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It Hurt Big Time: Understanding the Impact of Rural Adolescents' Experiences with Cyberbullying

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Abstract

In the 21st century, the growing use of online technologies has challenged parents and educators to understand the concerns and issues faced by adolescents with cyberbullying both in and outside the school context. The purpose of this study was to examine rural adolescents' experiences with cyberbullying in Canada. The participants included 1752 adolescents who attended 16 schools in rural Alberta. The 73-item online questionnaire included the following question: If you have ever known someone to be bullied, been a target of bullying, or ever bullied someone using online communication please describe the situation(s) and what happened as a result. Youth described online pretending behaviors, harassment, threat-making and violent activity. This study highlights the importance of teacher education and professional development programmes that are focused on helping adolescents navigate the complexities of their online communication.

The phenomenon of “cyberbullying” is prevalent and widespread, with the potential to be even more damaging than traditional forms of bullying (Anderson & Sturm, 2007; Chisholm, 2006; Wilson, 2005). Cyberbullying leads to a hostile school environment and highlights the need for teacher education programmes to help the next generation of teachers understand the impact of this type of behavior (Shariff, 2008). The purpose of this study was to generate and then examine written responses from adolescents about their experiences with cyberbullying. A child is considered to have been cyber bullied when she or he has been intentionally exposed to negative actions by another child or group of children involving the use of information and communication technology (Olweus, 1995; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Cyberbullying occurs in a number of online environments including: chat rooms, online bulletin boards, e-mail, instant messaging, web sites, cell phones, social networking sites, newsfeeds, and online multiplayer video games (Mishna, McLuckie & Saini, 2009). What makes a cyberbully more harmful than the traditional bully is his or her ability to communicate a message apparently anonymously, to contact the target at any time and to reach a much larger audience than the traditional bully is able to do (Wilson, 2005). Further complicating the issue of cyberbullying is that the majority of online communication, and therefore online bullying, happens outside of school often leaving school administration feeling ineffective in combating the issue. This is partly because public schools place heavy restrictions on the use of the Internet contributing to an even greater gap between students' online lives and the classrooms where they are expected to learn (Considine, Horton, & Moorman, 2009). According to Canadian researcher, Shaheen Shjariff (2008), it is essential for teachers and administrators to know their responsibilities to intervene when students cyberbully.

Cyberbullying refers to “the willful use of the Internet as a technological medium through which harm or discomfort is intentionally and repeatedly inflicted through indirect aggression

that targets a specific person or group of persons” (Williams & Guerra, 2007, p. S15). It is important to note that the presence of a real or perceived power imbalance is intensified in cyberspace, where bullies can hide behind a screen name, adding the advantage of anonymity. Ybarra & Mitchell (2004) report that 84% of aggressors know their targets, yet only 31% of targets report knowing their aggressors. They assert that this is one feature of Internet communication through which the bully may establish an important level of dominance. It also provides a way for youth to bully others in a relatively consequence-free environment (Bocij & MacFarlane, 2003). The uncertainty about the bully’s identity that accompanies online harassment increases the anxiety and fear felt by the target, which may result in increased feelings of distrust towards the innocent, even their close friends (Belsey, 2004). Thus, the cycle of social exclusion is effectively started with an anonymous online aggressor.

Fear of social exclusion empowers another advantage for bullies, who use digital forms of communication, to reach their target almost twenty-four hours a day (Beran & Li, 2007). In traditional forms of bullying, the target is often exposed to the bully’s negative actions for the duration of the school day when he or she can then seek refuge in the safety of his or her own home. However, 44% of preteens and 70% of teens who have been cyberbullied receive hurtful or threatening messages at home, leaving no safe haven from online harassment (Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, 2006). Teens are reluctant or even resistant to turning off the computer or cell phone in order to escape cyberbullies because having to refrain from the use of IM, e-mail and text messaging due to fear of being bullied would further increase feelings of alienation from their peers (Anderson & Sturm, 2007).

Finally, the ability of a cyberbully to spread his or her message to an incredibly large audience, transcending geographical, social and temporal boundaries, adds strength to his or her attack (Chisholm, 2006). A message posted to a discussion board, social networking site, or to a chat room can remain for years and be seen by individuals anywhere an Internet connection exists. This potential for an enlarged audience and increased longevity can work to intensify the effects of cyberbullying, especially when it is coupled with face-to-face bullying as studies indicate.

Researchers have suggested that there are two different dimensions to cyberbullying. The first dimension is when the Internet and other forms of digital communication are used as the primary tools of harassment. The second dimension is when the Internet and other forms of digital communication are used to facilitate more traditional face-to-face forms of bullying (Gillespie, 2006; Olweus, 1993). In this second dimension, harassment goes far beyond the exchange of vulgar and derogatory terms to include several forms of harassment that require the assailant to know personal information regarding the target. In one study, almost half of all participants who engaged in cyberbullying were previous targets of offline bullying (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004 a,b).

In 2001, one in seventeen youth reported being threatened or harassed while using the Internet (Paulson, 2003; Sampson, 2001). Five years later, those numbers had increased showing that between one-third and one-half of all students had experienced cyberbullying, with varying levels of frequency (Hindjua & Patchin, 2005a; Jackson, 2006; Kowalski & Limber, 2005; Lenhart, 2009). In addition to this, over 50% of youth reported they knew others who had been cyberbullied (Li, 2006). In a study of rural teens in Canada 17% of participants admitted to bullying online (Bright, Dyck & Adams, 2008).

In order to prepare students for life in the 21st century, we must first acknowledge and understand their online experiences with cyberbullying and then offer them multiple

opportunities to cultivate skills and strategies for handling difficult and complex issues. "Protection, however well-intentioned, actually fails to prepare young people by not providing the adult supervision and guidance that many of them would benefit from during their online encounters" (Considine, Horton, & Moorman, p. 473, 2009). This study seeks to understand not only what adolescents do with technology but also what technology does to today's youth.

Impact of Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is a trend that threatens the mental health and overall well-being of today's youth, with effects ranging from moderate to severe emotional disturbances. The effects of cyberbullying are manifested in forms such as reduced self-esteem, depression, the development of eating disorders, poor school performance, to long-term emotional and relational disturbances, suicide and an increased propensity for violence (Gillespie, 2007; Kuperschmidt & Patterson, 1991). The results of these effects are often seen most clearly in the school environment, and can be measured in terms of academic difficulties, withdrawal, school phobia and school drop-out rates (Beran & Li, 2007; Jackson, 2006; Shariff, 2008; Willard, 2006). These challenges to school success make cyberbullying an important topic for educators to address and to understand.

Research Methodology

The Research Question

The purpose of the study was to generate and examine responses by rural adolescents regarding their experiences with cyberbullying. The written data was part of a larger study on rural adolescents' perceptions and habits with online technologies (Bright, Dyck, and Adams, 2008). The full survey contained seventy-three items, but this study focuses on questions fifty-five through fifty-seven of that questionnaire, which provides qualitative data on cyberbullying from the students' perspectives. Students first responded to three questions asking whether or not they had ever known someone to be bullied, been the target of bullying or bullied someone. A follow-up item to each of the above requested students to indicate the type of technology used in each of these encounters. Finally, students were given the opportunity to write about their experiences with cyberbullying. The question asked of this group of adolescents was: If you have ever known someone to be bullied, been a target of bullying, or ever bullied someone using online communication please describe the situation(s) and what happened as a result. In examining the data, researchers asked the question: "What are the experiences of cyberbullying among rural adolescents?"

Participants

The participants were aged primarily from 12 to 15 years and were from five different school jurisdictions (and 16 different schools) in rural Alberta. From the sample of 1752 students, 676 students provided qualitative responses to question fifty-seven.

Instrument

The questionnaire for rural adolescents was developed and piloted by the researchers and reflects the many themes, questions, and categories identified in *Young Canadians in a Wired World* (Media Awareness Network, 2005). This earlier questionnaire on the topic of youth and Internet was administered by the Media Awareness Network, a non-profit Canadian organization dedicated to the development of media and digital literacy programs. The purpose of developing our questionnaire was to allow one or more school sites interested in online technology use among their students to document and gain insight into their social communication patterns and perceptions.

Procedures

As with all research involving children, human subjects ethics approval was secured and conversations ensued with school superintendents, school principals, teachers, parents and with the students themselves. All students who were present on survey day were asked to complete the questionnaire which was administered online by school Communication Technology personnel or classroom teachers. Students were introduced to the questionnaire through a scripted protocol developed by the researchers. They then voluntarily responded to the seventy-three questions in the larger survey, during a time period ranging from thirty to sixty minutes as needed. The identities of the students were completely protected in both the data gathering and data analysis portions of the research. The online questionnaire assigned a number to each student, along with gender, age and grade level, but did not record student names. Individual school districts requested that their data be available to examine on its own and in relation to the data as a whole. This information has been shared with representatives from each of the school jurisdictions, but for the purposes of wider research dissemination, data will be shared and discussed here in aggregate form.

For this study, qualitative data analysis procedures were employed. A grounded theory approach to data analysis was utilized throughout the research, an inductive process suitable to this study where very little pre-existing research is available (Glaser & Strauss, 1965). Analytic categories were assigned and compared using the constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklin, 2003). Second and third readings of the surveys by the researchers, one graduate student and one undergraduate student familiar with the research tested the workability of the categories and similarities and differences were noted.

Findings and Discussion

Adolescents' experiences of cyberbullying refer to the following themes: harassment, threats and violence, pretending behaviours, the relationship between online and offline communities, and the cyberbullying friend. Their experiences ranged from less concerning situations to emotionally scarring ones. For instance, one student explained that cyberbullying is, "[a] lot of stupid stuff that resulted in a lot of other stupid stuff." Other students in the study described cyberbullying as a "joke", "funny", or "playful banner [*sic*]". In contrast, another student described a personal experience with cyberbullying, in which "they swear at you and tell you what you act like even though it is not true and it does hurt big time." Students also wrote about the consequences of their cyberbullying experiences and these often referred to the presence of teachers, parents and police officers with varying results, suggesting the need for greater understanding of the impact of cyberbullying on the lives and learning of adolescents.

Harassment

Name calling or verbal abuse was the most commonly reported form of cyberbullying by students in this study. Name calling ranged from "rude" to "trash talk" to "inappropriate" to "mean" to "swearing [*sic*]" to "sexual" in nature. One student identified a reason behind name calling on the gaming site which he frequents: "kids on online game sites will right [*sic*] stuff to make them feel bad." Name calling was also frequently related to appearance ("called fat"), ability ("make fun of this person for being to [*sic*] smart"), and popularity ("wasn't the cool kid in school"). The frequently cited adage that "names can never hurt me" does not ring true with most students in this study.

One aspect of cyberbullying behaviours reported by students involve groups of students who work together to harass a target. One adolescent explained that "her friend got a bunch of girls to start adding her to msn and call her mean names. Then they told her to meet them outside the school so they could beat her up." In this example, the bullying took place both in the virtual and the real world by a group of girls who were reportedly friends of the target. This type of "gang" bullying can have a particularly damaging psychological effect, since it increases the power differential between the bully and target. The more people the bully has on his or her side, the more perceived power that individual may have. Whether these people are known to the target is inconsequential, since the online relationship is often just as real to adolescents as the face-to-face relationship (Wolak, Mitchell & Finkelhor, 2002).

Romantic relationships can contribute to cyberbullying through unwanted sexual invitations or contact online, constituting harassment. Verbal harassment ranged from sexualized insults to unwanted sexual comments to threats of rape. The other frequently represented type of online sexual harassment related to requests for the target to have sex, to do cyber sex, or to do bad / inappropriate things. These requests came through the varied media of online games, chat rooms, msn and others formats. A student described one girl's experience while playing a game online as follows: "one of the characters came up to her because the people on the other end can talk for there [*sic*] characters. He asked Fiona to have sex with him." Some of the incidents described in this study proceeded from romantic relationships, whether online or offline, however, others were unsolicited and bordered on cyberstalking.

Threats and Violence

Threats and violence comprised a significant theme in participants' responses to the question about their experience with cyberbullying, and they can be classified into the following categories: death threats, physical assault, sexual assault, and threats of harm. Students described instances of threats through technologies such as email, blogs, IM, and popular gaming sites – Runescape, and Habbo Hotel were mentioned.

Death threats comprised a large number of the threats described in the comments on cyberbullying. These took the form of general death threats (“threatened to be killed”), of specific method death threats (“His friend then said I should be changed [*sic*] to a walll [*sic*] and cut open with a rusty knife”), of collective death threats (“saying they were going to kill my friend and all of her friends”), and of suicide encouragement (“he told her that she should kill herself”). Such threats illuminate the types of emotional and psychological stress that students may experience as a result of cyberbullying obviously affecting their ability to perform well at school where the presence of the cyberbully is very real.

Threats of physical assault were the most prevalent form of threats in the responses given by students. These ranged from general (“threatening to hurt the person”) to specific in terms of injury and place or time (“say they are going to find a certain kid and break their legs” and “threat, like I will beat you up at school tomorrow”) to sexual in nature (“said that they were going to come and rape him/her”). In addition to this, some of the written responses referred to physical assault as a consequence if some action was not taken on the part of the target (“threatening one of my friends to do stuff or they would hurt them” and “threatened that if they didn't do something that the person wanted them to do that they would track them down and beat them up or kill them”). In addition to *threats* of physical assault, students documented many cases of actual assault as a result of cyberbullying, which will be presented in the discussion on the relationship between online and offline communities. These types of comments illuminate the blurred relationship between cyberbullying and the “real world.”

Students' descriptions of general threats of harm demonstrate the potential of psychological damage accomplished through communication technologies. One target explained, “i said something and she took it the wrong way and got mad at me and got her friends to say im [*sic*] looking forward to seeing u [*sic*] on mondy [*sic*].” While it is not clear what her friends planned to do to the target, the implication is one of unspoken aggression by a peer group. This method of cutting the target off from real or virtual social support is one way that cyberbullies damage the target's self-esteem (Anderson & Sturm, 2007). Another student described a cyberbullying encounter in which a bully will “threat [*sic*] the person and tell them they know where they live and they would shout out there [*sic*] name.” While this threat is not clearly related to causing physical harm, this message suggests an invasion of the presumed “safe haven” of home by the cyberbully.

There were three students who reported cyberbullying incidents in the international context. The first of these incidents was brushed off as insignificant because “they livesd [*sic*] in Sweden.” However, one other report involved a target from Brazil who issued a death threat to the cyberbully's friend. Another target described his or her reaction to internet bullying: “i just yelled at them becuae [*sic*] i didnt [*sic*] liek [*sic*] something they said and if i knew them in person id [*sic*] kick their ass.” Distance between the bully and the target may actually intensify the amount of aggression in a cyberbullying encounter.

Pretending

In order to establish the power differential described as essential to the definition of bullying (Besag, 1989; Rigby, 1993), some cyberbullies resort to pretending. In a national study of Canadian teens, a majority of participants reported that they had pretended to be someone else online (*Young Canadians in a Wired World*, 2005). In this study, cyberbullies were reported to assume alternate genders (“pretending to be this guy and they started sending her mean stuff”) and personalities (“being a hotshot online and as a result got cocky then got beat up”). These types of pretending and identity alteration allow the cyberbully an advantage over the target. As 14% of teens report close friendships or romances in online environments, it is not surprising that this has become an avenue for cyberbullying (Wolak, Mitchell & Finkelhor, 2002). Two individuals reported someone who had pretended online to be a guy who emailed or sent “mean stuff” to the target. In another situation, an individual “pretended to be a girl at my school and they wrote love letters to a boy at my school.” This latter situation could be considered bullying to both the direct and indirect targets, as both the female and the male involved likely experienced discomfort, embarrassment or shame from the actions of the cyberbully.

The Relationship Between Online and Offline Communities

Online technologies allow an overlap between the digital and the natural world. In fact, the internet is often described as a “place” itself (Laegran, 2002). A number of participants identified conflicts that began at school and transferred to online environments, such as MSN or email. The ability of a cyberbully to contact the target at any time increases the perceived power held by that individual. For example, one teenager described an incident in which “hey [*sic*] were in a fight at school and it got bigger on msn.” The other side of the situation was also frequently reported, as a bystander described “calling them mean names and then they got into a fight in real life.” This type of incident progression was quite common. Another example directly relates the school environment to cyberbullying: “they were bullied about something that happened at school, [*sic*] for weeks after they were bullied about it.” One individual was “flirting with a girl jokingly (they were friends) and the boyfriend beat him up,” showing how online interactions are not as private as students often assume (see Ipsos-Reid, 2006).

Perhaps one of the most revealing statements in terms of this environment overlap is found in the following: “My friend Kayla was onMSN [*sic*] and she just broke up with her boyfriend, and he said mean things to her, and she tried to kill herself, but we got it sorted out on the weekend.” This incident of cyberbullying began with a romantic relationship that was most likely conducted in the real world though online romantic relationships are not uncommon, even for adolescents (Wolak, Mitchell & Finkelhor, 2002) but included online exchanges. Verbal abuse on MSN by her ex-boyfriend, following a break-up, resulted in “Kayla’s” attempted suicide. The most telling portion of this account is the final phrase, “we got it sorted out on the weekend,” which suggests that there were no lasting effects from this encounter. In addition, it emphasizes the reality that many students deal with cyberbullying outside school hours, and may never mention their experiences to educators or other adults.

One student describes this type of encounter in which the cyberbully would “threaten the person and tell them they know where they live and they would shout out there [*sic*] name.” Another participant identified a threat to invade her privacy at home, when the cyberbully “said she was going to kill her in her sleep.” While bullies can make students feel unsafe at home, they

can also make targets feel unsafe at school (“scared because the bully might come to are [*sic*] school”) or in public (“threatened to kill me with a knife or whatever if they ever saw me in public again”). Cyberbullies can also tell the target’s secrets (“threatened to tell her secret if she did not do what she said”), furthering the privacy invasion. Personal details are sometimes used as leverage by a cyberbully, such as making comments about the target’s “dead dad”. These tactics prevent the target from living a full and productive life, due to a fear of realized threats.

The Cyberbullying Friend

Responses to the questionnaire indicated that the relationships between bully and target were often those of friends, best friends, or boyfriend/girlfriend. These close relationships can degenerate into betrayed trust, as a result of acquaintances “breaking in” to their online accounts for things such as instant messaging and email. For example, one student shared the following experience: “they broke into my MSN and trashed me in front [*sic*] of my friends.” Considering the high percentage of students who report sharing information such as passwords, this type of behaviour is not surprising (Bright, Dyck & Adams, 2008). However, the frequency of this type of situation indicates that cyberbullying often plays out within groups of friends. While this may be nothing more than the “high school drama” described by one respondent, continued betrayals of trust will have a significant impact.

Following an incident of cyberbullying, students reported both negative and positive changes in relationships. There were many responses that indicated cessation of communication between individuals and increased or new hostility between those involved (“The target and the bully were really good friends until one day [*sic*] when the target received [*sic*] a hurtful [*sic*] message. Afterwards, the two never talked to each other again (haven’t [*sic*] talked yet anyway”). In an interesting phenomenon, though, many students reported being friends, good friends, and even best friends with someone who had previously bullied them online (“this boy on our bus used to bully my friend but not any more because i stood up for her and now the boy on our bus and i are best friends” and “we were in a fight. . . now were [*sic*] BEST friends”). Of course, the middle path also exists, involving periods of online harassment, separation, and friendship (“separate [*sic*] from each other [*sic*] for a while which turns out to be a very long time then we get back together and then we apologize to each other [*sic*] then we are all friends again.” and “we were friends again [*sic*] the next day”). Again, a cross-over between online and physical environments presents itself and leads to several consequences.

Consequences of Cyberbullying

The written answer question in the survey asked students to identify the outcome of the situation (“please describe the situation(s) and what happened as a result”), however, not all students chose to respond to this portion of the question. In addition to this, while many students provided information about actions taken to end the aggression, final outcomes were not always given. Therefore, it was not always possible to determine whether or not the cyberbullying ended or was still in existence. Several trends did present themselves, however, in regards to the outcomes of cyberbullying, including if the aggression ended, if someone like a teacher, a parent or police officer, assisted the target, and if there were any consequences to the cyberbully or the target.

Students provided a variety of responses related to the outcome of cyberbullying

incidents, including a definitive end to the aggression, continued harassment, fortunate circumstance (“nothing ever came of it, luckily [*sic*]”), ceasing communication with the bully, engaging in positive action to end the bullying and responding aggressively. Some participants reported that, over time, the cyberbullying ended because the physical size of the target exceeded that of the aggressor. This response emphasizes the frequent connection between cyberbullying and traditional bullying (Gillespie, 2006). However, for some students, the bullying did not end, but rather they were “kind of used to it so they learned to live with it.” This type of response fits with the descriptors of self-consciousness and low self-esteem evident in many targets after prolonged bullying experiences (Mitchell, Ybarra & Finkelhor, 2007). Other targets took neutral actions, which varied from “blocking” the bully in communication or game technologies, signing off from the service or website where the bullying occurred, and refusing to respond to messages. According to students’ responses, these actions were generally successful in ending the aggression, though it may have taken some time (“he stopped sending messages after her not replying [*sic*] for a long time”). In a more constructive way, some students created new email accounts or told someone about the bullying. Finally, another group of responses indicated that the aggressive response can be the most effective in dealing with a cyberbully, though there may be other associated consequences, such as escalation before it ends (“faught/bullied [*sic*] back..the bully lef [*sic*] them alone after that”). One reason for this may be that the cyberbully is simply acting in aggression to test boundaries, rather than to cause deliberate harm.

Many students reported assistance from parents, educators or law enforcement to end cyberbullying experiences. In general, when students did appeal to adults in authority for help, a solution was effective, though there were some incidents reported where this was not the case. Some students were confident that simply telling an adult would always result in positive change (“u just say something and it changes like if u tell an adult then it will change”), while others found from experience that adults may not be capable of solving the problem (“She with us [*sic*] told a teacher and she did not know what to do since it was out of school.”). In some cases, the bullying ended after the parents of the target and bully spoke with one another. In other cases, the target’s parents learned of the cyberbullying, but took little action.

Some schools in the jurisdiction of this study employ a school resource officer who is present to deal with circumstances such as cyberbullying, when necessary. One student reported going “to our resource officer and he and our councilor [*sic*] and our principal took care of it.” This type of partnership represents the type and extent of authority necessary to effectively deal with most cyberbullies. Educators were an important source of help and support in ending online harassment, according to the students in this study. According to responses in this study, teachers were often informed of cyberbullying by the target or a bystander. One student explains that “the boy being bullied told a teacher and had it dealed [*sic*] with.” Another shared that “other students would hear and they would tell the teachers.” Although teachers were generally effective in resolving cyberbullying incidents, this was not always the case because encounters frequently took place outside school hours. According to students, school administration typically dealt with cyberbullies by meeting with them, followed by giving either in-school or out-of-school suspensions. In one case, four students were all suspended over a cyberbullying incident. Educators are acting to deal with cyberbullying, but the reality is that many students will never turn to adults in authority to help them with online dangers (Fekkes, Pijpers & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005; Hinduja & Patchin, 2005a). In these cases, it would be more helpful if educators work to develop in students “...enough self-confidence and critical maturity to be able to apply critical judgments..” (Frechette, 2006, p. 169).

In some cases, students turned to peers rather than an adult in authority, with positive results. Some bystanders described standing up for their friends, and, as one student said, “i’m tough and i stopped them.” Other peers went so far as to contact the cyberbully to determine identity or to warn him or her away from the target. Bystanders also employed more passive measures, such as counselling the target (“i usually talk them through it and get them to realize these people are not worth the time” and “asked his friends for help and they gave him advice and he ended up blocking the person”). Online friends also proved helpful when facing cyberbullies, as “they booted them from the session we were playing.” These peer relationships are supportive and helpful, which is a positive alternative to the gang mentality that frequently accompanies cyberbullying.

Students reported various consequences for those who engaged in cyberbullying, including school-related consequences, technology-related consequences, and even legal consequences. However, the majority of consequences seem to have fallen to the target. The target may lose friendships, either because a friend was bullying or because the bully spread rumours or pretended to send messages from the target’s MSN, email or cell phone. In addition, targets often relinquished computer privileges, such as MSN or email access due to experience with cyberbully attacks (“we got rid of our personal email accounts and got just one family one that only has my sister on it” and “she never entered that site again”). Some students even experienced anxiety or loss of concentration at school after being contacted by a cyberbully.

Conclusion

According to participants in this study, cyberbullying tactics included the use of threats, verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and pretending. One of the common themes in these cyberbullying methods was an invasion of privacy of the target, through using a target’s online account, threatening to harm the target at home or school (traditionally safe places), and telling the target’s secrets. As the literature on cyberbullying shows, most bullies know their targets, whereas targets frequently report unknown perpetrators. While cyberbullying often occurred within friendships or romantic relationships, this did not serve to protect the target from aggressive forms of online bullying. Rather, it may have intensified the emotional impact of an attack since it came from a friend. There was a trend of boyfriends and girlfriends who had ended their relationships and proceeded to dispute this through online harassment.

The outcome of cyberbullying situations often depended on the actions taken by the target. Students mentioned actions taken by the target, but were not always clear if these ended the cyberbullying behaviors. In some cases, targets of cyberbullying chose to block the bully or change online account names to avoid the harassment. Others retaliated in aggression, which proved effective in ending the cyberbullying attacks, though not without a relational cost. Many students reported turning to an adult in authority, such as a parent, an educator or a police officer, for help in ending the negative actions against them. Most students reported that this was an effective method of dealing with cyberbullying. Consequences of cyberbullying seemed to affect targets more than bullies. Many bullies reported getting in trouble, being suspended at school, or loss of friendship, but targets experienced emotional trauma, difficulties in school, loss of friendship and trust in other relationships, and loss of privileges or access to communication technologies. However, researchers suggest that schools have a role to play, not only to punish perpetrators of cyberbullying, but in designing interventions to educate students and teachers about cyberbullying and to intervene on behalf of targets (Kowalksi & Limber, 20087).

As school bullying has grown to include both traditional and internet aggression, sometimes in tandem, educators must be aware of the consequences to their students and their potential to help (Keith & Martin, 2005; Vaillancourt, Hymel & McDougall, 2003). Although much of cyberbullying occurs outside of school hours and property, it can have a significant impact upon academic performance, class attendance, and student relationships. A school also offers a prime location for dissemination of a hateful or hurtful website, email, or other communication, thus increasing the negative effect of these types of online harassment. Teachers need to be familiar with school policies or help develop school policies, if not in place, on cyberbullying so that they can deal with it effectively when a bystander or a target reports the behaviour. More importantly, a model of learning needs to develop for 21st century education that includes "...awareness, analysis, reflection, action and experience [which] leads to better comprehension, critical thinking, and informed judgments" (Frechette, 2006, p. 169). Students in this study tended to have confidence that adults could help, but if those in authority do not act, this tenuous belief will be lost. Students must also be given the opportunity to speak about their own experiences with cyberbullying. The themes that emerge from their encounters with this phenomenon can open up new directions for researchers and teachers seeking to understand, tackle and reduce cyberbullying.

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