Cyber-bullying in Schools: Problems and Solutions

Educators’ views on students’ use of technology to show kindness or to bully

Teacher Interview Findings

Study by

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The authors wish to thank Cheryl M., Assistant Director, Student Life at _______ School for her contribution and support of this work, as well as Dr. Karen Brown for her assistance in designing and conducting some of the interviews.
Introduction

In April 2012, the authors documented the results of the student surveys on cyber-bullying and cyber-kindness conducted at _______ School last fall. In addition to the information derived from the student surveys, input was sought from the educators’ perspective. Given the rapidly changing on-line world to which students are exposed, we were interested to learn from those who work with the students everyday in class, and some also in their boarding homes.

Educators’ are concerned on a number of levels about the impact of the digital world on the students, on their relationships with one another and with the community more broadly. In particular, the potential of cyber-bullying in on-line exchanges, how to address and prevent such conflicts, and how to promote cyber-kindness were discussed.

The Study

In November 2011, educators at _______ School were invited to participate in 30-minute semi-structured interviews designed and conducted by Dr. Wanda Cassidy, Dr. Margaret Jackson and Dr. Karen Brown. In total, 15 educators chose to meet with the researchers for formal individual interviews and some informal exchanges also occurred throughout the time the researchers spent at the school. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Participants in the interviews were assured their anonymity would be protected and pseudonyms were assigned to each participant. Participation was completely voluntary and participant consent was secured prior to the start of each interview.

Cyber-bullying involves the use of various formats of electronic communication (Facebook, email, text messages, camera phones, blogs, websites, YouTube, chat rooms, etc.) to convey messages that are mean, hurtful, nasty, derogatory, vulgar, untrue or generally unkind. In contrast to face-to-face bullying, electronic messages can reach a far wider audience, exist in perpetuity, and the perpetrators’ identity can more easily remain unknown.

In contrast, cyber-kindness should be understood to mean the use of those same modes of communication for the purpose of expressing care, kindness and thoughtfulness in ways that may bolster self-esteem in the recipient.

This study is similar in nature and scope with our earlier study examining educators’ perspectives on cyber-bullying in two technology-rich high schools in British Columbia (Cassidy, Brown & Jackson, in press).
The Participants

The 15 educators who chose to share their insights with us in the interviews were a diverse group. They included men and women with an average of 12 years of experience working at the school (between 2 and 23 years) and an average of 24 years’ experience in the field of education (between 11 and 38 years). They included teachers, house parents, administrators, counsellors, IT people, advisors, coaches, and individuals involved in organizing extra-curricular activities.

When asked about their personal familiarity level with various forms of on-line exchanges, the respondents uniformly rated their familiarity very high in terms of the more established forms such as email, cell phone text messaging, and YouTube. The ratings of familiarity then progressively decreased from Facebook to blogs to MSN chat rooms to Twitter, the latter being the form with which respondents felt the least familiarity. These findings mirror those we reported in relation to other schools in BC (Cassidy et al., in press). Arguably, one’s comfort level with various forms of technology may impact the ease with which one can address issues that arise as well as one’s awareness of what to look for in terms of problematic behaviours.

Level of concern

Respondents were asked at the outset of the interviews to rate their level of concern with the problem of cyber-bullying. They consistently rated their level of concern at a very high level, between 1 and 2 on a 5-point scale where 1 is “extremely concerned” and 5 is “not concerned at all”. The consensus around this particular question may be an artefact of the nature of the study – perhaps only those educators who felt strongly about the issue consented to taking the time to be interviewed on the topic. However, in one of our earlier studies, 42% of the educators interviewed had indicated that they were not concerned at all about the issue of cyber-bullying (Cassidy, Brown & Jackson, 2011).

Toward the end of the interview, participants were asked to rate on a 5-point scale how important they felt the prevention of cyber-bullying is, given the other competing priorities with which the School is faced. They again rated this issue a very high priority. Some commented that cyber-bullying can take on a life of its own and have an impact on the tone at the school. This priority level was also found in our other BC study (Cassidy et al., in press).

However, more nuanced responses emerged with respect to encouraging cyber-kindness in on-line interactions. Despite the acknowledgement that cyber-kindness is desirable behaviour, respondents suggested that character building and kindness in all kinds of interactions (not just on-line interactions) was more important. Several suggested that cyber-kindness will occur naturally, that it stems from the culture of the school, and that it is not necessary to explicitly encourage it.
Awareness of cyber-bullying

When asked to estimate the overall proportion of students who engage in cyber-bullying behaviour, many respondents were reluctant to even venture a guess. The reasons cited for their unwillingness to speculate included that it is very hard to know, that so much of it goes unreported, that some students may engage in cyber-bullying behaviour without seeing it as such, and ultimately, they raised the question of how to define cyber-bullying.

Certainly, the two respondents who suggested that maybe 30 to 40% or even 80% of students engage in cyber-bullying were adopting a far broader definition of this type of conduct than were their colleagues. The majority of respondents who provided a response to this question claimed that less than 20% (sometimes far less) of students were engaged in cyber-bullying behaviour. Such responses can be interpreted to suggest that, either the participants were using a highly restrictive definition of what constitutes cyber-bullying, or that they were largely unaware of the much higher level of participation to which the students’ self-reported answers point. Indeed, in our earlier report, we found that about 1/3 of students at this school who responded to our survey indicated that they had engaged in such conduct at least occasionally.

When asked to estimate the proportion of students who had been victims of cyber-bullying, only four respondents ventured a guess. It is interesting that it was the participant with the least experience who most accurately estimated that the vast majority of students had had these unpleasant experiences at least occasionally as was revealed in our earlier report stemming from the student surveys.

Definition of cyber-bullying

Given the discrepancies noted above in terms of estimations of how many students are involved, it is not clear that the scope of what comes under the definition of cyber-bullying is clearly understood. One respondent even pointed out that calling this research a “cyber-bullying study” would have negative connotations and might account for the relatively low response rates found in both the student surveys and the teacher interviews.

In fact, several respondents did request clarification during the interviews as to what exactly cyber-bullying entails. Cyber-bullying is language that can defame, threaten, harass, bully, exclude, discriminate, stalk, disclose personal information or contain offensive, vulgar, derogatory comments. Tactics can include masquerading, flaming, denigrating, put-downs, outing, stalking, or harassing. Telecommunications technology includes email, cell phones, text messages, websites, blogs, chat rooms, Facebook forums, game servers, video sharing websites, YouTube, Twitter and other social communication networks (Cassidy et al., 2011).
Throughout the interviews, it became apparent that many respondents had not initially taken such a broad definition and were instead thinking of only particular instances of which they may have heard where the bullying became extensive or involved many students, situations that had “gone viral”.

However, cyber-bullying can also be understood on a different level as more incremental and small instances which may appear insignificant on their own, may be more significant as part of an effort to isolate, ridicule, belittle, or cast out a peer.

**Cyber-bullying policy and curriculum**

We asked participants about their knowledge of School policies and curriculum intended to deal specifically with the issue of cyber-bullying. The majority of respondents named specific elements of the curriculum where they believed that a particular unit of material would address the issue of cyber-bullying. These were in courses such as Information Literacy and Technology, Health Career Education (HCE 9), and Planning (10).

As far as improvements to curriculum, one respondent suggested that the approach could be more strategic in terms of what is addressed in each grade and that education on this issue should occur on a more regular basis. Other respondents indicated that units were being developed on “social cruelty,” which would include cyber-bullying. One educator pointed out that it is hard for the curriculum to keep pace with the rapid rate of change in terms of technological advances and uses. It should also be noted that some participants believed that there were no parts of the curriculum intended to deal with the issue of cyber-bullying. While such statements appear to be inconsistent with the majority of responses received, they do indicate a certain lack of awareness as to what exists.

In terms of existing School policies on cyber-bullying, while some participants stated that there was such a policy, several respondents indicated that there were none or that they were not aware of any specific policies on this issue. A few respondents mentioned that cyber-bullying would be covered under the terms of the usage agreement (acceptable computer use policy). Some pointed out that there is a general policy on bullying, which would encompass cyber-bullying, but that it is not specific to cyber-bullying. Still others had no knowledge of the existence of a bullying policy.

Many respondents felt that cyber-bullying cases should be handled on a case-by-case basis and they generally expressed satisfaction with the ways in which cases are being handled and with the preventative measures that are in place. However, there are some questions that remain once cases have been handled due to the secrecy that often surrounds the incidents (protection of privacy), their resolution and the outcomes for victims and perpetrators. More adequate feedback and follow-up with teachers would enable them to better support students and to know what to look out for.

Some of the interview participants indicated awareness about plans to develop a specific cyber-bullying policy at their school that would:
1) clearly outline what constitutes cyber-bullying,
2) handle cyber-bullying differently from traditional forms of bullying, and
3) spell out specific sanctions.

However, some concerns were expressed about how to control cyberspace, the boundaries between home and school, and even about the very need for a policy. Many felt it was an issue best handled on a case-by-case basis as there are many variables to take into consideration including the type of behaviour, the impact on the victim, the attitude of the student who is caught cyber-bullying, and the response of the parents. For these reasons, some participants felt a specific cyber-bullying policy might be too restrictive. Similar concerns were raised in our studies at other schools in BC as well (Cassidy et al., 2011; in press).

**Best way to prevent cyber-bullying**

Not surprisingly, most of the educators we interviewed did feel *education* was the best way to prevent cyber-bullying: education for students, for teachers, and for parents. The research literature also posits that the prevention of cyber-bullying must bring together students, teachers, administrators, and parents in order to be effective (Beale & Hall, 2007; Diamanduros, Downs & Jenkins, 2008; Cassidy et al., in press).

The respondents recognized that students want to be engaged in the conversation; they do not wish to be spoken to about the on-line world as if their existing knowledge is insignificant. They do, however, need information and opportunities to discuss it. For instance, in the student survey, educational programs for students about cyber-bullying and its effects were highly rated as a “best approach” to preventing cyber-bullying. Further, while some students may roll their eyes at some of the education efforts that have gone forth, it is imperative to help students develop the tools they need to navigate the on-line world and its effects. As we reported from the student surveys, students who are victims of cyber-bullying are most likely to tell their friends about it (more so than their parents or their teachers or school administrators). As such, students should be empowered to handle these situations to the best of their abilities.

Much of the work with students needs to occur from a very young age as children are exposed to the on-line world very early. Also, *self-esteem and self-confidence* are part of the building blocks in the prevention of cyber-bullying. As one respondent mentioned, students are tagged by their confidence level and become vulnerable to bullying if that self-esteem is not present.

Awareness also featured into many of the responses about how best to prevent cyber-bullying. On one level, respondents discussed the students’ *self-awareness* of their own behaviour, defining their character, their values, the kind of people they want to be, and knowing their impact on the world around them.
On another level, respondents expressed concerns regarding students’ lack of awareness about their digital selves. Many of the educators felt that students may not fully comprehend the power of the device, the damage that can be done to themselves and to others, the risks, the real life consequences, what is out there about them, how they may be viewed by future employers or university admissions offices, the strategies they can take to protect themselves, and how to get help if/when they are cyber-bullied. One respondent described how he had been discussing stolen identity with his students when the students told him this was called “fraping” (i.e. Facebook raping – when someone uses your computer to pose as you and “puts stupid comments in your Facebook”), that it was a common occurrence and not a big deal. He expressed concern about the willingness of students to negotiate away the boundaries of acceptable conduct in the name of “fitting in.” He felt that they do not clearly define what is tolerable and what is hurtful. This example most clearly highlights the importance of the on-going conversation with students and of recognizing their realities, which cannot be done through a top-down approach.

The educators also felt that the best way to prevent cyber-bullying was through educating themselves. In order to be considered true partners in the endeavour to stop cyber-bullying, they need to be conversant in the various forms of technology that their students use (see also, Cassidy et al., in press). Several acknowledged that they did not feel up to the task of facilitating those conversations with students or that they did not have the knowledge to enable them to seize upon teaching opportunities which might present themselves. A few participants mentioned that they would benefit from professional development programs in this area. One respondent pointed out that measures to limit access to technology, while sometimes popular with educators and parents, are not very realistic. Instead, she suggests embracing the technology in order to really be able to help students understand the parameters.

Several respondents also spoke of their role in creating a safe environment by upholding and reinforcing the four pillars of the school: respect, honesty, service, and courage. Many respondents brought up character education and modelling ethical fitness. Students also rated “developing a positive school culture where students learn to be kind to each other” very highly in terms of the “best approaches” to adopt.

The educators also felt parent education was equally vital to the prevention of cyber-bullying. Again, awareness featured prominently in the discussions: parents’ awareness of their children’s on-line activities, the access to technology with which they provide their children, educating themselves about the on-line risks to which their children are exposed, the problem of cyber-bullying, monitoring their children’s on-line social media presence, and knowing the school policy and rules. Respondents, many of whom are parents themselves, discussed how education and awareness served to increase parents’ abilities to engage in conversations about technology with their children. In the student surveys, over 50% of students reported that they would tell their parents if they were victims of cyber-bullying, therefore, parents must be prepared to address these topics with their children. The workshops offered by the School for parents last fall were mentioned by some of the respondents as a positive contribution in this regard.
**Role of parents**

Beyond the on-line world, the role of parents was emphasized greatly in terms of their availability and presence for their children, in raising healthy, confident, responsible children and leading by example.

The role of parents in addressing cyber-bullying was also considered in relation to the partnership between parents and the School. The range of parent perspectives on the role and place of technology in their children’s lives and appropriate restrictions is perceived as one area of difficulty in terms of implementing policies and discipline with respect to cyber-bullying. Several respondents suggested, as stated above, that greater awareness of the realities of cyber-bullying, the nature and extent of the behaviour, would assist in a greater collaboration between the school and the parents, as would engaging in community conversations about the topic.

A few respondents also pointed to an idea that has been widely circulated: that children’s access to computers should be monitored in open areas. Over a third of the students surveyed indicated that the computer they used most was in their bedroom or another room where their usage was not monitored. One third of survey respondents also indicated that they used their computers late at night when, again, we would presume that their usage is not monitored. Educators interviewed expressed concern over this type of usage and felt that it was one area where parents could play a stronger role, i.e. determining access boundaries, monitoring usage, and modelling healthy on-line behaviours. The same is also highlighted in the research literature (Sakellariou, Carroll & Houghton, in press; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004).

**Cyber-kindness**

The interviews also included questions about cyber-kindness. The majority of student survey respondents had indicated that they had sent and/or received kind messages on-line. We asked educators to consider the role cyber-kindness might play in mitigating cyber-bullying or preventing it.

Here again, some respondents seemed to adopt a narrow definition, stating they had never been the recipients of cyber-kindness (i.e. they understood this to mean grand gestures such as a web page set up to support an individual who had been in a serious accident or to fundraise for one cause or another). Meanwhile, others indicated that it happens all the time, i.e. that students often send them kind messages or engage in cyber-kindness between themselves, supportive messages for a performance, compliments, get well notes, etc.

Cyber-kindness appears to be generally conceived of as being a part of the bigger picture in terms of the School’s environment, sense of community, participation, positive relationships, teaching about character and responsibility. Several of the educators thought that cyber-kindness should be modeled
by the educators in their own on-line communications with students, while some did not feel this was a priority or something that needed to be singled out. In fact, one educator went further than most and suggested that encouraging cyber-kindness would only promote more screen time, which she opposed. She felt that there is something lost in “cyber”-kindness, something that is different from face-to-face exchanges and the connection that is established that way. While she acknowledged that the on-line exchanges are meaningful to her students, she did not find them as significant as communications that take place in person. Nonetheless, as acknowledged by this respondent, the students do place a great deal of weight on these exchanges. Therefore, cyber-kindness may offer an alternative. Another respondent pointed out that encouraging cyber-kindness should be a very high priority because of the large significance of on-line exchanges in students’ lives. It is important to offer an alternative to the negative exchanges that may occur. Almost all of the students surveyed had acknowledged engaging in cyber-kindness, therefore, the notion is not foreign to them; however it is one which could or should be reinforced as we have suggested elsewhere (Cassidy et al., 2011).

Conclusion

The first step in preventing cyber-bullying at school is to assess the level of electronic bullying that is occurring (Beale & Hall, 2007). The School has successfully undertaken this first step as well as some of the additional steps that are identified in the research literature:

- **Curriculum**: inclusion of education on cyber-bullying and internet etiquette; collaboration in the development of lesson plans; reactive (e.g. delete, block, or ignore messages) and proactive prevention strategies (e.g. security and awareness) for students;
- **Policy**: inclusion of cyber-bullying in school’s anti-bullying policy and acceptable computer use policy; policies should clearly spell out prohibited behaviours and negative consequences; policies can also address jurisdictional issues where cyber-bullying may not originate at school but impacts the school in certain ways;
- **Involve students** in taking leadership on this issue, informing others when they have crossed the line, participating in the development of codes of conduct, helping adults better understand the on-line world;
- **Education for parents**; encourage discussion and awareness; information about blocking software and establishing household rules about internet use; positive parenting styles;
- **Professional development** for educators; information on warning signs to look for in cyber-bullies and victims; availability of on-line and print resources;
- **Relationship with police** who can educate students, parents, and school personnel and inform about the legal framework governing on-line interactions;
- **School climate** where students feel safe and can report problems;
- Encourage open sharing of information among educators and also with students;
- **Modelling appropriate on-line behaviours** at school and at home;
• **Understanding** that fear of losing access to computer/cell phone/internet may prevent students from coming forward when they are victims;

• **Coordinate** with other schools;


In sum, it is imperative that the School’s response to cyber-bullying be guided by a comprehensive understanding of the nature, prevalence, experiences, and impacts that cyber-bullying has had or can have on students and educators at the School (Cassidy, Jackson & Brown, 2009). It is also important that the approach and strategies adopted be consistent with the involvement of students, educators and parents.
References


