



Perceptions and responses towards cyberbullying: A systematic review of teachers in the education system



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ABSTRACT

The rise and availability of digital technologies for young people have presented additional challenges for teachers in the school environment. One such challenge is cyberbullying, an escalating concern, associated with wide-reaching negative consequences for those involved and the surrounding community. The present systematic review explored teachers' perceptions and responses towards cyberbullying in the education system. Once the search strategy was applied across the six databases, 20 studies fulfilled the inclusion criteria for the current review. The studies were reviewed and examined for common themes. Five themes were identified: (a) Cyberbullying characteristics and student involvement, (b) Cyberbullying training and guidance for teachers, (c) School commitment and strategies to manage cyberbullying, (d) The impact and extent of cyberbullying prevalence and consequences, and (e) Teachers' confidence and concern towards cyberbullying. The themes are discussed in a narrative synthesis with reference to implications for teachers and for the continued development and review of anti-cyberbullying initiatives.

1. Introduction

1.1. Cyberbullying: defined

Bullying, a sub-set of aggression, involves a repeated act of intentional aggressive behaviour by a powerful perpetrator, inflicting harm to the victim (Heinemann, 1973; Olweus, 1978). Bullying is often distinguished between two forms: 'traditional' and 'cyber', with the latter established as a definitional term in 2003 by Bill Besley (Bauman & Bellmore, 2015). Relative to bullying, cyberbullying is an intentional aggressive act to inflict psychological harm on another individual, repeatedly, through digital technologies and online mediums (Hinduja & Patchin, 2014). Recognised features of bullying (i.e., repetition, power imbalance, and intent) are also common features of cyberbullying, although the latter can be characterised by anonymity, instant dissemination, and unrestricted scope to target victims (Heirman & Walrave, 2008; Kowalski, Limber, Limber, & Agatston, 2012).

The widespread development of the cyber world through digital technologies and renewal of online communication apps means that pupils of all ages across the education system can be vulnerable to cyberbullying involvement (Livingstone, Haddon, Gorzig, & Olafsson, 2011). Teachers play a pivotal role in the prevention of this international issue, and so their perceptions should be acknowledged at the

forefront of any interventions.

1.2. Cyberbullying: prevalence

Development of anti-cyberbullying strategies requires an awareness of the prevalence and consequences associated with cyberbullying to provide an understanding of the complexities of cyberbullying behaviour (Smith, 2014). Despite this, issues in assessment methods may hinder application of the research to develop such strategies, so an understanding of teachers' perspectives on this issue can guide future research investigations when measuring bullying (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015; Volk, Veenstra, & Espelage, 2017). For example, a meta-analysis across 80 studies identified some reports give an estimate for cyber victimisation at 15% and others at 72% (Modecki, Minchin, Harbaugh, Guerra, & Runions, 2014), while perpetration rates have been reported as high as 60.4% (Xiao & Wong, 2013). This variability in reported prevalence has caused misunderstanding amongst teachers on the state of cyberbullying in the school environment. To provide transparency on effective interventions, teachers' perspectives, training needs, and knowledge towards cyberbullying need to be accounted for.

Children have access to technology both within and outside the school environment, with children (8–18 years) spending at least 7 h a week on social media applications (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010).

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As such, children are exposed to online risks and dangers outside of controlled educational settings, so it is essential teachers' perceptions concerning cyberbullying are addressed. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC, UK) in 2014/2015, found that children aged 11 and under (25%), adolescents aged 12–15 (9%) and 16–18 (6%) had attended counselling due to cyberbullying involvement, showing that all young people can be vulnerable to cyber-related risks (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), 2015). In 2016/2017, the NSPCC had reported a 12% increase in cyberbullying counselling sessions for young people, compared to the previous year (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), 2017). This demonstrates a growing concern that needs to be addressed within both research and application.

1.3. Importance of teachers

The advancement of technology has allowed schools and teachers to provide positive experiences for children through online materials and engagement in lessons (Byron, 2008; Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010). As the internet presents online risks (Soeters & Van Schaik, 2006), teachers have a responsibility to supervise children when they use the internet, while promoting awareness of e-safety issues (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Popović-Čitić, Djurić, & Cvetković, 2011). Research has shown that when children do come into contact with online risks, they will adopt positive (i.e., seek help from a peer) or neutral (i.e., ignore the situation) coping strategies (Staksrud & Livingstone, 2009). Differences in reported strategies between victims (i.e., problem-solving strategies) and perpetrators (i.e., emotion-focused strategies) have been found (Völlink, Bolman, Dehue, & Jacobs, 2013) and as such, teachers' management of cyberbullying is vital. These strategies exclude adult help (Staksrud & Livingstone, 2009), perhaps due to the fear of disclosure to adults (i.e., technology confiscated, detention, and belief in adults' ability to address the problem) (Agatston, Kowalski, & Limber, 2007; Li, 2006, 2007a, 2007b; Mishna, Saini, & Solomon, 2009; Thomas, 2006). Understanding teachers' management of cyberbullying can help develop new strategies to encourage pupils to disclose information and seek help, which in turn, will contribute to the identification and prevention of further cyberbullying incidents.

Teachers have a key role in the successful implementation of anti-bullying interventions (Biggs, Vernberg, Twemlow, Fonagy, & Dill, 2008; Epstein & Kazmierczak, 2006), with the same being extended to anti-cyberbullying initiatives (Stewart & Fritsch, 2011). Yet, teachers' experience and knowledge of bullying can impact on their preventive strategies to address the issue within the school (Kokko & Pörhölä, 2009; Sakellariou, Carroll, & Houghton, 2012). This accentuates the need for understanding teachers' knowledge towards cyberbullying. Previously, a content analysis across 142 schools in the UK, identified only a small proportion of schools that have actually addressed cyberbullying in their anti-bullying policies (Smith, Smith, Osborn, & Samara, 2008). Such policies are important in the guidance of appropriate behaviour within the school (Von Marées & Petermann, 2012), and as such, schools need to respond to the growing concern (Englander, 2013). Further, as pre-service teachers go through a period of intense teaching, assessment, and learning in preparation to teach as an in-service teacher (Ryan, 2009), their views towards cyberbullying would provide a useful insight into Initial Teacher Training (ITT). The confidence and commitment of teachers can contribute to their awareness and management of bullying/cyberbullying incidences (Boulton, 1999; Oldenburg et al., 2015; Olweus, 2003; Schmitz, Hoffman, & Bickford, 2012), so it is important to acknowledge the preparation of ITT for future in-service teachers.

Teachers play a fundamental role in providing continued education to assist students academic goals, while providing social and emotional support to young people. Teachers have a responsibility to provide a strong leadership within the education system, to improve coexistence

and emerging issues in the school environment (Epstein & Kazmierczak, 2006). Therefore, teachers have a key role in providing this ongoing education to encourage appropriate behaviours in the school environment. In terms of pre-service teachers, it is important to address ITT as the quality of the training can attenuate or precipitate student academic outcomes, based on teaching quality (Musset, 2010). ITT can provide preparation to address complex issues in the school, consequently having a responsibility to prepare prospective teachers to be more competent when addressing cyberbullying (Musset, 2010). Continued education and training for prospective and current teachers will provide a valuable platform to promote school culture and attitudes, in the hope to reduce cyberbullying situations.

Conceptualisations of bullying can vary across the school level, with intervention during bullying incidents predicted by teachers' beliefs. For example, teachers that had normative views towards bullying were less likely to intervene compared to those that identified with assertive or avoidant beliefs (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008). In addition, teachers' attitude and beliefs towards cyberbullying can significantly predict disclosure intentions of students. For example, due to fear of confiscated online privileges and overreaction by teachers, young people perceived they could not seek help from adults (Baas, de Jong, and Drossaert, 2013). To work towards tackling and reducing cyberbullying, policy and intervention developers need to collaborate with teachers, in order to recommend effective anti-cyberbullying interventions (Spiel, Schober, & Strohmeier, 2016). Together, the previous findings highlight the need for a systematic review of teachers' perceptions and beliefs on cyberbullying; no such systematic review currently exists. As noted earlier in the Introduction, the prevalence of cyberbullying involvement is largely inconsistent, and as such, creates difficulty predicting the true extent in the school environment. In a recent review of prevalence studies (n = 159), cyberbullying involvement across victimisation and perpetration ranged from 1.5% to 72% in the last year, and 0.5% and 63.4% in the last six months (Brochado, Soares, & Fraga, 2017). However, these variations can partly be attributed to methodological issues within the research (Brochado et al., 2017). This provides further justification for a systematic review of teachers' perceptions to explore for inconsistencies in teachers' knowledge and understanding.

2. Method

2.1. Aims of the study

This review identifies and examines teachers' perceptions towards cyberbullying. Study findings will be reviewed to identify themes. A narrative synthesis across the themes will provide an overview of teachers' conceptualisation and responses towards cyberbullying.

Prior research has largely applied reviews of the literature to explore the impact of cyberbullying and intervention programs (e.g., Cassidy, Faucher, & Jackson, 2013; Couvillon & Ilieva, 2011; Hong & Espelage, 2012; Notar, Padgett, & Roden, 2013). In this case, a systematic review was more preferable compared to a standard literature review because an explicit, objective, and standardised approach was undertaken following a methodological stance (Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016). For example, prior to conducting the systematic review, a protocol was registered with PROSPERO (CRD42017057228), to provide explicit information about the design and methodical stance of the review. This provided transparency in the review process, adhering to a structured and registered protocol. As such, this systematic review followed prescribed guidelines by the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination (2009). This systematic review addresses emerging knowledge to provide an insight into teachers' perceptions and responses towards cyberbullying in the school environment.

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