SCHOOLS AND CYBERBULLYING: PROBLEM PERCEPTION, CURRENT ACTIONS AND FUTURE NEEDS

Heidi Vandebosch
University of Antwerp
Sint-Jacobstraat 2, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium
heidi.vandebosch@uantwerpen.be

Karolien Poels
University of Antwerp
Sint-Jacobstraat 2, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium
karolien.poels@uantwerpen.be

Gie Deboutte
University of Antwerp
Sint-Jacobstraat 2, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium
gie.deboutte@uantwerpen.be

ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying is a common phenomenon amongst young people. It exhibits many similarities to traditional school bullying, with a potentially serious impact on the mental health and school functioning of victims. For this reason, action by schools is often recommended. The aim of this article is to provide a better picture of what schools are currently doing to address cyberbullying and of what schools will need to continue doing so in the future. An online survey was conducted among staff members of 309 primary and secondary schools in Flanders, which is the Dutch speaking part of Belgium. The questionnaire measured the schools' experiences with cyberbullying and their perceived

responsibility and efficacy in dealing with this issue as well as their concrete preventive, detective, and reactive actions. The results indicate that, although most schools are aware of relatively few cases of cyberbullying, they do consider cyberbullying to be a problem. Many schools consider it their duty to inform students about cyberbullying and to help find solutions to cyberbullying incidents involving students, even if they take place away from the school grounds or outside school hours. Although most schools organize concrete actions with regard to cyberbullying, they often seem uncertain about the appropriateness and effectiveness of their actions. They would welcome evidence-based intervention programmes that would appeal to their students.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, School Staff, Interventions

INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying has been defined as ‘an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time, against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself’ (Smith et al., 2008). Examples of cyberbullying include the use of the Internet or mobile phones to insult or threaten someone or to post embarrassing videoclips of someone on a website (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009).

LITERATURE REVIEW

To date, most research has focused on describing the current situation with regard to cyberbullying, addressing such aspects as the prevalence of cyberbullying (Riebel, Jäger, & Fischer, 2009), the profiles of bullies (Görzig & Ólafsson, 2012) and victims (Katzner, Fetchenhauer, & Belschak, 2009), and the impact of cyberbullying (Bonanno & Hymel, 2013) in addition to related definitional and measurement issues (Menesini & Nocentini, 2009). Most of these situation analysis studies are based on surveys among young people. Their findings indicate that cyberbullying is a common phenomenon, although the exact prevalence rates vary considerably, depending on the type of measurement (e.g. direct versus indirect measurements), the type of questionnaire (e.g. online, school, or face-to-face at home), and the specific age categories examined. For example, in a review of existing research, Tokunaga (2010) reports victimization rates of 4%-53%, with bully percentages of 3%-23%.

Studies on the negative impact of cyberbullying have demonstrated that its consequences are similar to those of traditional bullying. Victims of cyberbullying often experience more stress and depression-like symptoms (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007; Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2012; Machmutow, Perren, Sticca, & Alsaker, 2012; Ybarra, 2004a), low self-esteem (Brighi et al., 2012; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010), poor academic performance (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004b, 2007), and even suicide, in some cases (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

Many cases of cyberbullying originate in the offline social context of the school, with most bullying and victimization taking place between young people who know each other from school (Smith et al., 2008). In many cases, cyberbullying is actually an extension of traditional bullying, with traditional bullies targeting their offline victims online (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Mishna, Cook, Gadalla, Daciuk, & Solomon, 2010; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009; Wegge, Vandebosch, & Eggermont, 2013). Moreover, cyberbullying affects the students' functioning in schools (Beran & Li, 2007). For these reasons, many researchers and legal experts (see e.g. Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; Willard, 2012) argue that schools have an important responsibility to address this problem. Schools are also considered central actors, given their experience with traditional anti-bullying programmes (Dake, Price, Telljohann, & Funk, 2004; Samara & Smith, 2008) and their increasing involvement in teaching knowledge and skills related to IT (Tondeur, Cooper, & Newhouse, 2010; Tondeur, van Braak, & Valcke, 2007).

In light of the situations described above, many scholars have suggested that schools should adopt integrated anti-bullying programmes aimed at both traditional and new forms of bullying (Agatston, Kowalski, & Limber, 2007; Campbell, 2005; Mason, 2008). Proceeding from the 'whole school approach' (Samara & Smith, 2008), which has proven to be the most effective way to address traditional bullying, such programmes should rely on the cooperation of various actors (i.e. school staff, students, parents, and the wider community), and they should include various types of action (i.e. preventive, detective, and reactive). The development of such an integrated anti-bullying approach (Salmivalli & Pöyhönen, 2012) requires the consideration of characteristics specific to this type of bullying.

The specific characteristics of cyberbullying have consequences for the various actors that should be involved (Aoyama & Talbert, 2010; Li, 2006; Mason, 2008; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). Cyberbullying usually arises at home, and it cannot be observed directly except online. In addition, perpetrators often take advantage of the relative

anonymity offered by IT (Moore, Nakano, Enomoto, & Suda, 2012). School staff members are therefore likely to be less aware of this type of bullying than they are of traditional bullying, and they are thus less capable of responding immediately (Snakenborg, Van Acker, & Gable, 2011). For these reasons, other types of actors (e.g. parents and Internet service providers as well as the police and cyber-police) should also be engaged in actions aimed at the prevention, detection, and solution of cyberbullying (Vandebosch, Beirens, D'haese, Wegge, & Pabian, 2012). Within the school as well, the task of addressing cyberbullying appropriately requires the involvement of new types of partners, including staff members responsible for IT services and teachers who provide IT instruction (Diamanduros, Downs, & Jenkins, 2008).

Addressing cyberbullying requires adjustments in the content of anti-bullying programs (as implemented in schools). The prevention, detection, and solution of cyberbullying requires all parties involved to be aware of what cyberbullying actually is, which students are at risk of becoming perpetrators or victims, what leads to cyberbullying, and what can be done to prevent or solve it (Diamanduros et al., 2008). For example, preventive actions aimed at students should focus on the aspects of IT that distinguish cyberbullying from traditional bullying (Aoyama & Talbert, 2010; Salmivalli & Pöyhönen, 2012). More specifically, potential perpetrators should be made aware that the Internet and mobile phones do not offer complete anonymity. Potential victims should be taught how they can protect themselves better (e.g. by using privacy settings) and what they should do when they are being cyberbullied (e.g. save the evidence, tell adults). Finally, potential bystanders who witness cyberbullying should be instructed not to reinforce the perpetrator (e.g. by 'liking' rude comments on social networking sites) and to help the online victim (e.g. by reporting the abuse). These actions against cyberbullying involve a combination of actions aimed at bullying prevention, e-safety (i.e. safe and responsible use of ICT), and netiquette. These activities (and the parties involved) should be coordinated at the system level by a representative team from the school (Mason, 2008).

While many authors have suggested actions schools should take, very few studies have addressed what schools are currently doing about cyberbullying and what the potential barriers and facilitators for these actions might be.

Some authors note that 'schools have been slow to respond to the increased incidences of cyberbullying' (Aoyama & Talbert, 2010) and are only now 'beginning to extend their bullying policies to include the Internet' (Sharples, Graber, Harrison, &

Logant, 2009). Several aspects (or ‘barriers’) have been proposed in explanations for the initial and current lack of initiatives with regard to cyberbullying. First, school principals and teachers might underestimate the prevalence of cyberbullying, particularly given that it is less visible to them (Snakenborg et al., 2011) and because students are unlikely to report cyberbullying (Tokunaga, 2010) and its impact on victims. Second, school staff members might not feel responsible for cyberbullying, which usually takes place away from the school grounds and outside school hours. Third, they may lack the knowledge, financial means, time, and materials needed in order to address cyberbullying. On the other hand, media attention to cyberbullying has been increasing in recent years, and many policy initiatives have been proposed and adopted to address the phenomenon (e.g. large-scale awareness campaigns funded by governments, the promotion of IT curricula in schools). These developments might act as stimulating factors to improve the ability of schools to respond to cyberbullying, as could developments in research (e.g. increasing attention to the creation of evidence-based interventions against cyberbullying) and, closer to schools, the growing concern of parents.

The aim of this paper is to provide a better picture of the ways in which schools perceive cyberbullying, the actions they are currently taking to address the phenomenon (as compared to their actions with regard to traditional bullying or other initiatives in the context of e-safety), the potential barriers and stimulating factors that they encounter, and their future needs in this regard. The primary research questions addressed by this paper are thus as follows: How are schools currently addressing the phenomenon of cyberbullying, and how do they evaluate their actions?

The answers to these questions can provide cyberbullying researchers (who now appear to be shifting their focus from analysis towards solutions) and other developers of anti-cyberbullying interventions with information regarding the needs of potential users.

METHOD

Subjects

In all, respondents from 309 Flemish schools participated in an online survey. In most cases (72.2%), the standardized questionnaire was completed by the school principal. Other respondents included teachers (10%), IT coordinators (4.9%), psychosocial personnel (8.7%), and other (4.2%) staff members. Of all schools responding, 45.3% offered only primary education, 49.5% offered only secondary education, and 5.2% offered both primary and secondary education. The schools varied in size, ranging from

schools with 100 pupils to those with 1,900 pupils. The average school size was 409 pupils ($SD = 315.2$).

Instruments

The online questionnaire consisted of five parts. The items used in the questionnaire were inspired in part by previous studies on teachers' perceptions of cyberbullying (Baker, 2010) and schools' current actions with regard to traditional bullying (Samara & Smith, 2008; McGuckin & Lewis, 2008) and IT and e-safety (Sharples et al., 2009; Tondeur et al., 2010). They were also based on literature containing concrete guidelines for schools and school personnel with regard to addressing cyberbullying (Chibbaro, 2007; Marczak & Coyne, 2010; Mason, 2008). In order to adapt the questionnaire to the current, Flemish context, we also gathered input from a focus group consisting of Flemish educational experts (e.g. representatives of teachers' organizations, school psychologists, and school networks), some of whom also provided feedback on the actual questionnaire.

The first part of the questionnaire was intended to gather background information about the schools (e.g. level of education, type of education, number of students, number of school staff, and province) and about the person completing the questionnaire (function, age, and sex). The second part of the questionnaire concerned the schools' general perceptions of cyberbullying: their problem experience, responsibility, and self-efficacy. Using a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), respondents were asked to indicate their relative agreement with such statements as: 'Cyberbullying is not a problem at our school', 'It is not the school's responsibility to solve cyberbullying issues between pupils that take place outside school', and 'Our school knows how to deal with cyberbullying'. The third part of the questionnaire concerned the school's concrete experiences with cyberbullying. Items addressed the number of actual cases of cyberbullying of which school staff members were aware (during the current school year), the people who reported these cases of cyberbullying and the type of cyberbullying involved, and the profiles of victims and offenders as well as the relative frequency of cyberbullying as compared to traditional bullying (more, less, the same).

The fourth part of the questionnaire addressed actions against cyberbullying, traditional bullying, and e-safety. This section opened with a list of specific actions against cyberbullying and traditional bullying. These actions were classified under the following headings: 'Initiatives aimed at students' (preventive, detective, and curative), 'Initiatives aimed at parents', 'Initiatives aimed at teachers', and 'Initiatives aimed at

schools'. The respondents were asked to indicate the initiatives that their schools had undertaken. They were then asked about their schools' involvement with various types of IT and e-safety actions, indicating whether their schools had engaged in these actions. The fifth and last part of the questionnaire concerned the needs and wishes of the schools with regard to new tools and materials for fighting cyberbullying. We first asked the respondents to indicate the extent to which their schools had experienced a need for support in addressing cyberbullying. They were then asked to use a five-point Likert scale to indicate the relative importance that they attached to a range of aspects (e.g. price, appeal to students) when considering the adoption of intervention materials and programmes against cyberbullying.

Procedure

The Flemish Ministry of Education provided a database containing the email addresses of all primary and secondary schools in Flanders ($N = 3643$, 27 of which were incorrect). On 12 April 2011, we sent an email to each address, inviting the schools to participate in the online survey. Reminders were sent on 26 May 2011. Of the 497 initial responses (initial response rate = 13.7%), 309 were usable for further analyses (because the respondents had completed the entire survey), thus yielding a final response rate of 8.5%. Factors that are likely to explain the relatively low response rate include the length of the questionnaire and, related to this, a lack of time on the part of the respondents (many of whom replied that they were overloaded by all types of invitations to participate in surveys). The schools that participated in the sample seem to be representative of the entire population of Flemish schools with regard to such basic criteria as type of education and school size.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analysed using SPSS. Given that this survey is one of the first to investigate the experiences and actions of schools with regard to cyberbullying, we focus on describing the main tendencies for all relevant variables.

RESULTS

General Perception of Cyberbullying and the Role of the School

The results (see Figure 1) indicate that a majority of the schools (59%) think that their students are involved in cyberbullying. An almost equal percentage (55%) consider cyberbullying to be a problem within their schools. Almost all of the schools (92%) indicated that they consider it their duty to inform young people about cyberbullying. Although cyberbullying often occurs away from the school grounds and outside school hours, 63% of the respondents also reported feeling responsible for helping to find solutions for cyberbullying that originates at home. In contrast, however, only a quarter of the schools reported knowing the best way to address bullying, and less than half (42%) reported that their teachers currently receive sufficient information about cyberbullying. In general, school staff members do not think that they receive enough guidance. Only 13% agreed that they had sufficient professional support, and a similar percentage (15%) agreed with the statement that there are sufficient guidelines. The results further indicate a current lack of concrete materials. Only about one fifth (17%) of the schools reported having enough materials regarding cyberbullying.

Concrete Experiences with Cyberbullying in School

Most schools (59%) indicated that they had experienced 1-5 cyberbullying cases during the current school year. Most of these cases had been reported by the victims or their parents (58% and 61% of the schools, respectively). The school representatives had experience with several different types of cyberbullying, although direct forms of bullying (in which hurtful messages - text, pictures, videos - were sent directly to the victim) were the most common (mentioned by 66% of the schools). A clear majority of the schools (59%) mentioned cyberbullying on social networking sites, followed by cyberbullying by text messaging (52%), MSN (43%), and email (29%). Schools were most likely to identify students as the victims of cyberbullying (77% of the schools), although teachers had also become victims of cyberbullying (in 11% of the schools). A large majority of the schools (82%) considered cyberbullying to be less prevalent than traditional bullying.

Figure 1 Schools' Perceptions about Cyberbullying

Initiatives Regarding Cyberbullying, Traditional Bullying, and E-safety

In most schools, the principal is responsible for developing a policy against cyberbullying (71%) and traditional bullying (4/5 of all schools), often supported by other members of the school team, including school psychologists, teachers, and (specifically for cyberbullying) those responsible for IT. Nevertheless, only 18.4% of the schools reported having anti-cyberbullying policies that had been formalized in written documents.

The Flemish schools participating in the survey reported having organized a range of activities with regard to cyberbullying, even though activities addressing traditional bullying are clearly more numerous. While many of these activities are aimed at students (e.g. for prevention, detection, and intervention; see Figures 2, 3, and 4), others are aimed at parents and teachers as well.

A majority of the schools reported having preventive actions aimed at students. For example, 81% of the schools have classroom discussions about cyberbullying. Almost half of the schools (47%) also explain the school rules regarding cyberbullying to their students. Not all age groups are provided the same extent of focus by anti-cyberbullying actions. The most attention is focused on cyberbullying involving students between 11 and 12 years of age (81% of the primary schools) and between 13 and 14 years of age (61% of the secondary schools). Initiatives regarding the detection of cyberbullying are also less common than those intended to detect traditional bullying. For example, only 43% of the schools indicated having a system for reporting cyberbullying (as compared to 61% for traditional bullying). In more than half of the schools (57%), cyberbullying incidents are solved with the assistance of teachers or the principal (e.g. through discussion with perpetrators and/or victims). For traditional bullying, this type of approach is taken in almost all schools (97%). The lower percentage for cyberbullying could be because cyberbullying appears to be less prevalent (and less visible to the school staff). Moreover, the school staff might feel better equipped to take a proper approach to traditional bullying than they are to address cyberbullying (see *supra*).

The results suggest that there are fewer differences between cyberbullying and traditional bullying in terms of initiatives aimed at parents. About one third of the schools reported attempts to inform parents by providing textual information (35%) or by organizing special information sessions (28%). For traditional bullying, 50% of the schools provide textual information, and 28% organize information sessions. Flemish schools also pay considerable attention to informing and activating teachers with regard to cyberbullying, although they undertake even more activities with regard to traditional bullying. In 61% of the schools, teachers are encouraged to respond quickly and adequately to cyberbullying. About half of the schools have designated someone to advise teachers with regard to cyberbullying. The schools also provide information to teachers through written text (45%) or special information sessions (28%). Only about 10% of the schools indicated that they conduct organized assessments of teachers' experiences with cyberbullying.

Figure 2 Bullying and Cyberbullying Activities Aimed at Students: Prevention

Figure 3 Bullying and Cyberbullying Activities Aimed at Students: Detection

Figure 4: Bullying and Cyberbullying Activities Aimed at Students: Interventions

The questionnaire also contained items concerning the concrete materials and tools that schools use in their anti-cyberbullying actions. As is the case in traditional bullying, these materials are highly diverse and gathered through a range of channels. For example, about 33% of the schools reported obtaining their materials from organizations specialized in the development of educational materials. About one third of the schools (30%) receive their materials through the Flemish Ministry of Education, and 31% of the schools use the Internet to find materials to use in anti-cyberbullying actions. Only 28% of the schools reported that they were satisfied (or very satisfied) with the currently available range of anti-cyberbullying materials, with about one fifth (21%) reporting that they were dissatisfied (or very dissatisfied).

As indicated in the literature review, cyberbullying can also be linked with e-safety. According to survey results, three quarters of the Flemish schools responding have IT policy plans. Nevertheless, only 41% reported having explicit policies with regard to e-safety. In most of the schools (93%), students are informed about what is and is not allowed with regard to the use of computers, the Internet, and mobile phones in schools. These rules (and the sanctions for not following them) are mentioned in the statutes of 61% of the schools. Almost all of the schools (97%) reported integrating safe IT use into their lessons. Of all e-safety risks, cyberbullying is the most often addressed (by 90% of

the schools), followed by content risks (e.g. unwanted confrontation with violence, racism, and sexually explicit images; 74%), computer viruses (71%), and grooming (58%).

Needs and Wishes Regarding New and Existing Anti-cyberbullying Intervention Tools

A clear majority of the schools (62%) reported needing concrete support with regard to anti-cyberbullying interventions. According to the schools, it is important that interventions, materials, and tools related to cyberbullying be described clearly (93%), applied easily (94%), able to reach a large number of students (86%), attractive and fun to students (78%), and closely related to their living world (95%). They should also be ready for teachers to use (84%) and available at no cost (79%), and they should fit into the school curriculum (68%) and the available lesson times (79%). They should not require extensive training (84.1%). The attitudes that the schools reported with regard to the necessity of collaborating with external partners in the execution of interventions were more ambiguous (43.5% moderately to strongly agreed that this should not be required, while 42.5% were neutral and 14.2% disagreed or strongly disagreed). The schools also reported being moderately (39%) to very (52%) interested in computer-related tools (with game-like elements) that could be used to address cyberbullying.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Previous research has shown that cyberbullying is a common problem amongst young people and that it can have a serious impact on their mental health and school functioning. Most cases of cyberbullying originate in the offline social context of the school. Furthermore, most schools have experience with anti-bullying programmes, and they are increasingly involved in teaching knowledge and skills related to IT and e-safety. For these reasons, schools are considered a central actor in interventions related to cyberbullying.

This study is one of the first to provide systematic information on the perceptions and concrete experiences of school staff members with regard to cyberbullying as well as on the actions they are currently undertaking and their remaining needs.

According to the results of this study, although most schools are aware of relatively few cases of cyberbullying, they do consider cyberbullying as a problem. Many schools consider it their duty to inform students about cyberbullying and to help find a solution for cyberbullying incidents involving students, even if they take place away from the

school grounds or outside of school hours. Although most schools organize preventive, detective, and/or curative actions aimed at students, parents, or teachers, they often seem uncertain about the appropriateness and effectiveness of their actions. They indicate a strong need for more professional guidance in this area. Schools would welcome evidence-based intervention programmes that would be appealing to their students. In light of this reported need, scholars should conduct further investigation on the most effective ways of addressing cyberbullying.

To ensure the adoption, implementation, and continuation of such evidence-based, effective strategies, it is also important to devote additional consideration to the particular concerns of the school personnel. Adoption can be fostered by stressing the positive outcomes of these strategies as well as by addressing the perceived disadvantages or barriers related to them and by convincing teachers, principals, and other staff members involved about their ability to implement them. The latter requires providing professional training and/or clearly written manuals and easy-to-use materials. One requirement for the continued use of these strategies involves providing feedback to schools regarding the outcomes of their anti-cyberbullying efforts.

As argued in this article, anti-cyberbullying strategies should be part of a general, whole-school anti-bullying approach, involving a wide range of ‘old’ and ‘new’ actors (e.g. parents, the police, Internet service providers, social media platforms) and paying attention to social relationships in offline and online contexts. In the case of cyberbullying, it is still unclear what the specific role of these actors is or should be and how their efforts should be aligned in order to maximize their impact. For example, the circumstances under which schools should take the initiative to address cases of cyberbullying and those under which parents or the police should take the lead are unclear. Attention to online social relationships within the context of initiatives that address cyberbullying (which the results of this study suggest is the most relevant online risk that schools should address) could also stimulate a broader vision of online literacy amongst students. In addition to technical knowledge and skills (e.g. knowing how to use privacy settings), students should be taught about online social interaction norms (e.g. appropriate ways to behave online).

Policymakers involved with education, youth, well-being, IT, justice, and other related areas should undertake, stimulate, and coordinate initiatives promoting the adoption of evidence-based strategies for addressing cyberbullying in schools. For example, they could develop legislative initiatives (e.g. requiring schools to adopt

anti-bullying and anti-cyberbullying policies and formulating learning outcomes with regard to social skills, both online and offline), by providing facilities (e.g. support systems, financing) and by promoting awareness in schools (with regard to cyberbullying and existing evidence-based programmes for addressing it).

In this final section, we address several of the shortcomings of our study and offer suggestions for future research. As mentioned in the methods section, the response rate for the online survey was relatively low, despite the measures taken to encourage participation. In addition, although the schools that participated are representative of the entire population of Flemish schools in terms of type of education and school size, it could be that schools for which the issue of cyberbullying is more salient were more likely to respond to the questionnaire. We attempted to address this issue by explicitly mentioning in the invitation letter that we were interested in the reactions of all schools, even if they had relatively little experience with the issue. Another point to consider is that, because this study is one of the first to investigate the experiences, perceptions, and actions of school staff members, the findings are highly descriptive in nature. Finally, this study concentrates on one specific region, although previous research on traditional bullying and cyberbullying has provided evidence of cultural or regional variations regarding both the prevalence of cyberbullying and the way it is handled in schools (see e.g. Li, 2008).

Future studies could use our results as a starting point for 1) investigating the experiences, perceptions, and actions of school personnel with regard to cyberbullies in other regions; 2) analysing the relationship between problem perception, perceived responsibility, and self-efficacy when addressing cyberbullying and charting the number and nature of the concrete cyberbullying actions that are being taken; and 3) exploring the findings further using qualitative methods (e.g. in-depth interviews with school personnel).

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