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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.
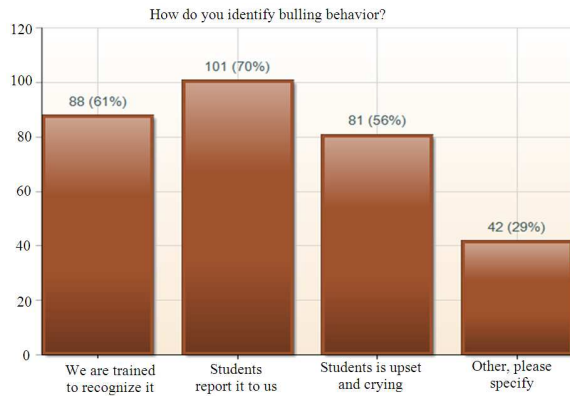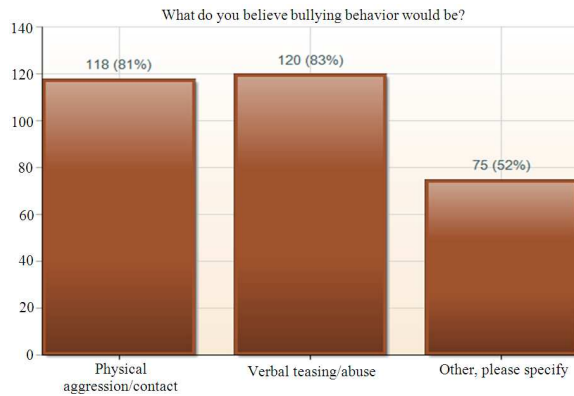
Fig. 1: Identifying bullying

Fig. 2: Indentifying bullying (the nature of 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
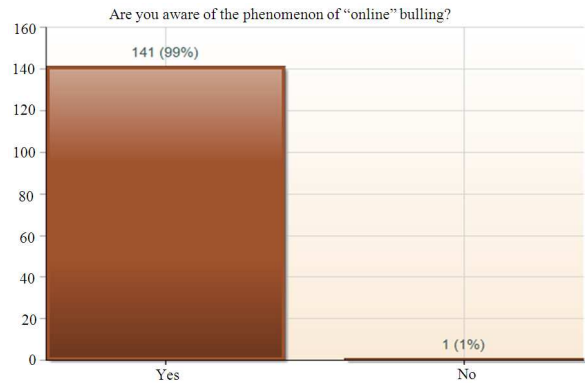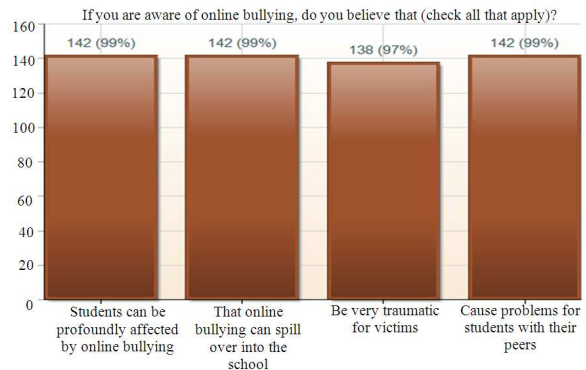

Fig. 3: Cyber-bullying

Fig. 4: The effects of bullying on victims

- About 99% of the teachers reported that they were equally aware of the phenomenon of cyber bullying as well as the social and emotional harm it causes its victims. They overwhelmingly, 88%, felt that schools should have intervention policies and that parents of bullies and victims should be involved in mediation efforts (Fig. 3)

About 91% of the educators surveyed are aware of the phenomenon of online bullying.

There was almost unanimous consensus among those surveyed about the extremely deleterious effects of online bullying on the victims (Fig. 4) with over 95% stating that bullying is traumatic, that the effects spill over into school and that it can cause peer relationship problems.

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

teachers' deficient perceptions of the nature and extent of the phenomenon (Naylor *et al*., 2006). In the present study, the teachers stated that they understood that the nature of bullying has changed from physical aggression to more discreet forms of abuse. They understood that it was now very common for the popular students to be bullies and that students tended to be supportive of, more tolerant of, bullying behavior.

Teachers surveyed also felt, by a very small proportional difference, that they do not support bullying. Supporting bullying was defined as not directly intervening in bullying or by ignoring the bullying. Most teachers however believed that there were not enough institutional policies or training in place to help them to intervene in bullying. What is interesting, as well, are some of the responses indicating that teachers believe that some bullying is victim precipitated.

Policies and intervention strategies: Generally, however, teachers felt that when there are policies in place that specifically address the problem of bullying and the practice of intervention, that these were helpful in resolving the situations (Fig. 5 and Table 1).

Approximately 53% of the teachers surveyed stated that their schools had anti-bullying practices/policies that are prescriptive in intervention practices. 97% stated that their districts had anti-bullying policies and of those that did have such policies, 54% stated that the districts were prescriptive in telling the teachers/schools how to deal with bullying.
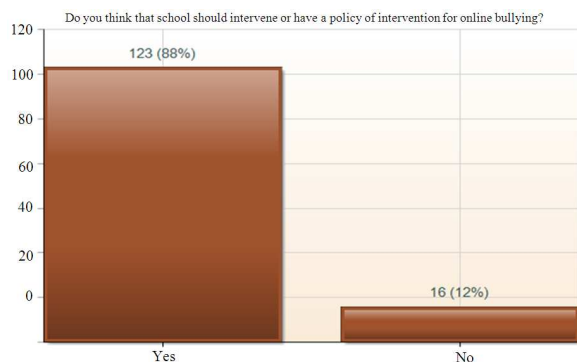

Fig. 5: Intervention strategies

Table 1: Intervention summary

Counseling/mediation for victims and perpetrators	85 (67%)
General programs/announcements to all students	59 (46%)
Support hotline for victims	10 (8%)
Involving parents in individual cases	87 (69%)
Involving parents generally	49 (39%)
Not in the school's jurisdiction	22 (17%)

Note: If yes to the previous question, what is your school's policy for intervention in online bullying? (Check all that apply)

With regard to intervention policies, a large percentage stated that in additon to counseling the parties that the schools mandated that parents be involved in particular cases (each over 65%). However, only involving parents generally in 39% of the cases

Additionally, there is very little support provided to students through help hotlines nor are there typically strong programming or announcements regarding bullying policies and assistance for victims (8% and 46% respectively).

DISCUSSION

This survey was designed to be an initial assessment of educators' abilities to recognize and intervene in bullying situations. This research was limited by the following:

- Relatively small number of subjects and, thus, cannot be generalized to a larger population of educators
- Lack of refined focus on specific bullying issues
- Inability to identify specific actual occurences that the educators, themselves, had experienced
- Inability of the survey to elicit detailed, qualitative information

According to Hirschstein *et al*. (2007), "Teachers have been identified as key agents of change in bullying prevention". This research does show that educators are aware and concerned about bullying. Future research should focus more on qualitative discussion about actual experiences with intervention. It also shows willingness by educators to intervene and mediate when bullying occurs.

The implications of these findings, however limited however, are important because the effects of bullying are so pernicious.

Setting policies and procedures for teachers/educators in the fight against student bullying is very complex. Technology is changing constantly and the school policies must keep up with the technology (Miller *et al*., 2009). Li (2006) and Smith and Brain (2000) stated "the education dealing with cyberbullying related issues should be a joint endeavor of schools, families, communities and the whole society".

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.

Prudence and foresight would dictate that we need to continue training our teachers and educators how to recognize and intervene in cyber-bullying.

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