Cyberbullying

Terror in the Classroom: What Can be Done?
By Ryan E. Winter and Dr. Robert J. Leneway
http://www.schoolcio.com

Imagine coming home from school and sitting at the computer to get away from the stress of the day. Within a few minutes you're bombarded with messages like "You're ugly…We hate you…Why don't you make us all happy and end your miserable life". Welcome to a world too many teenagers are facing. A world where bullying no longer takes place in the hallways at school or on the way home. Bullying is now more likely to takes place in the murky, often anonymous world of the Internet. About a third (31%) of all students ages 12-14 have been bullied online according to a study by Opinion Research Corporation (2006). This research paper will examine some of the reasons for "cyberbullying," and what may be done about it.

What is Cyberbullying?

Bill Belsey, President of Bullying.org Canada says, "Cyberbullying involves the use of information and communication technologies such as e-mail, cell phone and pager text messages, instant messaging, defamatory personal Web sites, and defamatory online personal polling Web sites, to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group that is intended to harm others". Nancy Willard, author of "An Educators Guide to Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats" breaks down cyberbullying into the following categories:

- **Flaming**. Online fights using electronic messages with angry or vulgar language.
- **Harassment**. Repeatedly sending nasty, mean, an insulting messages.
- **Denigration**. "Dissing" someone online. Sending or posting gossip or rumors about a person to damage his or her reputation or friendships.
- **Impersonation**. Pretending to be someone else and sending or posting material to get that person in trouble or damage their reputation.
- **Outing**. Sharing someone's secrets or embarrassing information or images online.
- **Trickery**. Tricking someone into revealing secrets or embarrassing information and then sharing it online.
- **Exclusion**. Intentionally and cruelly excluding someone.
- **Cyberstalking**. Repeated, intense harassment and denigration that includes threats or creates significant fear (Willard, 2006).

Many adults, based on their own perceptions of traditional, face-to-face bullying, may not recognize cyberbullying as a real threat. They often think of the bigger, stronger kid physically hurting or threatening the smaller, weaker kid, whereas, with cyberbullying, the bullies come in all sizes, still frightening and harming others, but without the physical contact. Often times, cyberbullies hide behind fictitious usernames and anonymous websites, making them hard to trace. As a result, the bully often feels invincible. Cyberbullies also feel empowered by the instant access to both the victim and the audience that the internet provides. Because the bully does not have face to face contact with the victim during the attacks, he may not be aware of the level of hurt he is inflicting. Therefore, he may be less likely to feel regret or sympathy toward the victim, making the attacks all the more vicious (Schneier, 2003). These factors can lead to a bully who feels more daring and powerful than the traditional bully. While the bully feels invincible, the victim often feels alone and helpless.

Examples of Cyberbullying

Within the last five years many news stories have covered the outbreak of cyberbullying. Earlier this year in Vermont, sophomore Kylie Kinney came forward with her story of harassment. While Kylie was in eighth grade, threats and homophobic remarks were made about her on a Web site titled "Kill Kylie Incorporated". Then, another classmate allegedly created an instant message screen name similar to Kylie's, and began writing sexual innuendos and offers of dates to her field hockey team. Consequently, Kylie quit going to school, was home-schooled for a period, and then transferred to a new high school. In response, Kylie said "I had no escape, everything followed me to school" (Broache, 2006).

In Canada, teenage Ghyslain was bullied when a group of his peers got a hold of a video he created. The video showed Ghyslain reinacting a scene from "Star Wars", flinging and twirling himself around his room. His peers then edited his video, adding special effects and sounds while splicing Ghyslain into movies such as "Chicago", "The Matrix" and "The Terminator". Then in turn, they uploaded it to the internet for everyone to see. Within two weeks, over 15 million had seen the two minute video. Now known as "the Star Wars Kid", Ghyslain dropped out of school and has had to seek psychiatric help (Paulson, 2003).

Sixteen year old Denise, from Los Angeles, experienced cyberstalking and denigration as a form of retaliation from her ex-boyfriend. Shortly after she broke up with her boyfriend, he posted personal information, including her cell phone number, e-mail

address and street address on sex-oriented websites. For months, Denise was constantly being harassed by prank calls, instant messages and drive by's. While her ex-boyfriend was quickly apprehended, it did not eliminate the continued hurt and helplessness Denise experienced (Strom and Strom, 2005).

Another example of flaming and harassment by electronic means is the case of Ryan Patrick Halligan. Thirteen year old Ryan was bullied for months by his classmates who started rumors that he was gay. He was constantly receiving harassing instant messages. One exchange even encouraged Ryan to end his life, which he did, a few days later. Ryan's parents never knew of this struggle until a few days after his suicide. "He just went into a deep spiral in eighth grade. He couldn't shake this rumor", said John Halligan, Ryan's father and cyberbullying activist (Ascione, L., 2005).

Cyberbullying seems to be on the rise. A survey conducted in New Hampshire in 2000 found that only 6 percent of teenagers had been cyberbullied (Finkelhor, D., Mitchell, K.J., & Wolak, J. (2000). Six year later, according to a national study by Opinion Research Corporation (2006) nearly a third of the nation's K-12 students have experienced cyberbullying.

Effects of Cyberbullying

Because cyberbullying lacks the physical hurt, skeptics of cyberbullying feel it is not as harmful as traditional bullying. These skeptics must look at the psychological damage caused by cyberbullying. Allison, a ninth grader from Washington, D.C. repeatedly received hate mail on her instant messages, "It seemed like it was from girls who I thought were my friends. When I confronted them, they denied it and blamed it on someone else. I never knew who was really behind it. I got really paranoid and couldn't concentrate in school" (Wiseman, 2007). Allison is not alone, many victims feel trapped, frustrated and distracted. Victims may also experience depression, sadness, low self-esteem, anger, thoughts of suicide and stress. Sociologist Robert Agnew maintains that those who experience this stress or strain are more likely to participate in "deviant or delinquent" behaviors in order to cope (Hinduja and Patchin, 2006). This is especially important to note because of the potential for delinquent behaviors affecting peers, school work, family and the community.

Research Questions

So, there is little question that cyberbulling exist, but what are the concerns students have regarding cyberbullying, why do they do it, and how comfortable are they in talking to others about cyberbullying.

Methods

Subject and instrument A total of 59 eighth grade students from a Midwest urban charter school including 24 males and 35 females completed a 25 question anonymous survey. Students were given a brief explanation to the purpose of the 25 question survey and encouraged to take their time and honestly answer the questions and not identify themselves in taking the multi-choice survey.

Results

The study found approximately 29 percent had been victims of cyberbullying and 24 percent had bullied someone online. Of those who had admitted to being cyberbullied, 59 percent admitted to bullying someone as well. In addition, approximately 80 percent of all of the students surveyed reported that they aware of instances of cyberbullying.

When male and female experiences were considered separately, it was found that over 20 percent of males and over 34 percent of females had experienced cyberbullying. In addition, 29 percent of males and only 20 percent of females reported to have cyberbullied.

Table 1 *Percentages of students experiencing cyberbullying*

	Male	Female	Total
Cyberbully Victim	20.8	34.3	28.8
Engaged in Cyberbulling	29.2	20.0	23.7
Aware of Cyberbullying	58.3	82.8	79.6

A Look at Cyberbully

Of those that reported that they had been cyberbullied, over 50 percent reported the cyberbullying lasted on average 2-4 days, while approximately 30 percent lasted a week or longer. Over 41 percent of the time cyberbullying took place with instant

messaging, chat rooms and blogs (MySpace, Xanga, Facebook, Bebo, etc). In addition, 35 percent reported that e-mail was used to cyberbullied them.

Of those students that reported being bullied, 59 percent of the time they were teased or called names, 47 percent were lied about, 35 percent were threatened and 30 percent had were sexually harassed. Almost half of those who were cyberbullied said additional bullying followed the initial episode. A total 35 percent of the victims kept the bullying to themselves while 30 percent told a friend, one person told a parent and no one told a teacher. However, angry, depressed and hurt were the top three emotions experienced (averaging over 3 points on a 5 point scale).

Cyberbullies

In the meantime, cyberbullying students admitted to being feeling moderately insecure, invaded, scared and isolated (averaging 2.4 points on a 5 point scale).

The most reported reasons those that admitted to cyberbullying (14/59) gave were out of revenge (57 percent) and anger (43 percent) while 21 percent admit to cyberbullying because they did not like the other person. When asked how the cyberbullying take place, the results are similar to the ones reported by victims of cyberbullying: 43 percent by instant messaging or chat rooms and 36 percent by e-mails or blogs. A total 86 percent of the cyberbullies admit to cyberbullying from home. Over 78 percent reported they were not confronted while only 2 people out of 14 report they were confronted by their parent(s).

All Students Reactions to Cyberbullying

Almost 80 percent of the 59 students surveyed are aware of cyberbullying with nearly 100% of the girls and 65% of the boys admitting awareness. The survey results also showed that students feel extremely comfortable talking to their friends (4.4 points on a 5 point scale). Students feel moderately comfortable talking with parents and teachers (2.7 and 2.6 points respectively) and least comfortable talking to Principals (1.9 points). So when asked , "overall, how much of a problem is cyberbullying," 21 percent the students reported cyberbullying is not a problem, 17.5 percent feel it's a minor problem, 35 percent feel it's a common problem and 26.5 percent say cyberbullying is a major problem.

Discussion

This study confirms other studies (Opinion Research, (2006) on the prevalence of cyberbullying in that about a third (29%) admitted to being bullied with half of them reporting that additional bullying accompanied the initial cyberbullying. Research finds a connection between bullies, cyberbullies and their victims. Bullies, compared to non-bullies, were more likely to be cyberbullies; while victims of physical bullying were more likely to be victims of cyberbullying (Li, 2006). By not addressing the teasing, name calling and gossip at school, they can become more prevalent and dangerous in cyberspace. The researcher found 59 percent of victims were teased or called names, 47 percent were lied about and 30 percent were sexually harassed.

Schools need to educate students in how to handle bullying. It was found that 57 percent of the cyberbullying was out of revenge, while 41 percent of the time it was out of anger. In the same survey, some students suggested to "just ignore it" and hope it goes away. Before schools can expect teenagers to have "netiquette", using the internet properly, and treat others well, they need to be taught appropriate non-harassment behavior. Within the past couple of years, programs and resources have been made available on how schools can deal with cyberbullying (see p.16 for resources links). Further information about these resources needs to get into the hands of parents and educators.

A third important issue is the failure of victims informing a parent, teacher or other adult of the cyberbullying. Even thought previous research indicated the number of teenagers who tell a parent or adult is already low (Wiseman, 2007; MSN UK, 2006) but it was still unexpected to find that 16 out of the 17 of those admitting to being cyberbullied did not tell an adult. Those who were not bullied reported that they feel somewhat comfortable talking to their parent(s) about cyberbullying, while extremely comfortable talking to their friends. These findings, along with stories like Ryan Halligan (the 13-yr old who took his life), suggest the need to increase the awareness of parents and other interested adults such as teachers and school administrators.

What Can Parents Do?

A survey conducted by MSN United Kingdom found that 74% of teens as compared to 80% in this study did not go to anyone for advice when they were cyberbullied (www.msn.co.uk/cyberbullying, 2006). One reason some teenagers are reluctant to tell parents or adults is the fear of retaliation. Online retaliation can often be vicious. These teens also don't see any immediate solution to the problem, so they keep it to themselves and hope it goes away. Another reason teenagers are also less likely to tell their parents is the fear of losing their use of the computer and internet access (Cottle, 2001). "Many teenagers are unwilling to risk having parents choose such extreme forms of protection because, without technology tools, they would feel socially isolated and

less able to stay in immediate contact with their friends" (Strom and Strom, 2005).

When teens refuse to get their parents involved, it is easy for parents to think that everything is fine. In a survey conducted by *Wired Safety.org*, only 15 percent of parents polled knew what cyberbullying was (Wiseman, 2007). Many times parents don't get involved because they are afraid of invading their teen's privacy. Others may feel that as long as they have filtering software their teen is protected from negative material. Not only can many teens override these obstructions and still access negative material, filtering software cannot prevent cyberbullying (Willard, 2006). Parents need to be educated about cyberbullying- what it looks like, what the effects are and how to handle it. Rosalind Wiseman, educator and author of the best seller *"Queen Bees & Wannabes"*, suggest parents consider the following:

- **Use technology as an opportunity to reinforce your family values.** Attach rules and consequences if inappropriate behavior occurs.
- **Move the computer out of your child's bedroom** and into the family room.
- **Teach your child not to share passwords.**
- **Install monitoring and filtering software.**
- **Monitor your child's screen name(s) and Web sites** for inappropriate content.
- If cyberbullying occurs, **save and print out any evidence** and decide whom you should contact for assistance.

Wiseman goes on to remind parents that technology is a positive tool and that there are many teenagers who use it responsibly. "We don't need to freak out. We do need to know what our kids can do with technology and hold them accountable when they use it unethically" (Wiseman, 2007, p. 7).

What Can Schools Do?

There are few laws that address how to handle cyberbullying. In 2000, CIPA (Children's Internet Protection Act) was passed. It requires public libraries and publicly funded schools to block access to sexually explicit material. Along those lines, DOPA (Deleting Online Predators Act) was introduced last May by U.S. Rep. Michael Fitzpatrick, R-Pa. DOPA would require libraries and schools to block access to "commercial websites that let users create public Web pages or profiles and offer discussion boards, chat rooms or e-mail services" (Rivero 2006). This legislation would prevent students from using popular websites such as Facebook, MySpace and Bebo unchaperoned. Individual states such as Arkansas, Florida, Hawaii, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Utah and Washington are creating their own legislation regarding bullying. For example, Florida's pending legislation would add: "Bullying or harassment of any student or school employee is prohibited: (c) Through the use of data or computer software that is accessed through a computer, computer system, or computer network of a public K-12 educational institution" (Hinduja and Patchin, 2007). Some of these states are also encouraging schools to address cyberbullying in their internet-use policies and school-wide bullying policies. That way, discipline for each violation would be determined by the individual school (Ascione, 2005). While it is a positive step, this legislation alone will not prevent cyberbullying altogether. One of the main concerns is how to legislate something that mainly takes place at home without infringing on the rights of free speech. "The fact that two teenagers say nasty things about each other is a part of growing up," says Steven Brown, executive director of the Rhode Island branch of the ACLU, "How much authority does a school have to monitor, regulate, and punish activities occurring inside a student's home?" (Ascione, 2005)

The courts have given some direction for schools dealing with cyberbullying. "School districts are well within their legal rights to intervene in cyberbullying incidents - even if these incidents were initiated off-campus – if it can be **demonstrated that the incident resulted in a substantial disruption of the educational environment**" (Hinduja and Patchin, 2007) (emphasis added). While free speech is protected by the First Amendment, a student's right to free speech is more limited than the "public at large". In Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District, 393 U.S. 503 (1969). The court ruled that a student's right to free speech can be limited when the speech "materially disrupts class work or involves substantial disorder or invasion of the rights of others." The standard of "material disruption" set by Tinker is often referred to by the courts ([Bloggin and the Law](#)).

In J.S. v. Bethlehem Area School District No. 415 (2002), the Commonwealth Court of Pennsylvania ruled that schools do have the authority to discipline students when behavior or speech happen off-campus as long as school officials can prove it was a clear disruption of the classroom environment. J.S. was expelled for creating a web page entitled "Teacher Sux" that included derogatory remarks and solicited funds to hire a hit man to kill his math teacher. Bethlehem Area School District was able to clearly demonstrate a significant disruption to the school environment. The court also concluded that in this day and age of school violence certain categories of unprotected speech include "fighting words, speech that incites others to imminent lawless action, obscenity, certain types of defamatory speech, and true threats" (Wheeler, 2007).

However, in *Emmett v. Kent School District No. 415 (2000)*, the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Washington overturned an expulsion of Nick Emmett and reduced it to a five day suspension. On his home computer he created a website called "Unofficial Kentlake High Home Page" where it included mock obituaries and encouraged visitors to vote on who should

"die" next. The reason the district lost is because it did not demonstrate that the website caused a substantial disruption to the school environment. The district failed to prove that anyone listed on the site was actually threatened (Hinduja and Patchin, 2007).

And more recently, in *Layshock v. Hermitage School District (2006)*, a student created a website from his grandmother's home computer creating a parody of the school principal on his myspace.com. While the site was non-threatening and created off-campus, school officials were able to prove a major disruption to the school day. Officials pointed out that staff devoted a lot of extra time diffusing and resolving the situation. Secondly, the computer system had to be shut down, resulting in cancelled classes and disrupting the educational environment (Hinduja and Patchin, 2007).

Meanwhile, other schools across the nation are beginning to address cyberbullying at the place where it usually begins, at home. Schools are educating parents to help stop cyberbullying and other online dangers. By giving parents tools and making them aware of what is going on, school officials believe they can curve the growth of cyberbullying. Also, the social networking site MySpace prohibits cyberbullying and will take down those sites when contacted by school administrators, parents or its users. MySpace also provides safety tips for parents and its users on its website.

While information regarding cyberbullying has grown within the last two years, many parents, teachers and administrators are still not fully aware of what is happening. In the same study from **Fight Crime: Invest in Kids**, only 37% of those (ages 12-14) who were bullied told their parents about it, while only 11% told a teacher. In a similar study conducted by i-Safe America, results show 58% of kids of have not told their parents or an adult of something mean or hurtful done to them while online (cite website). Meanwhile, only 6% of the students who had admitted to being cyberbullied in this study confided in an adult. "Every school has a responsibility to determine the extent to which students are exposed to cyberbullying", states bullying experts Paris S Strom and Robert D Strom (Strom and Strom 2005). In their 2005 essay, Strom and Strom give several implications for further research to be done on cyberbullying. They go on to state that educators often overlook the need to survey their students, to find out what is going on and what can be done to improve the current situation. They then suggest that the results of the survey should be shared with students, parents and staff that discussion on improving internet safety will begin (Strom and Strom 2005).

What Schools Should Do

Schools should start addressing students, parents and staff about the issues of cyberbullying. Students need to be reminded that what they do in cyberspace is not really anonymous. They need to know their behaviors and words are downloadable, printable and sometimes punishable by law. Mark Franek, Dean of Students and English teacher at William Penn Charter School, suggests "your school's technology teachers should demonstrate to students how each time they access the Internet they generate an electronic fingerprint called an IP, or Internet Protocol address, which authorities can use to trace all electronic communication from computers or mobile phones" (Franek, 2006). Students also need to be reminded not to share personal informational such as passwords, contact information and financial information with anyone. Franek adds that this communication can be done during regular computer classes or by holding special assemblies involving local authorities or experts in the field.

Schools should also have policies on cyberbullying explained clearly in the school's handbook and in the acceptable user policy (AUP). The AUP is a legal document signed by both student and parent, where the parent and student agree to follow the rules established by the school. By specifically addressing cyberbullying, "the school now has authority to take appropriate action to deal with the dangerous or abusive conduct" (stopcyberbullying.org). Experts Hinduja and Patchin suggest schools also include the following elements in their policy:

- Graduated consequences and remedial actions
- Procedures for reporting
- Procedures for investigating
- Specific language that if a student's off-school speech or behavior results in "substantial disruption of the learning environment," the student can be disciplined (Hinduja and Patchin, 2007)

Mark Franek offers a sample school policy from William Penn Charter School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Neither the school's network nor the broader Internet (whether accessed on campus or off campus, either during or after school hours) may be used for the purpose of harassment. All forms of harassment in cyberspace, often called cyberbullying, are unacceptable. Cyberbullying includes but is not limited to, the following misuses of technology: harassing, teasing, intimidating, threatening, or terrorizing another person by sending or posting inappropriate and hurtful e-mail messages, instant messages, text messages, digital pictures or images, or Web site postings (including blogs). Often the author (sender or poster) of the inappropriate material is disguised (logged on) as someone else.

Community members who feel that they have been the victims of such misuses of technology should not erase the offending material from the system. They should print a copy of the material and immediately report the incident to a school official (the

director of technology, the dean of students, or the director of the upper school). All reports of harassment in cyberspace will be investigated fully. Sanctions may include, but are not limited to, the loss of computer privileges, detention, suspension, separation, or expulsion from school (Franek, 2006, p. 42).

A good policy and student awareness is not enough, schools also need to get parents and staff involved and informed. As stated earlier, research shows, adults have a lack of knowledge when it comes to cyberbullying. Schools should provide meaningful training to both parents, staff and even students. Workshops can be designed to promote awareness, procedures for bully prevention and strategies to handle cyberbullying. The following resources can be used to help students, parents and educators learn more about cyberbullying.

- *Wired Safety*, "the world's largest internet safety and help group". Parry Aftab, Wired Safety Executive and cyberbullying expert, provides parents, educators and students many fun and up-to-date resources with online safety. Wired Safety also manages other cyberbullying sites such as *Teenangels, WiredKids, CyberLawEnforcement, StopCyberbullying*, and *Internet Super Heroes*.
- *Surf Swell Island*, "adventures in internet safety". This site, created by Disney, provides fun, interactive games with Mickey and friends. *Surf Swell Island* teaches kids about online privacy and positive internet behaviors.
- *i-Safe*, the "leader in internet safety education". This site provides fun, interactive resources (including curriculum) for students, parents, educators and the community. *i-Safe* also provides opportunities for students to become "i-Mentors", where students are able to help teach their peers about online safety.
- *Cyberbullying.us*, "identifies the causes and consequences of online harassment". This site includes news stories, research, activities and helpful resources regarding cyberbullying.
- *Cyberbullying.org Canada*, "always on, always aware", created by Bill Belsey, President. This site offers resources to help parents and educators understand cyberbullying and how to combat it.
- *Safe Families*, "keeping children safe online". *Safe Families* offers free internet filtering software and parental controls to help protect children online. Safe Families also provides parents an online safety workshop and guidelines for safe internet use.

Conclusion

With only 59 students from one Midwest eight grade, it is difficult to make significant generalizations. But, this study does seem to support the results of larger studies; including Cole, J. I., et al. (2001), Bullen, P., & Harre, N. (2000), (Finkelhor, D., Mitchell, K.J., & Wolak, J. (2000), (Li, Q, 2006) and Opinion Research Corporation (2006) on the topic and does begin to look at the impact, reasons and almost total lack of communication on the topic that student have with both their parents and their educators. Thus, it highlights the need for schools to develop awareness programs and provide informational resources for parent, teachers, administrators and students involved. Perhaps, additional research will examine the possible effectiveness of such educational programs to curb this growing concern which can produce life long emotional scars and even deadly results for our nation's children.

Dr. Robert Leneway is the program coordinator for the Educational Technology Program at Western Michigan University. He is an Assistant Professor and former Director of a Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers to Use Technology (PT3) Implementation Grant and a former educational consultant with the Michigan Department of Education.

Ryan Winter is middle school teacher at Excel Charter Academy in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and a recent graduate of the online Masters program in Educational Technology at Western Michigan University.