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Cyberbullying Knows No Borders

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Abstract

Cyberbullying is a global problem with a wide range of incidents reported in many countries. This form of bullying may be defined as harassment using technology such as social websites (MySpace/Facebook), email, chat rooms, mobile phone texting and cameras, picture messages (including sexting), IM (instant messages), or blogs. Cyberbullying involves repeated harm willfully inflicted on another person through technology and can include teasing, name calling, hurtful stories, embarrassing pictures, lies, false rumors, mean or threatening notes, threats of violence or death, and other hurtful actions.

This study was a Quasi-experimental form of Action Research exploring the Cyberbullying phenomenon. The ongoing project is an examination of the nature, extent, and affects of adolescents' Cyberbullying experiences. An anonymous survey of students in grades 6-12 was distributed by teachers and teacher candidates to their classes in San Diego County, California, USA. This personal distribution method resulted in 511 student participants from a pool of 528; a return rate of nearly 97%. The survey results were tabulated and descriptively analyzed to answer the research questions.

Most adults do not understand the nature or extent of teen interaction and socialization online and they do not acknowledge the serious and sometimes frightening consequences of Cyberbullying. At home, parents may not realize the full extent of their children's despair. At school, teachers and administrators may be aware of changes in a student's behavior but may not recognize the level of harassment or have an appropriate plan of action to stop it.

The consequences of Cyberbullying range from benign distress to the tragedy of adolescent suicide. This study not only highlights the nature, extent, and affects of adolescents' Cyberbullying experiences, but also points the way to concrete suggestions for teachers, administrators, and parents to address this international epidemic.

Introduction

The use of the Internet, cell phones, and other mobile communication-based technologies by children and adolescents exceeds use by the general population. They have fully embraced the new technology and use it not only to seek information and communicate with friends, but also to establish new friendships. Although most uses of communication-based technology are beneficial, useful, and fun, there has been a recent dramatic increase in the use of these devices to send harmful, cruel, and embarrassing text and images. (Willard, 2007)

Cyberbullying is a global problem with a wide range of incidents reported in the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Japan, Scandinavia, United Kingdom, Europe, and

elsewhere. Cyberbullying may be defined as harassment using technology such as social websites (MySpace/Facebook), email, chat rooms, mobile phone texting and cameras, picture messages, IM (instant messages), blogs (interactive web journals), and sexting (sending sexually explicit photos). This form of bullying involves repeated harm willfully inflicted on another person through technology and can include teasing, name calling, hurtful stories, embarrassing pictures, lies, false rumors, mean or threatening notes, forwarding sexually explicit photos, threats of violence or death, or other hurtful actions.

Although there are many illustrations of the potential consequences of Cyberbullying, the heart breaking story of Megan Meier was the first to bring national attention to this serious problem.

Megan Taylor Meier (November 6, 1992 – October 17, 2006) was an American teenager from Missouri who committed suicide at 14 years of age. Her suicide was attributed to Cyberbullying through a social networking website. Lori Drew, the mother of a former friend, had created a MySpace account and was using the name *Josh Evans* to befriend and eventually destroy Megan.

The last message Megan received from *Josh* included, "The world would be a better place without you". She was found twenty minutes later, hanging by the neck in a closet. Despite attempts to revive her, she was pronounced dead the following day.

A federal grand jury indicted Lori Drew on May 15, 2008, on three counts of accessing protected computers without authorization to obtain information to inflict emotional distress. She was convicted in 2009 and faces up to three years in prison and a \$300,000 fine.

Other examples include incidents such as:

"If I find you, I will beat you up," one message read. Frightened, Michael blocked their IM addresses but didn't tell his parents for two weeks. "It scared me," he recalls. "It was the first time I was bullied."

In June 2007 a twelve-year-old Japanese girl killed her classmate because she was angry about messages that had been posted about her on the Internet.

Canadian teenager David Knight's life became hell when a group of his school mates established a "Hate David Knight" website and posted denigrating pictures and abuse and invited the global community to join in the hate campaign.

Methods

Research Design

The study was a Quasi-experimental form of Action Research exploring the Cyberbullying phenomenon.

Quasi-experimental design is a form of experimental research used extensively in the social sciences. Although inappropriate for use in the physical and biological sciences, the method is a useful tool. The inherent weakness in the methodology is the lack of random allocation of groups or proper controls but this does not undermine the validity of the data. Although the

study population was not randomly selected from the larger population of students in San Diego County, it may be considered representative of similar large urban student populations based on the number of participants (511), the number of classes surveyed (19), the geographic distribution of the schools, and the group demographics of the study population.

Action research is a systematic rigorous approach to investigation that enables people to understand the nature of problematic events or phenomena. This form of research focuses on specific situations and localized solutions. This study aimed to increase awareness of Cyberbullying in San Diego schools and inform decision making by teachers and administrators concerning the detection, prevention, and intervention in cases of Cyberbullying.

This ongoing project is an examination of the nature, extent, and affects of adolescents' Cyberbullying experiences.

Subject Selection

Whole classes taught by teachers or teacher candidates in a Master of Education: Teaching program at the Hufstедler School of Education, Alliant International University participated in the study. A total of five-hundred eleven 6-12th grade students from schools in San Diego County, California self-selected to participate and were treated as a single study group.

Subject Demographics

Gender	Male	Female				
	44%	56%				
Grade	6-7-8	9-10	11+			
	77%	13%	10%			
Ethnicity	African-Am	Asian	Hispanic	Native-Am	White	Other
	25%	24%	20%	1%	27%	3%
Grades	Above Avg	Average	Below Avg			
	61%	25%	14%			
Computer Use	Never	Rarely	Weekly	Daily	> Daily	
	0% (1)	11%	23%	45%	21%	
Hours/Week	0-5	5-10	10-15	15-20	> 20	
	39%	27%	12%	10%	12%	

Instrumentation

The survey instrument used was a questionnaire developed by Miller (2009). A total of twenty-nine questions were analyzed to answer the research questions and reveal students' perceptions of Cyberbullying, the affect of Cyberbullying, opinions of how to stop Cyberbullying, and Internet safety practices.

Data Collection

The data set was collected through an anonymous survey of students in grades 6-12 and included three focus areas: demographic data, perceptions of Cyberbullying, and perceptions of the affect of Cyberbullying. The survey was distributed by teachers and teacher candidates

to their classes in San Diego County, California, USA. This personal distribution method resulted in 511 student participants representing a return rate of nearly 97%.

Data Analysis

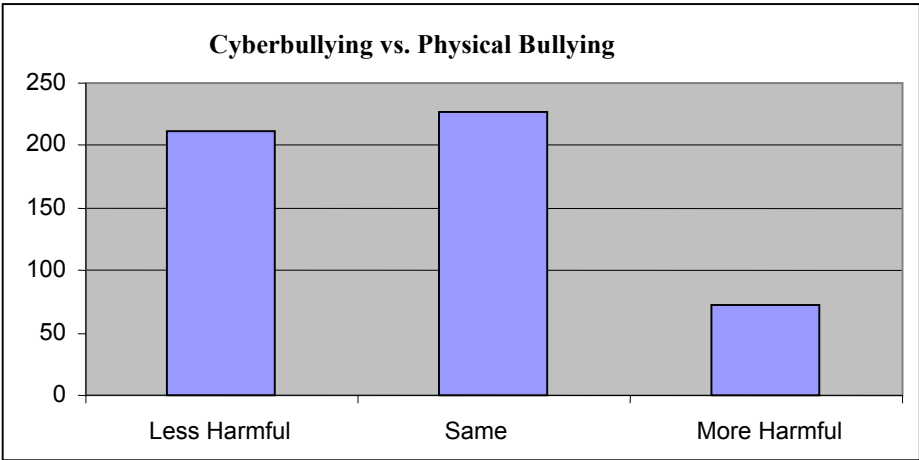
Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to examine the data. The descriptive form of analysis was used to quantitatively summarize the data set and provide an overall sense of the data being analyzed. For example, descriptive statistics did not reveal the basis for student perceptions of Cyberbullying, but did determine the most common perceptions within the study population. The inferential form of quantitative analysis provided the basis for conclusions and generalizations drawn from the study data to be applied to similar populations.

Conclusions

Survey results were tabulated and analyzed to answer the following research questions:

1) How do students perceive Cyberbullying vs. Physical Bullying?

Physical bullying is a problem, but Cyberbullying is even more significant and has the potential to be more detrimental. Over 58% of students felt Cyberbullying was equally harmful or more harmful than physical bullying. One student submitted a statement that said, “I would rather be hit or tripped because I’ll heal up. But if you destroy me on Facebook, I’ll never get better.”

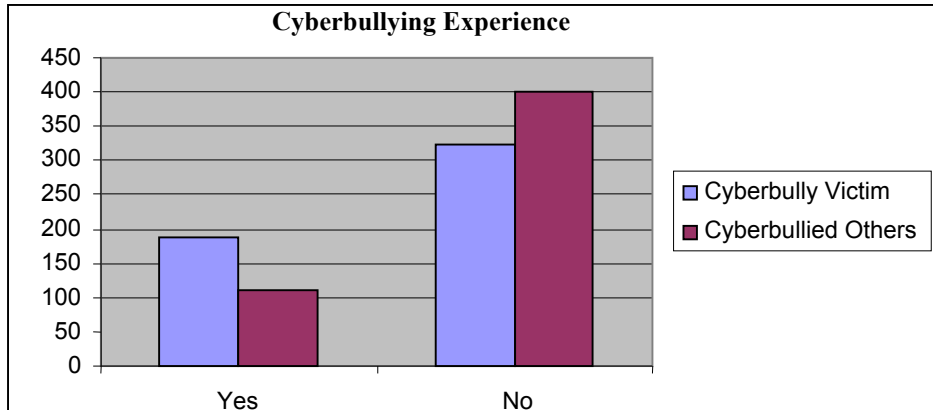


The consequences of Cyberbullying can be as serious, if not more serious, than physical bullying with incidents ranging from benign distress to the tragedy of adolescent suicide. (Beran and Li, 2005)

2) To what extent do adolescents experience Cyberbullying?

The survey results indicated 37% of students had been cyberbullied and the majority of students were victimized repeatedly. This represents a significant increase in Cyberbullying

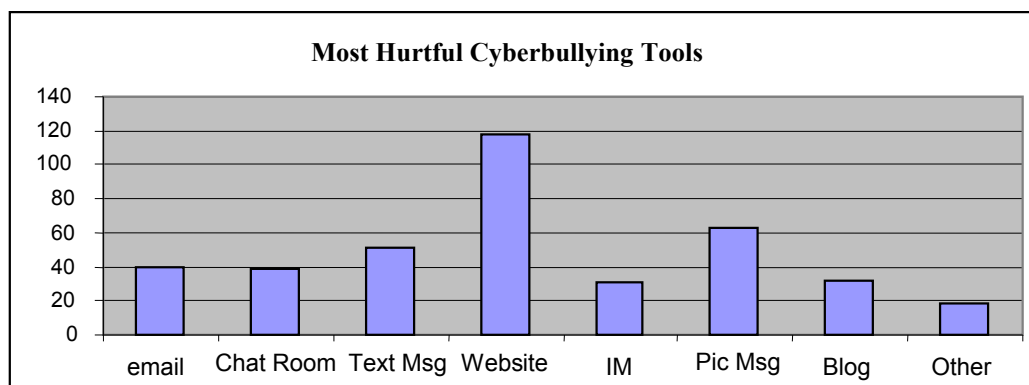
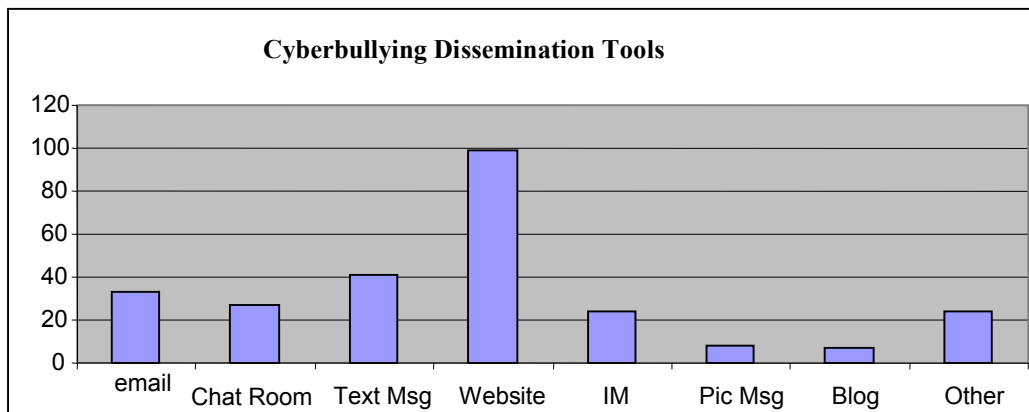
since 2005 when, according to the Second Youth Internet Safety Survey, only 9% said they had been harassed through the Internet or another form of communication-based technology.



3) What are the dissemination tools of Cyberbullying?

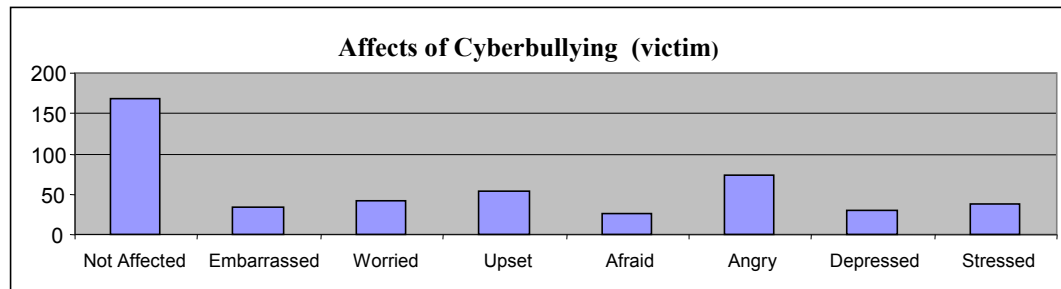
Although a wide range of technology-based communication was reported, Social Networking Websites, i.e. MySpace and Facebook, were cited as the most common Cyberbullying tool. This same type of website was identified by a majority of students as the most hurtful form of Cyberbullying.

Also notable is the low incidence of Picture Messages as dissemination tools, but nearly 20% identified this as the most hurtful form of Cyberbullying. This may reveal the beginning stages of the *sexting* phenomenon, a relatively new and damaging form of Cyberbullying.

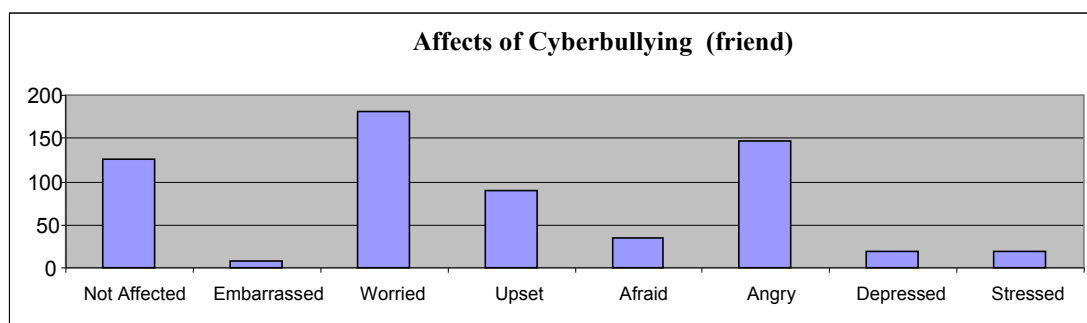


4) In what way does Cyberbullying affect students?

The National Crime Prevention Council (2009) reported victims of Cyberbullying experienced many of the same affects as children bullied physically, such as a drop in grades, low self-esteem, a change in interests, or depression. Nearly all Cyberbully victims in the study experienced negative feelings such as worry, fear, anger, depression, or stress.

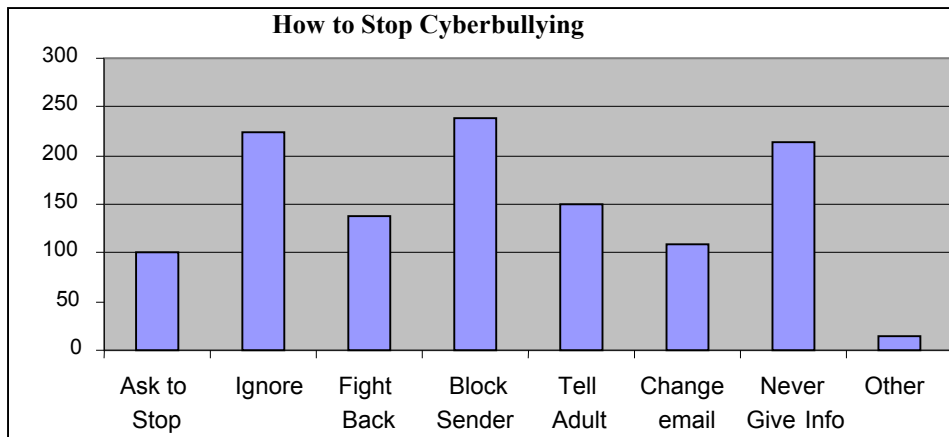


The reaction of students to the Cyberbullying of a friend mirror those feelings they have when personally victimized to some extent. However, there is a notable increase in worry, anger, and feeling upset when friends have been victimized.



5) What actions do students take to stop Cyberbullying?

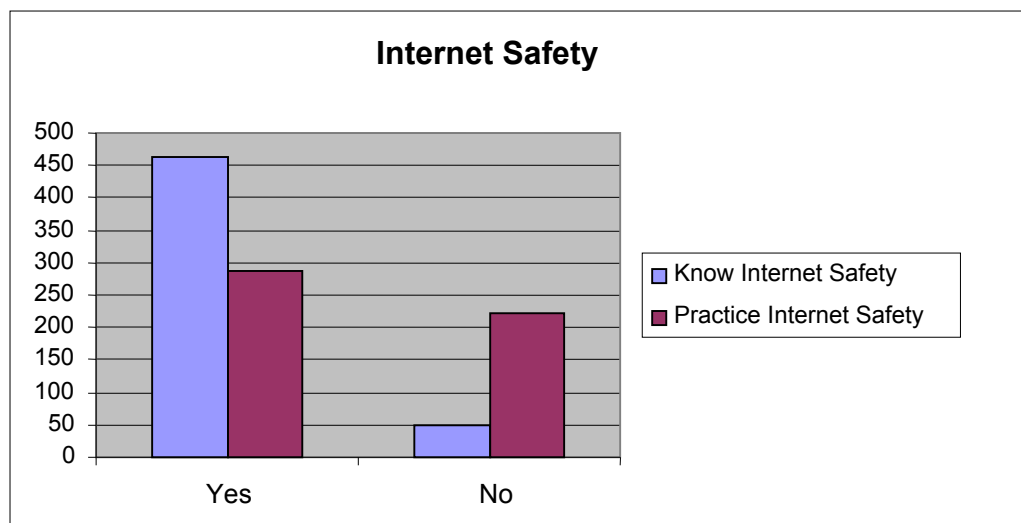
The most commonly cited actions to stop Cyberbullying were to block the sender (47%) and ignore the messages (44%). These are short-term solutions at best and have little or no deterrent affect on the Cyberbully. The second most commonly cited actions were to protect personal information (42%), and inform an adult of the situation (30%). Both of these actions are components of an overall strategy for Internet safety. It is encouraging that over 80% of respondents reported if adults knew about Cyberbullying they tried to stop it.



6) What actions do students take to protect themselves online?

Although over 92% of students reported they knew how to be safe on the Internet, only 53% reported using safe computing practices. This validated a recent study where nearly 40% of students say they have given out personal information, such as their last name and phone number or information about their parents or their schools. (Haffner, 2008)

Although this disconnect between knowledge and action is disconcerting, it may be more easily addressed than other aspects of Cyberbullying. If the goal is to facilitate change in the online behavior of students, education is the key element.



Discussion

Most adults do not understand the nature or extent of teen interaction and socialization online and they do not acknowledge the serious and sometimes frightening consequences of Cyberbullying. (National Crime Prevention Council, 2009)

Responsibilities of Teachers and Administrators

At school, teachers and administrators may be aware of changes in a student's behavior but may not recognize the extent of bullying, harassment, and threats or have an appropriate plan of action to stop these incidents from occurring.

Legal Concerns: Foreshadowing a growing trend, a school superintendent in New Jersey, USA sent a letter to the families of students in the district stating that officials would take disciplinary actions when "Cyberbullying and other forms of victimization disrupt the safe learning environment of our schools". (Dyrli, 2005) With the advancement of communication-based technology and adolescents fully integrating this technology into their lives, bullying is moving beyond the confines of classrooms, playgrounds, and cafeterias. (Brady and Conn, 2006)

It is to be expected that students and parents will likely bring a variety of statutory and constitutional claims in cases of Cyberbullying. What are the legal and ethical responsibilities of teachers, administrators, and other school district personnel regarding Cyberbullying and what can be done to stop, or at least limit, this harmful behavior?

Legally, school administrators are in a tenuous position. Schools and school district personnel have been held liable for harm caused by Cyberbullying that resulted from negligence. Although schools have a duty to ensure the safety of students, the legal standards and policies vary greatly. Such actions as death threats, threats of violence, excessive or discriminatory intimidation, or any evidence of sexual exploitation are clear violations and should be reported immediately. But not all cases are as easily discerned. In a Pennsylvania court case a school board, superintendent, assistant principal and a teacher were named as defendants because the assistant principal had confiscated a student's cell phone to view his recent calls and text messages. Although Cyberbullying was suspected, the court found the administrator's action violated the student's right to privacy and assigned liability to the school district and employees.

Cyberbullying Guidelines: If schools and school districts are to develop appropriate plans to stop Cyberbullying, what areas should be addressed and what steps should be taken?

Dr. Marilyn Campbell of the Queensland University of Technology advised using guidelines established to curtail physical bullying to combat the new threat of Cyberbullying. (2005) The four areas shown to reduce the incidence of bullying in schools were awareness raising, whole school policies, supervision, and programs. These focus areas may be used to organize the response of educators to Cyberbullying.

Awareness Raising: It is noteworthy that in this study, more than 30% of students responded that the best way to stop Cyberbullying was to tell an adult (parent/teacher) about the situation. It is also encouraging that over 80% of respondents reported if adults knew about Cyberbullying they tried to stop it. But how should educators (teachers and administrators)

respond when they discover or are told about Cyberbullying? And what can they do to be proactive and address Cyberbullying behavior before it starts?

The research of Campbell (2005), Willard (2007), and this current study provides insight into what can be done. Campbell states, “Professional development for teachers is needed and should include an explanation of what Cyberbullying is and the real consequences of severe and continuous Cyberbullying.” Willard provides additional insight by recommending engagement in participatory planning and professional development that includes district technology staff, parent organizations, social service agencies, and law enforcement. All stake holders must have an understanding of issues, resources, responsibilities, and responses related to Cyberbullying.

Students also must play an important role in the prevention of Cyberbullying as well as the planning of responses. Each school should conduct an anonymous student survey to determine incident rates, locations, delivery modes, and factors preventing reporting of incidents of Cyberbullying. Survey results should inform the planning and decision making processes of adults. Educators are responsible for providing lessons on Cyberbullying and integrating these lessons into the overall content area curriculum where appropriate.

Educators are also responsible for providing parent education on Cyberbullying. Parents must be aware of strategies to detect and prevent Cyberbullying and intervention techniques if their child is a victim. Most parents are unaware that their children may be the target of Cyberbullying or may be causing harm to others from their own home. And parents may not be aware of the full extent of their children’s despair or the hurt they may be inflicting on others.

Professional development for parents should include topics such as where to place the computer in the house, distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate information to share, how to access your child’s online communities (usernames/passwords, activities, postings), checking browser history and buddy lists, spotting secretive behavior, and how to install keystroke monitoring. This training will provide parents with the information and skills they require to properly supervise their child’s online activities at home.

Parents must also recognize the consequences if their child is engaged in Cyberbullying, including school discipline, civil litigation, and criminal prosecution.

Whole School Policies: Whole school policies have been shown to be the most effective action a school can take to prevent and respond to Cyberbullying. In general, policies should prohibit use of district networks, personal communication devices, and digital image devices to engage in Cyberbullying anywhere on school grounds or within the area where schools have a legal responsibility for student safety. The general policy must be individualized to meet the needs of each individual school and the policy must be translated into daily use to be effective. This does not require a complex implementation strategy, i.e., each school should have an anonymous report box for reporting bullying and Cyberbullying.

Supervision: Perhaps the most personal and effective means of preventing Cyberbullying is the supervision of students by adults. Teachers are already very much aware of their legal and moral duty to provide a safe environment for their students. However, with the proliferation of cell phones and other communication-based technology, supervision becomes difficult. Although Cyberbullying takes place both on and off school grounds, when students are at school, it is primarily the responsibility of teachers to supervise students’ use of computers and communication-based technology. It may be difficult for teachers to be

effective supervisors of online activity, but they must be vigilant. However, even with appropriate teacher supervision, the successful detection and prevention of Cyberbullying is contingent upon a timely and effective administrative response to teacher reports.

Prevention/Intervention Programs: It is critical that an effective anti-bullying/Cyberbullying program be implemented at every school. Since peers play a significant role in perpetuating the cycle of bullying and Cyberbullying, social programs such as peer helper programs, buddy programs, and transition programs are all effective ways to break the cycle. In addition, curriculum-based programs incorporating the direct teaching of core values, predictive empathy, peer norms, peer intervention, and *netiquette* help to reduce the incidence of Cyberbullying.

The success of any Cyberbullying prevention and intervention program is dependent upon regular and systematic program evaluation, suggested revisions based on evaluation, and implementation of the changes.

Responsibilities of Teacher Educators

If teachers and administrators are to reduce the incidence of Cyberbullying/bullying in schools through awareness raising, whole school policies, supervision, and programs, where will they learn the content, strategies, and skill set necessary to do this? How will awareness of Cyberbullying be raised if those responsible for teaching the content do not have the experiences to draw on? How will teachers with limited information and resources design the policies and programs required to detect, prevent, and respond to this threat to students? Without the appropriate skills and experiences, how can teachers properly supervise the online activities of their students?

Teachers must learn the content, strategies, and skills required to significantly impact the fight against Cyberbullying as an integrated component of their teacher preparation courses and experiences. Although a day-long seminar on the nature and affects of Cyberbullying may be a good starting point, it is not sufficient to meet the needs of teachers or teacher candidates. Successful detection, prevention, and intervention of Cyberbullying must be included within the overarching teacher preparation curriculum and teaching experiences.

Teacher educators must take advantage of opportunities to explore what has been done in the area of Cyberbullying including, but not limited to curriculum, policies, implementation strategies, professional development, strategic planning, student and parent resources, and cooperation between all stakeholders in education. They must seek out educators with experience in these activities and provide appropriate environments where, along with teacher candidates, they can learn from the experts. Through personal experiences, practitioners in the field, and the research findings of scholars, teacher educators can facilitate the acquisition of the information, skills, and experiences required by teacher candidates to address Cyberbullying.

Teacher educators may make the most significant direct contribution to the study of Cyberbullying through their own research. Professors focused on teacher education and preparation must overcome the obstacles of funding, workload, resources, and lack of support to provide the research foundation necessary to build an articulated, comprehensive, and effective process to detect, prevent, and successfully intervene in cases of Cyberbullying.

Closing

This study represents the start of an on-going project to examine the nature, extent, and affects of adolescents' Cyberbullying experiences. In addition, some concrete suggestions from representative and exemplary practitioners were provided to support teachers, administrators, and parents as they strive to eliminate, or at least contain, the threat Cyberbullying poses to children. In addition, teacher educators must not only prepare new teachers to face the challenges of Cyberbullying in their classrooms, but they must also contribute their own research findings to the growing body of knowledge on the subject.

It is imperative that all stakeholders in the fight against Cyberbullying present a unified, educated, and organized front against this growing threat to students.

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