

The role of education in the prevention of cyberbullying

The Bahá'í Community of Canada's submission to the
Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights study on cyberbullying

May 31, 2012

Introduction

The Bahá'í Community of Canada welcomes the opportunity to contribute some initial thinking on the issue of cyberbullying to the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights. The Committee's study addresses an issue of concern to all Canadians, as it involves the safe, healthy and productive development of our youngest citizens. We commend the Committee for initiating this timely and important study.

The Bahá'í Community of Canada is comprised of more than 30,000 members across the country, dedicated to the creation of a society that reflects principles of justice, unity, and the elimination of all forms of prejudice. We take an active interest in the well-being of young people through the implementation of programs at the grassroots that engage the interests and mould the capacities of young people for service to their communities. At the heart of these programs is a belief in the innate potential of children and youth to make constructive and positive contributions to the development of their neighbourhoods and the progress of our country.

In addressing this complex and multifaceted problem, we wish to restrict ourselves to a few reflections on the role of education in the prevention of cyberbullying. We are unable to comment on the important legal dimensions of this issue, but are confident that the committee will consider the submission and testimony of experts in this area. We will instead focus on concepts that guide our work with young people, share some insights that have arisen out of this experience, and explore their relevance to the problem of cyberbullying. It is our hope that these reflections may contribute to the research and analysis undertaken by the Senate Human Rights Committee with regard to this pressing issue.

The problem of cyberbullying

Cyberbullying has emerged in the context of new, online social spaces created by rapidly evolving communications technologies. Viewed from one perspective, cyberbullying presents many of the same issues of power and manipulation that arise in adolescent bullying. On the other hand, cyberbullying is a new phenomenon: electronically posted personal attacks can be spread more rapidly, and information in cyberspace can acquire a sense of permanence for victims. Online social spaces are not always governed by customary social norms, and constant connectivity to the internet can make such attacks appear more pervasive. The matter is complicated by the greater ease and facility of younger generations with new communications tools, compared with their parents and teachers, which presents a challenge for those seeking to help young people involved with cyberbullying.

The tragic results of cyberbullying have raised a host of legal issues about balancing the pursuit of justice and the protection of victims with the preservation of freedom of speech and expression. However, the principal concern of many parents, schools and communities is preventing and addressing cyberbullying without resorting to legal

measures. How do we help young people develop a strong moral and ethical framework? What kind of education do young people need to discern the effects of their online actions? How do we promote resilience in young people to transcend the damaging psychological effects of cyberbullying?

The role of education: Developing a twofold moral purpose

Adolescence is a critical stage in human life, characterized by sudden and rapid changes. These changes are not only physical; they are also emotional, intellectual and behavioural. Environment, culture, upbringing and personal relationships all contribute to the nature and direction of these changes, influencing young people to think and act in certain ways. It is roughly between the ages of 11 and 15 that young people define their identity and form conceptions, values and beliefs about individual and collective life.

Contrary to prevailing views of adolescence as a time for frivolous pursuits, we believe that this age group has tremendous potential waiting to be developed and channeled towards socially constructive ends. Young people need to be equipped both intellectually and spiritually to contribute to the progress of society. Intellectual development implies acquiring knowledge and practical skills to engage in a useful profession, provide for one's material needs, and contribute to society. Spiritual development involves strengthening the qualities that belong to our higher nature, such as empathy, love, humility, honesty and trustworthiness.

Educational programs should therefore aim to foster the intellectual and spiritual growth of students and enable them to contribute in some way to the improvement of their relationships and communities. These aims are reciprocal. For instance, one develops the quality of forgiveness when one chooses to forgive, and one is motivated to forgive not just because "it is the right thing to do", but because one is conscious that it contributes to a better society – more peaceful and less vengeful. Thus, education must imbue young people with a twofold moral purpose: to develop their inherent potentialities and to contribute to the betterment of society.

Imbuing a young person's personal development with a social purpose also enables young people to contextualize their identity within society. How am I contributing to the progress of others? How do my actions affect the environment around me? Am I conscious of the needs of others? Education that seeks to eliminate the myriad forms of bullying must develop capabilities that help youth recognize the moral issues underlying everyday decisions and identify the moral implications of speech and action.

To be able to make moral choices, one needs more than a set of rules; an entire moral structure needs to be erected in the mind of a young person – a strong social purpose that connects spiritual concepts, patterns of behaviour, and an awareness of consequences – that is sustained by the forces of volition and courage.

The concept of a 'moral structure' relates to the issue of cyberbullying in a number of ways. First, because online social spaces are frequently unsupervised and unmoderated, young people are left to determine their own course of action, using their own moral reasoning without direct guidance from parents or other such external forces. In these situations, young people need to be able to recognize the moral issues underlying what they say or do online, and examine the consequences of such decisions *before* rather than *after* deciding on a course of action. Thus, it becomes apparent that

young people need more than a set of rules, but a structure or framework that helps them decide upon the right course of action in different contexts.

Some degree of clarity around spiritual concepts is also needed. One common challenge among young people is their limited understanding of the spiritual concept of 'justice'. If they consider justice to be synonymous with retaliation, then vengeful actions become a proper response to injustice. For example, if someone hurts or disrespects me, then I am justified in hurting them back. This conception of justice is not moderated by other qualities such as compassion and mercy; therefore, bullying becomes a much larger phenomenon than just a few 'bad apples' in a classroom. In fact, in many cases, young people are both bullies and victims. This cycle continues when victims think that the proper response to victimization is aggression similar to that which they themselves experienced.

Finally, many young people are not fully conscious of the consequences of cyberbullying. They forget that their actions are not private and direct, but are open for all to witness. In the absence of defined rules and corresponding sanctions, the cyber-world is perhaps one of the greatest litmus tests of how well young people are equipped to put into action, without external pressure, values that they hold to be true. In this environment, only personal volition and courage will help them to successfully navigate and sustain their relationships. Young people have the capacity to freely make choices that transcend adversity and to demonstrate the courage to stand up for their ideals and values – even in the face of intense peer pressure. They need educational programs that nurture these qualities, in principle and in practice.

Indeed, the problem of cyberbullying cannot be separated from the environment in which young people are raised. Our media and cultural environment is highly individualistic, and the pursuits of status and personal advantage are often praised and valued. Even cruelty and violence are glorified. At an age when their actions and thinking are influenced more and more by their peer group and the media, adolescents need educational programs that help them to combat the negative forces of materialism, individualism and despair. Programs designed to prevent cyberbullying must therefore address this crucial period in the life of a young person, employing approaches that emphasize peer group learning and mentoring by older youth. Youth themselves need to determine constructive responses to the challenge of cyberbullying. A program of education that engages young people in an exploration of reality, and helps them to analyse their social environment and to recognize the influence various forces exert on their thoughts and actions will help them to develop more healthy and constructive relationships – online and offline.

Conclusions

After sharing the foregoing reflections, we wish to emphasize that these thoughts are a modest contribution to a wide-ranging discussion that is necessary to address the important and troubling issue of cyberbullying. It is clear that the development of solutions to this problem will not come from only one sector of society. Rather, it requires a concerted effort on behalf of parents, families, schools, community organizations, government, and, especially, young people themselves. We wish to commend the Senate Committee on Human Rights for undertaking this timely initiative and we look forward to benefitting from reflection on the results of the study.