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On the Front Lines: Educating Teachers about Bullying and Prevention Methods

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Abstract: Problem statement: Bullying is a serious problem in American schools and is characterized by aggressive behavior distinguished by unequal power and the intention to cause physical, social, or emotional harm to others. Bullying is evolving from the classic image of a big schoolyard bully picking on smaller kids to a more technologically, sophisticated model of kids using cyber technology to electronically tease, bully and harass their peers with texting, voicemails, emails and posts on public websites, like Facebook, that are popular with young students. While parents are and should be encouraged and trained to recognize understand the insidious nature of techno bullying, it is not enough. The schools should take an active stance against bullying and this includes training teachers and other personnel to be trained to recognize the signs and to intervene in bullying.

Approach: This article discussed a research project undertaken to get assess the following: how educators recognize bullying, what they can do and actually do to intervene as well as their need for more training and autonomy to intervene. Results: There were 145 completed surveys, with 51 partially completed surveys. The results were reported for the completed surveys only. Conclusion: This study examined how well a subset of teachers recognize the signs of cyber/techno bullying as well as their feelings of preparedness to intervene with the bullies and the bullied.

Key words: Recognizing bullying, internet technology, educators’ intervention strategies

INTRODUCTION

Problem statement: The media resonates with stories of victims of bullying; from the MySpace mom who bullied a young girl into committing suicide to a more recent case in Massachusetts involving allegations of statutory rape, physical assault and relentless bullying which resulted in a young girl’s suicide. The prevailing outcry is “why wasn’t anything done”, “where were the teachers?” The Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center, (MARC) at Bridgewater State College, is both a practical resource to combat bullying by providing training to educators and students alike as well as a research resource, conducting research on practices and other matters related to bullying.

This article discusses a research project undertaken to get assess the following: how educators recognize bullying, what they can do and actually do to intervene as well as their need for more training and autonomy to intervene.

Recognizing the signs of bullying is an important first step in efforts to combat and intervene in bullying. Much of the bullying currently is done electronically; students using computers and/or cell phones to conduct most of their communication with their peers. These students will also use this technology to harass and bully others. According to a research brief in which 334 college freshman were surveyed about their experiences with bullying while in high school, “42% of students surveyed reported that they had been cyber-bullied via Instant Messaging (Englander and Muldowney, 2007). This research was conducted continuously during the years 2006-2008. This study reported additionally that 22% of the subjects admitted to cyber-bullying someone else, with 20% admitting to bullying during school hours. This is an important finding because it underscores the need for school professionals; i.e., teachers, administrators or office personnel, to be trained to recognize and create intervention strategies to combat bullying.

According to current research regarding the efficacy of teachers to intervene, Englander (2005) and Stevahn (2004) have said:

Educators in the United States today are encouraged to utilize mediation techniques in addressing student conflicts, particularly at the high school and middle school levels. Some teachers are incorporating conflict resolution and mediation and negotiation techniques into standard curriculum (Englander, 2005; Stevahn, 2004)
Teachers can only intervene effectively if they understand the nature of the problem. Today’s bully is not the stereotypical big kid, wearing a striped shirt with his belly hanging out pounding other kids on the playground; that would actually be easily identified and easier to deal with by teachers. You would simply step in and stop the physical bullying and adopt a non-physical violence stance at the school. Today’s bully is more insidious, more technically savvy because, indeed, research is showing that the most rapidly increasing form of bullying is in the electronic arena: i.e., texting, posts on public “Walls” and cyber bullying (Englander and Muldowney, 2007). Recognizing that the problem exists is only part of the solution; teachers need to be cognizant of the deleterious effect bullying has on those being bullied as well as on the general school culture. A culture that ignores the problem of bullying is a culture that fosters the problem. Some studies have shown that unresolved school bullying problems are often a precursor of school violence and delinquency (Wong, 2004). Indeed, research on bullying and school violence has found that teachers have been identified as key agents of change in bullying prevention (Kallestad and Olweus, 2003).

Many European countries have only recently begun examining the problem including finding methods to intervene through official channels. One of the outcomes of this attention has been an effort on the part of governments and educational authorities in many countries to tackle the problem through various initiatives, including the setting up of anti-bullylegal guidelines (Ananiadou and Smith, 2002). School violence and bullying prevention and intervention programs must start as early as possible. Studies have confirmed that a substantial number of victims of bullying showed depressive tendencies such as sleeping or studying difficulties (Wong, 2004).

Teachers have to understand that it is not the classic bullying behavior that is concerning and that must be mediated, but the newer form of electronic bullying. School administrators must also understand this new frontier of bullying and be willing to provide the requisite training to teachers to help them to understand and intervene.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center (MARC) at Bridgewater state college offers training to schools; teachers, administrators, parents and children on how to recognize and intervene in electronic bullying. MARC also conducts ongoing research on the correlates and consequences of bullying, the best practices for intervention, the continuing evolution of the technology used to bully as well as ongoing, rigorous evaluation research on the impact of the MARC workshops. This present research is basic research in that it seeks to simply describe the current state of practice by teachers in this area. A survey was disseminated to teachers who had worked at schools where MARC had provided training. The survey was created and sent out on Zoomerang.com, which is a web-based survey instrument used by MARC for much of its research. The survey questions center on the following areas: Identifying bullying behavior; Understanding the nature and scope of the problem of bullying; Understanding the culture of bullying; their respective schools’ policies on bullying and institutional support for teachers to intervene in bullying and questions about the teachers’ recognition of bullying technology, i.e., texting and so on. The survey is 28 questions, with an additional 2 optional questions about the teachers’ title and whether they want to receive further MARC communications and lastly, a space for any comments from them.

RESULTS

There were 145 completed surveys, with 51 partially completed surveys. The survey questions are multiple choice formats, but were not mutually exclusive answer categories; participants were able to select more than one response to a question. This enabled the researchers to get a greater picture of the current state of the teachers’ abilities to identify and intervene in bullying in schools. The results are reported for the completed surveys only.

Identifying bullying: Teachers reported that they were able to identify bullying primarily because the students reported it to them, not because there were any “signs” or other objective evidence of bullying. In the open comment section of this question, there were comments again of relying upon reports from others, whether it was parents, students or other teachers, that bullying had been taking place (Fig. 1).

Most believed that bullying was verbal abuse, but almost as frequently believed that bullying was physical. When prompted to qualify other types of prevalent bullying behavior, in the open ended answer option, variations of “exclusion” were iterated. They saw that students were being isolated and excluded by their peers and identified this as a common form of bullying. Indeed, social exclusion as the act of “deliberately not allowing a person into a group (Lagerspetz et al., 1988; Naylor et al., 2006; Luan et al., 2008)”. Figure 1 shows how educators recognize bullying.
Fig. 1: Identifying bullying

The results show that 70% recognize bullying by the victims’ reports, 61% state that they are “trained” to recognize it and 56% see the victims’ behavior, i.e., crying.

Figure 2 addresses what the educators’ notions are about the actual nature of bullying.

These results show that there is a very close understanding about the nature of bullying; that over 80% believed that bullying was physical aggression as well as verbal/teasing aggression.

Understanding the problem of bullying:

- Teachers reported that they had attempted to intervene in clear cases of bullying only to have the victims deny that they were being bullied. These instances had occurred on more than one occasion. In those cases, the teachers would typically attempt to intervene directly with both bully and victim, but almost as frequently would try to determine why the victim denied the abuse

Understanding the culture of bullying: Current research states that teachers, generally, are not familiar with the culture of bullying. This is defined as knowledge of the actual occurrences as well as the media of bullying. This has been attributed to the
teach-ers’ de-ficient percep-tions of the na-ture and extent of the phe-nomenon (Naylor et al., 2006). In the pre-p-resent study, the teach-ers stated that they understood that the na-ture of bully-ing has changed from physical ag-gression to more discreet forms of abuse. They understood that it was now very com-mon for the pop-u-lar stu-dents to be bul-li-ies and that stu-dents tended to be sup-portive of, more tol-erant of, bully-ing be-havior.

Teach-ers sur-veyed also felt, by a very small pro-portional dif-ference, that they do not sup-port bully-ing. Sup-porting bully-ing was de-fined as not di-rec-tly in-tervening in bully-ing or by ig-noring the bully-ing. Most teach-ers however be-lieved that there were not enough in-sti-tu-tional poli-cies or train-ing in place to help them to in-tervene in bully-ing. What is in-te-ri-ng, as well, are some of the re-sponses in-di-cating that teach-ers be-lieve that some bully-ing is vic-tim pre-ci-pitated.

Policies and intervention strategies: Gen-erally, how-er, teach-ers felt that when there are poli-cies in place that spe-ci-fically ad-dress the prob-lem of bully-ing and the prac-tice of in-terven-tion, that these were hel-pful in re-solv-ing the situa-tions (Fig. 5 and Table 1).

Approximately 53% of the teach-ers sur-veyed stated that their schools had anti-bully-ing prac-tices/poli-cies that are pre-scriptive in in-terven-tion prac-tices. 97% stated that their dis-tricts had anti-bully-ing poli-cies and of those that did have such poli-cies, 54% stated that the dis-tricts were pre-scriptive in tell-ing the teach-ers/schools how to deal with bully-ing.

With re-gard to in-terven-tion poli-cies, a large per-cent-age stated that in ad-dition to counسيل-ing the par-ties that the schools mandated that par-ents be in-volved in par-ticular cases (each over 65%). How-ever, only in-volving par-ents gen-erally in 39% of the cases

Adding-ly, there is very lit-tle sup-port pro-vi-ded to stu-dents through help hot林-es nor are there typ-i-cally strong pro-gram-ming or an-nounce-ments re-gard-ing bully-ing poli-cies and as-sis-tance for vic-tims (8% and 46% re-spec-tively).

DISCUSSION

This sur-vay was de-sign-ed to be an ini-tial as-ses-sment of ed-u-ca-tors’ abili-ties to rec-og-nize and in-tervene in bully-ing situa-tions. This re-search was lim-ited by the fol-low-ing:

• Rela-tively small num-ber of sub-jects and, thus, cannot be gen-er-alized to a la-ger pop-u-la-tion of ed-u-ca-tors
• Lack of re-fined fo-cus on spe-ci-fic bully-ing is-sues
• In-ability to iden-tify spe-ci-fic ac-ual oc-ci-rence-s that the ed-u-ca-tors, them-selves, had expe-rienced
• In-ability of the sur-vay to el-icit de-tailed, qual-i-ta-tive in-forma-tion

Ac-cord-ing to Hir-chstein et al. (2007), “Teach-ers have been iden-ti-fied as key agen-ts of change in bully-ing pre-ven-tion”. This re-search does show that ed-u-ca-tors are aware and con-cerned about bully-ing. Fu-ture re-search should fo-cus more on qual-i-ta-tive dis-cus-sion about ac-ual ex-periences with in-terven-tion. It also shows will-ingness by ed-u-ca-tors to in-tervene and me-di-vate when bully-ing oc-cur-s.

The im-plica-tions of these find-ings, how-ever lim-ited however, are im-portant be-cause the ef-fects of bully-ing are so per-nici-ous.

Set-ting poli-cies and pro-cedures for teach-ers/ed-u-ca-tors in the fight against stu-dent bully-ing is very com-plex. Tech-nol-ogy is chang-ing con-stant-ly and the school poli-cies must keep up with the tech-nol-ogy (Miller et al., 2009). Li (2006) and Smith and Brain (2000) stated “the edu-ca-tion dealing with cy-ber-bully-ing re-lated is-sus-es should be a joint en-deavor of schools, fa-milies, com-munities and the whole so-ci-ety”.

CONCLUSION

This study exam-ined how well a sub-set of teach-ers rec-og-nize the signs of cyber/techno bully-ing as well as their feel-ings of pre-paredness to in-tervene with the bullies and the bullied.
Prudence and foresight would dictate that we need to continue training our teachers and educators how to recognize and intervene in cyber-bullying.

REFERENCES


