Poke Ping report, an 'Incubator'; a space where things that are 'munched' – or captured – are then uploaded to grow, be commented upon, added to, forwarded, possibly morphed or just lie dormant, before being re-'hatched', amplified, re-broadcasted or shared to a watching world. A disparaging description maybe, but one that resonated with many of the young people I have worked with from PRUs, many of whom live on the fringes of the online world as well as the offline.

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## INFOBAR

PUPIL REFERRAL UNITS (PRUs) WERE ESTABLISHED UNDER THE 1993 EDUCATION ACT, WHICH GAVE THEM BOTH A DEFINITION OF PURPOSE: AS A TEMPORARY, TRANSITIONAL PROVISION FOR DISAFFECTED AND DISRUPTIVE PUPILS; AND AN ULTIMATE GOAL: TO EMPLOY INTERVENTIONIST STRATEGIES WHICH WOULD ENABLE YOUNG PEOPLE ATTENDING PRUS TO BE RE-INTEGRATED INTO A MAINSTREAM SCHOOL. SOME REFER TO PRUS AS 'PUPIL RE-INTEGRATION UNITS'. CURRENTLY THERE ARE AROUND 560 IN THE UK, BUT EXACT FIGURES ARE DIFFICULT TO OBTAIN BECAUSE OF THE TERMS USED.



### ABOUT THE EXPERT

STEPHEN CARRICK-DAVIES (CARRICK-DAVIES.COM) IS AN INDEPENDENT CONSULTANT, WRITER AND TRAINER CHILD ADVOCATE WORKING IN THE FIELD OF NEW COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY, PREDOMINANTLY WHERE IT IMPACTS ON THE LIVES OF CHILDREN, PARENTING, AND SCHOOLS. PREVIOUSLY, STEPHEN WAS CEO OF CHILDNET INTERNATIONAL WHERE FOR 10 YEARS HE DEVELOPED AWARD WINNING INTERNET EDUCATION AND AWARENESS PROGRAMMES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE, FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS. STEPHEN'S PROJECT 'MUNCH POKE PING' HAS BEEN FUNDED BY NOMINET TRUST AND LOOKS AT THE USE AND MISUSE OF SOCIAL MEDIA WITH VULNERABLE AND EXCLUDED YOUNG PEOPLE. FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT MUNCHPOKEPING.COM

### What works

Like their counterparts in mainstream schools there is a mixture of models and practice when it comes to blocking access to personal devices in PRUs. Some use metal detectors at the start of a day to check that no weapons (or mobiles) are brought onto the premises. Others, like The Bridge Academy in West London, found that blocking or restricting ICT in any overt way didn't work. Andre Bailey, the school's head, says: "We have a four-day contact week – on Monday our students are at home and they are expected to engage with the school online. We learnt it's far more realistic to give young people the skills they need to make informed decisions for themselves but also to create a community feeling so that they can look after each other online."

"Mainstream schools can learn from what PRUs are doing," adds Seamus Oates, executive head teacher of The Bridge Academy and tri-borough AP. "Yes the numbers are smaller but the principles are the same. We can't continue to rely on the technical infrastructure – we must equip and prepare students."

Working with smaller groups of students has its advantages. For example, PRUs can have a closer engagement with parents and carers. Some are also able to allow students access to mobile phones, iPads and even game consoles within the school. One PRU even has a 'Facebook Friday' afternoon session where staff actively encourage pupils to use Facebook and are on hand to offer advice and guidance about privacy, safety and responsible use. Another PRU I worked with told me that allowing students to play computer games during their breaks was an

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important way for students to release anger and pent up frustration. It also helped address issues such as games rage and offline anger.

### Look and learn

Clearly a lot of these things are only possible in small education units where staff are able to build greater trust and help students tackle some of the underlying issues related to online safety and issues such as cyberbullying. For example, supporting students to develop greater empathy and resilience, helps them to better understand behaviour and cope when things go wrong.

There are important lessons to learn from those who teach the most excluded young people in PRUs, but it's also essential to recognise that the choice of whether to block or not could soon be irrelevant as internet applications are embedded into a whole host of objects. It is already possible to buy a smart pen, for example, which can record sound, convert handwritten text directly back to your computer at home and transcribe text.

Schools need to start piloting more open approaches now before they have to ban pens.

It's easy for those in mainstream schools to see PRUs as the 'Cinderella of the education system' and those working in PRUs are used to hearing the comment "I could never do what you do!" Maybe we can't, but we can certainly learn from what they are doing to provide holistic support and care for vulnerable, excluded students, both off- and online.



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