

Transforming School Leadership and Stakeholders' Perceptions Regarding Cyberbullying, Its Effects, and Suggestions for Intervention

Wesley Hester, *Shelby County Schools, Alabama*
Walter L. Fenn, *University of Montevallo, Alabama*

Cyberbullying is a growing phenomenon influencing schools, which must be addressed. Transformational school leaders, as the literature suggests, employ strategies for addressing cyberbullying including forming partnerships, implementing education and awareness programs, and applying disciplinary action. The purpose of this study is to understand how cyberbullying affects stakeholders and how transformational school leaders can better address the issue. Perceptions regarding cyberbullying were collected and analyzed using focus group interviews from school administrators, school counselors, parents, and external authorities. Content analysis identified five significant themes. Discussion of results, stakeholder implications, and recommendations include ideas regarding stakeholder partnerships, education and awareness programs, school disciplinary action, parental supervision and control, and ideas concerning relationships and trust.

Transformational leaders in today's schools understand that cyberbullying has been identified and established as a major issue facing students who access online communication and messaging devices (i.e. computers, notebooks, tablets, and smart phones). Texting and social networking have become major forms of communication for this generation of school-aged children. Our current middle and high-school children are faced with the ever-growing pressure of social status, which has become compounded by the increased use of hand-held devices that connect them to others at almost any time and any location (Taylor, 2008).

Transformational leadership consists of four factors, often referred to as the four I's of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Bullying of any kind, including cyberbullying, is not to be tolerated by school transformational leaders who exhibit the 4 I's including individualized consideration as they are concerned for the individual well-being of each and every student. School leaders are faced with the difficult and complex cyberbullying problems that arise between students and result in upset, insecure, and concerned parents, students, and other stakeholders. Research has been conducted on cyberbullying, its contributing factors, its increasing rates, and its effects upon victims, bullies, and bystanders. A small percentage of these studies provide information about actual perceptions of those directly involved

with students (Beale & Hall, 2007). This particular study focused on the perceptions of school stakeholders regarding the effects of cyberbullying on society, their communities, and their schools. The purpose of the study was to provide in-depth, personal data acquired from the opinions, perceptions, and thoughts of school stakeholders via focus-group interviews. The collection and subsequent analyses of this data were intended to provide a rich perspective into the realities of cyberbullying and its effects upon groups of individuals connected with schools.

Setting of the Study

The setting of the study was located in a single school system in the southeastern region of the United States. The school system serves a diverse population spanning an entire county, containing rural, sub-urban, and urban areas, various racial and ethnic groups and multiple socio-economic levels. Four distinct stakeholder groups were chosen to participate in focus-group sessions: school administrators, school counselors, parents of secondary students served by the school system, and legal-expert and law-enforcement officials who work in and serve the selected school system's area. Participants received information about the study prior to participation and all provided written consent prior to participation.

Research Methods

This cyberbullying study was framed and driven by the qualitative methods of a case study. The data were collected from various stakeholders representing different roles and the connection between stakeholders was the single school system served by the region in which the stakeholders live, work, and raise their children. The school system itself represents the focal point of the study. Stakeholders' opinions and perceptions were driven by three questions: 1. What were the school system's stakeholders' perceptions and beliefs of how cyberbullying affected the community? 2. What were the school system's stakeholders' perceptions and beliefs of how cyberbullying affected the school; and 3. What were the school system's stakeholders' perceptions and beliefs of how cyberbullying incidents initiated off school grounds should be handled by school officials? While each question sought the perceptions and beliefs of stakeholders, the questions were distinguished by who was affected by cyberbullying and how it should be handled.

The focus groups were homogenous, with each focus group consisting only of representatives from a single stakeholder group. All focus-group sessions were guided by discussion questions deriving from the three major research questions. All focus-group sessions, were conducted in forty-five to sixty minutes. Each focus group session consisted of at least five participants and at most ten participants. A total of eighteen administrators (three sessions), twelve counselors (two sessions), eighteen parents (three sessions), and ten legal-expert and law-enforcement officials (one session) participated in the focus group sessions. During the focus-group sessions, participants discussed various topics related to the questions posed by the principal researcher. These discussions were scripted and recorded via audio-recording devices. The focus-group sessions were the only data source used during the study. In-session data notes and transcribed data from

the audio recordings were coded and analyzed. The coding procedure used was content analysis, resulting in a number of themes emerged from the analyzed data.

Discussion of Results

Five major themes were identified during data analyses. One theme is directly related to the phenomenon itself, representing the idea that the number of cyberbullying occurrences were on the rise, which means that cyberbullying is perceived as a growing problem. A significant number of references were made regarding the increasing threat of cyberbullying. These references were made by individuals from different stakeholder groups and across multiple focus-group sessions. Two more themes were related to factors possibly contributing to cyberbullying and its perceived rise in occurrences. One of these pertains to the widespread use of technology and hand-held devices that make online interaction and social networking easy for children. The other theme relates to a perceived lack of knowledge and awareness of parents in relation to operating technology, understanding the power of technology, and understanding the threat cyberbullying poses to their children. Another theme involves the question of responsibility and authority. More specifically, participants discussed questions about who is responsible for dealing with cyberbullying, who has authority and when do they have it, and whether or not these roles are shared between parents, school officials, and law-enforcement. The fifth theme was about the perceived need for an educational component offered by schools to better address cyberbullying. This fifth theme focuses on a solution that can be used by schools to address cyberbullying.

The first theme, the effect of technology on society, particularly children, was mentioned throughout the focus-group sessions. The stated and implied “power” of technology was considered to be both beneficial and harmful to society, depending on how the technology was used. Participants mentioned technology as being a powerful vehicle for communication and media for entertainment, as well as information resources. The misuse of technology via cyberbullying, harassment, and other online negative behaviors were mentioned by all focus-group participants. A common theme was the polarized values that technology applications bring to society. These applications include texting, social networking, messaging, video sharing, gaming systems, and other online communication tools (Shariff, 2004).

Responses affirmed technology yields both positive and negative effects. Technology is an effective tool providing efficiency and unlimited connections to many resources. Technology also creates a platform for individuals with malicious intent to exploit potential victims, shed negative attention upon others, harass and cyberbully others through online devices and applications. Because of the mixed positive and negative impacts of technology, multiple participants referred to technology as both a “blessing and a curse.”

Stakeholder groups emphasized two elements as difficult and dangerous in relation to cyberbullying. One is the element of masked identity which creates a perception of safety among cyberbullies to harass, defame, and embarrass their victims without concern for being identified or facing any negative consequences (Mason, 2008). Technology’s capabilities to broadcast negative comments, embarrass others, and bully online victims are the other element mentioned by focus group members as being

dangerous. Technology has the capability for individuals to share information and communicate their thoughts and feelings to a large audience, ranging from a few to hundreds, thousands, and even millions of people.

Mass communication can be achieved by anyone through applications such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. The ability to share information is a tremendous benefit to society where individuals can instantaneously receive important information pertinent to their lives and affects them in a variety of ways. Conversely, these same tools are being used by individuals to cyberbully others. With instant and mass communication, cyberbullying is extremely dangerous and harmful to victims and their families, while creating a sense of disturbance and negative feelings (e.g. insecurity, awkwardness, anger, discontent) for bystanders who view or receive these types of communications and interactions (Juvonen & Gross, 2008).

A concern study participants emphasized was the lack of fear online users, especially cyberbullies, possess in terms of posting and communicating inappropriate and malicious content. Taylor (2008) dubbed this feeling of invincibility as the “disinhibition effect.” Taylor states that the disinhibition effect occurs when online users feel a sense of comfort when communicating through online means because of a lack of face-to-face interaction between the sender and receiver. Factors such as non-verbal cues and concern of immediate retaliation by the receiver are not present, which exists during in-person or face-to-face interactions. When users are not privy to in-person feedback from others or a real-world context, it may result in a false sense of security and lead to more harmful, malicious, and otherwise negative posts and comments, both in terms of severity and quantity (Taylor, 2008).

The second theme pertains to the apparent rise in the number of cyberbullying occurrences. Several participants perceive increased usage of technology has led to a direct increase in cyberbullying occurrences. Hinduja and Patchin (2010) noted this in their research. As with this study’s participants, Hinduja and Patchin stated increased use, access, and dependency to technology has and will continue to result in increased incidents of cyberbullying.

Many focus-group participants perceive an increase in the number of cyberbullying incidents. Hinduja and Patchin (2009) revealed that the increase of technology access and use has led to increased numbers of occurrences in activities considered to be cyberbullying. In addition to increased access and usage, user dependence upon technology has also increased. Youth dependence upon technology has increased. Other research supports the study participants’ responses about user dependency: Because of increased access and a perceived dependency upon technology among youth (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010), more instances of cyberbullying will occur as a result (Wright, Burnham, Inman, & Orgochock, 2009).

Participants felt as if young online users would be reluctant to report certain incidents involving their use of online applications such as social networking, texting, and gaming; because it may lead to parents denying them access to use the devices. Taylor (2008) shared since technology is such a significant part of young peoples’ social lives, losing access to online activity or electronic communication is not a desired outcome for young technology users. The increase in cyberbullying incidents, because of increased technology use (Wright et al., 2009), coupled with a perceived reluctance by

young users to report issues compounds the issue and ultimately leads to bigger and broader negative consequences (Feinberg & Robey, 2008).

In addition to increased access, usage, and dependence upon technology as a source for communication, participants across focus groups felt as if society had a tremendous impact on the increased use of technology. Participants mentioned a “moral decline” in society, which includes a lack of values and skills for dealing appropriately with conflict, respectfully interacting with others, and making good decisions in general. This sense of moral decline in society is one of the reasons transformational leadership is needed now more than ever in our schools. Through idealized influence, transformational leaders are moral and ethical in their behavior and as such, are viewed as positive role models for followers to emulate because they are respected, trusted, and admired (Fenn & Mixon, 2011).

Participants in this study perceived a lack of solid family structures and support systems as being a negative contributor to improper behavior, interaction, and decision-making, including online activities. Family structures and support systems, according to participants, was the presence of parents who are actively involved in their child’s life and who provide the model for handling issues, making decisions, and establishing boundaries and expectations to create better opportunities for success. According to all focus groups, these structures and supports are missing in many families and parents are not taking responsibility to ensure these elements do exist nor do parents follow through with adequate development and establishment of expectations for proper behavior. Effective monitoring and supervision by parents is lacking to ensure the appropriate behaviors are present in their children.

The third major theme emerging from the analysis of responses is the lack of parental control, awareness, and understanding of technology and their children’s online communication and interaction with others. Participants felt parents did not have a strong knowledge and understanding of technology, particularly online communication tools such as texting and social networking. Participant responses indicated parents lacked a strong understanding in these areas and their children often had a greater level of knowledge, understanding, and skill for operating these types of technology. Therefore, parents were not capable of effectively monitoring and supervising their children’s online activities and technology use (Mason, 2008). Some participants believed because of this lack of knowledge, understanding, and skill, particularly in comparison to their children, parents become disengaged and otherwise disinterested in what their children are doing online. All four focus groups stated although parents may not have equal or higher levels of technology skill and understanding, it should not be an excuse or deterrent for establishing boundaries and rules for monitoring and supervising their children’s online activity. Online activity is not policed or governed strictly, and user rights to privacy and speech prevent many issues from being addressed from a law-enforcement standpoint. As one participant from the counselor focus group stated, “Cyberspace has no rules.”

Participants in the administrator, counselor, and parent groups conveyed parents are not aware cyberbullying is an issue of concern and has significant implications nor do they treat cyberbullying with a heightened level of seriousness or sense of urgency. One participant stated many parents allow unfiltered and unsupervised online activity and consider cyberbullying to be a non-issue. One parent shared many parents think cyberbullying is “not a big deal.” Others mentioned some parents allow their children too

much freedom and too much privacy. Participants agreed parents who allow their children excessive freedom and privacy are one of the contributing factors to increased online misconduct, including cyberbullying. Some commented there is an apparent lack of responsibility and maturity among our youth which is particularly evident in online conduct and decision making. The perceived lack of responsibility among children and adolescents emerged in every focus group session. Participants in all groups believe there is a responsibility for all stakeholders involved. Participants from the counselor and parent groups mentioned an increase in parents who engage in inappropriate online activity and conduct and the implications of such behavior. Parent participants mentioned irresponsible parents engage in cyberbullying behaviors towards their children's peers via social networking sites and texting. Parents will engage in these activities in defense of their own children or they will engage for fun, entertainment, retaliation, or simply malicious intentions. Regardless of reason, participants across stakeholder groups perceive this as unacceptable and possibly detrimental to their children's understanding of proper online conduct. Students have a responsibility to behave appropriately online and make good decisions. Parents have a responsibility to establish boundaries, monitor online activity, and supervise their children. School officials have the responsibility to monitor technology use at school, communicate with parents about issues related to cyberbullying, and raise cyberbullying awareness to students and parents. Law enforcement has the responsibility to partner with school communities to address cyberbullying is threatening to others or criminal in nature. Research emphasizes the significance of responsibility in addressing online dangers and issues such as cyberbullying. Juvonen and Gross (2008) and Franek (2005) suggested responsibility is important when confronting issues in cyberspace since it is considered uncharted territory.

A fourth major theme is the authority and responsibility of parents, school administrators, and law enforcement, who are responsible for policing online activity and cyberbullying issues and who hold the authority in addressing cyberbullying issues. Participants understood and perceived the responsibility of policing online activity both in and out of the home to be of the parents. While schools are responsible for what happens on campus and activities involving school technology, most cyberbullying issues remain outside of school jurisdiction where school administrators have little to no authority (Burrow-Sanchez, Call, Drew, & Zheng, 2011). This perceived lack of authority has been difficult for school officials in effectively addressing cyberbullying and other online misconduct. Law-enforcement officials were also considered to be an authority that could affect online activity (Beale & Hall, 2007). Some legal-expert and external authority participants revealed law enforcement can get involved in cases where specific threats to do harm have been made or illegal pornographic material has been shared or communicated. This is also known as sexting (Willard, 2007). Furthermore, a participant in this group emphasized young people who engage in sexting or texting nude pictures of themselves and others, are subject to felony charges based on the state of Alabama's law regarding the possession and/or sharing of child pornography.

The final theme relates to an educational component many participants across stakeholder groups believe is needed in order to better address cyberbullying. Participants shared schools should provide instruction about cyberbullying, its dangers, and how to

avoid or cope with the pitfalls in online interaction, electronic communication, and social networking.

Suggestions for Cyberbullying Intervention

The analysis of participant responses provides an understanding of the causes of this phenomenon, suggestions for improvement, and strategies for addressing cyberbullying. These thoughts and suggestions if implemented properly with adequate collaboration among school system stakeholders, could positively affect cyberbullying situations. The following stakeholder suggestions present a set of tools and strategies for schools to use in combating cyberbullying in their school communities. One of the four components of transformational leadership is intellectual stimulation. Providing intellectual stimulation, transformational leaders engage all stakeholders in problem solving and identifying solutions while encouraging them to be innovative and creative in addressing problems and finding solutions (Fenn & Mixon, 2011).

One suggestion from the focus group responses concerned the development of education programs for students and parents. Transformational leaders educate school stakeholders about the effects of cyberbullying. These programs would focus on awareness of cyberbullying and its dangers. The audience is students and parents while school officials would provide the instructional program and resources. Schools could be directly responsible for providing resources and instruction with school staff for students and parents while partnering with community agencies and law enforcement. Participants felt this would be a great measure for prevention and creating partnerships between schools, students, and parents. Hoff and Mitchell (2009) emphasized the importance of this measure stating educational awareness programs should be established by schools with both students and parents involved. Beale and Hall (2007) stated these type programs help develop stronger relationships between schools, students, and parents, particularly in the case of addressing cyberbullying issues.

Burrow-Sanchez et al. (2011) believe specific criteria must be covered in the cyberbullying programs. The items addressed should include specific dangers present online, cyberbullying scenarios, potential pitfalls, and strategies to identify these situations. Students and parents should be aware of some of the possible legal implications resulting from cyberbullying including harassment, libel, violation of privacy (particular types of cyberbullying – hacking information, using account profiles, posing as another while online), and other laws protecting individuals from threats or malicious intent. Some participants, particularly in the parent, counselor, and external authorities groups, made comments alluding to the importance of specifying to students and parents about the dangers of cyberbullying and the legal implications for being involved in such behavior. One participant in the external authorities group shared cyberbullying needs to be treated as any other form of harassment, particularly when specific threats are made towards victims by individuals who have been identified as cyberbullies.

Another suggestion brought forth by study participants is the roles and responsibility of parents, in regards to cyberbullying. Participants representing each stakeholder group believe that parents play a crucial role in preventing cyberbullying as well as dealing with issues that are occurring. Parents can prevent cyberbullying with proper monitoring and establishing boundaries for their children's online activities

(Taylor, 2008). Participants from the parent and counselor groups believe many parents are lacking when it comes to monitoring their children's online activities and technology use. Participants suggested parents can accomplish this by first creating guidelines and rules for their children's online activities and their access to technology. However, participants also stated establishing rules is not enough. Parents must enforce the rules and directly supervise their child while using online applications such as social networking sites and text messaging. Supervising Internet use in general is another idea participants strongly suggest for success.

Modeling proper behaviors is another responsibility suggested for parents. Behaviors to model include interacting with others, handling difficult situations properly, and resolving conflict effectively without fighting or attacking others verbally, physically, or emotionally. In addition to teaching their children to handle conflict appropriately, without attacking others personally or with intent to harm them, parents should work with their children on respecting others regardless of their opinions. Participants from the parent focus groups felt children today do not know how to appropriately debate issues or disagree respectfully. Several participants discussed how children are too quick to attack others verbally, physically, and especially during online exchanges and comments posted to social networking sites. They felt parents modeling proper behaviors and correcting negative behaviors will be effective in the fight against cyberbullying. However, participants in all four focus groups believe parents are modeling negative behaviors through their interactions with other adults on social networking sites and other online communication applications, instead of modeling appropriate behaviors and teaching their children as they should. Modeling negative behaviors, according to many study participants, is extremely detrimental to the development of our youth in terms of using proper conduct in dealing with others and using proper interactions with others while online.

Conclusion

According to responses gathered from focus group sessions representing all four stakeholder groups, parents have several areas they can exercise responsibility. Parents can be responsible by: 1) monitoring their children's online behavior and technology use, 2) directly supervising their children's online activity and behavior, 3) controlling their children's access and the amount of online use by establishing firm boundaries and clear expectations regarding online behavior and activities. Parents who execute these three responsibilities will take tremendous strides in preventing issues of inappropriate online activity and possible involvement in issues such as cyberbullying (Taylor, 2008).

The stakeholders who participated in this study's focus group sessions offered an array of thoughts and suggestions about how to effectively address cyberbullying issues young people are facing in their lives and community, as well as in general society. The suggestions offered were the general consensus of all four stakeholder groups. The ideas presented pertained to how stakeholders, including students, parents, school officials, and external authorities (i.e. law enforcement), can help prevent and thwart cyberbullying problems (Beale & Hall, 2007). Although the suggestions may spark interest from those who experience or understand the implications of cyberbullying and other online misconduct, the implementation of the following suggestions will require motivated

stakeholders who take responsibility in doing their part to understand and address these issues. It will require school officials who are transformational leaders that motivate all stakeholders to act by providing meaning and challenge to the work needed to address cyberbullying (Avolio, 2011). These suggestions are generally proactive in nature, focusing on ways to prevent cyberbullying issues before they begin.

Results of the data analysis indicated four major endeavors are required to effectively address cyberbullying. These four endeavors can be described as components of a single plan. The plan and each of the four components requires efforts from students, parents, school officials, and external authorities (i.e. law enforcement). Each component requires stakeholders to take on different roles and levels of responsibility. However, each stakeholder's participation in the efforts of all four components is critical to the overall success of these approaches.

As mentioned previously, monitoring and supervising children and adolescents' online activities is crucial to identifying and ultimately preventing online misconduct such as cyberbullying (Taylor, 2008). Some participants in each of the four focus groups mentioned the lack of maturity and responsibility of children and adolescents to make appropriate decisions, especially when no adult guidance or supervision is being applied. Therefore adults, particularly parents, must provide a level of guidance and supervision for our youth when they engage in online activities, especially when involving communication and social networking (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). While adult supervision is needed at both home and school, parents must take on the bulk of responsibility relative to monitoring and supervision. The reason parents must carry most of the load is because most unstructured online activity occurs away from school and at home. Not only should parents monitor Internet devices at home (i.e. desktop computers, laptops, netbooks, and tablets), but cell phones should be a major focal point for monitoring activity. This includes call logs, text messaging, internet activity, social networking (e.g. Facebook and Twitter), and other forms of online communication. In addition to monitoring activities, direct supervision of activity is also necessary in effectively addressing or preventing cyberbullying. Parents should set limits on the amount of online activity for recreation and socialization. They must directly supervise their children's online activity while it occurs or at least create a setup where children are not isolated or protected from immediate parent supervision (i.e. no online activities allowed in locked rooms or on different levels of a home). Children must realize parents can check their activity at any moment (Taylor, 2008).

School officials must monitor and supervise online activity as well. Although most recreational and social online activity occurs at home or away from school, more opportunities are being provided at school or within school-related functions. Because of this increased opportunity at school and school functions, school officials must make stronger efforts to monitor and supervise online activities of their students. School officials are already required to monitor and supervise all student activities (Willard, 2007); therefore this effort is not a major undertaking. The school system involved in this case study possesses and utilizes tools and equipment for monitoring student online activity on the school system network. However, many students' cell phones and mobile devices are equipped with cellular data plans access outside networks, which cannot be monitored by school equipment and technology.

Schools should constantly assess their policies and procedures related to student technology use (Beale & Hall, 2007). With increasing pressure for additional technology to be incorporated into schools for instructional and student communication related to learning (i.e. Skype, group activities, etc.), schools must pay closer attention to monitoring and supervising technology use and online activities. Schools must ensure their current technology use policies and procedures are applicable and effective in relation to today's technology demands and capabilities (Beale & Hall, 2007). In addition to developing, revising, and improving their policies and procedures for technology use, schools must also take a look at their current harassment policies, including how current state and federal laws apply to harassment cases (Willard, 2007). Many state legislatures around the U.S. have empowered parents and schools to take action against students who harass other students. The main difference between states lies in the definition of harassment and the criteria that defines whether cases are considered harassment. External authorities, particularly law enforcement, have a vested interest in the recent adoption and revisions of laws concerning harassment. Schools should increase their dependence upon local law enforcement in cases of harassment, particularly situations where significant threats to individuals have been made and potential danger is present. Law enforcement should respond accordingly when schools call on them to assist, especially when schools do not have solid jurisdiction to address issues. Students may be threatened or harassed by other students off school grounds, which may lead to a question of authority regarding who is responsible for dealing with the perpetrator and protecting the victim. Law enforcement can play a significant role in addressing the issues because schools do not necessarily have the authority to completely handle it due to a question of school jurisdiction (Juvonen & Gross, 2008).

The development of partnerships and stronger communication among stakeholders was a suggestion made by many study participants across stakeholder groups. The formation of partnerships between students, parents, school officials, and law enforcement are critical to the success of programs and efforts to effectively address cyberbullying (Beale & Hall, 2007). Partnerships are crucial in most endeavors to involve multiple groups and entities. Efforts needed to effectively address cyberbullying are no different. Partnerships must develop between students, parents, schools, and external authorities such as law enforcement and other support agencies knowledgeable about cyberbullying and related issues (Willard, 2007).

These partnerships must be built upon the two critical elements of communication and trust in order for the partnerships to be successful. Communication between stakeholder groups must be established and maintained on a consistent basis. School-parent relationships thrive on positive and frequent communication. Therefore, in efforts to prevent and address cyberbullying issues, schools and parents must communicate their knowledge of what their children/students are involved in relative to inappropriate online activities and cyberbullying. Communication is also important between students and schools. Students may know information about cyberbullying issues which may affect the school in terms of physical altercations and harassment occurring on school grounds initiated online (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). Students who have knowledge of these issues prior to events such as these occurring, can help schools prevent them by communicating their knowledge and feelings about potential problems, threats to other students, and dangers to the overall school environment. Students who feel threatened by others via

online communication should communicate this to school officials, who can help protect them and address the harassing behaviors (Willard, 2007). Without communication, these partnerships do not exist nor do they assist in efforts to stop cyberbullying (Beale & Hall, 2007).

The other critical foundation of partnerships is trust. Just like communication, trust must exist between all stakeholder groups before a true partnership can be formed. In order for students to communicate their feelings of fear and concern to adults, particularly parents and school officials, they must hold a certain level of trust with the adults in their lives. In the case of parents, a level of trust must exist between them and their children (Smetana, Metzger, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2006) so their children are willing to share when problems occur online. Adolescents are often reluctant to tell their parents when they experience problems online because they are fearful that their parents will take their communication devices away or limit their access to them (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). Many adolescents will look for other ways to deal with negative online experiences so that they are not in danger of their parents limiting or stopping their access to technology or online activity. Some young people choose to keep their parents “in the dark” regarding these issues for fear of losing access to their online devices (Juvonen & Gross, 2008).

Many children and adolescents have developed a significant dependence on technology to communicate and socialize with others. It has grown to the point that online communication, texting and social networking primarily, has become their preferred form of communication. Their dependence upon these devices and applications to communicate and build their social lives causes them to feel lost and disconnected from the world without access to their online communication tools (Hoff & Mitchell, 2009). This is why young people will choose to keep their problems a secret from their parents, for fear of their parents taking those devices away. Many would rather endure problems such as cyberbullying in order to continue using their devices and connect with their social networks and friends online. It is crucial for parents to develop a trusting relationship with their children (Smetana et al., 2006) in order to be “in the loop” when it comes to their children’s online activities. Parents should establish a sense of comfort with their children that provides a sense of security in relation to helping their children deal with problems (Borawski, Ievers-Lanis, Lovegreen, & Trapi, 2003) online without posing the immediate threat of taking away devices or denying access to online communications. If this type of relationship is established, it will create more opportunities for parents to play an active role in guiding their children in making good online decisions and practicing good online behavior (Beale & Hall, 2007).

Trust must also exist between the other stakeholder groups. Another important partnership requires a healthy amount of trust is the relationship between parents and schools. Although trust is important in all facets of relationships between parents and schools (Tschannen-Moran, 2001), establishing trusting partnerships in dealing with online behaviors and cyberbullying is imperative. Parents must be able to trust school officials are providing the proper safety and security for their children when at school. Transformational leaders articulate to parents, students, and teachers, a compelling and positive vision of what the schools believe and what they value (Fenn & Mixon, 2011). This helps to generate trust between the schools and its stakeholders. When school officials communicate information to parents to inform them of issues that are occurring,

there must be a sense of trust existing between the parents and school officials, in order for the issues to be addressed appropriately. Parents rely on school leaders to communicate certain issues become known to them, but maybe do not exist at home or away from school. Some participants from all four stakeholder groups felt because certain behaviors and relationships exist exclusively at school, parents rely on school officials to communicate these issues to them. In cases of cyberbullying, problems resulting from cyberbullying and online misconduct between students will manifest at school (Shariff, 2004). At this point, school officials may deal with the manifestations, but are still limited in dealing with the initial online misconduct. School officials can use their established relationships and trust with parents to address the online behaviors occurring and initiating the issues occurring at school. Trust and communication empower partnerships between school and parents (Tschannen-Moran, 2001) and lead to another effective approach for dealing with cyberbullying.

The most common suggestion mentioned among participants in all focus group sessions is the need for formal education programs in schools. These programs should be designed to build awareness about cyberbullying, its nature, and its dangers among students and parents. Study participants suggested schools should be the responsible party for implementing the educational program, but all stakeholders should play a role in its overall success and outreach. According to many participants, schools should provide a formal education program for students that cover cyberbullying awareness, proper use of technology, online etiquette and proper conduct, coping with cyberbullying, seeking help, and reporting problems. Also, schools should provide programs to educate parents about cyberbullying in general, its dangers, proper monitoring and supervision, understanding technology use and its affect upon today's youth, and helping their children cope with online issues, conflict, and cyberbullying (Burrow-Sanchez, et al., 2011). Also, parents can receive information about seeking help and forming partnerships with schools and law enforcement to effectively prevent and address issues such as cyberbullying.

Students must be addressed about the dangers of cyberbullying and other types of online misconduct. Schools should educate students about pitfalls and what to look for when unsafe and inappropriate things occur while online. Students must be taught about how to disengage, ignore, and ultimately report issues of harassment, cyberbullying, and other online misconduct. Schools must teach students the skills they need to properly cope with adversity, conflict, and situations such as cyberbullying (Burrow-Sanchez, et al., 2011). Conflict management is a set of skills schools can teach students, which may prevent issues from developing into bullying or cyberbullying situations, fights, and other harmful or threatening situations. When teaching about dealing with conflict, students should learn the difference between conflict and bullying and how to handle each situation appropriately and accordingly. The same strategies and skills taught to all students can be utilized by witnesses and bystanders to address issues such as proper response and reporting problems (Burrow-Sanchez et al., 2011).

According to student participants, schools may be more apt to focus on students with their educational programs about cyberbullying and cyberbullying response, but parents are an extremely significant piece to the overall effectiveness of the program. Parents must learn about the true dangers and implications of technology use upon today's youth, including cyberbullying and other forms of online misuse and abuse. Parents should be taught how to effectively monitor their children's technology use and

online activity. Schools can provide tools for parents on how to effectively supervise their children and how to establish the appropriate rules and boundaries for their children's online use (Hoff & Mitchell, 2009).

Limitations

Several factors present limitations to this particular study. First, the study was conducted with participants representing a single school system in central Alabama, which may create a regional bias of opinion concerning cyberbullying, its effects locally, and strategies and solutions for dealing with it. The ideas and opinions gathered may not be applicable to other school systems, areas of the state, regions of the United States, or other parts of the world. Secondly, data analyses were conducted using subjective reasoning to determine key ideas, thoughts, strategies, solutions, and themes that emerged from the data.

Focus group sessions were conducted with single stakeholder groups only. No sessions were mixed with participants representing different stakeholder groups. All groups were homogenous in terms of stakeholder type. Therefore, no opportunities existed for representatives of different stakeholder groups to share ideas, questions, and discussion. Furthermore, only 56 participants representing four different stakeholder groups took part in the study. This number, although large enough to conduct numerous focus group sessions, may not fully represent the ideas, opinions, and beliefs of others living and working in the school system being studied or areas and communities served by the school system. Finally, various numbers of focus group sessions for each stakeholder group were required to achieve a sufficient number of participants representing the two demographic areas of the school system: rural/sub-urban communities and sub-urban/urban communities. The variation in the number of focus group sessions may have created a lack of consistency in responses between stakeholder groups.

Future Research

In addition to the suggestions participants have provided in this study, analyses of the study data have led to a number of ideas for future research. It was suggested throughout the focus group sessions adults had an inferior understanding and skill for technology use as compared to children and adolescents. This was mentioned several times as a barrier for parents in effectively monitoring and supervising their children's technology use and online activities. More research should be applied in support of this assumption by many participants in this study.

Trust was mentioned throughout the study and is considered to be a major foundation for the establishment of partnerships, effective relationships, and the ultimate success in stopping or slowing the effects of cyberbullying. Trust is an element that transcending many facets of life, but more research in the area of school stakeholder relationships would be a benefit to subsequent research, school-related programs, culture, community support and connections. In addition to trust, partnerships in general should be studied to determine their effects upon the ultimate success of school programs, school culture, and the culture of the community.

More research is needed to determine the effectiveness of educational programs focusing on cyberbullying prevention and intervention. Since this is one of the major suggestions provided, evaluating educational programs to discover pitfalls, positive aspects, and overall effectiveness to continuously develop and improve the programs is absolutely necessary. Technology effects upon society and our youth were mentioned throughout the study and in many prior studies. More research should be provided in two distinct areas concerning the effects of technology on our youth and society in general. Dependency upon technology is rising among our youth and this dependency may be causing some to develop an insensitive approach to dealing with others, lacking control to determine what is appropriate and inappropriate when dealing with others online, and an overall feeling of living in an alternate universe where cyberspace provides a second world is as real as the physical world. Additional research should focus on these elements to determine the actual effects of excessive technology use and dependency upon our society, particularly our youth. Some participants mentioned an overuse of technology may be causing children and adolescents to struggle with face-to-face interactions and relationships. Comparing the effects of online communication with face-to-face interaction between and among children and adolescents is recommended, as is researching how or if school transformational leadership and the prevalence of student cyberbullying are correlated.

Summary

While cyberbullying continues to affect our society, more knowledge about its implications on individuals involved is valuable. Also critical is stakeholder ideas and suggestions regarding best approaches for addressing issues such as cyberbullying. This particular study has established a foundation for how to acquire more information of this nature. Cyberbullying and other online problems are multi-dimensional problems which cannot be effectively addressed with simple solutions. These issues will require efforts from multiple groups of stakeholders operating with education, prevention, and supervision as the foundation for addressing the problems at hand. Our schools, communities, and society cannot afford to be reactive and look for solutions with the application of law and punishment alone. We must implement the preventive and collaborative efforts suggested by the participants involved in this study.

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