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A Case Study of Student-to-student Cyber Bullying in one High School

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Abstract

The research site was one high school located in southern United States where school stakeholders were concerned about student-to-student cyber bullying. The school district administrators did not examine student-to-student cyber bullying at the research site. The purpose of this case study was to explore teachers' experiences in student-to-student cyber bullying. The conceptual framework was based on choice theory. Data were collected from semi structured interviews with high school teachers. Qualitative data were analyzed through content analysis for emergent themes. Findings included that the school district administrators and teachers should implement a cyber bullying intervention program for student-to-student online safety.

Keywords:
Cyber Bullying, High School Teachers, Bully, Bullying Victim

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Prolegomena

School bullying is defined as an occurrence when a student is bullied from one or more peers (Egan & Todorov, 2009). According to Marshall, Varjas, Meyers, Graybill, and Sckoczylas (2009) and Nolle, Guerino, and Dinkes (2007), student bullying has increased and teachers have witnessed student bullying on a daily basis where student bullying victims are targeted based upon physical appearance, unusual styles or behavior, and nontraditional gender behaviors (Conoley, 2008). Wynne and Joo (2010) asserted that bullying may lead to harmful behaviors at school that affect students' welfare and academic performance (Petrosino, Guckenburg, DeVoe, & Hanson, 2010) because bullies believe that others have ill intentions towards them and as a result are impulsive and hostile (Bhat, 2008).

Problem Statement

The research site was one high school located in southern United States where school teachers reported to school administrators an increase in student-to-student cyber bullying. The school district administrators did not examine cyber bullying at the research site using a case study to explore teachers' experiences in student-to-student bullying. School leaders, teachers, students, and parents were very concerned about cyber bulling at one high school where teachers reported numerous student safety problems associated with bullying. Teachers' experiences of cyber bullying were not explored.

Nature of the Study

At the research site, over 1,000 students attended the selected high school. The majority of the students were African American. High school teachers are certified by the state where this study was conducted. School administrators have at least 5 years of administrative experience. School teachers reported to administrators that over 20% of students experience student-to-student cyber bulling.

Research Questions

What were teachers' experiences of student-to-student cyber bulling at one high school?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study was to explore teachers' experiences in student-to-student cyber bullying through semi structured interviews. Teachers' experiences included cyber bullying within the school and how it was handled in the classroom and at the school. The conceptual framework was based on choice theory.

Conceptual Framework

Glasser's (1998a) choice theory was used because this theory is closely related to bullying. According to Walter, Lambie, and Ngazimbi (2008), school interventions may help high school students in social decision-making processes by establishing and maintaining a safe learning environment where students are guided in making good choices when interacting with their peers online. School teachers need to recognize cyber bullying behaviors of students. For instance, teachers should be aware of cyber (online) bullying when bullies spread rumors about their peers to establish fear (Bauman, 2008; Koth, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2008).

Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations, and Scope

The focus of this case study was on cyber bullying. Discrepant data from the high school teachers' interviews may have contained information irrelevant to this study. Due to the sensitivity of this information, school teachers may have not disclosed important information. School teachers were the participants and semi structured face-to-face interviews were conducted. An assumption was made that the participants were honest in their interview responses about their experiences in student-to-student cyber bullying.

A limitation of this study may have been the small sample size. Participants' responses may have not been a reflection of opinions from the entire school population, which was high school teachers. The findings may not be generalizable to other similar school populations. The study was conducted in one high school within a school district at the research site. Participants were interviewed in a comfortable educational setting during the 2012-2013 academic year.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study may help school stakeholders in implementing a student-to-student cyber bullying intervention program to promote school safety (Ttofi, Farrington, & Baldry, 2008; Vreeman, & Carroll, 2007). Senior district and school administrators were interested in research-based findings to explain student-to-student cyber bullying problems (V. Thomas, personal communication, February 2011). Student-to-student bullying problems included online bullying at the research site, which can permeate the school learning environment (Bandyopadhyay, Cornell, & Konald, 2009).

Literature Review

Glasser developed the choice theory in 1996. According to Glasser (1998a), students control personal actions and typically make good choices when basic needs are met. Students' occasional poor decision-making may result in inappropriate behaviors. Choice theory is centered upon these needs: survival, love, belonging, fun, and freedom. According to Sullo (1997), humans may make no connection to what is happening around them when physiological needs are unsatisfied. Choice theory relates to bullying issues because students' certain basic needs must be satisfied within a learning environment (Glasser, 1998a); otherwise, students may begin acting out in undesired ways when they lack basic needs that must be met in order for students to feel connected to the school environment. According to O'Brennan, Bradshaw, and Sawyer (2009), bullying may lead to social emotional problems and the bully or the victim may report feelings of being threatened in or isolated from the school environment.

According to Waasdorp and Bradshaw (2009), because students have developmental differences, elementary students may seek assistance from parents or school teachers when faced with bullying, and middle and high school students may seek assistance either from friends or handle bullying on their own. Scholars have reported that school administrators should not allow students to handle student-to-student bullying alone and should counteract bullying (O'Brennan et al., 2009; Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2009).

Bullying is difficult to detect (Bauman, 2008; Frisen, Jonsson, & Persson, 2007; Kazdin, & Rotella, 2009; Tremlow, Fonagy, & Sacco, 2004) because bullies demonstrate the intent to harm their victim

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through repetitive malicious behavior to overpower their victim and deny that their behavior was purposeful. Although bullying is repetitive malicious behavior, bulling may be only observed once because power imbalance between the bully and the victim is the most critical component where the bully uses power from either physique or social status against non assertive students who may not defend themselves against the bully. The bully usually controls interactions with one or more persons controlling a situation by influencing peers to isolate the victim (Tremlow et al., 2004). The bully may cause bodily harm to or may verbally abuse the victim using inconspicuous hostility to negatively affect the victim's relationships with others. According to Bauman (2008) and Tremlow et al. (2004), the bully may exclude the victim from social events and gossip about the victim, and these behaviors are not taken seriously by school teachers or administrators and as a result may not intervene in these situations or overlook bullying behaviors because these stakeholders may focus on student fights (Corey, 2004; Peguero, 2011). Violence in schools may be the result of continuous bullying (Corey, 2004; Bandyopadhyay, Cornell, & Konald, 2009). According to Peguero (2011), bullying victims demonstrate dangerous behaviors in school. Bullying victims experience health problems (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2009) such as depression, low self-esteem, aggression, and sometimes suicide (Hazler, Carney, & Granger, 2006; Heilbron & Prestein, 2010; Nation et al., 2007; Thakur, 2012). According to Bacchini, Esposito, and Affuso (2009) and Nation et al. (2007), students who experienced peer victimization had a greater sense of hopelessness than students who were never bullied. These students who felt hopelessness expressed suicidal thoughts. Klomek, Sourander, and Gould (2010) asserted that bullying victims expressed suicidal thoughts and were more likely to have attempted suicide. Klomek et al. (2010) noted that indirect bullying was common among females via the Internet or email and was linked to depression and suicidal ideation. Van der Wal, de Wit, and Hirasing (2003) found associations between bullying and suicide to be stronger for indirect forms of bullying than direct forms of bullying.

Technological advances, the Internet, and programs such as Facebook and other social networking websites, Instant Messaging, and Skype have created new forms of bullying (Gravenor, 2007) such as cyber bullying, which is considered a relational form of bullying between

the bully and the victim and as a result this form of bullying is challenging today's school teachers and administrators (Jacobsen, & Bauman, 2007). The bully uses cyber bullying to send intimidating and hostile postings to others that include text messages, photos, graphics, and personal information of peers in order to present to the Internet community false profiles of the bullying victim to embarrass or ruin their reputations and to intentionally isolate them from an online group. Nowadays' cyber bullying can occur via emails, blogs, chats, and many other online platforms available on the Internet. The bully may use the Internet also known as cyberspace for online aggression on the bullying victim (Sturgeon, 2006). Mobile phones and pager systems can be used by the bully to negatively affect the victim (Fleming, Greentree, Cocotti-Muller, Elias, & Morrison, 2006). The United Press International (2008) reported that about 40% of U.S. adolescents are victims of cyber bullying and that cyber bullies engage in cyber bullying because consequences are usually nonexistent. Bullying victims are bullied through email, Internet chat rooms, and text messaging either on the Internet or via cellular phones. Therefore, online bullying is a popular method of cyber bullying (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Cyber bullies may use chat rooms, computer text messages, and emails to post messages to exclude, threaten, ridicule, and spread rumors about their victims who are usually from the same school. The content posted by bullies may contain embarrassing and confidential information about families and friends, and pictures and video clips usually taken and used without the individual's permission (Bhat, 2008). Social networking websites are about chatting online, posting and sharing files, photos, and videos. Blogging is an online diary. Cyber bullies may post harmful or derogatory information, files, photos, and videos about targeted victims while using alias identities (Bhat, 2008).

According to Buhs, Ladd, and Herald (2006), Conoley (2008), and Bauman (2008), school stakeholders must take a vital leadership role in schools with bullying incidents. Students need support in learning character education to foster positive interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships to reduce bullying in schools (Buhs et al., 2006; Bauman, 2008; Williams & Winslade, 2008) by focusing on student-to-student relationships.

Research Design and Approach

The research design for this study was a case study because data were collected by interviewing school teachers. Qualitative data were collected using semi structured interviews (Creswell, 2009; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Interviews were used for school teachers to elaborate on their experiences in cyber bullying at the research site.

The research site was one high school within one school district. The school district is located in a metropolitan area and has five high schools. Purposive sampling was used for this study because the school setting was selected due to the large number of incidents of cyber bullying reported by school teachers at one particular high school, which serves students in the downtown corridor of a metro city. At this high school, teachers reported having experience in student-to-student cyber bullying. The high school serves over 1,000 students in Grades 9 to 12 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Student ethnicity was approximately 76% African American, 22% European American, .2% Hispanic American, .5% Pacific Islanders, and .2% American Indian/Alaskan Native. The student body was 48.5% male and 51.5% female (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

Data Collection

The population at the research site consisted of state certified high school teachers. All teachers at this one high school were invited for study participation. At the research site, there are six school administrators and 74 teachers. The potential participants were given informed consent forms at a faculty meeting to invite them to participate in this case study. All teachers were invited to participate. Teachers were given 2 weeks to submit their consent forms to the school administration. The school principal collected all informed consent forms. Ten teachers agreed to participate in this study. The sample for this study was 10 high school teachers.

Each teacher who submitted the informed consent form was contacted for a semi structured interview. Face-to-face interviews were conducted at a time and place selected by each participant at the research site. The purpose of this study, ethical procedures addressing confidentiality, audio taping of interviews, and data reporting were explained to each participant. Each interview participant was assigned a

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pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. Participants were reminded that the interviews were strictly voluntary.

The semi structured interviews were guided by an interview protocol, which included interview questions and a description of the purpose of the research. To ensure validity of the semi structured interview data, all interview transcripts were reviewed multiple times and member checks were used with each interviewee to check for accuracy of the interview transcripts.

Data Analysis

Interview data from semi structured interviews were transcribed and analyzed using open—coding and thematic analysis to identify emergent themes and patterns. Open coding was used to categorize information within this study to determine themes and patterns within data. Interview information was categorized in relevant groups with multiple relevant descriptions of cyber bullying. Each significant datum was assigned a code. All like codes were grouped together. Different categories emerged such as school safety, cyber bullying, and bullying intervention, and data were re-reviewed and re-arranged to best fit the categories. Interview data were categorized by writing labels on post-it notes and index cards. In order to determine emergent themes or patterns, data transcripts were re-read for keywords and phrases.

Ethical Considerations and Roles of the Researchers

To conduct this study at the research site, school district policies and procedures for educational research were followed. Names of the participants and the school district will not be revealed in compliance with the guidelines of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act 1974 (FERPA). All interview data will remain locked for at least 5 years in a file cabinet. The researchers were neither teachers nor administrators at the research site.

Presentation of Findings

Participants reported that student-to-student cyber bullying needs to be properly defined at the school district level. Participants are aware that cyber bullying is about aggression to harm the victim through repetitive malicious behaviors. All participants reported that cyber bullying is about overpowering the victim and that bullying is very

difficult to detect. Participants do not have enough knowledge about how to detect cyber bullies although they understand that the bully is using technology to harm the victim purposefully. Most participants reported that bullying must be repetitive and transparent to teachers in the classroom when bullying is done online. Student-to-student online negative interactions are not available to school teachers given that such interactions take place online via secure blogs and social media websites. Participants remain concern about how bullies are controlling a situation of causing bodily or psychological harm to the victim after school hours.

Participants are aware of bullying that includes bodily harm and verbal abuse; however, they reported that when these behaviors occur online they are unable to help students. Participants need help with strategies to identify cyber bullying in their classrooms. For example, how could teachers help students with bullying and social events when bullying is transparent because bullying is happening online? How could teachers identify students' psychological problems when students do not seek help from the teachers? When teachers are aware of relational bullying then the incidents are reported to school administrators; however, policies and procedures regarding cyber bullying are not yet implemented at the research site. Most teachers reported that they will intervene in bullying situations when students share information with them about cyber bullying. Most teachers also reported that they associate academic underperformance of certain students to be the result of some form of cyber bullying.

Participants reported that students' low self-esteem and aggression are easy to detect in the classroom; however, when these two factors are associated with cyber bullying, teachers feel unable to help because students do not disclose any information about cyber bullying. Participants believe that surveys on bullying should be administered more frequently at school and should contain more info about forms of bullying and encouragement to talk to adults at the school. Teachers suggested that surveys on cyber bullying should be administered in every high school grade at least twice a year, once in September and again in June. Survey questions should include self-esteem, social and health issues, and encouragement to seek help from adults at school.

Most participants suggested character education to be included in the high school curricula to help both bullies and victims develop strong

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intra- and interpersonal skills. All teachers are willing to successfully intervene to stop the bullying in their classrooms and need support from administrations. Participants are hoping for students to inform teachers to resolve cyber bullying issues.

The majority of the teachers reported that students identified as bullies were perceived to control peers and to make verbal threats. Some teachers encourage their students to write about bullying in self-reports in order to help school officials prevent or reduce bullying incidents at school. All participants reported that name calling or spreading rumors about other students are not tolerated in the classroom and the incidents are reported to the school administrators.

Participants revealed that their students have reported having been victims of cyber bullying via email or text messaging; however, the percentage of students who spoke to teachers was very small. Teachers revealed that cellular phones should not be used in the classroom because the most popular method of cyber bullying is the use of text messaging on cellular phones. Teachers revealed that the majority of students who came forward indicated being a victim of or aware of online bullying.

Teachers' experiences in student-to-student cyber bullying vary because there are no policies and procedures used at the district regarding cyber bullying. All teachers reported that they are ready to follow school leadership on anti-bullying intervention. Teachers are ready to take a vital leadership role in their classrooms to prevent student-to-student cyber bullying as long as school officials implement anti-bullying intervention programs. Participants believe in school-wide or systemic anti-bullying intervention programs. Teachers need anti-bullying intervention activities in the classroom. Participants also expressed interest in professional development on anti-bullying programs in schools.

Participants reported that cyber bullying needs to be understood by parents, students, school administrators, and the community. Students at the research have not informed teachers when faced with cyber bullying. Most participants expressed their concerns about being unable to help bullies or victims of cyber bullying students in this high school because students' bullying interactions are taking place online.

Participants hypothesized that students may seek assistance either from friends or handle bullying on their own.

Discussion of Findings

These findings are in line with the research of Glasser (1998a) that students control personal actions, students may make no connection to what is happening around them when their needs are unsatisfied (Sullo, 1997), and that bullying may lead to social emotional problems (O'Brennan et al., 2009). Bullying is common among school-related problems, and school administrators frequently use questionnaires or surveys to determine the degree of bullying in schools and its effects on school climate (Peguero, 2011). Bandyopadhyay et al. (2009) asserted that responses to questions related to violence, gang activity, dangerous proximities within the school may give school administrators and teachers pertinent information that possibly leads to effective solutions to problems associated with bullying. Bullying victims not only engage in violence or dangerous activities as a reaction to fear of endangerment, but also they experience health problems (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2009).

Student fights and other forms of violence in schools may be results of continuous bullying (Corey, 2004). Peguero (2011) indicated that bullying victims demonstrate dangerous behaviors in school and undergo academic pitfalls due to fear of being bullied. Bullying is common among school-related problems, and schools frequently use questionnaires or surveys to determine the degree of bullying in schools and its effects on school climate (Peguero, 2011). Bandyopadhyay, Cornell, and Konald (2009) asserted that responses to questions related to violence, gang activity, dangerous proximities within the school may give school administrators and teachers pertinent information that possibly leads to effective solutions to problems associated with bullying. Bullying victims not only engage in violence or dangerous activities as a reaction to fear of endangerment, but also they experience health problems (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2009).

The aforementioned findings are in line with those reported by Bandyopadhyay et al. (2009) and Peguero (2011) that surveys on bullying may give school stakeholders information on preventing bullying. Participants reported that forms of violence in schools may be results of bullying (Bauman, 2008; Corey, 2004; O'Brennan et al., 2009; Waasdorp

& Bradshaw, 2009). Participants agreed that bullying victims experienced self-esteem and social problems (Hazler et al., 2006). Teachers need to know about the new forms of bullying (Gravenor, 2007). Cyber bullying can occur in emails and Instant Messaging (Gravenor, 2007). Students are being bullied in cyberspace (Sturgeon, 2006). Cyber bullying may occur after school hours and via Internet, mobile phones, and pager systems (Greentree et al., 2006). Victims of cyber bullying do not reveal bullying to their teachers (Bhat, 2008; Li, 2006; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Teachers are concerned about bullying at school (Bauman, 2008; Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2009). Teachers need anti-bullying plans to address all students' needs (Buhs et al., 2006; Conoley, 2008; Williams & Winslade, 2008). Students need a caring learning environment and connections to adults and peers (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007; Burlingame, 2004; Lindwall & Coleman, 2008; Walter et al., 2008). Students should be encouraged to talk about bullying to teachers (Egan & Todorov, 2009; Esbensen, & Carson, 2009; Evers, Prochaska, Van Martera, Johnson, & Prochaska, 2007; Glasser, 1998a; Hinduja, & Patchin, 2006/2007; Hubbard, 2004; Hunt, 2007; Thompson & Gunter, 2008). In conclusion, school districts stakeholders should implement a cyber bullying intervention program for student-to-student online safety.

conducted research for large school districts related to (a) the evaluation of the effectiveness of professional programs for teachers on student achievement as measured by standardized mandated testing, (b) the development of district-wide policies and procedures based on test scores in science, math, reading, and language arts literacy; and (c) schools and district performance of instructional practices and enhanced curricula. He has also conducted research for large graduate colleges and universities related to (a) interactions between online students and instructors, synchronous and asynchronous communication in the online learning environment, (b) the development of policies and procedures for online course delivery, and (c) enhancement of curricula.

Peter has expertise in higher education educational leadership: (a) chairing comprehensive examinations and EdD, PhD, DBA, and MA committees; (b) developing and evaluating curriculum and academic programs; and (c) teaching graduate courses in research, educational leadership in higher education, educational and information technology, online technology, e-commerce, software development, and information systems. He is a reviewer of many peer-reviewed academic national and international journals. He has presented a plethora of research studies nationally and internationally. Email: KiriakidisPeter@yahoo.com.

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