

School Psychology International

<http://spi.sagepub.com/>

Sticks and Stones Can Break My Bones, But How Can Pixels Hurt Me? : Students' Experiences with Cyber-Bullying

Wanda Cassidy, Margaret Jackson and Karen N. Brown
School Psychology International 2009 30: 383
DOI: 10.1177/0143034309106948

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://spi.sagepub.com/content/30/4/383>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



[International School Psychology Association](http://spi.sagepub.com/)

Additional services and information for *School Psychology International* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://spi.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://spi.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://spi.sagepub.com/content/30/4/383.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Jul 31, 2009

[What is This?](#)

Sticks and Stones Can Break My Bones, But How Can Pixels Hurt Me?

Students' Experiences with Cyber-Bullying

WANDA CASSIDY^a, MARGARET JACKSON^b and
KAREN N. BROWN^b

^a*Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, Canada and,* ^b*School of Criminology, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, Canada*

ABSTRACT Educators and the public alike are often perplexed with the enormous and evolving cyber *mise en scène*. Youth of the digital generation are interacting in ways our fore-mothers and fathers never imagined – using electronic communications that until 30 years ago never existed. This article reports on a study of cyber-bullying conducted with students in grades 6 through 9 in five schools in British Columbia, Canada. Our intent was to quantify computer and cellular phone usage; to seek information on the type, extent and impact of cyber-bullying incidents from both bullies' and victims' perspectives; to delve into online behaviours such as harassment, labelling (gay, lesbian), negative language, sexual connotations; to solicit participants' solutions to cyber-bullying; to canvass their opinions about cyber-bullying and to inquire into their reporting practices to school officials and other adults. This study provides insight into the growing problem of cyber-bullying and helps inform educators and policy-makers as to appropriate prevention or intervention measures to counter cyber-bullying.

KEY WORDS: cyberbullying; educational policy and practice; school culture; technology

Introduction

Youth today have adopted a new and distinct form of bullying that has changed the rules of mockery, insults and harm. A new forum, the electronic venue, has evolved in which youth of all ages spend a considerable portion of their days interacting and dialoguing in cyberspace,

School Psychology International Copyright © 2009 SAGE Publications (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore and Washington DC), Vol. 30(4): 383–402.
DOI: 10.1177/0143034309106948

where the language has changed and adapted to net-speak, identities can be protected and personalities changed, and youth are faced with new and almost limitless liberties to interact and role-play (Belsey, 2006; Brown et al., 2006; Willard, 2006). Since cyber-bullying has become a global phenomenon (Kowalski et al., 2008), educators, academics, policymakers and legal specialists are just now beginning to grasp the enormity of the problems associated with cyberspace behaviours and opportunities, while struggling to develop effective policies and practices to counter the problem.

Electronic arenas are not all negative, however, but can be a haven for positive discourse where youth can seek a safe, nurturing environment for behaviours that reflect and promote social responsibility and encourage caring and respectful interactions. These positive aspects of cyberspace can nurture healthy development of identity and foster 'netizenship'.

This article will report on a British Columbia, Canada cyber-bullying study conducted in 2007. Our research goals were to obtain as much information as possible from youth in elementary and secondary schools on their cyber-bullying experiences and practices, in order to assist educators and policy makers in determining effective practices and policies to counter and prevent cyber-bullying in schools.

Methods

Procedure

We conducted comparative analyses with data gathered from surveys administered to 365 students in grades 6, 7, 8 and 9 from three elementary and two secondary schools in a large metropolitan region of British Columbia, Canada. After obtaining ethics approval from the university and school districts, we selected five schools that represented a spectrum of socio-economic status and ethnicity. Before administering the surveys, we visited each participating classroom to discuss our research project and to distribute parental consent forms. Approximately one week later we returned to the schools to administer the surveys to participating students. While surveying the students one researcher was present in the room at all times to answer questions, interpret terms, language and phrases for English as a second or third language students and monitor the students' behaviour to ensure responsible reporting.

Survey instrument

The survey was divided into five sections, each section focusing on a different topic: Demographics, Victims of Cyber-bullying; Friends or

Other Students who have been Cyber-bullied; Solutions to Cyber-bullying and Opinions about Cyber-bullying. The survey included 192 variables comprised of closed-ended questions such as multiple-choice, dichotomous and categorical and ten open-ended questions strategically integrated at certain points throughout the survey. The researchers designed the survey to accommodate youth of varying language abilities, meaning the wording used was relatively simple and font was stylized for easy reading. The survey began by asking demographic information regarding age, gender, ethnicity, first language and home language, followed by questions relating to computer and cellular phone usage, the types and extent of cyber-bullying incidents from both bullies' and victims' perspectives, online behaviours such as harassment, labelling (gay, lesbian), negative language, sexual connotations, opinions about cyber-bullying, students' suggestions for solutions to the problem and their reporting practices to school officials or other adults.

The open-ended sections asked respondents if they would like to provide an example of a time when they felt bullied online or through text messaging, to tell us which students they thought were most likely to be victims of cyber-bullies and to relay incidents of cyber-bullying that they had participated in or witnessed. We also asked an open-ended question at the end of the survey that asked participants if they wished to tell us anything else about this topic.

In this article we report findings from both univariate and bivariate analyses using percentage quantification. When comparative analyses are utilized, we report primarily on the age variations in our sample population. Because of the wealth of information collected in this study, quantification comparisons between genders, ethnicities and educational districts, including more sophisticated statistical analysis, as well as qualitative analyses of the open-ended questions are reported elsewhere (Cassidy et al., 2009; Jackson et al., 2009).

Participants

We focused our study on middle school students, aged 11–15, as research has shown that youth in this age range may be more inclined towards online bullying behaviour and cyberspace victimization (Belsey, n.d.; Brown et al., 2006; Kowalski, et al, 2008; Willard, n.d.). Approximately two-thirds of students in our sample were 13 or 14 years of age and in grades 8 or 9. Twelve percent were in grade 6 and 20 percent in grade 7. Forty-one percent were male and 59 percent were female. The majority of our sample population is of Asian descent (Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Taiwanese, Japanese, Thai and Filipino) (69 percent), 21 percent identified themselves as Caucasian and just over 5 percent as South American or South Asian. This breakdown

roughly reflects the representation in the participating school district.

When asked how students rated themselves academically in comparison to other students in their grade, approximately 27 percent of participants said they do better than most students in their grade, 49 percent said they are on par with other students, 8 percent said they do less well than other students and about 15 percent of students have no idea of how they compared with other students.

Results

Online routines

In order to determine the extent of online involvement among youth, especially outside of the school environment, we asked the sample population if they use the Internet at home and if so, how often. Among the 363 survey participants (two missing) who answered this question, almost all (355) students reported that they use the Internet at home (seven of the eight students who said they do not use the Internet at home were female), with 64 percent claiming they access the Internet at least once a day, 23 percent three to five times per week and 7 percent reporting sporadically surfing once or twice per week. Because the number of computers in a home usually reflects the level of technological use among its residents, we asked participants to tell us how many computers are in their home. The results are interesting – only one student said there is no computer in his home, while 23 percent report one computer, 35 percent report two computers and just over 40 percent admit to having three or more computers in their homes ($n = 364$).

It is also interesting to note the similarities in Internet usage between genders, with Table 1 showing that almost 66 percent of the boys use the Internet daily compared with 64 percent of the girls; 22 percent of boys versus 24 percent of girls use the Internet three to five times per week and approximately the same percent of girls and boys (7 percent) use it once or twice per week.

Cellular phones

Slightly more than one-half of the respondents (58 percent) have their own cellular phones. Of those students who have cellular phones, approximately 40 percent use their cellular phones at school, although 57 percent report they do not use them for text messaging. Younger students (age 11) are less likely to have their own cellular phones (yes – 35 percent, no – 64 percent), with cellular phone ownership increasing with age, so accordingly, this ratio is then reversed, for example, for students in the 13-to-14-year-old age range (yes – 65 percent, no – 35 percent). In other words, by the time students reach the secondary

Table 1 *Internet use*

	<i>How often do you use the Internet?</i>				<i>Not applicable</i>	<i>Total</i>
	<i>At least once a day</i>	<i>3-5 times per week</i>	<i>1-2 times per week</i>	<i>1-3 times per month</i>		
Male						
Count	97	33	11	6	1	148
% within Gender	65.5%	22.3%	7.4%	4.1%	0.7%	100.0%
% of Total	26.9%	9.1%	3.0%	1.7%	0.3%	41.0%
Female						
Count	137	50	15	5	6	213
% within Gender	64.3%	23.5%	7.0%	2.3%	2.8%	100.0%
% of Total	38.0%	13.9%	4.2%	1.4%	1.7%	59.0%
Total						
Count	234	83	26	11	7	361
% within Gender	64.8%	23.0%	7.2%	3.0%	1.9%	100.0%
% of Total	64.8%	23.0%	7.2%	3.0%	1.9%	100.0%

school level (grade 8 and beyond), most students have their own cellular phone.

Victims of cyber-bullying

To assess the extent to which students had experienced cyber-bullying, we provided participants with 18 examples of cyber-bullying practices, and asked them to indicate whether they had experienced any of these since the start of the school year: never; occasionally; often. For brevity, we will refer to these questions by number throughout the rest of this article.

- 1 Received an angry, rude or vulgar message from another student over the Internet or email?
- 2 Received an angry, rude or vulgar message from another student using cell phone messaging?
- 3 Continued to receive hurtful messages even when you asked the sender to stop?
- 4 Were afraid to open your email or read your cell messages for fear of seeing hurtful messages?
- 5 Called a negative name or harassed because of your ability (e.g. academic, athletic, artistic)?
- 6 Called a negative name or harassed because of a disability you have?

- 7 Called a negative name or harassed because of your race or ethnicity?
- 8 Called a negative name or harassed because of your religion?
- 9 Called a negative name or harassed because of your clothing or dress?
- 10 Called a negative name or harassed because of your gender?
- 11 Called a negative name or harassed because of your sexual orientation?
- 12 Called a negative name or harassed because of your physical appearance (e.g. size, weight)?
- 13 Been labelled as gay or lesbian, even if you are not?
- 14 Been subjected to uninvited or unwanted sexual suggestions online or through text messaging?
- 15 Had unwanted sexually explicit pictures sent to you?
- 16 Received a threatening message from another student that made you afraid?
- 17 Discovered that someone else pretended to be you online and made you look bad?
- 18 Had someone send or post sensitive personal information about you to others online?

Certain questions elicited little or no responses. For example, most participants (85–98 percent) said they have never received the forms of cyber-bullying as set out in Questions 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 11, 14, 15 and 16, with responses being fairly consistent across age ranges. These questions probed issues concerning cyber-bullying over cellular phones, harassment due to religion or disability, sexual orientation, receiving unwanted sexual pictures and receiving messages that made them afraid.

Notwithstanding the lack of information retrieved from these questions, questions #2 and 16 exposed problems relevant to continuing research on cyber-bullying. Responses to question #2 reveal that cyber-bullying does not primarily occur through text messages ($n = 365$), an assertion that will be corroborated later in our analysis. This finding is important when determining appropriate interventions to cyber-bullying. Further, although 91 percent of students responded in the negative to Question #16, (Have you received a threatening message from another student that made you afraid?), the fact that 9 percent of the respondents had experienced fear is worrisome ($n = 364$). Evidence indicates that a few students across gender and age ranges are frightened from electronic messages they have received, and therefore, it is vital that teachers, administrators and parents understand that some students live in fear, either on or off school grounds. For example, of those students who confirmed they had received messages that made them afraid, 14 respondents (8 male, 6 female) divulged that the

messages threatened their life or safety, 25 students (8 male, 17 female) said the language threatened their reputation, 19 respondents (7 male, 12 female) claimed the messages affected their ability to concentrate on schoolwork, 20 students (7 male, 13 female) claimed such discourse affected their ability to make friends at school, 21 respondents (8 male, 13 female) confirmed the cyber-bullying made them want to bully back and 14 students (6 male, 8 female) revealed these electronic communications induced suicidal thoughts.

Other responses to our questions about the extent of cyber-bullying are more robust. When participants replied to Question #1, approximately 35 percent reported that they have *occasionally* received inappropriate messages, while 3 to 7 percent *often* claim receipt of anomalous online communications. Of relevance is the consistency in responses between students' answers to Questions 5, 9, 12 and 13 and what they wrote in the open-ended question asking them to indicate which individuals are most likely to be cyber-bullied. In the open-ended question, approximately 95 percent of both male and female respondents from all age ranges and across all represented ethnic backgrounds claimed that students are more likely to be cyber-bullied because of *specific attributes* such as special needs, academic abilities, un-popularity, physical appearance, physical and mental disabilities, unfashionable clothing and ethnicity. When responding to the closed-ended questions, 34 percent of the respondents claimed harassment because of their physical appearance, namely size or weight, 33 percent of the participants claimed they have been called a negative name because of their academic, athletic or artistic abilities; 24 percent of respondents revealed gay or lesbian labelling and 22 percent of participants admitted harassment because of their clothing or dress.

It is interesting, though, that in the written responses, only a few students say that students labelled as gay or lesbian are on the receiving end of cyber-bullying. It may be that the term 'gay' can be used as a flippant term not meant to harm or ridicule, yet those on the receiving end are offended by this labelling and language. As one 12-year-old boy said in one of the open-ended responses, 'gay and lesbian jokes are now just for fun and many students don't care. However some students take it seriously. Some friends of mine admit that they are gay and no one really cares'. On the other hand, it may be that some students are targeted because of sexual orientation, although our data indicate that students labelled in this way are not the primary targets of cyber-bullying.

With regard to question #17, almost one-quarter of participants aged 13–15 confirmed that occasionally someone else had used their online identity and pretended to be them, subsequently tarnishing their reputation. Approximately 25 percent of 12- to 14-year-olds also disclosed

that other youth have posted sensitive, personal information about them on the Internet (Question #18).

Question #7 asks participants if they have been harassed because of their race or ethnicity. In a province that is very ethnically diverse, it is interesting to note that between 10 percent and 20 percent of students in the age group of our study report occasionally being racially cyber-bullied, peaking at age 14 (10 percent of 11-year-olds, 18 percent of 12-year-olds, 13 percent of 13-year-olds, 20 percent of 14-year-olds, and 19 percent of 15-year-olds). Fourteen-year-olds are also the most likely age group to experience being cyber-bullied because of gender; 23 percent at age 14, whereas only 2 percent of 11-year-olds report such behaviour, 12 percent of 12-year-olds, 8 percent of 13-year-olds, dropping back to 6 percent of 15-year-olds. A more detailed discussion of gender differences is reported separately (Jackson et al., 2009).

Students who cyber-bully

We asked participants if they have harassed or bullied another student online either through chat rooms, emails, text messaging or any other online discussions. On average over one-quarter of students aged 12–14 years reported that they have cyber-bullied others online, with fewer students aged 11 (17 percent) and 15 (19 percent) reporting such online behaviour. For students who did report engaging in any type of cyber-bullying, 14 percent divulged they cyber-bullied because they did not like the person; 13 percent advised they cyber-bullied because that person upset them; 10 percent admitted they were bullied first, so it was acceptable to bully back; 9 percent claimed that since their friends had bullied others online, it was acceptable behaviour and 7 percent reveal they did it because it was fun.

For those students who confirmed that they *often* bully others online (as opposed to occasionally), 11 students confirmed cyber-bullying once or twice per week, four participants engaged in this behaviour three or four times per week, four others admitted doing it everyday and three respondents undertook such behaviour several times a day.

The 'pretend' game

We asked participants about their specific online behaviour and whether they occasionally adopt different personae such as switching genders, ages or physical appearances. As Brown et al. (2006) point out in their review, youth may adopt or hide behind avatars, different identities and unique personalities to engage in online activities they may not normally assume in face-to-face encounters. Tackling such clandestine behaviour while sitting behind a computer keyboard is far easier and intrusive than physical confrontations. Over half (52 percent) of participants revealed they *often* pretend to be older when online, and

although the purpose is not clear in each case, 21 percent divulged that they do so because of entry restrictions into adult websites. Also relevant to an understanding of cyber-bullying is that 33 percent of respondents take on different personalities when online. We also found that 23 percent admitted participating in wild and crazy online activities that they normally would not do in the real world; 23 percent pretend to be a different gender; 19 percent espouse a different physical appearance; 15 percent admitted acting contrary to what they would do in the real world by being hurtful and arbitrary and 15 percent admitted taking another person's identity and assuming that new selfhood online.

Across the age spectrum, although pretending to be older is consistent across most age ranges, more 14-year-old participants (30 percent) compared to other ages pretend they are older to access restricted websites, and also report adopting different personalities when online (37 percent). Again, more youth aged 14 years (31 percent) report engaging in wild and crazy digital behaviours that they would never do in real life, while also claiming they have acted in a mean online manner (22 percent) or said hurtful things (20 percent). Lastly, although a fewer percentage of students aged 11 and 12 report taking someone's name and pretending to be that person online (2 percent and 7 percent respectively), a much higher percentage of students aged 13, 14 and 15 admit doing so (21 percent, 20 percent and 19 percent respectively). Age 14, comes up time and time again in this study as being a key age for cyber-bullying or being victimized or participating in other problematic online behaviours.

Origins of cyber-bullying

We were curious to determine where cyber-bullying was likely to start – at the school or at home, and the interplay between the two settings. Close to three-quarters of participants (64 percent) claimed that cyber-bullying is most likely to start at school and then continue at home by the same students. We suspect that students interpreted this question to mean the events that precipitated the cyber-bullying, rather than the use of the school computer to cyber-bully. In other words, cyber-bullying is typically a reaction to an incident that happened on the school grounds, and is then carried over into online exchanges using the home computer. In their analysis of the existing literature on cyber-bullying, Brown et al. (2006) found that cyber-bullying typically originates in the school arena where students are victims of conventional bullying or harassment, followed by the victim retaliating at home through digital media.

Further, our study sought to determine the most popular vehicles for cyber-bullying, since youth are very selective when engaging in online

misbehaviour. Setting out three common settings – chat-rooms, emails and text-messaging – we found that over one-half (53 percent) of participants claim that cyber-bullying is most likely to occur in chat-rooms, while 37 percent maintain that such behaviour is more prevalent in email communications. Confirming our earlier assertions about text-messaging, only 7 percent of respondents reported that cyber-bullying occurs through text messages.

Reporting practices to cyber-bullying

We asked participants if cyber-bullying does occur, to whom would they report or entrust this information. We were curious to know whether students would confide in their parents, school officials, friends, the police or would keep the experience to themselves. This information has policy implications for schools and provides information on the sense of isolation victims of cyber-bullying may feel. Our analysis determined that participants who are (or could be) victims of cyber-bullying are almost equally split (47 percent versus 42 percent) on whether or not they would confide to school personnel ($n = 325$), but approximately 74 percent ($n = 335$) would tell their friends and approximately 57 percent ($n = 330$) would tell their parent/guardians. It seems seeking police intervention is the least favourable course of action, with 70 percent ($n = 313$) of participants rejecting this reporting practice. Interestingly, one-quarter of respondents ($n = 321$) say they would not tell anyone about being cyber-bullied. This revelation has implications for school counsellors, administrators and parents, who may observe a youth exhibiting worrisome symptoms, but are unaware of the source of the behaviour.

For those participants who state they would *not confide* cyber-bullying problems to *school personnel*, the most prevalent reasons for not doing so are as follows:

- fear of retribution from the cyber-bully (30 percent);
- it is the student's problem and not the school's mandate (29 percent);
- the school staff could not stop the bullying anyway (27 percent);
- they could get their friends in trouble (26 percent);
- their parents would restrict their access to the Internet (24 percent), and
- other students would label them as 'informers' or 'rats' (20 percent).

It is revealing that the most common reason given for not entrusting school personnel is fear of retribution from the cyber-bully. This runs contrary to existing cyber-bullying literature that claims that youth are most reluctant to inform adults of cyber-bullying problems for fear of having their technology restricted or parents finding out about it and 'grounding' their access to cyberspace (Brown et al., 2006). This has

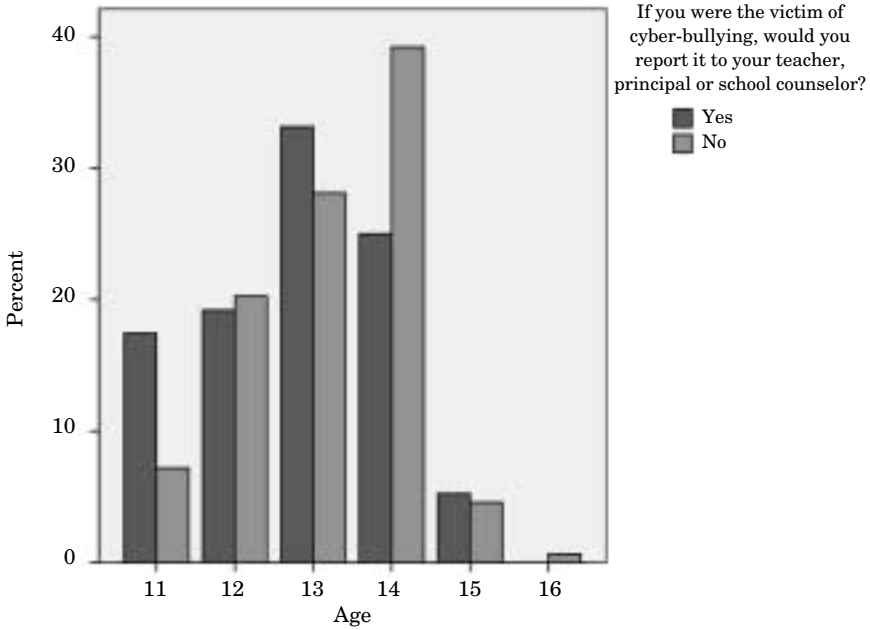


Figure 1 Reporting to school officials (n = 325)

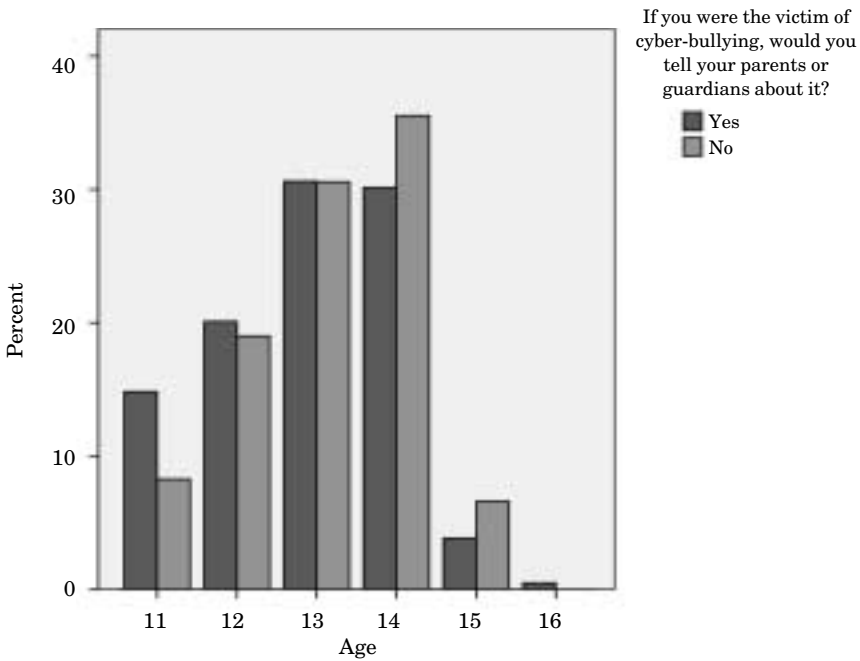


Figure 2 Reporting to parents / guardians (n = 330)

implications for school officials who are considering banning cellular phones on school grounds as a way to counter cyber-bullying. Although youth are also concerned about having their access to technology restricted (24 percent say this is a concern), this is not the primary motivation for not informing adults about being cyber-bullied. Students are more worried about their peers finding out – getting their friends in trouble, being called a ‘rat’ or experiencing further retaliation by the bully. Keeping silent may be seen as the best option for victims, particularly when they do not know who is doing the bullying, since much of the bullying is anonymous or hidden behind avatars.

When we asked the 37 percent of participants why they would *not inform* their *parents* of cyber-bullying incidents, the answers were similar to not reporting to school personnel, except that fewer participants (22 percent versus 30 percent) feared retribution from the cyber-bully and only 19 percent thought their parents/guardians could *not* prevent cyber-bullying as opposed to 27 percent who believe school staff could *not* stop this behaviour. Students seem to believe that bullies are less likely to discover a victim’s disclosure to his/her parents (and therefore less likely to retaliate), and many more students trust their parents (over school officials) to find a solution to their cyber-bullying problems.

We were also curious as to what students would do if they *witnessed* hurtful cyber-bullying taking place, and to whom they would report such incidents. Our analysis indicates that reporting an incident to police, even if someone is being hurt, is the least viable option for participants. Students are more likely to report to school officials if they *witnessed* cyber-bullying than if they *experienced* it themselves (52 percent versus 47 percent), and less likely to tell their parents (45 percent versus 57 percent). In both instances, students are most likely to tell their friends than an adult (70 percent if they witnessed cyber-bullying; 74 percent if they experienced cyber-bullying), with fewer students keeping it to themselves if they witnessed someone being cyber-bullied than if they experienced it themselves (18 percent versus 25 percent).

When we looked at victims’ reporting practices according to age, it is notable that students who are cyber-bullying victims are more likely to report incidents to school personnel at age 11 (students in elementary school) than at age 14 (students in high school). In fact, 73 percent of 11-year-old students are more likely to report problems to school officials as opposed to 42 percent of 14-year-olds. Consistent with this pattern are the participants’ responses when asked if they would report matters to their parents or guardians (see Figures 1 and 2). Overall, although more students than not would report occurrences to parents/guardians at age 11, the percentages are reversed as students grow

older. Perhaps it is not surprising that as students enter adolescence, they are less likely to confide in parents or guardians, particularly as a first option.

Solutions to cyber-bullying

We provided students with ten feasible solutions to cyber-bullying and asked them to rank the options, according to their first, second and third choice. The ten solutions were set out as follows:

- 1 develop programs to teach students about cyber-bullying and its effects;
- 2 set up an anonymous phone-in line where students can report cyber-bullying;
- 3 make it known that the school does not tolerate cyber-bullying;
- 4 punish students who participate in cyber-bullying;
- 5 have a zero tolerance policy towards cyber-bullying;
- 6 involve the police in cases of cyber-bullying;
- 7 get parents, students and school staff together to talk about solutions;
- 8 develop a positive school culture where students learn to be kind to each other;
- 9 offer lots of extra-curricular activities so students won't have time to cyber-bully;
- 10 work on creating positive self-esteem in students.

The three solutions most often selected as first choice are:

- 1 setting up anonymous phone-in lines (19 percent);
- 2 developing programs to teach students about cyber-bullying and its effects (18 percent);
- 3 punish students who participate in cyber-bullying (11 percent).

However, when we added the first, second and third choices together, the first two solutions (#1 and #2) remain the overall top choices, but the punitive measures option (#3) is removed and replaced with 'work-ing on creating positive self-esteem in students'. Although a few students indicated in the open-ended sections that they are aware of an existing anonymous help line, the Kid's Help Phone, most students think that a new and separate anonymous phone line for cyber-bullying is needed. The Kid's Help Phone (1-800-668-6868 - <http://www.kidshelpphone.ca/en/>), which could be a source of help for cyber-bullying, is described on their website as:

Canada's only national, bilingual, 24-hour, toll-free confidential and anonymous phone and web counselling, referral and information service for children and youth. We provide counselling services to young people between the ages of 5 and 20 and help adults aged 21 and older find the counselling

services they need. We don't trace calls, we don't use call display and we never call callers back. (Kid's Help Phone)

Another issue for educators and parents to consider is students' perception that the school needs to work more diligently at fostering self-esteem among youth. Students seemed to be cognizant of the fact that there is no 'quick fix' to cyber-bullying, that in the long term, students with better self-esteem are less likely to cyber-bully or perhaps less likely to become victims of the cyber-bully. It is interesting that students chose these three top choices, instead of other solutions posed such as imposing zero tolerance policies, involving the police or providing additional extra-curricular activities to keep students busy. Also interesting is the fact that respondents who were 13- or 14-years-old were more likely to choose 'creating positive student self-esteem' as either their first, second or third choice, than students who were younger.

One of the options provided to students in this section on solutions was to 'Get parents, students and school staff together to talk about solutions'. It is interesting that, while this is not a top-rated option, close to one-third put this as one of their three top choices. Students clearly see the need for collaboration between youth and adults. Youth generally are more knowledgeable about digital technology, have experienced firsthand the effects of cyber-bullying and know peer culture, whereas adults (parents and educators) are in a position to develop programs and policies that bring about change and can offer support in concrete ways to victims of cyber-bullying.

Opinions about cyber-bullying

At the end of our survey we asked students their opinions about cyber-bullying as follows:

- Cyber-bullying is a normal part of the online world. There is nothing anyone can do to stop it.
- I know of someone who has been really hurt by cyber-bullying.
- I know of someone who is being cyber-bullied and I don't know how to help him or her.
- Online bullying is different from in-person bullying.
- Online bullying can't hurt you; it is just words in virtual space.
- If someone is being hurt online using the school network, the school should be told.
- It is the school's responsibility to stop or prevent online bullying.
- If students bully each other on their home computer, the school has a responsibility to stop it.
- If students bully each other on their home computer, it is only the parent's responsibility.

- I would report cyber-bullying if I could do it anonymously.
- I have the right to say anything I want online because of freedom of expression.
- The solution to cyber-bullying lies with students because they know the online world.
- Adults created the Internet, now they should live with the consequences.
- I would like to create a more kind and respectful online world.
- I am less likely to bully online if I'm happy at school.
- If my school was more welcoming to all students, there would be less cyber-bullying.
- If adults treated young people more kindly, students would treat each other the same way.
- Adults should stay out of young people's online communications.
- I know how to solve cyber-bullying, if only the adults would listen.
- Cyber-bullying is more of a problem now than it was a year ago.

On a *Likert-type* scale, students were asked to grade their responses from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Our analysis indicates that although students have strong opinions about cyber-bullying, there also is much misunderstanding about its implications. For example, approximately 47 percent of respondents argue that freedom of expression is a right and online speech is borderless, although researchers have clearly identified the limitations and legalities of Internet speech and freedom of expression under the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (see Shariff, 2006; Shariff and Gouin, 2005; Shariff and Johnny, 2007). When designing curriculum to counter problems of cyber-bullying, Canadian educators may wish to incorporate lessons on the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and related legislation so that students become more aware of the legal curtailments to freedom of expression in cyber-space.

Also of interest to policymakers and educators is that three-quarters of students say that cyber-bullying is more of a problem today than it was a year ago. Roughly the same percentage of students also claims that it is very different from face-to-face bullying. Of concern is that close to half of students (46 percent) say that cyber-bullying is a normal part of the online world and that 32 percent maintain that online bullying is not hurtful as it is just 'words in cyberspace'. If cyber-bullying is considered 'acceptable' or 'normal' and 'not hurtful', then this is an additional challenge for educators and policymakers who wish to encourage more positive exchanges over the Internet and to foster a more caring and respectful discourse.

Although students are split as to whether it is the school's responsibility to stop cyber-bullying, 60 percent communicate that the solutions

lie with students. Unfortunately only 37 percent claim they know the answers, although this response indicates that students wish to be a part of the dialogue. This compares to students' earlier statement that they thought school officials and parents should work collaboratively with students in seeking solutions. Students expressed hope for a more respectful online world (79 percent), and identified the school culture as possibly contributing to cyber-bullying behaviour. Two-thirds of students said if their school were more welcoming there would be less cyber-bullying, while 58 percent noted that students were less likely to bully online if treated fairly at school. Students also pointed to the role of modelling in preventing cyber-bullying; 18 percent of students strongly agreed and 35 percent agreed with the statement, 'If adults treated youth more kindly, students would treat each other the same way'.

Consistent with findings from other parts of the survey, almost three-quarters of the participants agreed they would report cyber-bullying if they could do so anonymously.

Conclusion and educational implications

In the population of 11- to 15-year-old students that we surveyed, we found that most students use the internet on a daily basis and that their most common vehicle for cyber-bullying was through chat rooms or over email, not through text messages. At the time that we designed the survey in late 2006, FaceBook, YouTube and Flickr were not as popular as they are now and therefore we did not ask specific questions related to these media, although it is likely that students considered FaceBook an example of a chat room. Chat rooms have educational potential; for example, establishing study groups on FaceBook or using FaceBook as a means to promote social causes. English and language arts curricula also provide opportunities to discuss the 'flat' medium of Internet discourse and ways in which communication might be improved or re-directed into positive exchanges.

It is clear from this study that students want to dialogue about cyber-bullying and want to be part of the solution. Schools need to provide spaces in the curriculum and in the life of the school for students to talk openly about the impact of cyber-bullying and about ways to prevent and counter cyber-bullying. Students also requested a site where they can report their experiences anonymously, without fear of reprisal from the bully or being labelled a 'rat' for telling the authorities. Indeed, fear of reprisal is the main reason why students keep silent about their victimization. Interestingly, they are more likely to report witnessing another student being victimized in cyber-space than they are to report their own situation. This could be from fear or it may

relate to their self-esteem (which cyber-bullies target) and which students say should be addressed as one way to prevent cyber-bullying.

Students proposed solutions that dealt with immediate redress (anonymous reporting, punitive measures) but they also suggested longer-term, relationship-based solutions that addressed the school culture, students' self-esteem and modelling by adults. Those who advocate cultivating an ethic of care in schools (for example, Cassidy and Bates, 2005; Johnston, 2006; Noddings, 2002, 2005; Rauner, 2000) note the powerful effect of modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation to developing more respectful and responsive interactions and fostering a safe and nurturing environment for all students. Applied to the context of cyber-bullying, the ethic of care has much to say about the healthy development of identity and 'netizenship'.

Students are somewhat cynical about the school's ability to deal with cyber-bullying and this may be a major reason for youth choosing to report an incident of cyber-bullying to their peers first, the parents or guardians next and lastly to the school. Yet, because cyber-bullying often starts at the school, and carries over into the home computer, the school has a responsibility to deal with bullying behaviour and to provide redress and safety for students who are victims. Building relationships with parents and opening the door for dialogue with stakeholder groups (educators, parents, students, justice personnel, Internet providers) will encourage stronger solutions that link the home, school, and community.

We also found it interesting that although students said in an open-ended response that most of the cyber-bullying victims are those who do not fit in, for reasons of dress, ethnicity, physical appearance, academic or athletic (in)ability, the fact that approximately one-third of students report that they have been cyber-bullied shows that the victim is also the 'average student', and that cyber-bullying is much more widespread than students think. Victims are not only those students from marginalized groups. Indeed because much of the cyber-bullying takes place within friendship groups (Jackson et al., 2009), attention needs to be given to the discourse that youth use with each other. Dialogue deemed as 'teasing' by the perpetrator, might be construed as an insult by the person at the receiving end. Because bullying begets bullying (Brown et al., 2006; Kowalski et al., 2008; Willard, 2006), the cycle of dialogue between students can spiral downwards into more vicious exchanges. Further, because 25 percent of students say they would keep the bullying to themselves, with 9 percent saying they received messages that made them afraid and 4 percent saying that they had suicidal thoughts, this is cause for educators to make cyber-bullying a priority.

Educators also need to be cognizant of the wide range of reasons

students give for cyber-bullying in the first place. Doing it because 'it is fun' or 'their friends do it' encourages a different kind of intervention than 'because the recipient upset them in some way' or 'they were bullied first'. Certainly a variety of intervention measures need to be considered, from empathy training, to assertive training, to developing a school culture that is more respectful, inclusive and caring. Students also need to be made aware of the restrictions on free speech, the longevity of their communications and cyber-space etiquette.

Adopting proactive strategies that improve students' behaviour in online environments, empowering cyber-bullying victims to report incidents to school officials and parents, creating a more inclusive, welcoming and responsible school culture, developing programs to educate students about cyber-bullying and its effects and dissuading bullies from acting out in cyberspace are worthwhile goals for education in this decade.

Note

This research was supported by funds from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

References

- Belsey, B. (n.d.) Retrieved 25 June 2007. Available from: <http://www.cyberbullying.ca>
- Belsey, B. (2006) 'Bullying.org: A Learning Journey', *Bulletin – Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers Association* 49(4): 20.
- Brown, K., Jackson, M. and Cassidy, W. (2006) 'Cyber-Bullying: Developing Policy to Direct Responses That are Equitable and Effective in Addressing This Special Form of Bullying', *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy* 57: <http://umanitoba.ca/publications/cjeap/>
- Cassidy, W. and Bates, A. (2005) "Drop-Outs" and "Push-Outs": Finding Hope at a School That Actualizes the Ethic of Care', *American Journal of Education* 112(1): 66–102.
- Cassidy, W., Jackson, M. and Brown, K. N. (2009) 'Out of The Mouths of Babes: Students Voice Their Opinions on Cyber-Bullying', submitted to the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies*.
- Jackson, M., Cassidy W. and Brown, K. N. (2009) "You Were Born Ugly and You'll Die Ugly Too": Cyber-Bullying as Relational Aggression', submitted to the *Journal of School Violence*.
- Johnston, D. K. (2006) *Education for a Caring Society: Classroom Relationships and Moral Action*. New York: Teachers' College Press.
- Kid's Help Phone, Available from: <http://www.kidshelpphone.ca/en/>
- Kowalski, R., Limber, S. and Agatston, P. (2008) *Cyber Bullying: Bullying in the Digital Age*. Victoria: Blackwell Publishing.
- Noddings, N. (2002) *Educating Moral People: A Caring Alternative to Character Education*. New York: Teachers' College Press.
- Noddings, N. (2005) *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*, 2nd edn. New York: Teachers' College Press.

- Rauner, D. (2000) *They Still Pick Me Up When I Fall*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Shariff, S. (2006) 'Cyber-Dilemmas: Balancing Free Expression and Learning in a Virtual School Environment', *International Journal of Learning* 12(4): 269–78.
- Shariff, S. and Gouin, R. (2005) 'Cyber-Dilemmas: Gendered Hierarchies, Free Expression and Cyber-Safety in Schools', paper presented at Oxford Internet Institute, Oxford University, UK, International Conference on Cyber-Safety. Paper available at: www.oii.ox.ac.uk/cybersafety
- Shariff, S. and Johnny, L. (2007) 'Cyber-Libel and Cyber-Bullying: Can Schools Protect Student Reputations and Free Expression in Virtual Environments?', *Education Law Journal* 16(3): 307.
- Willard, N. (n.d.) Retrieved 25 June 2007. Available from: <http://www.cyberbully.org>
- Willard, N. (2006) 'Flame Retardant', *School Library Journal* 52(4): 55–56.

Wanda Cassidy is Associate Professor of Education and Director of the Centre for Education, Law and Society at Simon Fraser University. Her research primarily focuses on law-related and citizenship education in schools, and the interrelationship between law and societal values and beliefs, including the ethic of care, social responsibility, inclusion and diversity, and social justice. She is currently principal investigator of a three-year study examining students' legal literacy, particularly in the areas human rights, citizenship, identity and environmental sustainability. She has published in the *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, *McGill Journal of Education*, *American Journal of Education* and *Education and Law Journal*. She has also written a chapter in *Doing School Differently: Innovative Education for Young People* (Sage, in press). **Address:** Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby, BC, V5A 1S6, Canada. Email: cassidy@sfu.ca

Margaret Jackson is presently Professor in the School of Criminology at Simon Fraser University, and Co-Director, Simon Fraser University Institute for Studies in Criminal Justice Policy, and Director of FREDA, an SFU centre undertaking research on violence against women and children. She was principal investigator for a Ministry of Justice study on child abuse. Other research areas of interest include bullying/cyberbullying, problem-solving courts and sociocultural factors impacting marginalized girls and youth. These involvements resulted in her serving as a co-investigator/principal investigator for SSHRC, Status of Women, Heritage Canada, Metropolis-RIIM and NCPC grants, as well as currently, for two CIHR grants. She has published in *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy* and *McGill Journal of Education*. She also co-edited *Girls and Violence: Contributing Factors and Intervention Principles* with M. Moretti and C. Odgers (Kluwer, 2004) **Address:** School of Criminology, Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby, BC, V5A 1S6, Canada. Email: margarej@sfu.ca

Karen Brown is a PhD candidate and Instructor in the School of Criminology at Simon Fraser University and a Researcher with the Centre for Education, Law and Society in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University. She is also an Instructor at Vancouver Island University. Her research interests include violence and threats against lawyers and cyber-bullying in schools. She is currently undertaking a national study in Canada on violence and aggression against Canadian lawyers. Recent articles have appeared in *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, *The International Review of Victimology* and *Canadian Journal of Education Administration and Policy*.
Address: School of Criminology, Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby, BC, V5A 1S6, Canada.