

Cyberbullying is for Real

Chandra Martz

Southern Utah University

Author Note

Chandra Martz has been a 5th grade teacher at Willow Springs Elementary in Canyons School District in Draper, Utah. She recently was hired to be an Elementary Technology Specialist for Canyons School District. She is working towards her Master's Degree through SUU in Cohort 1. She is also currently working to obtain a Technology Endorsement.

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Chandra Martz currently lives in Draper, UT. She can best be contacted through email at chandra.martz@canyonsdistrict.org.

Abstract

Bullying has been a major issue in education for many years, but with technology becoming prevalent in students' daily lives, cyberbullying has now become apparent. Social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. have made it easy for people to contact each other at anytime throughout the day or night. Cell phones also provide a medium for students to have immediate contact with friends. Although there are many benefits that come with these technological resources, they provide a means for cyberbullying, which is an issue that needs to be taken seriously.

This paper will define cyberbullying. It will focus on specific incidents involving student cyberbullying through different social media networks and mediums. It will show the gravity of cyberbullying, as well as explain the state and local laws and policies that center around the issue. Finally, the paper will describe preventative actions that people can do to protect themselves and others from cyberbullying.

Keywords: cyberbullying, Twitter, Facebook, technology, education, cell phones, bullying

Cyberbullying is for Real

Cyberbullying is becoming an increasingly major problem in schools and society and needs to be addressed. It takes the concept of bullying to a whole new level. Being a victim of bullying throughout my high school years, prompted me to dive deeper into the issue of cyberbullying. I was a victim of traditional bullying. Not to minimize the effects of traditional bullying, but I was fortunate that I was finally able to remove myself from the bullies and prevent myself from any further engagement after 3 years of consistent harassment. Unfortunately, the pain and hurt I felt is still very real.

Since bullying was such a major issue throughout my childhood and especially my teenage years, I turned to technology as a way to escape the hurt. After reading articles about students who have been cyberbullied, I realized that those victims don't have the option of easily stepping away from their problematic bullying. They encounter the issues every time they turn on a computer or check their text messages. Therefore, I chose to focus on the issue of cyberbullying in hopes of enlightening people on the severity of this serious issue.

Research and Literature Foundation

What is Cyberbullying?

Definition. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, cyberbullying is defined as “the willful and repeated use of cell phones, computers, and other electronic communication devices to harass and threaten others.” In addition, “cyberbullying generally refers to electronic harassment or bullying among minors within a school context (Cyberbullying, 2012).

Bullying vs. Cyberbullying. While bullying can be detrimental to victims, cyberbullying can be worse. In a traditional bullying situation, the victim can visually see the bully. This is not the case in cyberbullying situations. Most often, the victim does not even know who is targeting them or for what reason.

It can also be much easier for a bully to continually harass through cyberbullying. With regular bullying, the bully can see the effect they are having on the victim, and may back down eventually. On the other hand, with cyberbullying, the bully can attack from a distant location, making it so the bully does not see the emotion or the immediate response of the victim. Therefore, the cyberbully may continue to harass the victim past the victim’s breaking point. In addition, with

regular bullying, the issues usually stay between the bully and the victim. Only a limited circle of friends may know about the issue. Unfortunately with cyberbullying the spiteful actions may spread virally around the world (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Cyberbullying may cause deeper strain on the victims because they are unable to remove themselves from the situation. They cannot simply walk away.

Types of Cyberbullying. Cyberbullying can come in many forms. Netsmartz.org (2011) lists six basic types of cyberbullying. They include the following:

- Flaming and Trolling (Sending hostile messages to cause deep pain to others)
- Happy-Slapping- (Recording harassment or bullying in an abusive way and then posting the video online so everyone can see)
- Identity Theft/Impersonation- (Taking over someone else's account in order to humiliate by posting pictures, videos, or other information)
- Photoshopping- (Editing pictures of someone so the person is placed in an embarrassing situations)
- Physical Threats- (Sending threat messages to a person through social networks, e-mail or text messages)

- Rumor Spreading- (Spreading rumors or gossip about a person through social networks, e-mail or text messages)

Signs of Victims. Victims of cyberbullying feel a wide array of emotions. In a study done by the National Crime Prevention Council, "Over half of cyberbully victims report feeling angry (56%); one-third report feeling hurt (33%); a third report being embarrassed (32%), and one in eight said they felt scared (13%)" (Teens and Cyberbullying, 2007). Because cyberbullying has such a detrimental affect on the victim, it is pertinent that people recognize the signs displayed by the victim. People who are victimized may begin to show changes in their behaviors or deviate from their normal routine. They may begin to avoid technological devices, withdraw from family and friends, have a low self-esteem, have poor eating or sleeping habits, their grades may decline, or they may even avoid conversations about computer use (Cyberbullying 2011). If signs go unnoticed, severe cyberbullying can lead to depression and even suicide.

Statistics. Although a study in 2008-2009, shows that regular bullying occurs more often, cyberbullying seems to be an increasingly reoccurring theme (Students Reports of Bullying, 2011). "Estimates of the number of youth who experience cyberbullying vary widely (ranging from 10-40% or more), depending on the age of the group studied and how cyberbullying is formally defined" (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). In most studies,

the number of students cyberbullied is around 20 percent. Interestingly enough, 10% of students said that they have been both the cyberbully and the victim at one point or another (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

Research from the Cyberbullying Research Center (2012) claims that mean or hurtful comments and rumors are the most common forms of cyberbullying. At first, most cyberbullying issues seemed to appear in chat rooms, but now it has extended to other formats of social networking.

Although 67% of teens said that bullying and harassment happens more offline than online, "32% of online teens say that they have been targets of a range of annoying or potentially menacing online activities." Teenage girls seem to be bullied online more often than boys. (Bullying Statistics, 2012).

Cyberbullying has increased the potential suicide rates from 3-8% of middle-school students. Students victimized by sexting have increased suicide attempts to 12% (Cyberbully Statistics, 2011). A new term "cyberbullicide" has even been coined to refer to these unfortunate suicides. Cyberbullied victims are twice as likely to contemplate suicide (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2012). Stories like Megan Meier's, who committed suicide after being a victim of

cyberbullying, reaffirm the fact that cyberbullying is a real problem that needs to be addressed (Bullingisrabbitt, 2008).

Field Activity

Cyberbullying Policies

During the 2011 Utah Legislative General Session, Utah State Senator Ralph Okerlund (R-Monroe) sponsored S. B. 304 that added cyberbullying and hazing to the existing anti-bullying policy. The bill defined cyberbullying and stated that on or before September 1, 2012 each school board would need to adopt a bullying, cyberbullying, harassment, and hazing policy. This policy was to be developed from input of students, parents, teachers, school administrators, school staff, or local law enforcement (Malloryblack, 2011). The policy needed to have the following components: a definition of bullying, cyberbullying, harassment, and hazing, language prohibiting the aforementioned, language prohibiting retaliation, and language prohibiting making a false report. A copy of this policy must be placed in every student and employee handbook. The bill also included training for school employees (Preventing Bullying, 2011).

In accordance to the state policy, the Utah State Office of Education added cyberbullying to its policies. In turn, each district will have to have its policies in place by September 1, 2012.

Box Elder School District

As I mention before, I was bullied a lot throughout my school experience. So, I decided to research the bullying policy put in place by Box Elder School District. The policy was updated on January 13, 2010 and does meet the state requirements (School Board Policies, 2012). In addition, I interviewed two administrators to see what they are doing to prevent cyberbullying from happening in their schools. Then, I also examined the policies established in the district where I currently work.

Box Elder Interviews

Darin Nielsen. Darin Nielsen is the Supervisor for Informational Technology for Box Elder School District. At a district level, Darin assists the Board of Education in creating policy for technology use for students and teachers. He explained that in Policy 4177 students are allowed to access the district's WLAN with a personal computer device such as a smartphone, iPad, iPod, laptop or tablet. In order for students to use these devices, a teacher must first sponsor them.

Darin stated, through policy, that social networking sites are blocked for student access through the school server, and teachers are prohibited from engaging in social networking

through text or any other digital format inside or outside of school for any non-professional reason.

Although there is no table showing the prevalence of cyberbullying in Box Elder District, Nielsen said that it does occur through social networking websites, texting, and email. He also mentioned it is very hard to take cyberbullying to court, but "cyberbullying can also be classified as bullying, computer misuse, electronic device misuse, harassment, sexual harassment, threat/intimidation, and/or threatening bodily harm depending on the interpretation of the administrator handling the incident" (D. Nielsen, personal communication, July 16, 2012)

Jeanne Andersen. Jeanne Andersen is the assistant principal at Box Elder Middle School. It was interesting how in her interview, she expressed that there is nothing schools can really do about cyberbullying. She explained that students can come into her office and fill out a complaint form, but there isn't much she will do about that form. If the same problem is reported consistently to her 5 or more times, then she will call in the person who filled out the complaint. After hearing the victim's side of the story, she will often call in the bully and ask them to stop. If the complaint is serious enough then she will turn it over to law enforcement.

When asked about the consequences that are put in place, Mrs. Andersen said, "There is really nothing I can do about it." She also stated that most cases that are reported are usually cyber harassment because the bullying is usually back and forth between the two people involved.

Box Elder Middle School does have a bullying prevention program in place, and in that program there are 2 lessons that cover cyberbullying. Unfortunately, the lessons are taught sporadically, and therefore do not seem to be all that effective (J. Anderson, personal communication, July 12, 2012).

Darrell Eddington. In an interview conducted with Darrell Eddington, the principal of Box Elder High School, Mr. Eddington mentioned that most of the cyberbullying at his school comes from text messaging. Using either their own phone or sending an anonymous text through the Internet, a bully will threaten to beat up the victim. He stated most of the messages seem to be empty threats, but they infringe on the victim's sense of safety nonetheless.

Eddington said, "Any type of bullying is taken very seriously at this school. Once it is reported, it is investigated immediately." He continued to explain the steps the school had in place for bullying. First, the report is sent to the resource officer to see if any laws had been broken. Next,

there is an interview with the person who reported the issue. During that interview, they will try to get the name of the bully and anyone else involved. After the interview with the victim, they will have a meeting with the bully and the bully's parents. In this interview, they will ask the bully to stop. If the issue continues, they will take further disciplinary actions such as suspension. Eddington states that the most important part of the process is parent involvement. If the parents are not already involved by the time it gets to the administration, they will call them.

During the interview, Mr. Eddington mentioned that he saw a huge difference between the cyberbullying that occurs with boys versus the types of cyberbullying that occurs with girls. With boys, it is usually a one-time thing. If you tell them to stop, they stop and get over the problem. On the other hand, with girls the problem has usually been building for a very long time. Sometimes the problems continue to move with them from elementary to middle and on to high school. So, in this case, it is difficult to bring the issue to a resolution.

Eddington explained that by law, schools are required to have at least one assembly a year to talk about cyberbullying. The assembly should talk about what to do or how to respond if you are in a situation that involves cyberbullying. He continued to say, that one assembly is not enough. Children know about

cyberbullying, but they need to be taught how to treat each other correctly. In his school, they bring in a 2-day program sponsored by Proctor and Gamble that teaches students about bullying, relationships, and communication skills. Although he figures that this program works, he says that students can't learn everything they need to know about being a good person in a 2-day class. They need to have positive influences around them on a daily basis. That is why he, his assistant principals, and counseling staff work so hard to build a relationship with the students (D. Eddington, personal communication, July 12, 2012).

Canyons School District

During a recent technology endorsement class I took, I heard about a few Twitter pages that surprised me. One was called Hawkprops. It is a Twitter page that was created as a hazing page for Alta High School students (<https://twitter.com/Hawkprops>). The other page is called Mt_jordanprops. This Twitter page was created as a hazing page for Mount Jordan Middle School Students (https://twitter.com/mt_jordanprops). These sites made me curious to see what policies Canyons School District had in place.

I found that Canyons School District also met the requirements of the State Cyberbullying Policy. The policy for the district was adopted on May 4, 2010 (Policy-JICFA, 2011).

This made me want to dig deeper to see why the district was allowing these Twitter pages to be seen and used by students.

Canyons Interview

Alli Martin. I contacted Alli Martin, who was the technology specialist at Alta High School in Canyons School District last year. Mrs. Martin revealed that Alta currently has no school-wide cyberbullying prevention education plan in place, but if there is cyberbullying taking place, it is handled using the same policies as regular bullying. Mrs. Martin said that she was aware of a cyberbullying page for Alta, and she did tell the administration, but she is unaware of what they did to follow up on the issue. She continued to explain that there are many things that the school could do about the page. One thing the school needs to do is make parents aware about the page and educate them on how Twitter is being used in this particular instance. Another thing she mentioned should be done is to have a representative from Alta High create a fake name and monitor the site more closely for investigation purposes. Finally, they need to set up a tip line where students can anonymously report instances of cyberbullying. She feels like right now many students are afraid to report cyberbullying because they are afraid of the repercussions (A. Martin, personal communication, July 13, 2012).

Social Networking Sites

Cyberbullying in Utah is defined as bullying done to minors in schools. According to Mrs. Anderson at Box Elder Middle School, nothing can be done to address cyberbullying in her school because the creation of cyberbullying sites cannot be proven that it is done within a school (J. Anderson, personal communication, July 12, 2012). Therefore, I wanted to investigate the level of responsibility the social networking sites are taking to prevent cyberbullying from occurring on their sites.

In Twitter's Help Center, it states that "Twitter is a communications platform rather than a content provider, we do not mediate between disputes" (Abusive Behavior, 2012). Twitter is not willing to help stop cyberbullying, although there are websites posted on their help page that people can go to get help to stop cyberbullying. Twitter's suggestions are to block the person from the page. Yet, by doing this, the bully can still post comments about the victim on other people's pages. Therefore, the victim is still being bullied.

On the contrary, as of July 2012, Facebook decided to make it easier for young users to report cyberbullying issues. It changed it's wording from "report" to "this post is a problem," in hope of helping kids feel safe when reporting an issue. It also gives kids questions to respond to that will help them

measure the severity of the problem. Facebook has even posted links to help anyone who may need more professional help (Facebook Amps Up, 2012).

One of the best ways to help decrease cyberbullying is to educate people on the subject. Puresite.com shows that only 41% of parents in America are aware of cyberbullying (Cyberbullying Statistics, 2011). Parents give their children access to smart phones and other devices that reach the Internet, but many of them are not very aware of what their children are accessing. By making parents aware of the issue of cyberbullying, it may make parents more aware of their child's use.

Companies like Facebook, MTV, the cyberbullying.us website have some amazing resources for teens. One of the resources from cyberbullying.us (2012) gives "The Top 10 Tips for Teens." These tips give suggestions for teens to think about before they engage in online activities. One of the tips suggests that teens "Think before they post." About half of the young people posting online do not think of the consequences of their posts. Many do not realize that what they post, not only affects the intended victim, but may possibly come back to hurt them as well. (Cyberbullying Statistics, 2011)

There are also many resources available for teachers to teach about cyberbullying. Lesson plans have been created and

are posted on sites such as netsmartz.org, cybersmartcurriculum.org, and kamaron.org. There are also many video clips and presentations that teachers can use as resources. Netsafeutah.org has great Internet safety presentations set up for all grade levels.

At an elementary school in Canyons School District, two 5th grade students (student 1 and student 2) from other classes hacked into a school writing account of another student (Student 3). After hacking into the account, Student 1 and Student 2 began to write sexual, vulgar, and slanderous comments about Student 3's teacher as if they were Student 3. When the Student 3's teacher logged in to her account to correct the students' work, she was surprised to find these horrible comments that had been written about her from Student 3's account. The teacher immediately contacted the principal of the school, and after a conference with the parents, teacher, students, and principal; the two students involved were suspended for two days. Even though the students 1 and 2 hacked into the system from a home device, it was still the school's responsibility to handle the issue because it involved school assigned user accounts, and the students were targeting another student as well as a teacher. Following the school policy, the students were suspended for 2 days (L. Wright, D. Ashby, personal communication, July 10, 2012).

Canyons School District is also having a few issues with the social network Twitter. Both Mount Jordan Middle School and Alta High School have unofficial school hazing pages. By creating fake accounts, anybody can log on to the page and write whatever they want. Without the support of Twitter, it is very hard to shut these pages down.

In Canyons School District, the same policy is applied for bullying and cyberbullying. The policy explains that students who promote or engage in bullying or cyberbullying can face suspension, expulsion, or loss of participation in extracurricular activities. It also mentions that it could be referred to law enforcement.

Greece School District, New York

Recently, at a national level, there was a major issue of cyberbullying in Greece School District, NY. Four students were suspended from school for one year after cyberbullying a bus monitor on their way home from school (Students Who Bullied, 2012). One of the students recorded the incidence with a phone and posted video to youtube.com. The video quickly went viral, and people were outraged by the students' behavior.

In response to the severity of cyberbullying in New York, on Monday July 9, 2012, Governor Cuomo of New York signed into a law a measure that will address the problem of cyberbullying.

The law, which will focus on cyberbullying through email, text messaging and social networks, goes into effect on July 1, 2013. This law seems to be the most definitive law in regards to steps schools will need to follow. Although the legislative leaders proposed to make this offense a specific crime, the governor of New York made a deal that it would not constitute criminal charge and that the state would look more closely into the issue as to what should be done with a school-age online bully (Virtanen, 2012).

The law dictates that school employees must report online harassment within one school day, and must follow it up with a written report. It also requires teachers to be trained on identifying bullying incidents (O'Leary, 2012). Further more, it requires districts to create policies and enforce them, and will punish those districts that chose not to abide by the requirements (New York, 2012). The law requires schools to report incidents that occur off campus if they could be expected to cause disruption at school or interfere with mental or emotional health, safety, or school performance of a student.

Of the 50 states, 49 states currently have bullying laws in place. Montana is currently the only state that does not have any laws against bullying. Of those states, 42 of them have included electronic harassment laws, but only 14 states have

included cyberbullying laws (Hinduja, S. & Patchin, J. W., 2012).

Theory to Practice

Cyberbullying *is* for real. Studies show that students experience cyberbullying at every grade level. So, it is a necessity to teach students about cyberbullying throughout their entire school experience.

Bullying and cyberbullying have become such an issue that state legislatures have now required school boards to create and adopt policies, not only to include bullying, but specifically cyberbullying. The New York Legislature should be applauded. They have taken the greatest step toward creating a law that defines cyberbullying and the steps school boards need to follow in order to incorporate all aspects of bully prevention short of the consequence for cyberbullies.

While the Utah State Legislature, starting August 2012, has required school boards to incorporate cyberbullying into their policies, they are not as defined. Box Elder School District has already adjusted their policies to meet the state requirement. Yet, after interviewing personnel from two different schools, it is apparent that in order for the policies to be effective, the administration and faculty need to be trained on the severity of

cyberbullying and that they have the ability to make a difference.

Box Elder High School administration has implemented a very definitive prevention/awareness program at their school for the faculty, staff, and students. In comparison, Box Elder Middle School administration has the attitude that there is nothing that they can do about cyberbullying. It is "out of their hands." This is a real concern considering that research shows that middle school students have an increasing rate of cyberbullicide.

Even though laws have been put into place that require school districts to implement policy on cyberbullying, it is difficult for a victim to succeed in bringing his/her predator to justice. Because cyberbullying is defined to take place in a school environment, it is challenging for the schools to prove that cyberbullying has occurred.

Even though New York has the most definitive cyberbullying law, it still does not address any kind of consequence for the cyberbully. Because other states have even less definitive policies, school administrators struggle to find the appropriate consequences for the violators, usually allowing the cyberbully to go unpunished.

In as much as laws and policies have not been created to include consequences, schools are required to take a proactive approach to cyberbullying. Box Elder High School has adopted a program to teach students about respect for other students. This program includes education on: cultures, ethnicities, bullying, harassment, and cyberbullying. Many elementary schools such as Willow Springs Elementary adopt character education programs that now include cyberbullying. The key factor to any of these programs is teaching students how to prevent cyberbullying from happening to them and how to stay safe on a technological device.

Relevance to Professional Goals

As part of my new job as an Educational Technology Specialist, it is important for me to get the teachers excited about using technology in their classrooms. Yet, part of a teacher's responsibility when teaching technology to students is teaching students how to be safe in a technological environment. Therefore, by becoming more informed about cyberbullying, I am able to pass on my knowledge to others. Now I can use the resources I found and can teach parents, teachers, and especially students about the impacts of cyberbullying and what they can do if they are put in a cyberbullying situation.

NBPTS standards say that teachers are “concerned with students’ self-concept, their motivation and the effects of learning on peer relationships” (Five Core Propositions, 2012). That is why teaching cyberbullying is so important. If students are being cyberbullied, they will lack motivation and will have a low self-concept. Teaching about cyberbullying will help students understand that teachers care about the students’ wellbeing.

Although I have seen many newscasts that spotlight cyberbullying, I did not realize how many people are truly being affected by the issue. One thing that amazed me as I was doing the research was the amount of people who knew that cyberbullying was going on and did nothing to stop it. NBPTS also mentions that teachers are “concerned with the development of character and civic responsibility” (Five Core Propositions). As a civic responsibility, students need to know that it is their civic duty to report bullying. If they know about it and choose not to do anything about it, they are no better than the bully.

Therefore, it is imperative that schools teach students the importance of how to handle cyberbullying situations. The National Crime Prevention Council suggests these positive reactions for students when they encounter cyberbullying: blocking communication, deleting messages without reading them,

talking to a friend, and reporting the problem (Cyberbullying, 2012).

More importantly than teaching students positive reactions, it is essential to teach students prevention techniques and how to stay cyber-safe. Teachers need to teach students that in order to prevent cyberbullying they need to refuse to pass along cyberbullying messages, encourage friends to stop cyberbullying, and raise awareness. They also need to explain Internet safety, such as never sharing personal information and passwords, never meet anyone face-to-face that you met online, and make sure your parents are informed about your online use (Cyberbullying, 2012).

Why this is Important for PreK-12 Students

When interviewing Darrell Eddington, he said that the schools cannot avoid allowing the use of technology just because cyberbullying exists. Instead we need to educate the students on the issues. He mentioned that there are so many useful resources on Internet and other technological devices, that we cannot allow the fear of cyberbullying to detract from the use of the many amazing tools.

Eddington stated that "cyberbullying is a social issue. Schools don't cause it, but they are asked to fix it. It is a school's purpose to prepare kids for their life after high

school. Fixing social issues is just part of that" (D. Eddington, personal communication, July 12, 2012)

The points Eddington made are completely correct. Even though cyberbullying is often done off of school property, schools are expected to fix the problem. If we can teach students the seriousness of cyberbullying, maybe we can be proactive instead of reactive to the situation.

Conclusion

Cyberbullying is becoming more prevalent with the increase of technological devices and social networking sites. In its entirety, it is hard to control. Legislators and schools have begun to incorporate laws and policies to address the issue, but cyberbullying is too illusive.

Cyberbullying is detrimental to the victim, because they cannot escape the terror. Unfortunately, the cyberbully usually ends up with little reprimand. Therefore, since it is so hard for schools to prosecute the cyberbully, it is vital that schools teach students about cyberbullying prevention. When schools teach cyberbullying prevention, they show that they are concerned with the students' self-concept and that they are concerned with the development of character and civic responsibility which relates to the NBPTS standards.

Cyberbullying is an issue that can effect student

motivation and wellbeing. By teaching prevention, hopefully students will know how to act and react to a cyberbullying situation.

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