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*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Cyberbullying in schools: a new technique for an old practice! Leadership awareness versus school reality**

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**Cyberbullying describes forms of bullying using the technology. With the increased spread and usage of technology, cyber bullying has become prevalent in schools. The purpose of this study was to examine the degree private school principals in Beirut were aware of and responsive to the concept of cyber bullying. Parallel to this, the study surveyed randomly selected Grade 10 students to investigate if they were being involved in cyberbullying as a bully, bullied or bystanders. 50 private schools participated in the study, whereby 50 principals and 260 students completed relevant surveys. Data was analyzed using SPSS 21.0 for windows. Results indicate that cyber bullying knowledge of school principals was limited and so was their awareness of the notch to which it was taking place in their schools. Student results indicate that cyberbullying was widespread in investigated schools. Recommendations for both policy and practice are suggested as well as future research.**

**Keywords:** school leadership – bullying - cyber bullying- technology – safe internet

## **INTRODUCTION**

Cyberbullying describes forms of bullying in which individuals use electronics to affront, insult, threaten, harass, and/or intimidate a peer (Berger, 2007; Raskauskas and Stoltz, 2007). Through cyberbullying a victim suffers from teasing, lies, rude and mean comments, rumors, aggressive or threatening comments, and/or suffer from being made fun of by the use of Photoshop of his/her photos over the net (Berger, 2007).

Studies have asserted that cyberbullying is far more dangerous than traditional bullying because of the associated anonymity (Mishna et al., 2009); the assaults victims suffer on their personal space and the fact that potentially harmful messages (Betts, 2009); and because such offenses can spread to large groups in no time (Cowie and Jennifer, 2008). Besides, cyberbullying provides opportunities for petit-sized individuals, who do not often take part in physical assaults, to get involved in

harming others (Hobbs, 2009). A study conducted by Koloff (2009) indicates that cyberbullying has been the cause of several student suicides.

Studies addressing cyberbullying are relatively limited in number (Cowie and Jennifer, 2008). A study conducted by Cross et al. (2009) assures that almost one third of all 11-16 year old individuals have been bullied online, and for approximately 25% of those the bullying was ongoing. Betts (2008) assures that anti-bullying school policies, when they exist, do not constitute subtle strategies for preventing students from taking part in anti-bullying. They are more punitive than being preventive. School principals who are aware of cyber-bullying tend to work more effectively to safe-guard school environments against it (Hinduja and Patchin, 2009; Willard, 2007).

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate cyberbullying within the Lebanese school contexts. It

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aimed at examining the degree private school principals in Beirut were aware of and responsive to the concept of cyber bullying. Parallel to this, the study surveyed randomly selected Grade 10 students to investigate if they were being involved in cyberbullying as a bully, bullied or bystanders.

Particularly, this study aimed at eliciting answers to the following research questions:

- 1- To what extent are school principals concerned about cyberbullying?
- 2- How are school principals managing cyberbullying problems?
- 3- How is the concept of cyberbullying introduced and discussed with students?
- 4- Are Grade 10 students in participant schools involved in cyberbullying in any form?
- 5- What are the means of cyberbullying in which Grade 10 students are engaged?

### Importance of the Study

The international literature indicates that there are some studies that have addressed cyberbullying from the view point of students (Hinduja and Patchin, 2007; Underwood, 2003), however, a very limited number of studies have considered school principals' perspectives (Shariff, 2008; Willard, 2007). Within the Lebanese context, there is no single published study that has approached cyberbullying. Thus, this study is of value to both national and international readership. With a better understanding of cyberbullying, schools, parents, and community can more effectively work to create safer environments for students (Hinduja and Patchin, 2009; Willard, 2007).

### Review of Related Literature

#### Cyberbullying

Belsey (2004) describes cyberbullying by stating that: "Cyberbullying involves the use of information and communication technologies such as e-mail, cell phone and pager text messages, instant messaging, defamatory personal Web sites, and defamatory online personal polling Web sites, to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group that is intended to harm others ( p. 8). According to Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007), it is means for indirect aggression in which the victims suffer from insult, derision, intimidation, harassment and threat. The bullies, through this indirect aggression often manipulate peer relationships resulting in huge damage by repeatedly spreading lies, disseminating rumors, poking fun of bullied, or even threatening and exerting aggression on them (Berger, 2007). Cyberbullying can be exercised through the

internet via which bullies affects bullies by texting them anonymous messages and pictures which could or not be witnessed by bystanders (Raskauskas and Stoltz, 2007; Dehue, Bolman, and Vollink, 2008).

Cyberbullying has been considered as a more dangerous form of bullying as it is not bounded to by a specific time and place (Erb, 2006; Dehue et al., 2008; Feinberg and Robey, 2008). Thus, the authority of schools over cyberbullying is not a full one (Anderson and Sturm, 2007).

#### Dangers of Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying can result in very serious harm on the bullied (Belsey, 2004; Li, 2006; Berger, 2007; Raskauskas and Stoltz, 2007; Hinduja and Patchin, 2007; Dehue et al., 2008; Feinberg and Robey, 2008 Feinberg and Robey, 2008; Smith et al., 2009). It can "undermine school climate, interfere with victims' school functioning, and put some students at risk for serious mental health and safety problems" (Feinberg and Robey, 2008, p. 10).

Bullies can practice it anywhere and anytime without having their identities unveiled (Keith and Martin, 2005; Sparling, 2004). Research have shown that the bullies often express things virtually that they would never ever dare to utter on face-to-face basis (Keith and Martin, 2005; Sparling, 2004; Willard, 2007). The harm on bullied can last for a very long period of time as it shakes the bullied self-efficacy (Willard, 2007). In some cases, suicide has been reported as a result of cyberbullying (Koloff, 2008).

Both parents and school principals seem to be limited in knowledge about cyberbullying as the literature indicates (Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, Fisher, Russell, and Tippett, 2008). This has the effect of making cyber bullying a very negative experience to victims as they often find themselves helpless and without any kind of support from schools or family as they tend to hide this kind of bullying they are suffering from because they often feel ashamed (Raskauskas and Stoltz, 2007), so they rarely come forward and discuss what they have been subjected to (Hinduja and Patchin, 2008; Juvonen and Gross, 2008; Koloff, 2008).

#### Statistics on Cyberbullying

Hinduja and Patchin (2007) reported that 11% of their 384 youth respondents were victims of on-line bullying; 47.1% reported being a witness and 29% reported being a bully. Similarly, Li (2006) conveyed that 53% of 177 seventh grade students surveyed knew of someone being cyberbullied. This is also in line with a study conducted by Katzer, Fetchenhauer, and Belschak (2009) who reported that one third of their sample comprised of 700 students from Grades 5-11

experienced cyberbullying more than once a month. Katzer et al. (2009) concluded that victimization between school and the Internet are highly interrelated. In other words, school issues are primary causes for cyberbullying acts. This point is also assured in a study conducted by Kowalski and Limber (2007) whose study indicated that around 52% of their 3767 respondents enrolled in Grades 6-8 cyberbullied because of scholastic issues and that cyberbullying took place at school premises.

### **Impact of Cyberbullying on Schools**

The above statistics ring the bell for school administrations as cyberbullying could cause severe problems at schools (Kowalski and Limber, 2007; Katzer et al., 2009). Given the facts that bullies remain anonymous, spread their bullying instantly and that they say things they would never say on face-to-face basis; then cyberbullying at schools is far more perilous than face-to-face bullying (Belsey, 2004). Consequently, it has the effect of deteriorating school culture and renders it unsafe and threatening and hence uncondusive to student learning (Sousa, 2003; Cheurprakobkit and Bartsch, 2005).

Thus schools need to confront the dangers of cyberbullying with policies that protect students and provide them with methods to prevent and reduce cyberbullying (Franek, 2006). This may not be realized unless school leaders understand cyberbullying and become aware of its signs (Franek, 2006).

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

An invitation for participation in the study was sent to 112 private K-12 schools in Greater Beirut Area was sent. Only 56 schools responded positively, out of which 50 schools completed the surveys. Thus the sample was comprised of 50 school principals and 260 Grade 10 students who were enrolled in those schools.

### **Research Instruments**

1- *Student Survey Instrument:* A short survey was developed in Arabic and was inspired by Smith et al. (2006) questionnaire. The survey questioned students about how often they had become victims of cyberbullying or actively cyber bullied others, both inside or outside school. Six media types were addressed, including: (1) short text messages (SMS), (2) YouTube video clips, (3) Phone calls, (4) Emails, (5) Facebook, and (6) Instant messaging. A section of the questionnaire

was devoted for the purpose of collecting information about students, including: gender, age, and overall years in school.

2- *Principal Survey Instrument:* A 15-item questionnaire adapted from Li's (2008) survey on School Cyberbullying was developed addressing school principals. The internal reliability of the instrument is 0.88 according to Li (2008). The questionnaire aims to measure school principals' perceptions and experiences of cyberbullying. Each statement was rated by a five item Likert-scale ranging from strongly agrees to strongly disagree. The survey also included demographic data such as gender and years of experience.

### **Analysis of Data**

Data was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 21.0). Descriptive statistics were used to describe and summarize the properties of the mass of data collected from the respondents. Means scores, standard deviations and percentages were calculated per each item of the survey instrument.

## **RESULTS**

### **Demographic Characteristics of the Sample**

Section A of the principals' survey collected demographic information pertaining to school principals. These are presented in Table 1 which indicates that the majority of the sample was comprised of female principals (54.3%). The age of the majority of participants was more than 46 years (51.5%). 43% of participant principals had a principalship experience between 6-10 years. Finally, the majority of the sample were holders of none educational Bachelor degrees (67.5%).

On the other hand Table 2 presents demographic characteristics of the sample of students involved in the study.

### **Research Question 1: To what extent are school principals concerned about cyberbullying?**

Section B (I) comprised of 6 items attempted to elicit answers for research question 1. Principals' responses are presented in Table 3. As this table shows, principals admitted that cyberbullying was taking place in schools (63%) but not in their own school (15%). They believed that cyberbullying impacts students negatively (63.1%) but not largely on school culture (37.1%). Only 32.4% principals considered cyberbullying to be as serious as face-to-face bullying, and 18.5% considered it as a primary concern for them at school.

**Table 1** Demographic Characteristic of Principals Participating in the Study

	%
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	40
Female	60
<i>Age (Years)</i>	
Less than 25	0.0
26-35	7.6
36-45	40.9
46 and above	51.5
<i>Experience in Principalship (Years)</i>	
1-3	35.0
4-10	6.6
11-15	43.0
16-20	8.6
21 or more	6.6
<i>Highest Degree Held</i>	
End of School Certificate or less	14.2
Bachelors (Faculty of Education Graduates)	12.3
Bachelors (Graduated from faculties other than Education)	67.5
Masters	6.0
PhD	0.0

**Table 2** Demographic Characteristics of Grade 10 Students Participating in the Study

	%
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	47
Female	53
<i>Age (Years)</i>	
16 years	4
15 years	95
13 years	1

**Table 3** Principals' Concern about Cyberbullying

Items	SA	A	N	D	SD
Cyberbullying is taking place in schools	40.2%	22.8%	2.3%	23.7%	11.0%
Cyberbullying is as serious as face-to-face bullying	18.6%	13.8%	3.0%	31.4%	33.2%
Cyberbullying can negatively impact students	28.5%	34.6%	4.1%	18.4%	14.4%
Cyberbullying can negatively impact school culture	21.8%	15.3%	2.8%	28.9%	31.2%
Cyberbullying is happening in my school	9.1%	7.9%	35.6%	24.7%	22.7%
Cyberbullying is one of my primary concerns at school	7.3%	11.2%	27.8%	31.2%	22.5%

### Research Question 2: How are school principals managing cyberbullying problems?

Section B (II) comprised of 5 items attempted to elicit answers for research question 2. Principals' responses are presented in Table 4. As table 4 shows, only 17% of school principals admitted that they had cyberbullying policies in place at school to safeguard the wellbeing of

students. The majority of them do not hold orientation sessions for students (18.5%) and parents (13.1%). On a brighter side, school principals explained that 81.1% of school principals ensured computers at school did not allow students to access social media websites which could help in one way or another to minimize cyberbullying. Finally, school principals explained that school counsellors were made available to support

**Table 4** Principals' Management of Cyberbullying

Items	SA	A	N	D	SD
We have policies in place for dealing with cyberbullying at school	9.1%	7.9%	22.7%	35.6%	24.7%
Orientation sessions are held in school to raise student awareness about cyberbullying	7.3%	11.2%	22.5%	27.8%	31.2%
Orientation sessions are held in school to raise student awareness about cyberbullying	8.5%	4.6%	14.4%	34.1%	38.4%
Cyberbullied students have counsellors to deal with	20.2%	11.8%	31.0%	13.3%	23.7%
Computers at schools are controlled to avoid the use of programs via which cyberbullying would most likely take place	48.6%	33.2%	3.0%	13.8%	1.4%

**Table 5** Means for Addressing Cyberbullying with Students

Items	SA	A	N	D	SD
Teachers are trained to hold classroom discussions about cyberbullying	9.1%	3.9%	22.7%	39.6%	24.7%
Curricula are enriched to address cyberbullying	9.3%	9.2%	19.5%	29.8%	32.2%
Classroom activities address cyberbullying	18.5%	4.6%	24.4%	24.1%	28.4%
School-wide activities are held to address cyberbullying	10.2%	11.8%	21.0%	23.3%	33.7%

**Table 6a** Grade 10 experience with cyberbullying

Items	Yes	No
I have been cyberbullied during this academic year	68 %	32%
I have cyberbullied at least one colleague during this academic year	67%	33%
I have watched a friend cyberbullying another at least once during this academic year (bystander)	73%	27%
I have cyberbullied a friend while on school campus	68%	32%

**Table 6b** Method via which Grade 10 students were cyberbullied

Items	Victim	Bully	Bystander
Facebook	63%	59%	48%
Short Text Messages on Mobile (SMS)	41%	33%	29%
Anonymous mobile calls	21%	15%	11%
YouTube	45%	42%	18%
Chat rooms	18%	23%	12%
Picture/Video clip phone bullying	26%	31%	14%
Email	47%	23%	15%

students who were cyberbullied (32%).

### Research Question 3: How is the concept of cyberbullying introduced and discussed with students?

Section B (III) comprised of 4 items attempted to elicit answers for research question 3. Principals' responses are presented in Table 5. Parallel to Table 3, cyberbullying does not seem to be a major concern for

schools. This is manifested in the weak interest in teacher preparation (15%), curricular enrichment (18.5%), classroom activities (23.1%) and school-wide activities (22.0%).

### Research Question 4: Are Grade 10 students in participant schools involved in cyberbullying?

Student survey consisted of sections A and B. The latter collected demographic informations about student and

are represented in Table 2. Section B attempts to collect responses from students regarding their cyberbullying experiences. The first 4 items of section B attempted to elicit answers for research question 4. Students' responses are presented in Tables 6a/b.

Table 6a shows that 68% of participant students were being cyberbullied during the academic year in which the study was conducted. 67% bullied a colleague, while 73% played the role of bystanders within the cyberbullying process. Interestingly, 68% of students explained that they performed bullying while on school campus.

Around 177 students who participated in this study said they were victims or bullied someone else during the current academic year. Meanwhile, 190 students acted as bystanders within the process of cyberbullying. All of those students were requested to describe means via which cyberbullying took place. Besides, students were asked to tell if the act of cyberbullying took place while on school campus or not. Results are presented in Table 6b.

Table 6b suggests that the Facebook is the most popular website for cyberbullying, followed roughly by YouTube, Emails and SMS; picture/video clip phone bullying and chat rooms; and finally by anonymous phone calls.

## DISCUSSION

Results indicate an obvious gap between what school principals claimed and what was actually going on in schools as per students. In fact, school principals asserted that cyberbullying was still not prevailing in their schools, as 17% of principals thought that it has crept into their own schools. Meanwhile, 68% of a tiny sample from only one Grade level of their schools manifested that they were being cyberbullied during the academic year in which the study was conducted. This discrepancy between what principals thought and what was going on with students is alarming; especially when the principals expressed that they were slightly concerned about cyberbullying in their schools (18.5%).

Results indicated that schools were not seeking any prevention for the occurrence of cyberbullying in their schools. No teacher training is devoted for that purpose. Besides, schools do not seem to be enriching the curricula with activities, information or school-wide activities and events that could serve in raising the awareness of students as to the harm they could be causing to colleagues when they bully them technologically. This is not a surprise, given the fact that only 37.1% of school principals believed that school culture would be threatened with the prevalence of cyberbullying within their premises. The study shows that not only school principals did not seek preventive measures against cyberbullying, but also they did not set up school policies and measures to deal with

cyberbullying as it takes place. Their management of the whole phenomenon is quite weak.

Facebook, YouTube and Picture/video clips should be used to enhance student rather than to be major tools for exercising cyberbullying against colleagues. This should be part of the teaching and learning process taking in classes; and teachers need to raise student awareness as to the legal aspects that they could confront if they don't respect governing rules of using them. Unfortunately, this is a viscous circle, because this necessitates teacher training.

## CONCLUSION

Cyberbullying rates obtained detected in this study are higher than those obtained in studies reported in the literature such as Hinduja and Patchin (2006; 2007), Li (2006), Li (2007), Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007) and Smith et al. (2006). One justification has to do with a methodological issue related to the choice of the sample. In fact, this study has selected youth of an average age of 16 years only. Other studies selected individuals whose age range was between 6-19 years old. This could be one justification for this discrepancy.

Students preferred tool of cyberbullying was found to be the Facebook. This is a finding that goes opposite to Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007) as well as Smith et al. (2006) who found out that phone calls and text message bullying were the most dominant tools of cyberbullying. One justification could be attributed to the rapid growth of the number of users of the Facebook from one year to another. Facebook has reported 1.11 billion users in March 2013. This number was only 12 million by the end of the year 2006 and 50 million by the end of the year 2007, which are the years in which the studies above were conducted.

School principals involved in this study regarded cyberbullying to be a less serious form of bullying as compared to face-to-face cyberbullying. This is an alarming finding which entails that they are not fully aware of the harm entailed by cyberbullying. The literature asserts that the dangers of cyberbullying are far more hazardous than those of traditional bullying (Betts, 2009; Cowie and Jennifer, 2008; Hobbs, 2009; Koloff, 2009; Mishna et al., 2009). The anonymity of this type of bullying, the speed of spread, and its lack of limitation to time and place are all factors that contribute to making cyberbullying far more threatening (Erb, 2006; Betts, 2009; Cowie and Jennifer, 2008; Dehue et al., 2008; Feinberg and Robey, 2008; Hobbs, 2009; Koloff, 2009; Mishna et al., 2009).

Because principals did not consider cyberbullying a serious phenomenon in school, they did not set up preventive or punitive or curing policies to handle them. They did not focus on enhancing teachers' skills so as to enable them to raise student awareness regarding

cyberbullying; nor did they emphasize the dangers of this issue by enriching the curricula with activities whether per classrooms or school-wide. The literature emphasizes the importance of school policies, teacher training, curricular enrichment, and involvement of parents as keys to combat cyberbullying in schools (Siu, 2004; Erb, 2006; Betts, 2009; Cowie and Jennifer, 2008; Dehue et al., 2008; Feinberg and Robey, 2008; Hobbs, 2009; Koloff, 2009; Mishna et al., 2009). Given this fact, schools are unaware of the degree to which cyberbullying can grow in their own schools and what consequences could entail.

### Limitations of the Study

This study is confronted with a number of methodological limitations which restricts the extrapolation of its results. The first one of them all is the small size of the sample group of school principals and participating students. In addition, the criteria used for selecting the schools were limited to the ease of accessing schools. Only private schools were invited to participate in the study, and particularly those localized in Beirut, the capital of Lebanon. It would be desirable to corroborate the obtained results in representative sample groups.

### Recommendation for Practice

There is much to recommend based on the results obtained from this study. School principals are invited to give cyberbullying another thought, one that recognizes the possible threats that it could entail. It can cause very serious harm (Belsey, 2004; Li, 2006; Berger, 2007; Raskauskas and Stoltz, 2007; Hinduja and Patchin, 2007; Dehue et al., 2008; Feinberg and Robey, 2008; Feinberg and Robey, 2008; Smith et al., 2009); including threats on school culture and student learning (Feinberg and Robey, 2008). Not only this, Koloff (2009) has reported suicide as one consequence of cyberbullying. Pre-service and in-service principal training programs should be modified to raise their awareness as to this particular phenomenon, its consequences and the means for tackling it effectively. Once principals' awareness is raised, they could work towards enriching teachers' experience with technology use, so that they can better raise students' awareness on how to effectively and ethically use technology. By this teachers could act as "agents of change" by proactively opening a dialogue with students about this problem.

Principals are urgently called to set robust anti-bullying preventive and punitive policies. It is necessary for all members of the school to be on one accord and have a united front against the unwanted behavior based on such policies. The integration of bully prevention programs at schools can show solidarity on the part of administration and staff and that cyberbullying is against school policy. Students need to know that they will be

held accountable for their own actions.

### Recommendations for Future Research

This study was limited to private schools located in Beirut, the capital of Lebanon. It would be informative if future research employs a more representative sample of schools. The involvement of public schools would give a more comprehensive picture of the reality of cyberbullying in schools. Besides, geographic dispersion would be beneficial allowing for schools for the various governorates of Lebanon to take part.

Another recommendation for future research is to approach cyberbullying through the qualitative methodology so as gain deep empathetic information pertaining to why students get involved in cyberbullying.

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