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The Issue of Cyberbullying: A Literature Review

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Hannah Hartzler

The Issue of Cyberbullying: A Literature Review

Honors Project Sponsor: Dr. Holliday

The University of Akron

Introduction

Many people know about bullying, how it works and the effects that it can have, but not as many people are equally aware of cyberbullying specifically. In fact, when someone says the word bullying, many people will think solely of in-person, direct bullying and disregard cyberbullying. Bullying is defined as, "...unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time," (Stopbullying.gov, 2020). There are four main points that define bullying: 1) it is unwanted, 2) it is aggressive behavior, 3) there is an imbalance of power and 4) it is repeated. A single unintentional act of aggression towards a person is not considered bullying. Stopbullying.gov defines cyberbullying as, "...bullying that takes place over digital devices like cell phones, computers, and tablets," (Stopbullying.gov, 2020). The above definition of bullying can be used to fully clarify cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior, with an imbalance of power, repeated, and done over some type of digital device.

In this paper, I will consider the differences between direct bullying and cyberbullying, statistics that pertain to cyberbullying, the importance of educating ourselves on cyberbullying and ending it, factors regarding who is cyberbullied and who cyberbullies and finally, what teachers can do to help. The purpose of this paper is to review current research in order to help educate teachers on cyberbullying and how they can help.

Review of the Literature

The review of the literature consisted of ten articles all between 2018 and 2020. The articles were found by using the key word, "cyberbullying," and the Academic Search Complete database with a filter selected for peer-reviewed journals. The other source of information is stopbullying.gov, which states that it is, "A federal government website managed by the U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services,” (Stopbullying.gov, 2020). This website is reviewed consistently to give the most updated information.

Of the ten articles that were reviewed and shown in Table 1, nine of the articles completed their own studies/surveys. The studies and surveys in these articles were completed across the world including countries such as, Germany, Australia, the United Kingdom, Poland, Turkey, Spain and the United States. This shows that cyberbullying is an issue all over the world and not just in the United States. There were different age ranges of the participants, but they typically fell in the 11-21 age range with one study doing a survey with participants ages 18-40. One unique characteristic of one of the studies was that it was focused on students with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and those on the Autism Spectrum. Two studies interviewed adults about what they have seen in schools and the prevention methods that are currently in place. The tenth article did not contain a unique study, but instead provided information on cyberbullying by citing 14 other sources.

Table 1

Literature Review

Author	Title	Year	Country	Target group	Findings
Beer, Hawkings, Hewitson & Hallett	“Perpetrators, victims, bystanders and upstanders: cyberbullying in a special school context”	2019	United Kingdom	A single senior member of the staff	This study focused on students with ADHD and those on the Autism Spectrum. Through a case study of an incident occurring of a 15 year old sharing a video of a ten year old having a meltdown, it was determined that students with disabilities, are at a high risk of cyberbullying. Also found that two main parts of cyberbullying are an imbalance of power and intentionality.

Iranzo, Buelga, Cava, & Ortega-Barón	Cyberbullying, psychosocial adjustment, and suicidal ideation in adolescence	2019	Spain	1,062 ages 12-18	Study found that cyberbullying is directly and indirectly linked to suicidal thoughts. Researchers used seven different sets of scales with different items to determine the prevalence of different indirect and direct links to cyberbullying. Results found a significant indirect relationship of cyberbullying and suicidal thoughts. This was through perceived stress, loneliness, depressive symptomatology, and psychological distress.
Janopaul-Naylor & Feller	Cyberbullying: Harassment at your fingertips	2019			This article does not include a study, but instead discusses cyberbullying in different ways. This includes, similarities and differences of cyberbullying and direct bullying, cyberbullying warning signs, and examples of cyberbullying.
Kırcaburun et al.	Problematic online behaviors among adolescents and emerging adults: Associations between cyberbullying perpetration, problematic social media use, and psychosocial factors	2019	Turkey	804 ages 14-21 and 760 ages 18-40	The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between cyberbullying and social connectedness, belongingness, depression and self-esteem. The study found that those who are cyberbullying are more likely to be experiencing a lack of social connectedness, feeling as if they do not belong, depressed, and experiencing low self-esteem.
McLoughlin, Spears, Taddeo, & Hermens	Remaining connected in the face of cyberbullying: Why social	2019	Australia	229 ages 12-17	This study found that 58.5% of those that participated had experienced cyberbullying in some form. Also found that females were more depressed

	connectedness is important for mental health				and less connected socially. Those that had been cyberbullied, compared to those that had not, had increased levels of depression, anxiety and stress along with lower levels of social connectedness based on the scores of the scales provided by the participants.
Schultze-Krumbholz, Hess, Pfetsch, & Scheithauer	Who is involved in cyberbullying? Latent class analysis of cyberbullying roles and their associations with aggression, self-esteem, and empathy	2018	Germany	849 ages 11-17	This study looked at the different roles in cyberbullying outside of just the cyberbully and the cyberbullying victim. Almost one third (28.4%) of the participants were considered communicating outsiders. These were people who would mention an issue they saw to a parent or adult, but otherwise were not involved. Aggressive defenders made up 9.5% of the participants. They are more likely to tell their peers and to confront the bully or try to help the victim, but do not tend to tell adults. Bully-victims made up 7.1% of the participants. They are less likely to defend the victim and are more likely to tell their peers and endorse antisocial behavior. Prosocial defenders made up 52.2% of the participants. They are the most likely to tell adults and comfort the victim. The last group is the assistants and they make up 2.8% of the participants. They do not tend to help or intervene and are likely to join in cyberbullying.
Shakir et al.	Do our adolescents know they are cyberbullying victims?	2019	United States	539 ages 11-19	The purpose of this study was to determine how common cyberbullying was on social media and what the sociodemographic

					<p>characteristics were. The study found that 40.6% noted that they had experienced cyberbullying and 56.4% knew someone who had been cyberbullied. It was also found that anxiety was higher in cyberbully victims compared to those who were not cyberbully victims (44.5% vs. 17.1%). The study found that cyberbully victims are more likely to be younger, 14 or 15 years old and that race and gender did not appear to be a factor.</p>
Thomas, Scott, Coates, & Connor	Development and validation of the bullying and cyberbullying scale for adolescents: A multi-dimensional measurement model	2019	Australia	1,217 ages 12-17	<p>This study used a pencil and paper survey that dealt with bullying. The study used four types of bullying, verbal, relational, physical and cyberbullying. Those that were victims experienced verbal 15%, relational 10.7%, physical 4.9%, and cyberbullying 1.4%. Those that were the bullies reported verbal 2.7%, relational 2.5%, cyberbullying 1.5% and physical 1.4%. These percentages are based on the whole group of participants.</p>
Tomczyk, & Włoch	Cyberbullying in the light of challenges of school-based prevention	2019	Poland	11 adults who were mostly teachers	<p>The purpose of this study was to show the opinions about cyberbullying prevention as shown from teachers' experiences. The participants did not have a positive reaction to the programs for cyberbullying prevention that were currently in place. The study found that one of the best ways to help prevent cyberbullying or e-threats is to increase the level of digital safety in the school, which requires an increase in digital</p>

					literacy. The issue that was determined is that this requires effective, research based digital literacy in the schools and this will mean that new solutions will need to be designed and experimented with.
Walters & Espelage	Assessing the relationship between cyber and traditional forms of bullying and sexual harassment: Stepping stones of displacement?	2020	United States	2,039 ages 11-19	This study found that there was a correlation of direct bullying victimization leading to eventual cyberbullying, but there was no correlation of cyberbullying leading to eventual direct bullying.

Direct Bullying vs. Cyberbullying

Direct bullying and cyberbullying are both bullying and can happen without responsible adults' knowledge. However, this is where the similarities stop. There are some obvious differences such as direct bullying is face to face while cyberbullying uses technology and can be anonymous. Direct bullying has a limited amount of time that it can occur because the bully and the victim both have to be present whereas cyberbullying can happen anywhere and anytime. There are less obvious differences such as the power imbalance. During direct bullying, the bully is typically older, bigger or stronger. During cyberbullying, the bully might be younger, smaller, and weaker, but also be smarter and more advanced with technology (Janopaul-Naylor, E., & Feller, E., 2019). "Messages and photos posted in cyberspace become part of the public domain and thereby take on permanence, allowing the victim to be re-exposed to the trauma long after the initial message or post. This is in contrast to previous generations when bullying was more finite, limited by time, location, and the local audience," (Shakir et al., 2019). Cyberbullying can

be more harmful because during direct bullying, the person can step away and the only fragment left is what is in their memory. Although they are different, direct bullying and cyberbullying can occur at the same time, such as, bullying in the form of name-calling or spreading rumors can be done in-person or online (Thomas, Scott, Coates, & Connor, 2019). A student might get picked on at school by getting called names and then when he gets on his phone he is also receiving messages calling him names.

Statistics

According to Shakir et al., 15.5% of high school students reported being cyberbullied in the 12 months prior to the survey done in 2015 by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. This number was similar when compared to the statistics from 2013 (Shakir et al., 2019). Another finding in the Shakir et al. study was that white females were more likely to be cyberbullied than any other group based on race and gender (Shakir et al., 2019). Shakir et al. completed their own survey, which included 539, 11-19 year old students. When asked about being cyberbullied, 218 students identified that they had been cyberbullied in some form, which was 40.6% of the students surveyed. Those 40.6% were then asked if this made them want to stop using social media and only 19% of the students said yes. According to this survey, those who are cyberbullied are more likely to be younger, 14 or 15 years old, have a medical condition, and claim to have depression and anxiety, race and gender did not seem to be a factor (Shakir et al., 2019). In another study it was found that the most common group that faces cyberbullying is females in 7th and 8th grade (Iranzo, Buelga, Cava, & Ortega-Barón, 2019). Girls tend to more commonly be the victim of an incident of online aggression (Janopaul-Naylor, E., & Feller, E., 2019).

20-40% of young people are affected by cyberbullying (Kırcaburun et al., 2019). Iranzo, Buelga, Cava, and Ortega-Barón, found that 2-57% are affected by cyberbullying with the average being 23%. These numbers were taken from studies that the authors, Iranzo, Buelga, Cava, and Ortega-Barón reviewed. According to the literature, the amount of people affected by cyberbullying is 15.5-40% of all students and girls around the ages of 14 or 15 are more likely to be the victims.

Importance of Stopping Cyberbullying

“Consequently, teens who report cyberbullying and school bullying are more likely to report lower life satisfaction and are at the highest risk for suicide,” (Shakir et al., 2019). This alone shows why it is so important to understand cyberbullying and find ways to stop it before it’s too late. Depression and anxiety increase as children progress into adolescence. Because of this, adolescence is already a very vulnerable time. Cyberbullying is linked to depression and anxiety in adolescents (McLoughlin, Spears, Taddeo, & Hermens, 2019). One thing that helps reduce depression is social connectedness. “Furthermore, research shows that higher levels of social connectedness may result in more positive mental health and wellbeing,” (McLoughlin, Spears, Taddeo, & Hermens, 2019). If adolescents are impacted positively by being connected socially, then when they are being cyberbullied and they are being pulled away from the social connections it is going to impact them negatively. Preventing cyberbullying would mean helping decrease rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide in adolescents.

Factors

There are many different reasons why cyberbullying happens. “The fact that cyberbullying perpetrators do not need to know their victim and do not see the results of their actions are among the factors that can increase the frequency of CBP,” (Kırcaburun et al., 2019).

CBP, as mentioned in the previous quote, stands for cyberbullying perpetration. According to Walters and Espelage, “An alternate and perhaps more defensible conceptualization is that children learn the techniques of bullying, not only from each other, as postulated by social learning theory (Akers, 1998; Bandura, 1986), but also by experimenting with bullying in a relatively safe environment.” As stated in the above quote by Kircaburun et al., cyberbullying may be seen as a relatively safe environment because the cyberbully does not see or may not even know their victim. Because cyberbullying is done in what seems to be a safe environment, children can try it out and learn by actually doing it instead of just learning by watching others.

According to Walters and Espelage, in the past, research showed that from middle school to high school the frequency of cyberbullying increases and direct bullying decreases. This would mean that in many cases bullying came before cyberbullying, but more recent research has shown that cyberbullying is becoming more common in both age groups (Walters & Espelage, 2020). The main reason for cyberbullying becoming more common among middle school students now than previously is that technology is becoming more widely available. According to Kircaburun et al., there was a study published in January of 2017 that found that social media users had increased by 21% all across the world as compared to the year before.

Students with disabilities are more likely to cyberbully than those without disabilities because they do not always understand conflict resolution strategies. This is especially true when the disability hinders their social skills such as students on the Autism Spectrum. “Individuals with disabilities may be more likely than those without to engage in retaliatory bullying, perhaps due to the perception of fewer response alternatives,” (Beer, Hawkings, Hewitson & Hallett, 2019). This retaliatory bullying is often done in the form of cyberbullying due to a deficit in social skills (Beer, Hawkings, Hewitson & Hallett, 2019).

Bystanders are always an important part of social interactions. Acceptable social behavior varies based on the group. People tend to watch for cues from bystanders to determine if the social behavior is acceptable for that group. “In cases of indirect cyberbullying, the audience represent a necessary precondition for cyberbullying and how these persons (or bystanders) react to the incident can influence the further process of cyberbullying considerably,” (Schultze-Krumbholz, Hess, Pfetsch, & Scheithauer, 2018). Essentially, the lack of a bystander standing up for the victim is seen as approval for the behavior. Initial cyberbullying incidents may occur without much influence from bystanders, but how the bystanders react will typically determine if the cyberbullying continues.

Those cyberbullies tend to be people who have been cyberbullied themselves. “A unique finding in our study is that a majority of adolescents who reported cyberbullying on SM also report having been cyberbullied,” (Shakir et al., 2019). The study does not report whether or not these cyberbullies are victims or the bullies first. Supporting those who have been cyberbullied could help to eliminate the amount of cyberbullying because they may be less likely to cyberbully themselves. Kırçaburun et al., found that there was a relationship between cyberbullies and social connectedness, belongingness, depression and self-esteem (Kırçaburun et al., 2019). When an individual is dealing with these kinds of emotions, they have a higher chance of lashing out at those around them and this can come in the form of cyberbullying.

What Teachers can do

Understanding the warning signs of a student being cyberbullied is the first thing that a teacher should do to help students. “Warning signs can include poor school performance or frequent absences, avoidance of computers, cell phones and other devices, stress when receiving email, instant messages or text,” (Janopaul-Naylor & Feller, 2019). Other potential warnings

signs could be depression, anxiety, or even mood swings (Janopaul-Naylor & Feller, 2019). Students may never say anything to an adult about being cyberbullied so it is important to understand and recognize the warning signs.

Schools are expected to have policies in place against cyberbullying, but this can actually do more harm than good because the policies tend to be ineffective (Beer, Hawkins, Hewitson & Hallett 2019). The main reason the policies do more harm is because a busy teacher might believe that the children are being protected by the policy and do not need to worry about cyberbullying. So the students not only aren't getting help from the policy, but they also aren't getting help from their teacher (Beer, Hawkins, Hewitson & Hallett 2019). Although all policies are different, from my experience, many seem to have a similar concept, which is that the students are to come to an adult if they are being cyberbullied. This is usually accompanied by a school gathering to discuss that students need to be nice to each other online and offline. Using a gathering like this in a large group is not likely to influence many students and when being told by the principal or administration that they can go to a teacher for help, the students are not likely to go. The best way to get students to go to an adult for help is for the teachers themselves to be open and show their students they can come to them for help.

There are a lot of different ways that teachers and adults can help students when it comes to cyberbullying. The issue is that there is not a single answer that can solely help solve cyberbullying. Different techniques need to be used together. Some of these techniques are: teaching students the proper way to use technology, informing students they can come to the teacher or adult when they are cyberbullied, and not allowing phones or other personal devices during school hours. Although these three techniques may seem great, they all have their issues. Some students, even after being taught not to, are still going to cyberbully. Not all students will

have the courage to go to a teacher or adult when they are being cyberbullied. Finally, not allowing phones or other personal devices during school hours will help with the issue during those specific hours, but then when they get their phone back it is still an issue. This could help some students who are or have been victims feel more comfortable at school because they know that during those hours they are relatively safe.

One of the best ways for a teacher to start making a difference is by educating themselves. There are many ways that teachers can educate themselves on cyberbullying. The most convenient way to do this would be to do some research online. When the word “cyberbullying” is put into Google Scholar, over 77,000 articles are found. More current research is best, so when filtered for articles written in 2016 or later, over 29,000 articles are found. Teachers could use this as a resource to find articles to educate themselves. Narrowing down the search more would be helpful and depend on each individual teacher. Searches could be done for “cyberbullying victim,” “cyberbullying at school,” or “cyberbullying bystander” etc. This is a great resource for teachers as there are many different studies that can be found to help learn about the prevalence and what has been shown to help with cyberbullying. Another way that teachers could educate themselves is by finding professional development that covers cyberbullying. One organization that does these kinds of professional developments is ADL (Anti-Defamation League), which is based in New York. These are typically either half day or full day sessions (“Bullying and cyberbullying workshops,” n.d.). When a teacher believes that they can make a difference they are more likely to step in and help. “Implementation of effective curricula requires teachers read the recent subject matter literature, invest in their professional development (e.g. by participating in conferences, courses, online trainings) and improve their

digital literacy,” (Tomczyk, & Włoch, 2019). By educating themselves, the teachers will feel more confident in their abilities to help and be more likely to at least try.

Conclusion

Cyberbullying is an issue that can cause anxiety, depression, and even suicidal ideation. Because of this, it is important that as teachers, we work to help those who have been affected and prevent it any way that we can. Learning more is one of the first steps for any teacher because the more you know, the more likely you are to step in. Adults other than teachers can make a big difference in the life of a student who is being cyberbullied. Together, we need to learn more and work together to make our students safe.

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