Teachers’ experiences, perceptions of and skills in addressing cyber bullying in Irish schools

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Abstract
Internationally, cyber bullying is an increasing problem in schools. Ireland is no exception. With the significant pace at which technology is evolving it is increasingly difficult for teachers to keep pace with the changing nature of bullying manifestations. The aim of the study reported here was to examine teachers’ experiences and perceptions of cyber bullying amongst students. It also aimed to explore their perceived skill in supporting their students in this regard.

Key Words: Cyber bullying, schools, teacher attitudes, school responsiveness, anti bullying policy.

1. Defining cyber bullying
Cyber bullying has been briefly defined as ‘sending or posting harmful or cruel text or images using the Internet or other digital communication devices’ (Willard, 2004: p. 1). More broadly, cyber bullying has been defined in terms of the use of electronic devices through which to bully (Agatson, Kowalski and Limber 2007, Patchin and Hinduja 2006, Swartz 2009). The intention behind the behaviour is an emergent theme in cyber bullying definitions with language such as “wilful and repeated harm” (Patchin and Hinduja 2006:152), “deliberate, repeated, and hostile behaviour by an individual or group, that is intended to harm others” (Belsey 2006:2) and “aggressive” (Shariff 2008) “cruel…social aggression” (Willard 2007:1) common in the literature.

Technological advancement occurs at significant speed particularly as recent years demonstrate in terms of social networking technologies and therefore it can be difficult for the research to keep up with current cyber
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bullying tends. Willard (2005) defined eight sub categories of cyber bullying that have proved helpful in providing a framework with which to understand cyber bullying behaviour. These he identified as Flaming: electronic fights using message with angry/vulgar language, Harassment: the repeated sending of nasty/insulting messages, Denigration: posting gossip or damaging someone’s reputation online, Impersonation: pretending to be someone or posting material intended to damage that person’s reputation or friendships, Outing: the sharing of someone’s personal or secret information online, Trickery: talking someone into sharing information and them making it publicly available online, Exclusion: intentionally excluding someone from an online group and cyber stalking: repeated intense harassment that incites fear.

It is however important to note that defining bullying cyber or traditional is somewhat contentious particularly the repeated nature of the behaviour (Mannix McNamara 2005). This becomes even more problematic in the case of cyber bullying where every hit on a web page containing denigrating text or visuals could be construed as repetition (Slonje and Smith 2008). Cyber bullying can be more challenging in that the bullying can follow the target into their home and private space and the bully can keep their identity unknown which is a unique and insidious form of dominance (Ybarra and Mitchell 2004).

2. Cyber bullying and schools

One might assume that by simply turning off the technology the target of cyber bullying can escape from its impact. However, it is not that simple, particularly in the case of school children for whom technology has become an interwoven aspect of everyday living. For many school children school is often discussed via technology in the evening and online
communications are often discussed as part of the school day, both worlds are intertwined (Hinduja and Patchin 2006). Unlike traditional bullying cyber bullying behaviours happen more frequently outside of the school premises, even though the perpetrators are known through school (Smith et al 2008). Even though the behaviour happens outside of school the reverberations regularly impact upon the school the following day (ibid). Schools in Ireland have anti bullying policies; these are a requirement in national policy, but these policies are lagging far behind in terms of dealing with cyber bullying. Currently, cyber bullying is addressed as a ‘type’ of bullying covered under the Guidelines on Countering Bullying Behaviours in Primary and Post Primary Schools (DES 1993). Given the increasing nature and severity of cyber bullying, there is need for educators, administrators and authorities to take action (Li 2006). The limited nature by which these guidelines address cyber bullying mean that teachers have relatively limited action competence in this regard.

3. Research design
On order to examine the research aims of teacher attitudes, perceptions experiences and skills in dealing with cyber bullying, an online survey was designed. A purposive sample of teachers who had graduated from teacher professional development programmes in the University of Limerick was invited to participate. They were e mailed and invited to participate. Two hundred and seventy four teachers responded. Ethical approval was granted for the study.

4. Research Results
Of those that took part in the study 36% were male and 64% were female. The majority of the respondents were post primary teachers (90.8%)
while the remaining 9.2% were primary school teachers. The majority of those that took part in the questionnaire were subject teachers (55.7%), 18.7% were a special duties post holder, 12.6% were assistant principals, 7.3% were guidance counsellors, 2.3% were principals. Other respondents included, home school liaison officers, TY co-ordinators, deputy principals, special needs assistants and a school chaplain. Respondents came from twenty four of the twenty eight counties in the Republic of Ireland. The study included teachers from all types of schools in Ireland including, comprehensive, vocational, mixed and gender specific schools. The respondents taught all years in a wide variety of subjects.

When asked if respondents perceived that bullying occurred in their schools 98% perceived that bullying occurs among students in their school. 57.7% of teachers believed that it occurs mainly outside of the classroom and most particularly at lunch time, in the corridors and after school.

![Figure 1: Perception of Bullying Among Students](image)
The majority of teachers (60.3%) believe that bullies target both male and female pupils. One fifth of teachers believe that they target mainly females and 19.4% believe that bullies target mainly male pupils. 60.2% of respondents believe that bullying is occurring almost every day, 21.6% are of the opinion that it occurs once a week, 8.7% of teachers believe it is occurring on a monthly basis and almost 10% believe bullying occurs rarely in their school. It is of note that 90.7% of the teachers believed that bullying was mostly prominent in the first three years of secondary schools with second year being chosen by almost half of the respondents (48.8%). Pupils in these years are aged between 12 and 15 years.

Respondents perceived themselves to have a high level of awareness of cyber bullying, with over 90% choosing the options aware or very aware.

![Figure 2: Awareness of Cyberbullying](image-url)

The use of digital media such as phones, emails or web pages via which cliques or individuals can carry out bullying against individuals or groups (Questionnaire Respondent, 222)
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However not all respondents were as clear about cyber bullying:

Repeated attempts to make another person feel powerless - whether through physical, verbal or emotional means. One serious incident may also constitute bullying (Questionnaire Respondent, 17)

46.6% of respondents believe that cyber bullying occurs frequently among students, over half (53%) indicating a perception that it occurs sometimes and only one respondent (0.4%) indicated a perception that it never happens among students.

When respondents were asked the question, “How well do you feel able to support students who are the target of cyber bullying?” respondents indicated some significant limitations

Not v able. It is hard to know when it is happening as a student’s cyberspace is not something that they would share with teachers etc. I have heard about it but would never have come across it in my experience. Not sure how I would deal with it if I had to (Questionnaire Respondent, 215)

They pointed to the lack of training they have received in this area and also lack of knowledge.

Not very able I think teachers should receive some guidance as to how to deal with cyber bullying (Questionnaire Respondent, 152)

Insufficient support due to lack of information on how it happens etc (Questionnaire Respondent, 2)

Many teachers in the study were also unsure of their role and felt that it wasn’t part of their responsibility as a teacher as this type of bullying mostly occurs outside of school hours.
It is difficult to determine whose place it is to step in when this type of bullying occurs as teachers are not likely to be involved in these social networks with pupils. It is also possible to argue that it is the pupil’s family or friends who would be better equipped to help pupils being bullied in this manner (Questionnaire Respondent, 148).

Anything that happens outside of school should be dealt with by parents (Questionnaire Respondent, 122).

Over two thirds of the respondents believe that traditional bullying is still the most prevalent form of bullying among school children. 19.2% believe that cyber bullying has become the most prevalent type of bullying and 8.4% identified homophobic bullying as the most prevalent.
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Only 8.3% of respondents perceived that teachers were very able to resolve the situation to the satisfaction of all. Almost half the respondents believe that they are somewhat able to resolve the situation so that everyone is content. When asked what teachers needed in order to be able to effectively deal with bullying in schools, the answers were diverse and complex. Many felt teachers needed to be given more information especially on cyber bullying, 

*More information on cyber bullying, how it happens, consequences etc.* (Questionnaire Respondent, 4)

Teachers also felt that in-service is necessary in this area and identified a need for specific training on how to deal with bullying;

*I think all teachers should receive training on conflict management and that will facilitate all teachers being involved in anti-bullying which should help diminish the occurrence of bullying as students are aware that all teachers are 'on board' (Questionnaire Respondent, 58)*.
Teachers perceive that students bully teachers with 58.7% claiming it happens sometimes and a further 12.8% stating that it happens often. Teachers commented further on this question revealing that cyber bullying was a popular option for students to bully teachers;

*The 'rate my teacher' phenomenon (Questionnaire Respondent, 130)*

*Specifically of teachers on facebook and Bebo, "rate my teachers" (Questionnaire Respondent, 55)*

Experiences of teachers included:

*A teacher was receiving sexually explicit texts from a student (Questionnaire Respondent, 49)*

*Using information from personal websites to try and manipulate teachers and intimidate them. Taking recordings in class (video or pictures) to ridicule the teacher in front of other pupils (Questionnaire Respondent, 45)*
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Facebook pages about schools/teachers with horrendous comments
You tube clips of classroom incidents (Questionnaire Respondent, 12)

Students can hold grudges against teachers (especially girls) and this can be put up on websites (Questionnaire Respondent, 3)

Figure 6: Teachers bullying Students

Over half the respondents indicated the perception that teachers sometimes bully students, (2.4%: often, 32.7%: rarely and 10%: never).

When asked for additional comments at the end of the survey, some respondents took some time to write about their concerns with regard to cyber bullying.

Cyber bullying is becoming an almost unmanageable problem in schools. I use the word unmanageable as so much of it takes place outside of school and yet it impacts on school life. Parents are very unaware of what their children can get involved in while left
unsupervised on their computers. Therefore education is a key factor in this area for parents/teachers/students (Questionnaire Respondent 1)

I feel the Gardai (police) should be involved in these cases. One reason I think bullying (both student led and teacher led) seems to happen so often within schools is that schools seem to operate outside the realms of the law of the land. It is as if law and order is left at the school gate and all kinds of illegal behaviour become only "messing" or "acting out" once inside the classroom (Questionnaire Respondent, 5)

Find out more about how bullying in school spills outside the school (Questionnaire Respondent, 28)

5. Implications

The data suggest that while teacher are generally aware of cyber bullying, they also identify the need for support and professional development in order to be better able to help their students. They indicated perceptions of relatively high levels of occurrence of cyber bullying. The teachers’ perceived competence with regard to successfully addressing cyber bullying was however much lower which clearly suggests the need for more effective policy development specific to cyber bullying. It also suggests the need for professional development for teachers in the area of cyber bullying which develops their knowledge with regard to the complex nature of cyber bullying and its impact on the esteem and well being of students.

Even though cyber bullying actions may occur outside the school (for example on home computers) the motivation to engage in that action may have had its genesis within the school and certainly the impact of the behaviour infiltrates the relationships within the school. Some teachers seemed unclear as to whether the school had any remit in dealing with cyber bullying as they argued that cyber bullying occurs outside the school
environs. This is a problematic stance, cyber bullying between students in a school is often rooted in the relationships in that school and indeed cyber bullying actions quite frequently occur within the school environs particularly when the mode is by phone. While it is unfair to expect the school to act as a panacea for all societal ills and parents do have a key role in ensuring that they are aware of how their children use and are affected by their technology, teachers nonetheless do have a role in addressing cyber bullying and can have a significant influence on raising student awareness with regard to its impact.
Bibliography


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