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Student Bullying Prevention: Educators' Responses to Varied Types of Bullying Occurrence in an Online School Setting

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The prevalence of bullying for online students is gaining importance as school safety incidents continue to rise. With more students choosing to attend online schools, understanding how bullying plays out in this setting is essential. Several factors were examined by surveying educators of an online school and included occurrences of types of bullying behaviors, whether training was received to address these behaviors, and how prepared educators felt to detect and respond to bullying. The findings indicated verbal bullying was the most prevalent type, with 75% of respondents suspecting at least one instance of verbal bullying per year, followed by relational bullying at 60%, cyberbullying at 51.9%, and physical bullying at 23.5%. When examining if educators received training for recognizing student bullying, in all cases of bullying, more educators received training than did not. Lastly, when examining how educators respond to bullying, participants reported that they felt prepared. Implications for practice suggest that bullying occurs in online settings, and thus, further efforts are needed to train educators to detect and respond to bullying. Future research is needed to see if varied types of bullying play out in different ways in both online and brick-and-mortar schools with a focus on marginalized populations and different geographic settings.

Keywords: Bullying, Cyberbullying, Online Education, Physical Bullying, Relational Bullying, Verbal Bullying

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, recent estimates show that millions of kindergarten to twelfth-grade students experience bullying at some point during the school year, highlighting the public health significance of anti-bullying measures and campaigns (Gaffney et al., 2021; National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2021; Rose et al., 2022). Bullying is a form of intentional harm caused by one person or a group of persons towards another person or group of persons (American Psychological Association [APA], 2018). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), bullying is referred to as aggressive behavior that places harm on a peer who is neither a sibling nor a dating partner, involves an imbalance of power, is repeated, and is unwanted (2023). While there is some debate about whether all the aforementioned elements are necessary to constitute bullying (Slattery et al., 2019), these characteristics can appear on a spectrum or continuum of severity in cases of bullying. Researchers generally categorize bullying into three types: physical, verbal, and relational/social (Chang, 2021). Researchers have recently added more categories to these types to describe other forms of bullying that do not fit within a singular domain, such as cyber and sexual bullying (Armitage, 2021).

Bullying that occurs in the school environment includes incidents that occur on school property, during school hours, at school events, or as a direct result of the relationships created within the school setting (NCES, 2016). However, only one or two of these conditions must apply to merit the label “within a school setting.” For example, cyberbullying happens via online platforms and is not relegated strictly to happening within school hours. However, if those engaging in cyberbullying are students or peers in situations directly related to their schooling, then this would count as bullying within a school setting. Much of the research examining bullying in virtual learning environments is focused on higher education (Harvey et al., 2014). However, recent empirical work demonstrates that these bullying behaviors are common among students in both online and brick-and-mortar school settings (Cziboly et al., 2023; McBrayer et al., 2020; Mickova et al., 2023; Tysinger et al., 2016).

While studies have examined educators’ perceptions of bullying in brick-and-mortar schools, limited studies have examined educators’ perceptions of bullying incidents for students in online school settings (McBrayer et al., 2020; Tysinger et al., 2016). It is vital to attain the voice of those working with students to be able to detect and respond to bullying. For this study, the researchers believe that, like brick-and-mortar schools, bullying is indeed happening in the online setting, and schools need to keep all kids safe and free from bullying. Additionally, although bullying among students has been an ongoing problem in schools, research indicates that many students do not disclose the bullying they experience or witness because of the widespread nature of bullying, feelings of helplessness, concerns over inappropriate adult action, self-reliance, shame, and confusion with defining bullying differently than adults (deLara, 2012). Thus, it is imperative that we as educators are able to detect and respond to bullying behaviors to combat this reluctance of students to tell or rely on adults for intervention. Thus, this study will examine varied types of bullying, including relational (social exclusion and spreading rumors), verbal (name-calling and teasing), physical (hitting, pushing, and kicking), and cyberbullying (posting a harmful picture or video online, pretending to be someone else online, cyberstalking, and creating a harmful webpage), with all based on student content (responses, discussions, posts, assignments) in an online school setting. To that end, this study employed the following research questions:

1. To what degree do educators suspect varied types of student bullying in their online school setting? and
2. How prepared are educators to respond to varied types of student bullying in their online school setting?

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Prevalence and Causes of Bullying

Basile et al. (2020) found that nearly 20% of students reported bullying on school grounds. Further, Waasdorp & Bradshaw (2015) contended that roughly half of the youth who reported being a victim noted experiencing multiple forms of bullying. Overall, the researchers found that 27% of students experienced cyberbullying, 53% relational bullying, 38% physical bullying, and 88% verbal bullying. Given the increase in the number of hand-held devices for students within the past decade, bullying is rapidly becoming a common virtual behavior (NCES, 2022). Devos et al. (2018) found that one in three youth reported experiencing cyberbullying. Adolescents who disclosed that they had bullied others in real life were more than 2.5 times as likely to report bullying others online (Ang & Goh, 2010).

Students who are bullied frequently attribute the cause of the bullying to personal traits such as race, ethnicity, gender, disability, religion, and sexual orientation (Atay et al., 2022). Presumably, bullies target these traits in a school setting with verbal, physical, or relational aggression. While a bully's motives are more clearly informed by their personal experiences and challenges (Amra & Agarwal, 2019), the climate of the school itself may also affect how students are viewed based on these traits. Stressful situations can occur in a student's life in school as they navigate academic performance, build friendships, work with teammates within sports, and become involved in romantic relationships (Alathari et al., 2018). These challenging areas of personal and professional growth are also ripe with the possibility of bullying for those who fall within these targeted communities. Concerns regarding bullying need to be addressed school-wide to ensure a safe school climate for all students, as all forms of bullying, whether frequent or infrequent, are unacceptable (Alathari et al., 2018).

Impacts of Bullying

Bullying in schools can negatively affect students who are both the targets and perpetrators of this behavior. Bullying incidents are not singular events but often occur in multiple instances over an extended period (Haynie et al., 2001). For victims of bullying, research indicates negative impacts on their school attendance (Baams et al., 2017; Hutzell & Payne, 2012), their physical well-being (Bogart et al., 2014; Gruber & Fineran, 2007), and their psychological health (Campbell et al., 2012; Chester et al., 2017; Hampel et al., 2009). Additionally, bullying has been shown to have a direct negative impact on schoolwork, family and friend relationships, and self-esteem and identity (Atay et al., 2022). Students who identify as bullies may experience increased depression, antisocial behaviors, employment issues, and drug use (Copeland et al., 2013; Farrington & Ttofi, 2011). Harmful effects of bullying include but are not limited to increased risk of internalizing problems, risk of suicidal ideation and/or attempts, externalizing behaviors, social interaction/friend-keeping challenges, academic failure, school disengagement/dropout, adjustment difficulties to adult responsibilities and career development, and risk for criminal justice system involvement (Gaffney et al., 2021).

Online Schooling on the Rise

Online education at the K-12 level has been on the rise in the past decade and was further compounded by the recent global health pandemic. According to NCES (2021), virtual school enrollment in the US rose 46% overall and 105% in secondary schools from 2013-2014 to 2019-2020. Lehrer-Small (2022) reported that virtual schooling in 10 states increased 176% from 2019-2020 to 2021-2022, with Iowa reporting the greatest increase of 388% over that period. Research has suggested that much of the shift from brick-and-mortar schools to online instruction can be attributed to poor school climate, particularly issues stemming from bullying (Kokko et al., 2015; Tonks, et al., 2021). For example, Tonks et al. (2021) surveyed special education students and parents regarding their motivations for switching from face-to-face school to online education. Students indicated that they chose online schooling over face-to-face schooling because “I got bullied a lot,” “kids were not kind to me,” or “they picked on me for no real reason” (p. 178). In these cases, students and parents viewed online schooling as a safer alternative.

What is unclear in the rising age of online education is to what degree bullying occurs in the online school environment and how prepared educators are to respond to these suspected types of varied bullying. The question is, are adolescents still at risk when there are no physical interactions, and learning is limited to the virtual setting? Like brick-and-mortar schools, bullying is happening in the online setting, and there is a need to keep all kids safe and free from bullying (McBrayer et al., 2020). Some researchers suggest that “the Internet platform may extenuate existing behaviors; traditional bullies can now tap into the ample opportunities afforded via cyberspace to torment victims” (Ang & Goh, 2010, p. 388). Online disinhibition, or the “lowering of behavioral inhibitions in the online environment,” plays a large role in expanding the scope of influence for some bullies, and this phenomenon has been documented in studies of cyberbullying (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012, p. 434), Furthermore, given the growing number of platforms that encourage online disinhibition, it can come as no surprise that peer victimization beyond the school grounds may be increasing. Peer victimization can manifest online in ways “that apparently would not be exhibited in a similar scenario in the ‘real world’ ” (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012, p. 434). In other words, because the digital worlds are seen as ‘not real,’ those participating in them do not allocate the same level of self-restraint or concern for the other that would be expected in more real-life arenas. Thus, this high prevalence of bullying paints a threatening picture concerning the safety of youth, especially as school safety incidents continue to rise at a more frequent rate throughout the United States (NCES, 2023). With more students choosing to attend online schools, coupled with a lack of student self-reporting, a stronger and more in-depth understanding of how bullying plays out in this online setting is essential from the perspective of those educators working with our students.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Analysis

This quantitative study utilized survey methods, descriptive statistics, and chi-square analyses to ascertain educators’ perceptions of bullying as they pertain to school safety preparedness in an online K-12 school. Great Charter Academy (GCA), pseudonym, is a public K-12 online school in the southeastern region of the United States. GCA serves a statewide (urban, suburban, rural) attendance zone, offering the services and amenities of a traditional brick-and-mortar school without the building. Students access lessons and live classes via an online learning management system and are partnered with certified teachers who instruct and guide student progress and achievement.

Instrument

This current study is based on prior research that utilized a survey titled: *Crisis Event Perception Survey (CEPS)*, which is a 37-item survey instrument that included five demographic questions and was researcher-created and confirmed to adhere to the needed content validity and reliability of the survey research (Tysinger et al., 2016). The original researchers ensured the content validity of the CEPS in a two-stage process. The first stage of content validity analysis included a review by two experts, and based on their feedback, additional items were created to address the educators' perceived preparedness for responding to the various crisis events based on their school's current policy. Administrative and counseling staff members conducted the second stage of the review, after which some questions were removed to ensure participant confidentiality. The CEPS was adapted and expanded in this current study to include the additional components identified for crisis events beyond the original CEPS in the newly titled survey: *Sustainable, Accessible, Feasible, and Effective (SAFE) Crisis Event Perceptions Survey: CEPS Version 2.0* referred to as *CEPS Version 2.0*. This second version included eight items that were demographic in nature (professional role, responsibilities, and professional and personal traits), 20 questions that were specific to the four types of bullying, and 10 questions regarding the fidelity of the school safety policy and procedures. The survey was upheld to the same rigorous content validity and reliability standard as the first version.

The current study specifically focused on varied types of bullying, including relational (social exclusion and spreading rumors), verbal (name-calling and teasing), physical (hitting, pushing, and kicking), and cyberbullying (posting a harmful picture or video online, pretending to be someone else online, cyberstalking, and creating a harmful webpage), all based on student content responses (discussions, posts, assignments). Though most interactions between students in this virtual school setting happened online, the possibility for situations such as in-person testing and school/community-related events led to the inclusion of physical bullying as a possibility, and therefore also a survey item under review in this study. The survey questions inquired about how many times per year the specified crisis area was suspected (never, 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, and greater than 6 times) and if the educators received training via university-based teacher education programs, local/district in-service or professional development, teacher professional organization conference, online webinar or training, and/or other means, and how well prepared they felt to respond to the suspected area of a crisis on a Likert type scale to include: very prepared (4), somewhat prepared (3), somewhat unprepared (2) and very unprepared (1).

Data Collection

The CEPS Version 2.0 instrument was delivered electronically via Qualtrics™, an online survey platform. Before contacting potential participants and administering the survey, permission was granted from the researchers' Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the school district Superintendent. Contact with potential participants occurred through email as the survey was distributed electronically and on a one-time basis. Creswell and Creswell (2017) suggested a four-part survey request to include an advance notice alerting potential survey participants, a notice requesting participation in the survey, a follow-up notice, and personalized contact to all non-respondents. The typical completion time for the CEPS Version 2.0 was 10-15 minutes. Taking these recommendations into account with the need to obtain a high response rate, a four-part invitation to the survey was employed over four weeks. First, a recruitment and advance information email was sent to all potential participants explaining the details of the study and confirming the correct contact information. Second, after one week, an invitation to survey email was sent to all potential participants requesting participation. The invitation to survey email indicated the purpose and significance of the research, anonymity assurance, implied consent, and a link to the survey using Qualtrics™. The invitation to the survey email explained that the survey was anonymous and of a voluntary nature and that all data would be unidentifiable to each participant. Additionally, the invitation to survey email outlined the participant's rights, including the right to opt out of the survey after having started their responses and the right to skip over questions during the survey. One week following the invitation to the survey email, a third email was sent to remind and follow up with potential survey participants. The researchers sent a fourth email one week later as a final reminder. The survey closed one week after the final reminder email.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were utilized to denote the occurrence of bullying (times per year [%]) as well as training received (yes or no [%]). These descriptive statistics were employed to measure the degree to which training was received to prepare for these crises and how prepared the educators felt to respond to these situations based on their prior training. Data were exported into an Excel spreadsheet and color-coded to identify trends and patterns. The chi-square analyses (utilized to estimate the yearly occurrence of bullying based on the rate at which the participants had suspected varied types of bullying while working in an online educational setting) were performed in the R version 4.3.0 package (R Core Team, 2024).

The research utilized chi-square analyses to examine associations between categorical patterns within the sample as a whole. As the examination of cross-classified category data is common in evaluation and research, chi-square tests represent one of the most utilized statistical analyses for answering questions about the association or difference between categorical variables (Franke et al., 2012). The numbers represent the observed values (how many people actually said they were trained and prepared), and the values in parentheses represent the expected values. The expected values are what you would expect to observe if the null hypothesis were true, meaning training does not matter. Within the R software, Fisher's Exact Test was also run, which is a slight "correction" that is more conservative, typically used when you have smaller cells (sample size) versus the sample as a whole.

RESULTS

Overall, 92 participants completed the survey. The original survey was sent to approximately 500 educators, and although the response rate was limited, the researchers believed this was a sound representation of the perceptions of bullying in an online setting at varying levels, and thus, a viable sub-set of respondents was confirmed; the limitations section will address some suspected reasoning and will be addressed in future research. Respondents included 14 school administrators, 20 school support personnel, and 58 teachers. To note, varied types of bullying included relational (social exclusion and spreading rumors), verbal (name-calling and teasing), physical (hitting, pushing, and kicking), and cyberbullying (posting a harmful picture or video online, pretending to be someone else online, cyberstalking, and creating a harmful webpage), with all based on student content (responses, discussions, posts, assignments) in an online school setting.

Respondents indicated verbal bullying as the most prevalent type of bullying they suspected, with over 75% (n = 70) suspecting at least one instance of it per year. Relational bullying was the second most prevalent type of bullying, with 60% (n = 55) of respondents indicating they suspected relational bullying at least once per year, followed by cyberbullying at 51.9% and physical bullying at 23.5% at least one time per week. In terms of chronic cases of bullying (more than five times per year), nearly 20% (n = 18) of respondents indicated they suspected verbal bullying to be a chronic form of bullying in their schools. Moreover, cyberbullying and relational bullying were both reported as chronic problems, with 13.4% (n = 13) and 10.5% (n = 10) of respondents reporting having suspected more than five incidents of each, respectively. Table 1 summarizes the participant responses regarding how many times per year educators suspected varied types of student bullying. See Table 1.

Table 1
Frequency of Suspected Bullying By Type

Times Per Year	0	1-2	3-4	5-6	6+
	%	%	%	%	%
Relational	40	36.2	13.3	2.9	7.6
Verbal	24.5	32.1	23.6	12.3	7.5
Physical	76.5	19.6	2.9	0	1
Cyber	48.1	28.8	9.6	3.8	9.6

Note: n = 92 for each condition

Table 2 exhibits how often educators reported receiving specific training for recognizing signs of varied types of student bullying and how prepared educators felt to respond to these types of suspected student bullying based on their school's policy. See Table 2.

Table 2
Participant Training and Feelings of Preparedness by Type of Bullying

	Training Received		Feelings of Preparedness			
	No	Yes	Very Prepared	Somewhat Prepared	Somewhat Unprepared	Very Unprepared
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Relational	41.9	58.1	29.8	42.3	21.2	6.7
Verbal	20.8	79.2	49.5	36.2	12.4	1.9
Physical	41.9	58.1	25.5	45.1	19.6	9.8
Cyber	29.8	70.2	34	39.8	20.4	5.8

Note: n = 92 for each condition

A series of chi-square analyses were performed to identify whether training on specific types of bullying increased the perception of preparedness. If training is related to preparedness, there may be more people than expected who feel prepared and, vice-versa, there may be more people who feel unprepared than expected if they do not receive training. Tables 3-6 highlight that not everyone is receiving training and that training is indeed related to feelings of preparedness.

Table 3 shows that many respondents (43 respondents) were not trained in relational online bullying. However, those who received training felt prepared to respond to online bullying (59 respondents) compared to only two trained people but still felt unprepared. Most untrained respondents felt unprepared to respond to relational bullying (27) compared to those who felt prepared despite no training (16). See Tables 3.

Table 3
Training and Preparedness for Relational Online Bullying

	Trained	Untrained
Prepared	59 (44)	16 (31)
Unprepared	2 (17)	27 (12)

$X^2 = 42.00$; significant at $p<.001$

Note: Observed/actual frequencies with expected frequencies in parentheses; X2 = Chi-square

Table 4 reveals that most respondents received training on verbal online bullying (83). Only 22 respondents did not receive training. Most of those untrained still felt prepared to respond to verbal online bullying. However, there are still more participants who felt unprepared without training than expected, indicating that training is important in preparing individuals for responding to online bullying. See Table 4.

Table 4
Training and Preparedness for Verbal Online Bullying

	Trained	Untrained
Prepared	77 (71)	13 (19)
Unprepared	6 (11.9)	9 (3.1)

$X^2 = 13.00$; significant at $p<.001$

Note: Observed/actual frequencies with expected frequencies in parentheses; X2 = chi-square

Table 5 indicates that training on physical bullying is rarer than with other types of bullying addressed in our survey. Of the respondents, 48 did not receive training on responding to physical bullying that can be identified online. This is an important finding, as educators still have a role in identifying physical bullying, even in an online environment. Also, importantly, being trained is highly related to feelings of preparedness, as only three respondents felt unprepared after receiving training. See Table 5.

Table 5
Training and Preparedness for Physical Online Bullying

	Trained	Untrained
Prepared	50 (37)	21 (34)
Unprepared	3 (16)	27 (14)

X^2 = 28.00; significant at p<.001

Note: Observed/actual frequencies with expected frequencies in parentheses; X2 = chi-square

Finally, Table 6 shows that most respondents received cyberbullying training. This is unsurprising as the educators surveyed in this study work with an online school. Only eight respondents felt unprepared after receiving training. Similarly, 19 respondents indicated that they did not receive training but felt unprepared compared to 11 who did not receive training but felt prepared.

Survey results indicated that educators received the most specific training for recognizing signs of verbal bullying and cyberbullying at 79.2% (n = 73) and 70.2% (n = 64), respectively. The least amount of specific training for recognizing signs of bullying was provided for relational and physical bullying. Of the 92 respondents, 58.1% (n = 53) reported having received training to recognize the signs of both relational and physical bullying. Despite over 40% (n = 39) of respondents reporting not receiving specific training for recognizing the signs of relational and physical bullying, more than 70% reported feeling prepared to handle situations in both areas (n = 66, 64), respectively. See Table 6.

Table 6
Training and Preparedness for Cyber Bullying

	Trained	Untrained
Prepared	65 (54)	11 (22)
Unprepared	8 (19.1)	19 (7.9)

X^2 = 28.00; significant at p<.001

Note: Observed/actual frequencies with expected frequencies in parentheses; X^2 = chi-square

DISCUSSION

Bullying can impact students in any and all school settings. While most research examined student interactions in the virtual classroom setting of higher education environments (Harvey et al., 2014), there is evidence that bullying behaviors are also frequent among students engaged in online schooling (Cziboly et al., 2023; McBrayer et al., 2020; Mickova et al., 2023; Tysinger et al., 2026). This current study was part of a larger survey examining online educators' overall preparedness for a multitude of school crises. This work is unique because it specifically examined educators' perceptions of bullying behaviors in an online K-12 school setting, further contributing to the limited existing research in K-12 online school settings (McBrayer et al., 2020, Tysinger et al., 2016). These important results demonstrate that despite no physical interaction or shared physical space between the students, educators still perceive that bullying behaviors occur between students. There is a need for all educators to be vigilant of bullying behaviors regardless of the setting, and four specific areas of discovery were uncovered through this study.

First, educators in the current study suspected verbal bullying had occurred among students more than any other type of bullying (75.5%). Seventy-five percent of educators reported that verbal bullying in the form of suspected name-calling or teasing occurred in students' online content via responses, discussions, posts, or assignments. These findings are consistent with perceptions of verbal bullying in traditional schools (Bradshaw et al., 2013; Rigby, 2020; Woolley, 2019). Interestingly, this is also where educators reported having the most training and feeling the most confident to intervene. Research has shown that educators are more likely to intervene in overt types of bullying, such as verbal and physical bullying (Byers et al., 2011). This is likely because these types of bullying are more observable than covert relational or cyberbullying behaviors, therefore making it easier to recognize and actively mediate. Another explanation could be that schools generally have concrete policies regarding more overt, observable behaviors such as verbal or physical bullying, and consequently, educators feel more confident when addressing these situations with students (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006).

Second, relational bullying in terms of social exclusion and spreading rumors that occurred in students' online content via responses, discussions, posts, or assignments was reported by 60% of participants. Interestingly, a large percentage of educators in an online setting recognized relational bullying, given that it is often ambiguous and not easily detected (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). Educators in the traditional setting generally have the least amount of empathy for students who experience relational bullying and have been found to be less supportive (Wilford et al., 2021). Perhaps this is because relational bullying has been viewed as a lesser offense than other types of bullying, such as physical bullying (Harcourt et al., 2014).

Third, cyberbullying was reported by 51.9% of participants. The fact that only a moderate percentage of virtual educators suspected cyberbullying was surprising, considering that student interactions are almost primarily online in this particular setting. The more a teacher has training in technology or the use of the internet, the more aware they have been of cyberbullying (Sezer et al., 2015), so it could be expected that an educator who interacts with students primarily in the virtual environment would be more sensitive to cyberbullying. A low number of educators (i.e., one in four) felt unprepared to address cyberbullying despite teaching in a virtual environment. Perhaps those behaviors considered traditional bullying practices may not translate into the virtual school setting. For example, when describing cyber risks for students in the online environment, Mickova et al. (2023) noted several potential sources of conflict, such as account hacking, cyberattacks, and intentionally disrupting the online environment (e.g., kicking out others from the class). These definitions do not fit the traditional mold of bullying or cyberbullying, as most educators have encountered them (Armitage, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). Potentially, bullying behaviors are perceived differently in the online environment both by educators and students and thus, varied types of bullying and their impacts in schools need further elucidation. Another explanation could be based on some evidence that educators view cyberbullying, especially in the secondary setting, as a natural conflict that "prepares students for life" (Stauffer et al., 2012, p. 352).

Lastly, physical bullying (23.5%) was the least likely suspected type in the virtual setting. While it was not surprising that physical bullying was the least reported by teachers, given that students are not with one another in the same physical space daily. It was surprising that educators reported that they suspected that hitting, pushing, or kicking was occurring among students at all. This is also the category for which educators received the least training. What is unclear about these physical bullying situations amongst online students is how they would have been observed and who might have been involved. One possibility is that educators observed physical interactions among peers taking classes in the same setting and from students reporting acts of bullying in their academic work.

LIMITATIONS

One major limitation of this study is that respondents were asked to indicate whether they suspected each type of bullying was occurring instead of defining that type for the virtual environment. This is significant because traditional bullying behaviors may not translate into the virtual school setting. For example, when describing cyber risks for students in the online environment, Mickova et al. (2023) described instances of account hacking, cyberattacks, and intentionally disrupting the online environment, such as kicking others from the class, as potential sources of conflict. These types of descriptions do not fit the definitions of traditional bullying or cyberbullying (Armitage, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). Potentially, bullying behaviors are perceived differently in the online environment by instructors and students and thus, the varied types of bullying and their impacts in schools merit further exploration. Additionally, one potential limitation includes the exclusive reliance on teacher reports, and no measures that take into account student reports. This is concerning since teachers may or may not always notice every form of bullying occurring in an online setting, and students are more certain to notice, given that they are targeted to receive these behaviors. Thus, continued research is intended to examine the voice of the student, but this is not to discount the vital importance of educators being trained to detect and respond to all types of bullying. One final limitation is that only one K-12 school was included in the survey in this study, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Future efforts are recommended to employ methods to increase response rates. Online surveys are increasingly popular in research, given their cost-effectiveness and potential reach. However, low response rates remain a key contributor to bias and the overall quality of results. Having a well-designed survey, providing financial remuneration, sending personalized invitations, having regular reminders, and using more than one recruitment strategy are evidence-based approaches to improve response rates in the future (Shiyab et al., 2023).

Implications for Practice and Future Recommended Research

Some parents and students switch from brick-and-mortar to online schooling to avoid bullying situations (Kokko et al., 2015; Tonks, et al., 2021). However, the current study shows that these problems still exist for students in the virtual realm. Regardless of whether a classroom is face-to-face or online, teachers are key contributors to the academic and social well-being of their classrooms, and research must include the perspective of educators in the detection and response to bullying behaviors. Historically, there have been two main issues for educators when it comes to bullying: identifying the behavior (Byers et al., 2011; Slattery et al., 2019) and knowing when and how to intervene (Byers et al., 2017; Mishna et al., 2005). Research has shown that educators are underprepared to deal with these issues (Yoon et al, 2020) and need more training (Bradshaw et al., 2013; Williford, 2015). Educators in the current study reported receiving the most training in dealing with verbal bullying and felt most prepared to deal with that behavior. However, what is surprising is that in this virtual setting, educators still reported suspecting instances of physical bullying but received the least amount of training and felt the most unprepared to address this form of behavior. In addition, one in four educators felt unprepared to address cyberbullying despite their teaching in a virtual environment.

Teachers play a key role in preventing bullying in the classroom (Yoon & Bauman, 2014). The more confident a teacher feels about addressing bullying, the less likely bullying will take place in their classroom (Veenstra et al., 2014). The current study shows that educators still suspect each type of bullying in the virtual setting. Therefore, for educators in the virtual setting to effectively create a safe online learning environment, training is an avenue to identify and address varied types of bullying with the support of school leadership. The more a teacher understands bullying, the greater the likelihood they will recognize and intervene to protect students (Campbell et al., 2019). This study has demonstrated that bullying is occurring in online settings. Thus, further professional learning is needed to train educators to suspect and respond to crises to feel best prepared to protect students from bullying. Future recommendations should include continued research with online school settings to see if varied types of bullying play out in different ways in both online and brick-and-mortar schools and in urban, rural, or suburban settings, as well as based on specified demographics with a focus on marginalized populations. Additionally, a closer examination of the types of responses educators employed and their effectiveness is merited.

DECLARATIONS

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