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# Cyberbullying in Education: A Literature Review

Harvey Kenworthy  
hgk2@zips.uakron.edu

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Harvey Kenworthy

Cyberbullying in Education: A Literature Review

Honors Project Sponsor: Dr. Holliday

The University of Akron

### Cyberbullying in Education: A Literature Review

According to Menesini and Spiel (2012), cyberbullying is, “electronic bullying” or “internet bullying” that can take the form of threatening text messages, offensive videos/photos, excluding others, or releasing personal identification online. Since technology is used in nearly every aspect of our society, it is not surprising that around ten percent of children ages 9-16 have experienced cyberbullying (Menesini & Spiel, 2012). When considering the outcomes of cyberbullying (e.g., stress that decreases performance levels, social anxiety, mental health, and suicidal ideation, (Brailovskaia, Teismann, & Margraf, 2018; Hase et. al., 2015; Alhujaili & Karwowski, 2018), it is clear that this topic is worthy of attention from individuals in the educational field that have frequent contact with these students. These educators have the capability to make meaningful changes. In this paper, I will discuss the distinction between traditional bullying and cyberbullying, various academic, social, and psychological outcomes associated with cyberbullying, as well as a review of current interventions and programs that may be implemented to reduce and prevent cyberbullying. Further, I will interview a variety of administrators and educators from northeast Ohio schools about anti-cyberbullying programs that are implemented into their school systems to determine whether or not these programs are consistent with what the literature suggests.

#### **Bullying and Cyberbullying**

Cyberbullying is different from traditional bullying in a variety of ways. Cyberbullying differs from traditional bullying in that it uses technological resources. Additionally, cyberbullying focuses more on non-direct exclusion or harassment, while traditional bullying involves a direct physical or verbal interaction and does not use technological resources

(Bonanno & Hymel, 2013). With the evolution of technology, more students have access to devices that can connect to the internet. Educationally, technology can provide both teachers and students with resources and information at a much faster and easily accessible rate. For cyberbullying however, technology has become an extra tool that can be used to cause harm to others. With instant messaging, bullies can now harass other students with messages that would cause emotional harm. The same can apply to communications through social media, email accounts, and other forms of technology (Menesini & Spiel, 2012).

Cyberbullies can also use technological resources as a means to exclude others. For example, cyberbullies can exclude the victim from a social networking group or event. Despite the fact that this communication occurs through technology, the victim will likely feel the same exclusion from others as they would through means of traditional bullying (Von Marées & Petermann, 2012). Beyond that, cyberbullies also use technology to find a victim's personal information and exploit it to others as a form of bullying. This could become potentially dangerous for the victim, as they could then be targeted by other bullies because of the personal information spread to others without their consent. Examples of this could include a personal address, where they go to school, photos, or other private information. (Von Marées & Petermann, 2012). Overall, it is evident that technology is the main tool that is used during cyberbullying.

Since cyberbullying occurs with the aid of technology and may not even require that the bully and the victim be in the same geographic region, another difference to note is that traditional bullying may include physical bullying. With traditional bullying, physical examples could include outward aggressive behavior and violent acts towards another individual (Bonanno & Hymel, 2013). This process involves these major roles, the bully, the person who commits or

victimizes another individual on a repeating basis, the victim, who receives the physical acts of aggression from the bully, and the by-stander, which can be a witness of the bullying, or others that are not directly involved. In cyberbullying however, there are no physical acts that can be brought upon the victim. Cyberbullying only contains the domains of verbal, emotional, and psychological bullying, which means that victims of cyberbullying cannot receive any physical forms of bullying because the way the bullies cause repetitive harm to victims is through online or technological resources.

Another domain in which cyberbullying may differ from traditional bullying is that a cyberbully can remain anonymous. This is when a bully non-directly harasses the victim and is harder to track down because of it (Payne & Hutzell, 2017). With traditional bullying, there tend to be more one-on-one interactions. This means there is more in-person contact and both the victim and bully likely know one another. Cyberbullying on the other hand, can shield the identity of the bully. Cyberbullies can use an anonymous username, email account, or online profile, to cause repetitive emotional, psychological, or verbal harm to the victim (Von Marées & Petermann, 2012). This means that victims could have trouble finding a cyberbully because they cannot be as easily tracked down as traditional bullies. Even if the victim can restrict messages from the cyberbully, the cyberbully could easily make another account to start the cycle again. Students in present day schools have access to many devices that can connect to the internet, making cyberbullying much more prevalent and the reason why having the sense of anonymity can become potentially more dangerous.

Cyberbullying is not just a negative form of communication. It is another kind of bullying because it causes repetitive harm towards the victims and involves an imbalance of power between individuals (Menesini & Spiel, 2012). Negative forms of communication include both

of the participants in a conversation sending negative messages to each other. Cyberbullying is another form of bullying because there is only one side that intends to cause harm or exclude another person using technological resources as opposed to just direct contact (Menesini & Spiel, 2012). This shows how cyberbullying utilizes technology to cause repetitive harm and contains anonymity. So cyberbullying is seen as a separate form of bullying.

### **Cyberbullying Outcomes**

Cyberbullying can have a profound impact on students. With the daily use of social media and other technological devices during school time, these devices need to be considered when dealing with cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is significantly related to lowered academic performance outcomes (Sarwar, Zulfiqar, Aziz, & Ejaz Chandia, 2019). Social anxiety and stress are also factors to consider when cyberbullying is present among schools. With cyberbullying, the negative attention and exclusion impacts students' social attitudes and behavior in a negative way (Alhujaili & Karwowski, 2018). There are also psychological factors that impact students in a negative way because of cyberbullying, including the increase of suicidal ideation and behaviors (Brailovskaia, Teismann, & Margraf, 2018).

Academically, many students struggle to maintain and achieve the expectations that they are supposed to meet for their grade levels. With cyberbullying, the academic output from students can become limited or less than what they are supposed to meet. Cyberbullying prohibits students from maintaining an appropriate academic level (Sarwar, Zulfiqar, Aziz, & Ejaz Chandia, 2019). This means that students who experience cyberbullying during their academic career within schools are more likely to have their grades decrease. This is largely part due to the increase use of social media among middle level and high school learners during school. During the school day, cyberbullying can cause distractions through the use of

threatening or harmful messages and pictures to lower academic performance (Sarwar, Zulfiqar, Aziz, & Ejaz Chandia, 2019). Because of these distractions, students might not meet the academic expectations that are set out for them. Cyberbullying is therefore a toxic situation when involved in a student's learning career.

Socially, students, especially in post-elementary grades, strive for acceptance among their peers (Alhujaili & Karwowski, 2018). When cyberbullying occurs, the outcomes of social attitudes and behaviors are impacted negatively. Cyberbullying contains different types of harassment, which can include exclusion from groups (Alhujaili & Karwowski, 2018). This support demonstrates that the social outcomes negatively impact students and their behaviors while attending school. There are also other types of cyberbullying as mentioned previously, that could impact a student's time at school by diminishing their social attitudes due to cyberbullying.

The psychological aspects of cyberbullying are a critical area that may affect students on a daily basis. Psychologically, students need to be supported during the critical years of developing the adolescent mind. If there are negative, repeated interactions while a young learner is developing, then there will be psychological consequences (Hase et. al, 2015). There are many different pieces of research that show samples who experienced cyberbullying have a strong correlation with negative psychological symptoms (Hase et. al, 2015). From this evidence, students need to have strong intervention strategies to reduce negative psychological outcomes that result from cyberbullying.

There is another factor of psychological outcomes that are very serious and demand attention when dealing with cyberbullying, suicide. If the amount of repeated harassment from cyberbullying continues, then the topic of suicide may be brought up. Suicidal behavior or ideation is when a student contemplates the value of their life and may think of harming

themselves (Hase et. al, 2015). There are studies that show correlations between cyberbullying and suicidal behavior or ideation. The only way to reduce some of these behaviors are intervention strategies and positive mental health (Brailovskaia, Teismann, & Margraf, 2018). From this support demonstrating that suicidal behavior and ideation correlates with cyberbullying, it is absolutely vital to make sure that students in schools do not succumb to negative psychological symptoms, but rather they should have mental health strategies provided that help them combat this.

### **Intervention Strategies**

Intervention strategies are the next step to take when trying to deal with cyberbullying. There are different kinds of interventions that can be used to combat cyberbullying. There are traditional plans that follow the route set up by other bullying programs that schools have implemented, and there are also ones that utilize technology to teach students about cyberbullying (Tanrikulu, 2018). A factor of developing intervention strategies for cyberbullying is the amount of perception a plan receives. If the perception of an intervention plan from students, teachers, parents, administrators, and others is seen as attentive and taken seriously, then the plan will most likely be effective against cyberbullying (Giménez-Gualdo, Arnaiz-Sánchez, Cerezo-Ramírez, & Prodócimo, 2018). Following this information, the rest of this section will discuss what is deemed to be effective from research and will include examples of strategies that are used in school systems.

There are many different factors for what is deemed effective when considering implementing new intervention strategies into school systems. One of the most important ways that many people are convinced of effective intervention strategies is to exhibit empirical data that is peer-reviewed. This is so that the data can demonstrate why their strategies or

interventions can be effective when implemented in schools (Tanrikulu, 2018). One study includes that both teachers and students need to cooperate. Also, students should extend their problems to teachers because teachers are trusted adults. The study also mentions what is effective is to use strategies such as avoidance, communication, and reporting serious conditions to the police if necessary (Giménez-Gualdo, Arnaiz-Sánchez, Cerezo-Ramírez, & Prodócimo, 2018). If the students are not viewing teachers as trusted adults, then they are likely not to report cyberbullying problems. Other studies suggest what makes a strategy effective is implementing technology, using an internationally accepted prevention or intervention, and using a program that is implemented for traditional bullying. Also, the duration of a prevention plan should not be as important as the intention of a plan (Tanrikulu, 2018). This means that these factors are useful when trying to decide which strategies should be used and should be considered with every new strategy.

For the implementation of strategies in schools there are some that stand out. From the factors mentioned above, these strategies have been found to be effective within schools to combat cyberbullying. These target not just students, but faculty, administrators, and parents as well. For example, a study by Espelage & Hong (2017), mention that the United States instigated an intervention strategy called I-SAFE. This strategy included 5 online hour-long lessons that included topics such as personal safety, internet safety, what accounts as intellectual property, online law enforcement, cybersecurity, and cybercommunities (Espelage & Hong, 2017). This means that the I-SAFE program meets expectations as well as being easy to use for faculty, administrators, teachers, and students. The program is designed to teach students and parents what is required to combat cyberbullying.

Researchers recommend that administrators stay up to date with cyberbullying policies. Specifically, because administrators handle policies within schools, it is important that the policies that are implemented are relevant, effective, and utilize community resources. One such study by Simmons and Bynum (2014) give six useful tips that administrators can use. These tips are as followed, bullying policies to be updated to combat cyberbullying, integrating cyberbullying prevention into school curriculum that teaches both students and parents on on-line safety, launching a community cyberbullying task force to keep students safe, inviting police officers that specialize in cybersecurity to educate students on the aspects of cyberbullying and internet safety, forming a safe and trusting climate for students to tell responsible adults about cyberbullying instances, and finally, documenting all evidence by what their district requires in a case of cyberbullying (Simmons & Bynum, 2014). Making sure that policies are updated is beneficial because if there are outdated policies, then they will not be able to effectively manage and prevent novel cyberbullying tactics. Having school curriculum in place that guides teachers to effectively educate students on the topic of cyberbullying is useful because they will know how to prevent it or handle it if it happens to them. By implementing these six recommendations, administrators can improve their cyberbullying policies. The way that cyberbullying can be prevented is to make sure that everyone is educated on how cyberbullying works for not just students, but others who are part of the school system.

### **Interviews**

Cyberbullying is prevalent among schools all over the country. For this project, I have interviewed a number of different administrators and faculty about their cyberbullying programs they use in schools. The schools are located in northeast Ohio and provide insight of how cyberbullying effects schools and how they combat it. Below are the questions that were asked to

each interviewee. Before each of the responses, a description of the interviewee and school will be provided. The interview process went through an email process. I sent emails to the interviewees and they would send back their responses. When I received emails, I recorded their response. The whole process took a week to complete.

These are the questions that I asked for each interview below:

1. What is your opinion on cyberbullying?
2. Do you think cyberbullying is present in your school?
3. Do you think there is a distinction between traditional bullying and cyberbullying?
4. What current strategies is your school implementing to combat cyberbullying?
5. What do you think is the most important factor when developing strategies to combat cyberbullying?

The first interview I was able to complete was with a Principal, Principal Sally (pseudonym). Principal Sally works at a school in northeastern Ohio. The school is a very new school just opening only last year and Principal Sally has been there since the beginning. The school was funded and built by a foundation fairly recently. There are two kinds of schools the foundation built, one an elementary and the other a secondary school. Principal Sally works in the elementary school. The school also provides students with laptops that they can use within school hours.

These are some of the responses she had to the questions. For the first question, Principal Sally describes cyberbullying as “very real and is rampant across all ages”. Which means that as an administrator, she sees cyberbullying as a very serious issue in schools. For the second question about if cyberbullying is prevalent in the school, she responds, “I have had a few incidences of conflict, not bullying, via Musicaly, but that is it”. This would mean that there have

not been any kind of continuous cyberbullying, but rather one-time arguments between students through a social media app. For the third question about the distinction between cyberbullying and traditional bullying, her response is, “Cyberbullying is just based on the avenue in which the bullying has occurred”. This implies that cyberbullying is an extension, or the next step of bullying that would take place. For the fourth question, which asks if there are any current strategies being implemented within schools, she mentions that, “Our district does iSafe- where students are educated about cyberbullying and what it looks like. We also do digital literacy in our library class to talk about internet safety”. From this response, students at the school are provided with a program that teaches them safety of online resources and also have extra resources within their library. For the final question, asking about the most important factor of combatting cyberbullying, she says, “The child, family, and school all being on the same page. Educating parents on what to look for and monitoring their child’s use of electronic devices and social media”. This implies that by educating all parties involved in the school system, cyberbullying can be reduced due to the amount of awareness the problem receives. Which also includes parents being involved with knowing what to watch out for when dealing with cyberbullying.

For the second part of interviews, I was fortunate this semester to participate in field experience at a middle school, located in northeastern, Ohio. The school was built almost a decade ago, so their policies and programs are still fairly new. This school also provides students with personal laptops to use within the classroom. I was able to interview five staff members in the school via email. Four out of five of the staff members, Nancy, Alesha, John, and Janet (pseudonyms), are in the intervention specialist program at the middle school as an intervention specialist or intervention specialist aide. The other staff member, Natalie (pseudonym), was a

licensed teacher that teaches sixth grade mathematics. Many of the staff members have been at the school since it was built.

For the first question, many of the teachers agree that cyberbullying is an issue that is increasing. Many of the examples include “Cyberbullying is everywhere!” (Nancy) or “It’s constant- students that are targeted struggle to remove themselves from peers” (John). This is a good sign because if teachers/staff within the school are aware of the problem, is a good first step to finding solutions. For the second question, all of the interviewees agreed that cyberbullying is present in the school, with such examples including “Absolutely, every day.” (Alesha) and “Yes. It is everywhere. We see it on a daily basis” (Natalie). This is another good indicator because all of the interviewees agree that cyberbullying is occurring within their school. Knowing this would then increase the question of how they can reduce cyberbullying’s negative effects on students. For the third question, there was a large emphasis on how cyberbullying is different when compared to traditional bullying. Quotes from the staff members included, “Cyberbullying goes on after school too. Traditional bullying ends at the end of the (school) day. I believe this is why kids struggle today.” (Janet) and “Cyberbullying can be shown to hundreds of people at once” (John). These responses indicate that cyberbullying is different from traditional bullying because instances of cyberbullying can still happen after school hours, also, different kinds of negative messages can be spread to a large number of people at a fast rate. For the fourth question, the middle school implements a simple approach to combat cyberbullying. Examples from the interviews included “Assemblies – talking to students about it (cyberbullying)” (John) and “See something, say something” (Natalie). This strategy involves educating students about cyberbullying and how it can affect them. There is also the sense of community with students being able to speak out for one another. If they see an issue, they can then help their peers by

reporting it to trusted adults, which is a great way to reduce cyberbullying. For the final question, the staff members agree that this problem affects students the most out of everyone involved.

When asked the final question some of the interviewees responded, “Know your students and know how to monitor social media” (Janet) and “parents need to monitor screen time as well as where they are and what they are doing” (Nancy). From these responses, the staff members at the middle school understand that both parents and teachers monitoring screens is a necessary action to reduce the cyberbullying problem in schools. There is also the example of getting to know your students and noticing if anything might be wrong and then asking the student about what is troubling them.

These interviews were overall a great insight into the opinions and strategies that are mentioned from administration and other staff members in schools. Asking them questions about what necessary precautions are needed to take for cyberbullying provides the sense of how teachers and staff know how prevalent the problem is. It is also interesting to hear about how different opinions on certain questions can have an impact on students in future discussions. The implications that I have learned from these interviews is that some middle schools may not have a fully developed plan on how to combat cyberbullying. An example is the “see something, say something” program at the middle school. To better this, it would be beneficial if both staff and administrators look at research of which plans, or strategies would be more effective. Another implication is that trying to monitor student computers and encouraging parents to do so as well is not an easy task. For schools that provide computers within the classrooms, there are applications and preventive measures that can be used to monitor screen time. Since the computers are provided by the school, they are easier to monitor, but other devices students use may need more time to install parental controls. The best recommendation would be to use

applications or plans that have worked for other schools to monitor student access of computers and other electronic devices. Having staff members opinions is integral to understanding the problem, what is currently being done, and how they can also move forward into the future with new ideas to combat cyberbullying.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, cyberbullying is a very serious and relevant topic. There is a distinction between traditional bullying and cyberbullying because cyberbullying utilizes technology. The academic outcomes of cyberbullying are decreasing levels of academic performance. Socially, cyberbullying impacts students by increasing rates of stress and diminishes social attitudes within schools. Psychologically, cyberbullying increases negative psychological symptoms, which can then lead to suicidal ideation or behavior. What works for strategies that combat cyberbullying is an overall theme of educating everyone involved in school systems. Actual strategies used in school systems rely on implementing plans that work with traditional bullying and bringing in community resources. Lastly, the interviews of schools on their cyberbullying programs provide an inside view of how effective cyberbullying preventions are used in schools. Cyberbullying is still new to school systems, without taking the necessary precautions, students will suffer from the negative outcomes that result from it.

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