

# The Online Abuse of Professionals – Research Report from the UK Safer Internet Centre

Prof Andy Phippen, University of Plymouth

## Executive Summary

*“I was accused of inappropriate behaviour with a young lady at a local secondary school. She was also my step-niece. I was questioned by the Police on one single occasion and released without charge, caution or reprimand... I also ended up in the care of a psychologist to help me deal with the loss of self worth, depression and the urge to commit suicide.”*

This research was conducted on behalf of the UK Safer Internet Centre in the first half of 2011. Comprising of:

- A survey of 377 education professionals
- Follow up interviews with 8 participants
- Analysis of 35 cases from the first three months of the Professional Online Safety Helpline

The research aimed to explore the growing problem of education professionals being subject to online abuse by pupils in their care, the parents of such or other members of staff. While we were aware of a number of such incidents this is the first attempt to quantify the problem in the UK. The following provides summary statistics of key findings.

- In total, 40% of respondents were male, 60% female with 33% aged between 25 and 39, 50% aged between 40 and 54.
- The majority were engaged in online social networking activities to some degree, around 60% using Facebook, and smaller proportions used other technologies (Skype – 36%, Instant messaging – 21%, Twitter 14%).
- The vast majority of respondents (81%) worked in an institution where Acceptable Usage Policies (i.e. “rules” for the use of the Internet at the place of work) were in place for both staff and students. 68% of respondents had guidance available on the use of social networking by staff for personal and professional use.
- 58% had received some level of training on such issues in the last year. This does mean that over 40% of respondents had not received any training. 25% of respondents did not know whom they should approach if they were subject to online abuse in their professional role.

**Alarmingly, 35% of our respondents said that either they, or their colleagues, have been subject to some form of online abuse. Respondents were most likely to be subject to abuse from pupils (72% of incidents) but parents (26%) and other staff (12%). Parental abuse was also prevalent in helpline cases, with 20% having some relation to abuse by a parent. We also identify cases where parents would abuse pupils using social media. It seems to a subset of the population the teacher is no longer viewed as someone who should be supported in developing their child’s education, but a person whom it is acceptable to abuse if they dislike what is happening in the classroom.**

**Clearly some people are viewing social media as a bypass to the traditional routes (Headteacher, board of governors) of discussing dissatisfaction with the school.**

There were a variety of types of incidents with some reports of comments made about them in general conversation in online environments such as Facebook. One of the most prevalent types of abuse was through the establishment of a Facebook group to be abusive about a particular teacher. There were reports of pupils trying to establish fake Facebook pages in a teacher's name, posting videos of teachers in class on YouTube, and setting up whole websites to be abusive about a single or group of staff. RateMyTeacher.com was also mentioned a number of times as a site where abusive comments had been posted. In some cases where teachers had complained to RateMyTeacher, the comments still remained. We are also starting to see the use of mobile technology for abuse, in one case family members of a teacher were targeted on subjected to long term harassment.

While the impact on the individual of such incidents is clear from interview and case analysis, individuals present classic signs of bullying – feelings on isolation, lack of support and ultimately depression:

*“ I eventually had a breakdown in the summer holiday needing an emergency doctor to be called out – as I had become suicidal – a fact that none of my staff know as I was much better by the start of the term. I had intensive support from the mental health unit via my GP, a new telephone guidance service that really helped me plus medication which was a great help, and still is. “*

What is also apparent is much of the abuse falls between what is illegal and what is socially acceptable, which makes it even more difficult to resolve as police will not become involved unless laws are broken. This, in turn means that victims are at an even great loss to know what to do, not understanding who they can turn to. Normally lines of support (for example, senior management team, unions, Police) have been shown to be ineffective in a number of cases:

- In general support and advice is varied and inconsistent. While 70% of those who reported incidents said that senior management in their institution had been involved, over a quarter said that this involvement had little or no impact. In one case it was remarked that senior management intervention had made matters worse.
- Some respondents had turned to unions (30% of respondents with less than 50% being happy about the support they received) and police (25% of respondents with less than 40% happy with the advice/support they received).

**Over 75% of respondents stated they believed that education professionals needed more help and that support should be consistent:**

*“Mine is not an isolated case and I know of others in a similar position from other authorities who have also suffered this kind of professional abuse. I believe that the online environment is potentially a massive threat to professional identity, both from those who might abuse and professionals themselves who might not use social networking sites with due diligence.”*

[helpline@saferinternet.org.uk](mailto:helpline@saferinternet.org.uk), or saferinternet website. Helpline no is 08443814772.

## Introduction

The online abuse (or “cyberbullying”) of children and young people has been well documented in research<sup>1</sup> and the media<sup>2</sup>, and there is much advice and support for these issues<sup>3</sup>. While there is still much to be done around awareness and education of the impacts of cyberbullying of young people, a far less understood phenomenon is the abuse of education professionals by those in their care and also other adults they come into contact with in their professional capacity (in particular the parents of pupils). Discourse with teachers and associated education professional by members of the UK Safer Internet Centre identified this as a growing issue – senior management teams and individual staff members are becoming increasingly concerned about the prevalence of abuse, its perceived acceptability, and the impact of such.

Research was conducted in order to better understand the phenomenon and its impacts. It engaged with education professionals to give them a voice to discuss the issues they face and to build an evidence base to inform policy and practice around protecting professionals while conducting their job roles. It underpinned the establishment of a Professional Online Safety Helpline<sup>4</sup>, which was established in the early part of 2011 to provide a consistent line of support for professionals facing abuse issues, whether related to them or the pupils in their care.

This report presents the results of this research, carried out over a six month period, prior to the establishment, and during the first 3 months of operation, of the helpline. It explores the engagement of education professionals with digital technologies, the policy and support they receive around the professional use of technology and the right to protection from abuse, and the prevalence and nature of the abuse. The report brings together data from multiple sources (discussed below) to present a worrying picture of a profession where abuse is, for some, commonplace, and where the impacts of such can be extremely damaging for the victim and potentially their peers and family. It demonstrates the value of a consistent line of support for education professionals in all matters related with online technology and both child and professional protection.

## Methodology

The research used a mixed methods approach to both understand the breadth and depth of the problem, as well as understanding trends facing professionals. These methods were:

**1. A survey comprising a number of questions asking education professionals about their own use of social media, the policies in their workplace that provide a level of protection for online abuse, and their awareness of professional abuse issues in their own setting.** It also asked questions about the resolution of issues and whether they felt that more support was needed. The survey was conducted via an online questionnaire and disseminated via teaching mailing lists between January

---

<sup>1</sup> For example: [http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/EUKidsII%20\(2009-11\)/home.aspx](http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/EUKidsII%20(2009-11)/home.aspx)

<sup>2</sup> For example: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/one-in-five-children-is-victim-of-cyberbullying-ndash-with-girls-targeted-most-2330270.html>

<sup>3</sup> For example: <http://www.beatbullying.org/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.saferinternet.org.uk/>

and March 2011. In total 377 people responded to the survey, providing a solid, broad base for the rest of the research.

**2. A number of follow up interviews from survey respondents who had stated they were willing to comment further.** Interviewees were chosen from those survey respondents who had either been the victims of abuse themselves or who had to support staff who had been the subjects of attack. Interviews were conducted via email using a semi structured approach which explored in more detail the nature of the abuse in the individual’s case and also the impact of such on the victim. 8 interviews were conducted in all and provided some detailed examples of the harm that results from this form of abuse.

**3. Analysis of cases collected by the professional abuse helpline in the first three months of operation.** Each case is logged with details of the nature of the incident, advice given and any subsequent follow up. This provided another layer of evidence to understand the issues professional face related to online issues and also the trends in abuse. In total 35 cases were studied from this period.

## Results

The results presented below draw on all three data sets to discuss the issues faced by education professionals.

### Respondent Demographics

Initial questions in the survey established a baseline for our respondent demographic. Figures 1, 2 and 3 show a good spread in terms of both gender, job role, and age. We have broadly classified job role into four categories – teaching staff, non-teaching staff (administration, teaching assistants, librarians, etc.), senior management and “other”. The other category was by far the smallest and comprised of roles such educational advisor, social work and community support officers.

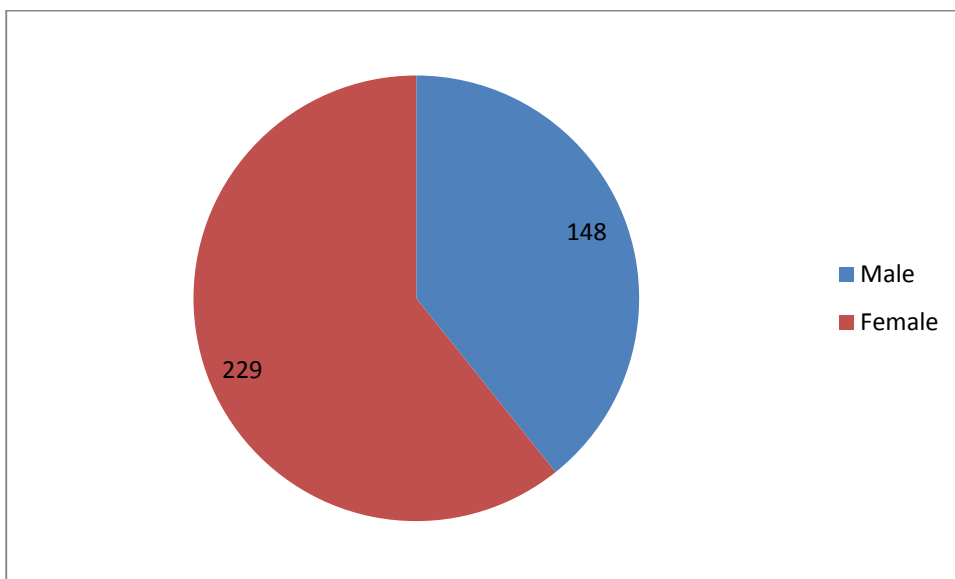


Figure 1 - Respondent gender

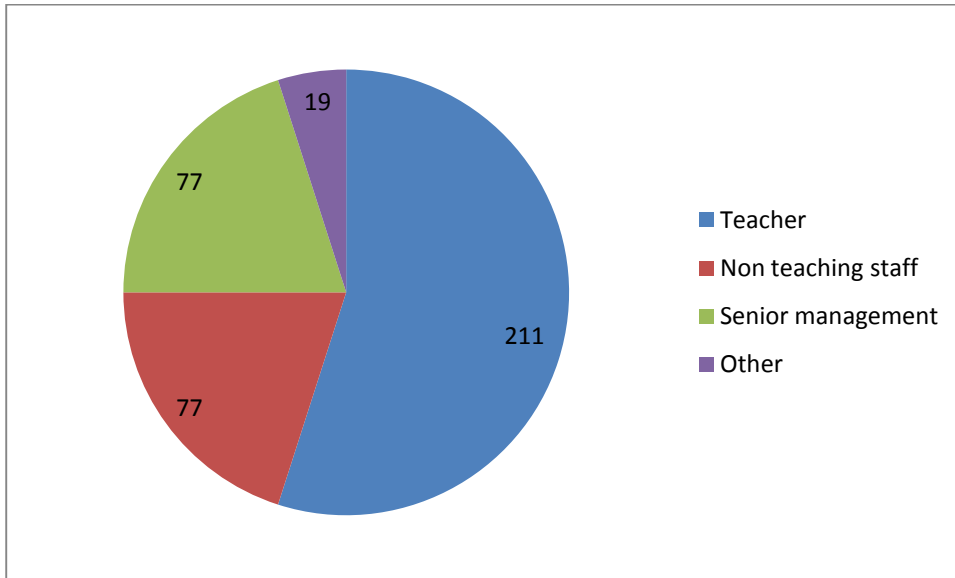


Figure 2- Respondent job role

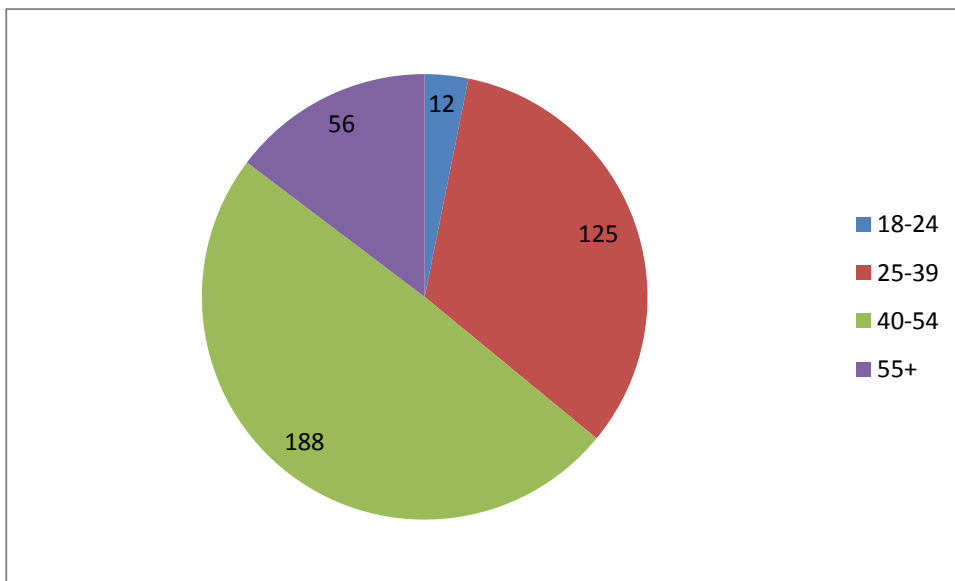
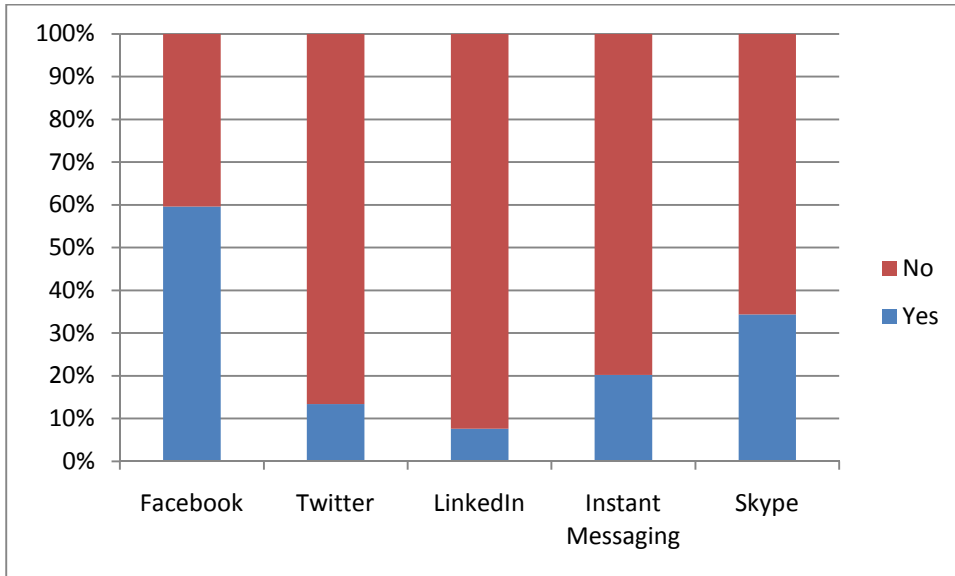


Figure 3 - Respondent age

A final aspect of respondent profiling was the exploration of their own use of social technology, whether for work and personally. This is a useful measure because it has often been claimed that the teaching profession does not have the means to protect itself from online issues as they fail to engage with such themselves. However, as illustrated in figure 4, we do have a population which, while not 100% engaged, is certainly conversant with digital technology.



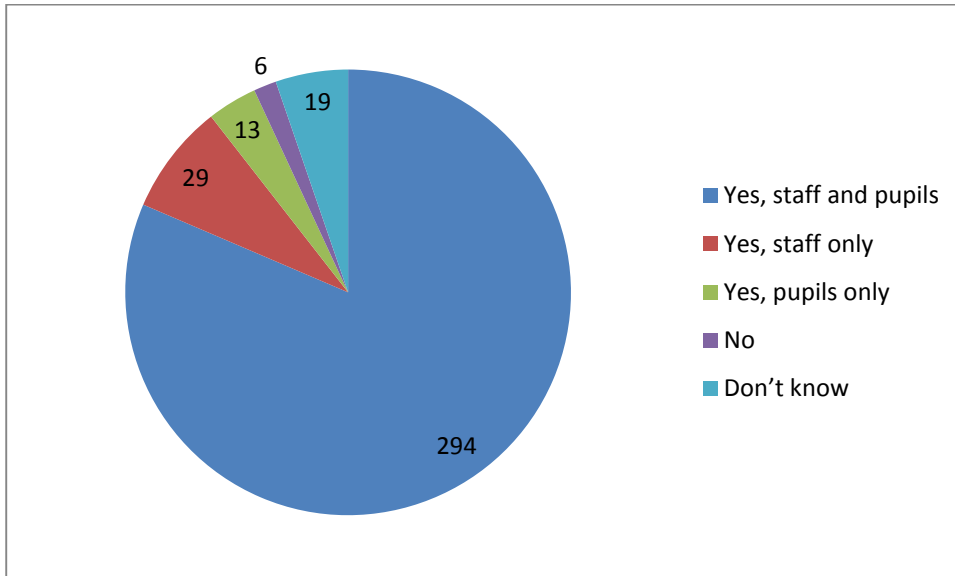
**Figure 4 - Respondent's use of social technology**

While the statistics suggest there is a difference in the use of social technology by education professionals than children and young people, the gap between them is not as far as one might assume. In a recent report for Speechly Bircham for their I In Online project<sup>5</sup>, research on around 4,000 children and young people between the ages of 9 and 18, measured 68% of respondents using Facebook, 31% instant messaging and 7% using Twitter.

### Policy and Training

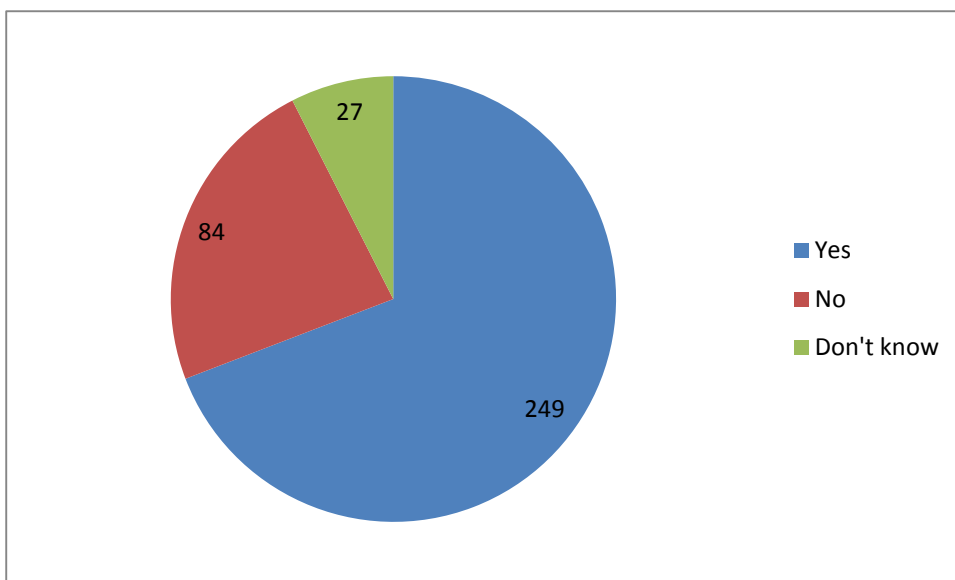
The next section of the survey explored policy and training, asking a number of questions related to the availability of advice and support within the respondents work setting. The first question asked was whether their setting provided Acceptable Usage Policies (AUPs) for the use of technology. AUPs are a crucial first step in ensuring ground rules are laid and there is clear communication of what is acceptable and unacceptable for both staff and students in their use of technology. It also helps (if comprehensive) to raise aware of the issues that result from the abuse of technology, as well as providing clear guidance of disciplinary routes in the event of breaches of the AUP. As can be seen from figure 5, in general AUPs are in place, which is encouraging. However, some concern is raised from this graph in that some respondents did not know whether such a thing was in place. It demonstrates a lack of awareness of the issues around online practice.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.theiinonline.org/2010/11/child-privacy-code-and-report/>



**Figure 5 - Does your setting provide acceptable usage policies?**

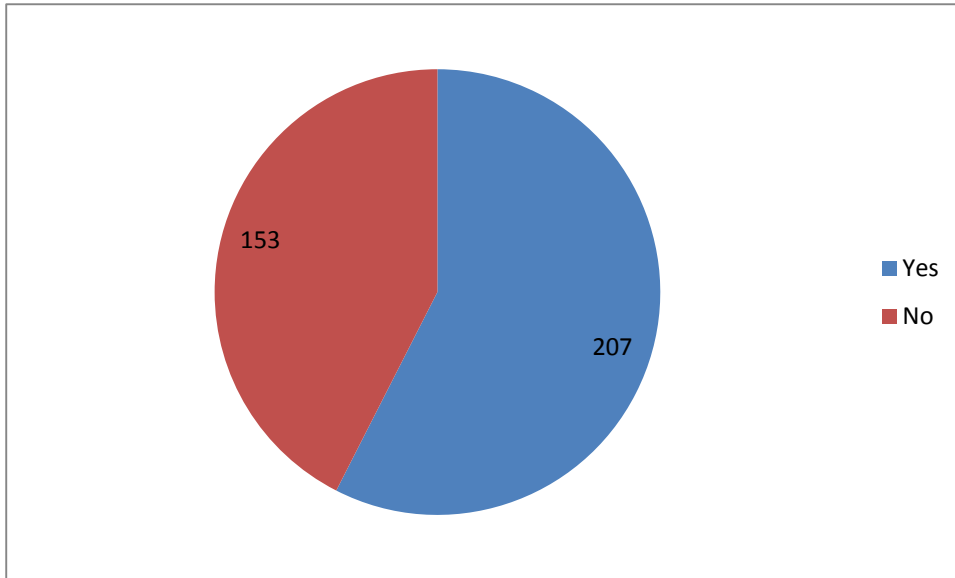
A further policy question related to the availability of advice around staff’s use of social technology. Certainly the analysis of cases from the helpline highlighted that this is an issue still being faced by professionals – there does not seem to be a consistent line of advice related to whether it is generally acceptable for staff to use social technology but also more specific questions such as is it ok for a teacher to be friends with a pupil on a site such as Facebook<sup>6</sup>? Figure 6 shows that in the majority of cases there are policies in place. However, there is a larger proportion than for AUPs who said there was no policy in place and a number who, again, said they did not know.



**Figure 6 - Availability of policy and guidance around staff use of social technology**

<sup>6</sup> It would be the view of the UK Safer Internet Centre that this would not be advisable unless the teacher used a separate profile for engaging in pedagogic practices with their pupils.

Finally when considering policy and education we asked whether respondents had received any recent training in matters related to social technologies. From our work with 360 Degree Safe<sup>7</sup> we know that staff training is consistently one of the weakest areas of online safety policy and practice in schools in the UK. It is also important to consider recent training – issues in this area move forward so quickly that training and knowledge quickly becomes stale as new technologies and, subsequently, new forms of abuse arise.



**Figure 7 - Have you received any training in the last 12 months about such matters?**

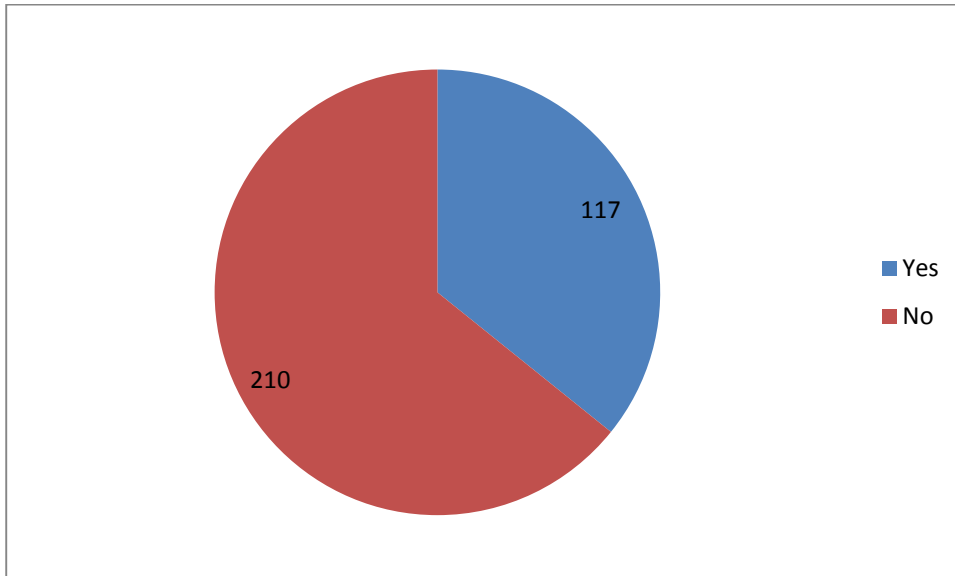
Figure 7 shows that while the majority of respondents have received some form of training, there is a large proportion who have not. This is a cause for concern when considering whether education professionals have the necessary knowledge and capability to be aware of the potential for abuse they face and how they might address such issues.

### **The Abuse of Education Professionals and Its Impact**

The next section explores the prevalence and nature of online abuse suffered by education professionals in far more detail. If we consider initially the data from the survey, we asked how many of our respondents had, or knew of colleagues who had, suffered abuse via online technology:

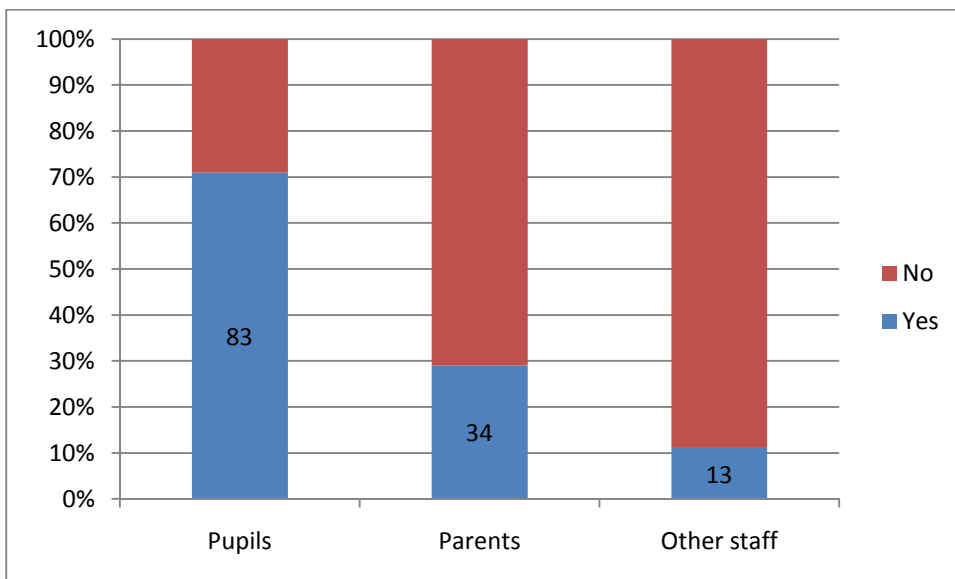
<sup>7</sup> <http://www.swgfl.org.uk/Staying-Safe/Content/News-Articles/Largest-ever-survey-of-E-Safety-in-schools-reveals>





**Figure 8 - Have you or colleagues ever been subject online abuse?**

What is clear from this result is that our anecdotal experiences in the growth of online abuse were certainly not isolated incidents. Almost 36% of our respondents saying they had experience of these issues. We then asked who was involved in this abuse, and the results show some worrying outcomes:



**Figure 9 - Who was involved in the abuse**

We were shocked to see such a high number of incidents involving parents as this had not been identified in preliminary discussion with schools. In our sample 30% of cases of online abuse involve parents, even though we would traditionally expect, through initiatives such as home/school agreements<sup>8</sup>, that parents will support teachers in their children's' education.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/pupilsupport/parents/involvement/hsa/a0014718/home-school-agreements>

We will return to abuse by parents in the next section, but we explored more detail around abuse by pupils though further analysis of survey data, as well as interview and case analysis of the helpline.

Respondents were invited to comment on the nature of the abuse, and the majority were cases of posting on social networks, or sites such as RateMyTeacher.

There were a variety of types of incidents with some reports of comments made about them in general conversation in online environments such as Facebook. One of the most prevalent types of abuse was through the establishment of a Facebook group to be abusive about a particular teacher. There were reports of pupils trying to establish fake Facebook pages in a teacher's name, posting videos of teachers in class on YouTube, and setting up whole websites to be abusive about a single or group of staff. RateMyTeacher.com was also mentioned a number of times as a site where abusive comments had been posted. In some cases where teachers had complained to RateMyTeacher, the comments still remained. While some defenders of free speech have argued that such sites have a right to exist, we would question the role of a site where pupils can freely post slanderous and abusive material about a member of the teaching profession and threats of violence toward them. In order to see the impact of such comments on website, an interview with a male teacher can be used to illustrate:

*I was accused of inappropriate behaviour with a young lady at a local secondary school. She was also my step-niece. I was questioned by the Police on one single occasion and released without charge, caution or reprimand. I assumed that to be the end of the matter as I had no case to answer, which was confirmed by my solicitor. The Police, naturally, reported the allegation to my employer as I work in most of the local schools as a technical advisor/engineer to a greater or lesser extent. The local authority, for whom I work, then launched their own 'investigation' which began (6 months after the interview with Police) with a punitive suspension for approximately 5 months. The standard of their investigation was appalling by any measure and appeared to be politically motivated from the outset with a staunch presumption of guilt throughout.*

One issue that strongly comes through from this quote is the level of support available to some staff accused of such things (discussed in more detail below). In this case the unfounded accusation resulted in investigation by police and employer. The accuser, however, did not receive any such disciplinary action. This was also something that has borne out in some of the analysis of helpline cases, when those the abused might normally expect to turn to either provided little support or, as in this case, wished to distance themselves from the accused. The impact of such can be extremely serious, as highlight in this case:

*The impact on me was enormous. My immediate work colleagues were as supportive as they could be but were banned from all contact. This led to me becoming ill and requiring significant medication to deal with severe depression. I also ended up in the care of a psychologist to help me deal with the loss of self worth, depression and the urge to commit suicide.*

In another case, we can see that sometimes while a pupil is caught, the severity of what they have done is not realised and, again, the management response can be ineffective and counter-productive:

*We have had issues where members of staff have been "bullied" through Facebook but I don't have any further details because these incidents were dealt with by senior*

*managers. I do know that students have had suspensions for doing so. However, in December it was brought to my attention that a student had made a derogatory comment about the Principal on Twitter and as she had tagged the college Twitter account it was showing up in our feed. On further investigation I found that the student had also made comments about my teaching ability and me personally but this hadn't been tagged so I only found it by viewing her tweets*

In this case there was a prolonged campaign of abuse about staff at the school which did not come to light until reported to the school by a third party. However, while the pupil was disciplined, the outcome did not appear at all satisfactory:

*The student was immediately suspended and her mother was asked to come into college. The suspension lasted for a day and a half, which my colleagues and I feel was not long enough. I was also told that I had to continue to teach her until she leaves college in summer and to help her achieve a high grade for the course. Her parents also banned her from using Twitter. The subject of web censorship appeared on an exam paper we were discussing in class a few weeks later and this young lady was very vocal about the fact that she had been censored and that she should be free to say what she likes, when she likes and about whomsoever she chooses.*

We have also had a number of cases of staff being subject to abuse via mobile phones, generally where pupils have obtained a member of staff's personal number. However, in one case this was taken to an extreme where pupils managed to obtain the personal number of a family member of the victim and engaged in a campaign of abuse toward this individual too.

What emerges from these cases is that victims struggle for somewhere to turn. This is exacerbated given that while the contact is annoying, it is sometimes difficult to prove the source or demonstrate anything that would require police involvement (which would only arise, for example, if threats of violence were made). Therefore, victims are left in "limbo" with a lack of support from senior management and no means of involving the police. Again, in the cases we explored, advice and support lacked consistency or the means to resolve the issues.

## Parental abuse

As discussed above, the most surprising finding from this work has been the level of parental involvement in the abuse of teachers and other education professionals. In one interview with a Headteacher, they seemed to have almost given up in trying to address these problems:

*I have had another parent make unpleasant remarks about the school on a blog but I think that we just have to live with that as it is the extension of the school gate.*

Once again our interviews have highlighted the fact that this sort of abuse can have potentially devastating consequences:

*A parent set up a Google group and devoted it to saying unpleasant things about me. I started off as the Head and then he started referring to me just by my surname. He invited other parents to join in but only one did. As the other parent had a child with asthma they linked a comment about me leaving her child to die in the corridor to the*

*BBC news report about the child that died in a Stockport school. In spite of the fact that her child never had an attack in school and we don't actually have a corridor*

We should stress that with abuse was carried out by a parent, not a pupil. In this case a parent of a child at the victim's school decided to conduct a prolonged campaign of increasingly aggressive about toward the Headteacher. When challenged about this in the early stages of the abuse, the parent did not see much wrong with what he was doing, and even said his children were happy to at the school. Again in this case the impact of a prolonged ordeal on the victim was severe:

*I eventually had a mini breakdown in the summer holiday needing an emergency doctor to be called out – as I had become suicidal – a fact that none of my staff know as I was much better by the start of the term – greatly helped by him removing his children from school. I had intensive support from the mental health unit via my GP, a new telephone guidance service that really helped me plus medication which was a great help, and still is.*

Returning to our earlier comments about the limbo in which some victims find themselves, it was only when the abuser became more aggressive and started making defamatory comments about the Head's practice that the website (Google in this case) removed the postings. It does raise a complex question in considering how people can respond to such situations – when does a nasty comment become one that is defamatory or abusive?

In considering the cases reported to the helpline, 7 out of the 35 had some level of parental abuse. As well as levelling abuse at the school or staff, in two cases parents were also being abusive about a child or children at the school in question as a result of what we might refer to as playground altercations. In one of these cases the level of abuse was severe enough to consider reporting the incident to CEOP. We feel there is serious cause for concern if children at a school can be subject to abuse from (supposedly) responsible parents and the perpetrators see nothing wrong with this.

## Support and Advice

From the data presented we can see that the online abuse of professionals is prevalent and potentially extremely damaging. In all of our data sets we aimed to consider the level of support that professionals can receive and the value of this. While in one of the cases presented above it was clear that support had been decidedly lacking and harmful, we used the data to get a more general perspective on this. The survey initially asked whether our respondents' places of employment had policy in place to respondent to these types of incident. We feel this is an important first step as it shows that the school is acknowledging that this is an issue their staff face.

From figure 10 we can see that just over half of our respondents' institutions do have a policy, which means many either do not, or the respondent did not know. Given that around a quarter of respondents did not know, we can once again highlight the issue of staff awareness of such matters.

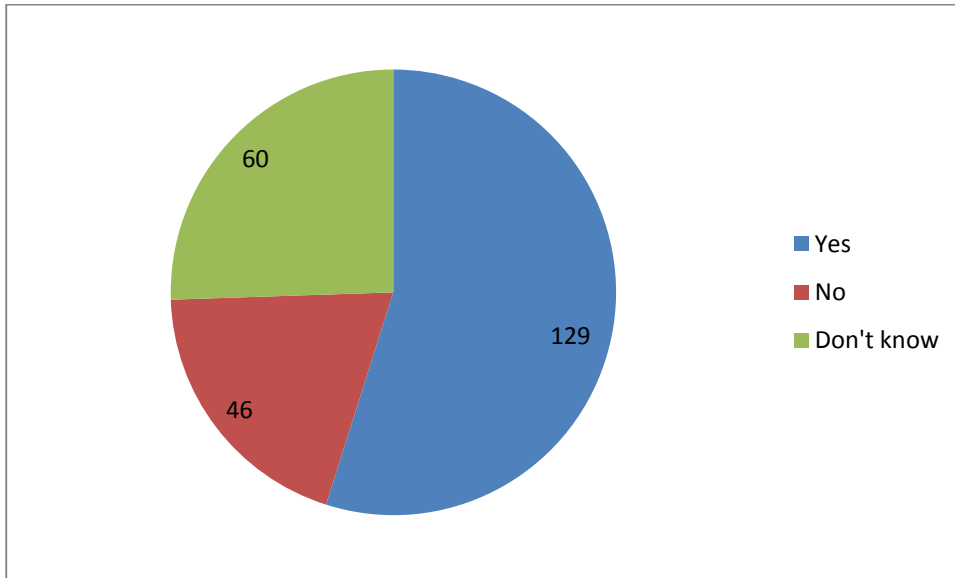


Figure 10 - Does your institution have policies in place to deal with such incidents?

It does seem from our research that in many cases a school will be in reactive mode to such things, i.e. the schools who have had to deal with an incident will put a policy in place but awareness is not at a level where they will be proactive in establishing policy prior to events. One of our interviewees highlighted this issue in observing practice at their own school:

*Recent incidents have resulted in staff training and clear staff policies about use of social networking and keeping themselves safe. Also Safer neighbourhood team running internet safety workshops for parents on parents evenings*

In developing the exploration around support, we also asked, in the event of an incident, whether third parties were involved in its resolution. As can be seen from figure 11, while the majority involved senior management, it only went further than that in a minority of cases.

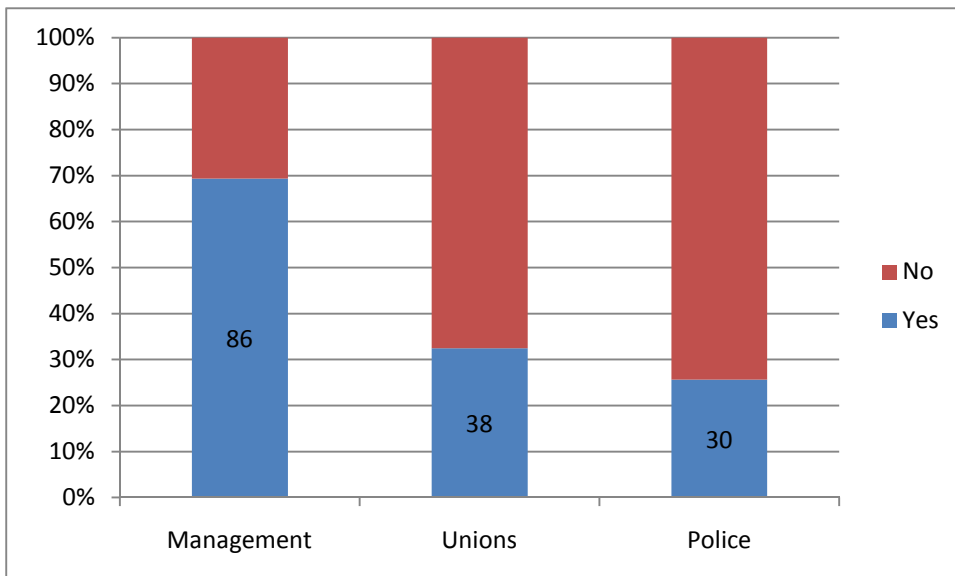


Figure 11 - Were any of the following involved in resolving the situation?

What is more interesting to explore is how effective third party interventions were, which is illustrated in figure 12:

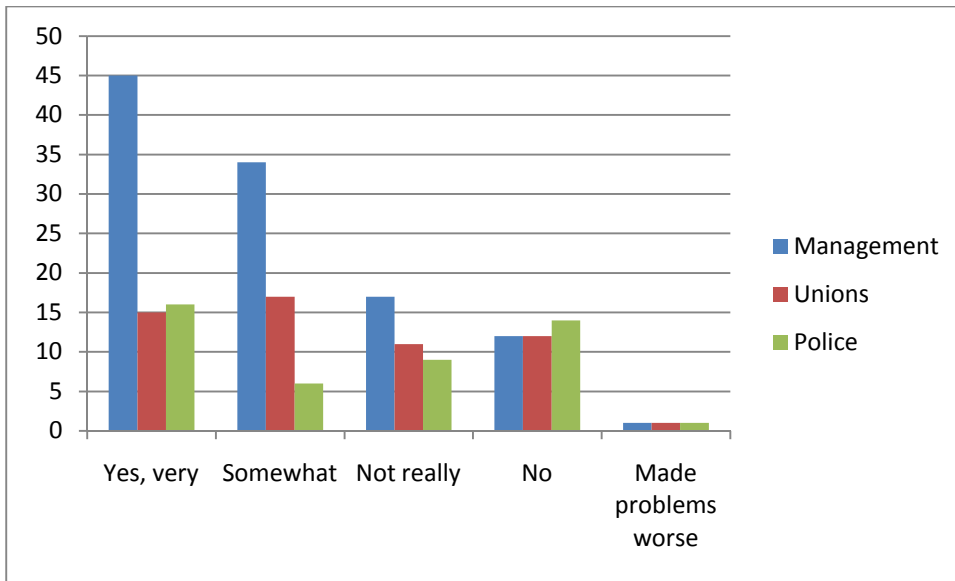


Figure 12 - Effectiveness of response from third parties

While in general response from senior management was effective, there are still 26 cases where there was either negligible or negative impact. More concerning, however, is the variability of support from both unions and the Police. While we have a smaller set of evidence to draw from in these cases there is certainly not a positive skew to their involvement.

Over 75% of our respondents said they felt more support should be offered to the teaching profession in dealing with these issues. In our interviews this need is also borne out. One observed they felt that the digital literacy of senior management was at fault:

*I think that a lot of managers are not familiar enough with social media to really understand the consequences. More need to experience this medium themselves to truly see what goes on. I personally have Facebook and Twitter accounts so I do understand their use and implications. I think that younger teachers, who use social media more than us oldies, are also not aware of the implications of using such tools and of befriending students.*

This issue of digital literacy was certainly reinforced in considering the helpline cases. One of the recurring themes centres around professional digital literacy (for example, advice on whether staff should be friends with pupils on sites such as Facebook) as well as requests for information around emerging technologies and their potential impact in the classroom (such as Formspring, FourSquare, etc) and even simple points of clarification (for example, one enquirer asked what “sexting” was). We also saw issues of reactions to inappropriate content and how the staff member might address this in the classroom.

Another problem that arises from the helpline data is the digital literacy of parents. In one case an enquirer (not an education professional but someone who contacted the line anyway) asked why the school was not filtering and blocking her child’s mobile phone. In this case they then went on to

ask if someone from the helpline could contact Facebook regarding their (underaged) child's use of Facebook. In another a concerned parent felt that a case of spam was a directed attack on their child, rather than a blanket email sent out to many thousands of people. While the focus of this research has not been around parental engagement and responsibility our data has highlighted (from cases of parental abuse of staff and pupils and also the nature of some enquiries to the helpline) that parents are, in some cases, not engaging responsibly digital technology and social media are demonstrating a lack of digital literacy themselves and not taking parental responsibility in the protection of their children.

*Mine is not an isolated case and I know of others in a similar position from other authorities who have also suffered this kind of professional abuse. I believe that the online environment is potentially a massive threat to professional identity, both from those who might abuse and professionals themselves who might not use social networking sites with due diligence.*

What all our data shows that on many occasions education professionals have lacked lines of support in addressing what could potentially be very harmful attacks on their character, practice or personal lives. This, of itself, demonstrates the need for a body where to which professionals can turn in order to gain consistent, practical advice on dealing with the issues they face. A final comment from one of our interviewees shows the frustration and isolation that can result from poor support:

*I understand and recognise the importance of safeguarding children and applaud measure taken to ensure that allegations are taken seriously and investigated thoroughly. My concern is the lack of transparency throughout the investigative procedure, the lack of commitment on the part of local authorities to be impartial, and the treatment of the professional concerned and the mental and emotional welfare of the person. My trade union representative gave me extremely poor advice and proposed a militant standpoint during the singular interview I was subjected to as part of the local authority investigation. In my particular case, it took the authority six months to begin an investigation following the report from the Police. It then took another four to five months to conduct their own investigation, which from my participation consisted of one 30 minute interview consisting of 5 questions; the relevance of which still evades. Fairness, impartiality, transparency, communication, time diligence and adherence to 'innocent until proven guilty' need to be addressed. Support during and after the incident (where shown to be not guilty of course) both for the person concerned and their family.*

## Conclusions

This research draws from several evidence bases to better understand the growing issues teaching professional face around abuse via online technologies. We have clear evidence that this is not a few pockets of isolated incident but something happening to a large number of professionals. The impacts are wide ranging and can be severe affecting others beside the initial target of the abuse. Most concerning is the role parents play in this abuse, of both teachers and also pupils in schools. Schools and policy makers need to start making it very clear how unacceptable this is and make strong stances to show that such behaviour will not be tolerated.

We also know the support can be poor and inconsistent, which further highlights the need for a service such as the Professional Online Safety Helpline. We know from our data that knowledge around online safety issues can be poor, and the level of training and wider awareness (for example from Governing bodies) has also been highlighted as weak in the research on 360 Degree Safe data. Teaching professionals have a right to a work environment that is free from abuse, whatever the form, and information, support, training and policy all play a role in ensuring this is the case.