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## **TEACHER ROLES AND DIGITAL THREATS: PREVENTING AND ADDRESSING CYBERBULLYING IN EUROPEAN SCHOOLS**

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### **Summary**

The rapid growth of the internet and social media has provided a new platform for bullying, although traditional forms continue to exist. Cyber bullying is the term used to describe any aggressive, intentional act, behaviour or communication undertaken an individual or group, using electronic and digital means against a vulnerable victim, repeatedly and over time. The reality and impact of bullying has been the subject of extensive research over many years in all countries. Bullying occurs throughout the world and can occur at many stages in the course of life, from childhood to adolescence and in to adulthood, in private, educational and work settings. Bullying is a distinctive pattern of harm and humiliation of others, especially those who are in some way smaller, weaker, younger or in any way more vulnerable than the bully. Bullying is a deliberate and repeated attempt to cause harm to others of lesser power.

This paper reviews the issues and themes identified in the international research on cyberbullying. It summarizes the key factors involved and provides a comparative analysis based on research undertaken in five countries and schools (Ireland, Spain, Italy, Poland and Romania). In addition, the paper identifies innovative learning strategies, digital resources and detailed findings from surveys of teachers, students and parents that offer techniques and actions to educational establishments to ameliorate this phenomenon. All this is designed to identify and pinpoint the critical issues involved in developing evidence-based responses to the issue of cyberbullying in European schools.

The anonymity and seeming ubiquity of the threatening remarks or actions that constitute bullying can have a deeply disturbing and disconcerting impact. The sense of menace is amplified by the uncertainty and fear of being stalked and pursued. Many studies over several years have examined the negative effects that cyberbullying can have on victims (and also on bullies themselves). Victims are more likely to report lower grades, poor concentration, anxiety and a range of academic problems as a consequence of experiencing cyber bullying. Both victims and bullies often report higher levels of stress, depression and low self-esteem. A particularly serious consequence of cyber bullying, as also in harassment in general, is suicide.

Research on cyberbullying is plagued by inconsistent findings and exaggerated claims about prevalence, development over time, and effects. To build a useful and coherent body of knowledge, it essential to achieve some degree of consensus on the definition of the phenomenon as a scientific concept and that efforts to measure cyberbullying are made in a

“bullying context”. This will help to ensure that findings on cyberbullying are not confounded with findings on general cyber-aggression or cyber-harassment. We tentatively recommend that cyberbullying should be regarded as a subcategory or specific form of bullying, in line with other forms such as verbal, physical, and indirect/relational.

## **Dimensions of Cyberbullying**

Cyberbullying has become an international public health concern among adolescents. On that basis alone, significant further study is indicated and recommended in all the relevant literature. A review of the available evidence suggests that cyberbullying poses a threat to adolescents’ health and well-being at many levels. A plethora of correlational studies have demonstrated a cogent relationship between adolescents’ involvement in cyberbullying and negative health indices. Adolescents targeted via cyberbullying are found in all reports to have increased depression, loneliness, anxiety, suicidal behaviour, and a range of depressive affects and somatic symptoms. On the other hand, perpetrators of cyberbullying are more likely to report increased substance use, aggression, and delinquent behaviours. Adolescents in most advanced industrialized countries are moving beyond using the Internet as an “extra” in everyday communication (cyber utilization) to using it as a “primary and necessary” mode of communication (cyber immersion). In fact, 95% of adolescents in the United States are now connected to the Internet. This shift from face-to-face communication to online communication has created a unique (and potentially harmful) dynamic for social relationships – a dynamic that has recently been explored in the literature as cyberbullying and Internet harassment.

Compared to traditional bullying, cyberbullying is unique: it reaches an unlimited audience with increased exposure across time and space, preserves words and images in a more permanent state, and lacks any supervision. Furthermore, perpetrators of cyberbullying do not see the faces of their targets. Subsequently they may not understand the full consequences of their actions, thereby decreasing important feelings of personal accountability. This has often been referred to in the literature as the “disinhibition effect”. Given that cyberbullying is a relatively recent phenomenon, it is important to note that there are still definitional and methodological inconsistencies throughout the literature. For example, some scholars have chosen to adopt a more conservative criterion to define cyberbullying (for example, “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices”), while others have adopted a broader definition (for example, “using electronic means to intentionally harm someone else”). The term cyberbullying represents an umbrella term. This includes related constructs such as Internet bullying, online bullying, and information communication technologies and Internet harassment.

Research over many years has revealed a significant relationship between involvement in cyberbullying and affective disorders. For example, results indicate that there is a significant relationship between *cyber-victimization* and depression among adolescents, and among college students. Specifically, results showed that higher levels of cyberbullying victimization were related to higher levels of depressive affect. Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007) asked

adolescents open-ended questions about the negative effects of cyberbullying. Notably, 93% of cyber-victims reported negative effects. Reactions to being cyberbullied may also depend on the form of cyberbullying. For example, Ortega et al. (2012) found that different forms of cyberbullying may elicit different emotional reactions – for instance, being bullied online may evoke a different emotional reaction than being bullied via mobile phones. In terms of predicting the most deleterious outcomes, past studies have shown that pictures/video images were the most harmful to adolescents.

Taken together, results from many worldwide studies suggest that involvement in cyberbullying puts adolescents at risk for increased problems and complications around internalization and health function. These include many dimensions: depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and psychosomatic issues (difficulties sleeping, headaches, and stomach aches), as well as a loss of connection from parents and peers. All this serves to threaten security and adolescents' basic fundamental need for meaningful connections. In addition, participation in cyberbullying also places adolescents at risk for increased externalizing issues, such as substance use and delinquent behaviour. Recently, researchers have begun to examine how developmental changes in adolescent risk factors affect subsequent involvement in cyberbullying behaviour. Modecki et al. (2014) have investigated the role of increasing developmental problems (problem behaviour and poor emotional well-being) among adolescents and how these might predict subsequent involvement in cyberbullying over a 3-year period (while applying consideration for sex and pubertal timing). The findings demonstrate that adolescents' early stage developmental increases in problem behaviour predicted their involvement with cyberbullying at later stages.

In summary of all the research findings and evidence, research has demonstrated that cyberbullying, victimization and perpetration have a significant detrimental impact on adolescents' health. In fact, the studies reviewed above all suggest that cyberbullying is an emerging international public health concern of significant scale, related in turn to serious mental health concerns. There is ample evidence of serious and sustained significant impact on adolescents' levels of depression, anxiety, self-esteem, emotional distress, substance use, and suicidal behaviour. Moreover, cyberbullying is also related to a wide range of adolescents' physical health concerns.

## **Responding to Cyberbullying**

The evidence and research on the negative and serious effects and impact of cyberbullying is extensive and remarkable. In such a situation, meaningful prevention and intervention efforts are a priority – particularly for those involved in education. Research also tends to indicate, however, that effective prevention and intervention efforts to address cyberbullying are currently lacking and insufficient. Reports and studies all confirm the suggestion that prevention efforts directed towards reducing cyberbullying should address adolescents' self-esteem. This is the key factor, followed by specific problem behaviours.

Meaningful social connection is key to effective prevention and intervention efforts. Finally, the results from recent studies and investigations conducted by Hinduja and Patchin (2007) suggest that adolescents' socializing agents (friends, family, and adults at school) play an important role in whether or not adolescents choose to cyberbully others. Surveying a random sample of 4,441 adolescents, the study results showed that adolescents who believed that several of their friends were involved with cyberbullying were more likely to cyberbully others themselves. These results suggest the need for prevention efforts designed around correcting the "misperceived" norm of cyberbullying.

In a major study published in 2016, the European Parliament (2016, "Cyberbullying Among Young People") reviewed the position of cyberbullying in Europe and compared the responses of the various Member States. This study provides an overview of the extent, scope and forms of cyberbullying in the European Union. It factors into account the age and gender of both victims and perpetrators as well as the medium used. The lack of harmonization at European level is highlighted by the fact that only Belgium, Germany, Italy, Ireland, the UK and Spain have dedicated juvenile courts to try cyberbullying cases.

The study also highlighted positive initiatives started by authorities to tackle the phenomenon, such as the implementation of early warning systems in schools, with a series of indicators that allow teachers to spot cases and inform parents or guardians. Of the EU28, only Spain, Italy, Greece, Finland, Croatia and Belgium require teachers to oversee this process. The European Commission defines cyberbullying as "repeated verbal or psychological harassment carried out by an individual or a group against others through online services and mobile phones". Cyberbullying is generally understood as bullying taking place on the internet. There is no single definition of cyberbullying agreed upon internationally or at European level. However, attempts to define this phenomenon have been made by international organizations, EU institutions and academia. There are no standards specifically targeting cyberbullying at international level. However, Article 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) on the protection from all forms of violence is applicable to bullying online. At regional level, the Council of Europe has adopted a range of legally binding measures relevant to bullying online. The EU has only a 'supplementary' role in this field consisting of supporting, coordinating or supplementing the initiatives adopted by Member States at national level.

At national level, none of the 28 EU Member States have criminal legal provisions targeting cyberbullying specifically. The most common good practices in the nine Member States selected for further analysis can be grouped around two main areas: Education/awareness raising; Child protection. The Report's conclusions affirm that a cultural change by victims, perpetrators and bystanders is essential. To this end, support and educational programs for all those involved and not involved in bullying incidents should be created. Reporting mechanisms such as helplines and the installation of reporting tools in children's computers to signal incidents should also be put in place. These mechanisms have been created in the Netherlands in the form of a report button that can be activated when children encounter online threats.

## **The APPs Project Research**

The “Addressing teaching to Prevent cyber-bullying Phenomenon at Schools” (APPs) project was initiated in 2017 and funded under the Erasmus + program of the European Union. Its research aim is to improve the knowledge about school needs in terms of prevention of the cyber-bullying phenomenon, with special attention to the main sub-areas such as xenophobia, racism, gender-based harassment and disability to create an analytical framework that will be used in the development of subsequent Vertical Learning Modules (VLM). The partners comprised a network of schools in Italy, Romania, Poland and Spain. Research was undertaken by the Irish partner, Universal Learning Systems.

The Primary Research for the APPs project was conducted in a variety of ways, based upon the emerging findings of the secondary and the baseline research. It was determined that surveys would provide the main bulk of the research, to be conducted among the key stakeholders in the partner schools: the teachers, students and the parents. In addition, the e-training element for partner participants provided a direct link to the partners themselves on all of the areas relevant to the project aims and resulted in some valuable findings.

The baseline research was in the form of a survey sent to all partners. The purpose of this survey was to establish a clear picture of the schools involved, statistically and with regard to relevant issues in each country and school, such as existing cyberbullying policies. Differences emerged with some schools, for example, having policies and others not. All partners responded, and the sharing of this information across countries is expected to provide opportunities to learn from each other.

The surveys, using Google Surveys, were sent out for distribution among the APPs project partners. All ethical issues were explained in detail and good practice was followed in terms of anonymity and confidentiality. Survey questions were administered to three groups in the partner countries with participating schools (Italy, Spain, Romania, Poland):

- Parents;
- Teachers;
- Students.

The rate of the numbers responding were exceptionally high. This ensured a satisfactory outcome for the findings and reinforced the validity. Among the students, 440 responded out of a possible 1245 (as per figures supplied in the baseline survey for each school). At 35%, this is a notably high response rate for young people when they are self-responding. For parents and for teachers, the response rates were extremely high: Teachers were 99 out of a possible 122 (as per figures supplied in the baseline survey for each school), and Parents were 142 out of a possible 192 (as per figures supplied in the baseline survey for each school). These response rates reflect the keen interest in, and importance of, the subject of cyberbullying and the many issues arising.

Key Points Emerging from Surveys have been detailed according to the three categories investigated. It should be noted that the percentages mentioned reflect the numbers responding to each particular question rather than a percentage of the overall response rate.

### ***Key points: Students***

- 23.6% did not understand cyberbullying;
- 41.6% did not know about school's response;
- 69.6 did not know what supports were in school;
- 46.1% said they had not discussed cyberbullying with their parents;
- 16% said teachers had not discussed with them;
- 52.7% do not know what to do if it happens;
- 9.6% direct experience;
- 38.9% indirect experience.

### ***Key Points: Teachers***

- 55.6% have policies in place;
- 46.9% have procedures;
- 59.6% do not know about school/community supports;
- 87.8% said they discussed cyberbullying in school (65.2% of these were informal);
- 61.9% had no professional support – but 54/3% had in-service training!

### ***Key Points: Parents***

- 94.4% understood cyberbullying;
- 75.7% discussed with children (n.b. children claimed only 46.1%);
- 55.4% knew of school supports (32.8% knew community supports);
- 67.2% said they would recognize signs of cyberbullying;
- 9.8% said a child had experienced it;
- age 12 has a peak rate for experiencing cyberbullying;
- 24.3% approached school re their child (n.b. 61.5% [26 people] were not satisfied with school's response);
- 25% sought outside help;
- 11.1% used the police;
- 72.3% discuss online safety;
- 66.2% of 139 responses allow children use ICT in their bedrooms (53% restrict usage/time);
- many parents said a solution was to be more interested in their children's activities and lives.

## **Critical Issues and Recommendations**

From the survey findings, a number of critical issues emerged that concern issues such as providing information for parents, fostering communication about cyberbullying between children and parents and information on available supports.

- More information is required for children regarding what to do in the case of cyberbullying, whether witnessing or experiencing it.
- Paying especial consideration to the peak negative experiences is critical at the age of 12, in advance of this age, during it and among older child who may be able to play buddy/mentor roles.
- Review of current policies and procedures, in consultation with families and children, is recommended strongly
- More consultation/cooperation with children and parents in drawing up new policies and procedures is essential.
- Recognition of the intrusive nature of cyberbullying and the psychological impact is vital.
- More information for parents regarding supports already existing is recommended.
- More information for children on all aspects of cyberbullying, which should be developed in the VLM's and in the development and dissemination of the policies and procedures, is strongly endorsed and recommended.
- Children, teachers and parents have useful ideas for preventative strategies.
- Helping parents communicate issues with their children is a key role and objective in any interventions.

## **Conclusions**

The primary research has provided useful results for the APPs project, addressing the key questions outlined in the project application. It has reached out and included all stakeholders in each partner country and offers a useful framework to respond to this growing phenomenon through training.

The findings of the secondary research illustrate the widespread nature of this phenomenon. The setting out of innovative learning strategies gives strong evidence-based findings to enable the partners in the APPs project to realize the core aims of the project.

When partners integrate the findings of all parts of the research they will be facilitated to develop successful training modules that will provide a sustainable resource that may be shared internationally with schools and address in a meaningful manner the phenomenon of cyberbullying.

It is important to note that the majority of studies investigating the relationship between cyberbullying behaviours and adolescent health have been correlational in nature. While correlational studies are an important first step to understanding the impact of cyberbullying, longitudinal studies are now needed to increase our understanding of how cyberbullying experiences affect adolescents' health over time. By using longitudinal designs, it will be possible to test whether adolescents' depressive symptoms, social anxiety, or suicidal tendencies related to cyberbullying are antecedents or consequences. For example, it is possible that depressive symptomology could either be an antecedent or an effect of cyberbullying victimization. Longitudinal study designs permit us to examine both of these possibilities with more clarity.

Findings from the literature reviewed have significant implications for health care professionals, educators, and caring adults. First and foremost, the studies described throughout urge educators, counsellors, and health care professionals to address cyberbullying when assessing adolescents' physical and psychological health concerns. It is clear that adolescents who are involved in cyberbullying experiences require support. However, evidence suggests that the majority of adolescents do not seek help from adults when involved in cyberbullying. Therefore, it is important to take a proactive approach. In the final analysis, research suggests the fact that support for identification, prevention and intervention on cyberbullying should come from multiple professional communities that serve youth.

These include:

- Educational (teachers, guidance counsellors, administrators, chaplains, professionals working in the schools).
- Behavioural health (clinicians treating adolescents with mental health concerns, psychologists, therapists).
- Medical (paediatricians asking about cyberbullying experiences during visits, specialists).

Sensitive probing about cyberbullying experiences is warranted when addressing adolescent health issues such as depression, substance use, suicidal ideation, as well as somatic concerns. Routine screening techniques can be developed to assist in uncovering the harm endured through cyberbullying to help support adolescents recovering from associated trauma. Finally, research suggests a strong need for comprehensive, school-based programs directed at cyberbullying prevention and intervention. Education about cyberbullying should be integrated into school curriculums and the community at large, for example, by engaging adolescents in debates and community discussions related to cyberbullying legislation, technology, accountability, and character. This ultimately concerns students and their health and wellbeing. Students should therefore be at the forefront of all efforts and directly involved to guarantee some measure of success.

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