How Middle School Principals of Small Rural Schools Address Cyberbullying

Christina M. Force, Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, Bloomsburg, PA, USA

ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying affects almost half of the teenagers in America (National Crime Prevention Council [NCPC], 2010). The effects of cyberbullying can be detrimental to teens and may include withdrawal from school activities, illness, depression, eating disorders, or suicidal ideations (Dehue, Bolman, & Vollink, 2008; Mason, 2008). In order to effectively deal with this issue, it is imperative that front-line middle school principals are prepared to address this growing problem. The purpose of this study was to examine how middle school principals of small rural schools address cyberbullying and their beliefs on its effect on the school climate and students. This study examined what middle school principals have experienced with regard to cyberbullying and the ways in which principals have responded to incidences of cyberbullying. A qualitative design using an exploratory multiple case study approach was utilized for this study. The results of this study describe how middle school principals in a small rural setting address cyberbullying and its impact on the school environment.

KEYWORDS

Administration, Online, Bullying, Cyberbully, Education, Middle School, Prevention, School Climate

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a serious threat to school safety and the well-being of today’s children. Cyberbullying has also emerged as a threat to today’s youth (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2012; Stockdale, Hangaduambo, Duys, Larson, & Sarvela, 2002). According to the National Crime Prevention Council (NCPC; 2010), cyberbullying is a problem that affects almost half of all teenagers in America. Cyberbullying is the use of electronic means to harm or threaten individuals (Chibbaro, 2007; Cyberbullying Research Center, 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Strom & Strom, 2005). E-mail, text messaging, cell phones, chat rooms, web pages, instant messaging, and various social networks are some of the tools that cyberbullies employ in their attempt to intimidate and humiliate their victims (Campbell, 2005; Chibbaro, 2007; Smith et al., 2008; Strom & Strom, 2005; Szader, 2012).

Cyberbullying is similar to traditional bullying in that one person exerts control or power over another weaker individual (Cossin, Cowie, de Bettencourt, Lemme, & Naylor, 2006; Hines, 2011). Today’s youth have access to a variety of technologies such as cell phones and the Internet that can be used for cyberbullying, which in turn may cause victims to experience pain and embarrassment (Mason, 2008). Cyberbullying can have detrimental effects on its victims and may include withdrawal from school activities, illness, depression, eating disorders, or suicidal ideations (Hindjua & Patchin, 2012; Mason, 2008; Willard, 2006). The ramifications of cyberbullying on students may impact the way a principal leads a school as he or she attempts to address incidences of cyberbullying and its effect on school climate.

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Principals take on an important leadership position in school and play a pertinent role in setting the climate of their school (Portin, Alejano, Knapp, & Marzoff, 2006). A positive school climate reduces the number and frequency of cyberbullying incidences principals may encounter in their schools (Hinduja & Patchin, 2012). The purpose of this study was to examine how middle school principals of small rural schools address cyberbullying and its effect on their school’s climate and students.

Cyberbullying has become widespread and may have devastating consequences for its victims; therefore, it is vital that all efforts be made to curtail such activities (Brady & Conn, 2006). School districts have many varying views on how cyberbullying should be dealt with, especially if it occurs outside of school. The seriousness and increasing prevalence of cyberbullying calls for more research focused on the middle school level as this age group prefers the anonymity that cyberbullying provides (Campbell, 2005; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Olsen, 2011). In addition, there are few studies focused on the role of the middle school principal in small, rural settings.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

According to Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson (2010), principals are the central figure in school leadership. The researchers collected data from nine states, 43 school districts, and 180 elementary, middle, and secondary schools. In addition, numerous interviews were conducted with various school personnel and survey data was provided by over 10,000 teachers, administrators, and other school personnel. The researchers asserted that leadership consists of two core functions—providing direction and exercising influence with the goal of improving the organization. Louis et al. (2010) purported that “leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school” (p. 5). Likewise, it was determined that principals have the most influential role in a school which has an enormous impact on student achievement.

The National School Climate Center (2012) defined school climate as “the quality and character of school life” (p. 1) which is based on interpersonal relationships; teaching and learning practices; organizational structures; goals; values, and patterns of students, parents, and school personnel’s experience of school life. Student safety is a primary concern for all schools and is an important aspect for maintaining a positive school climate (National School Climate Center, 2012). Cyberbullying is a new phenomenon that can impact the safety dimension of school climate, and may inhibit student learning and healthy development (Devine & Cohen, 2007).

Research has found strong relationships between leadership, school climate, and effective schools. A study conducted by Kelley, Thornton, and Daughtry (2005) of 31 elementary schools found a correlation between principals’ effectiveness and school climate. Additional research has indicated that positive school climate has been shown to produce many beneficial outcomes for students which include positive youth development, increased student graduation rates, improved student learning and academic achievement (Cohen & Geier, 2010; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004). Research conducted by Hinduja and Patchin (2012) indicated that schools possessing a positive climate are comprised of students who are less likely to bully.

Bullying has long been considered a part of growing up and something most children experience. Over the last two decades, society has recognized this behavior as a societal concern (Campbell, 2005). Bullying can manifest itself into several forms and consist of verbal, physical, or psychological attacks intended to intimidate the victim (Campbell, 2005). Wang, Lannotti, and Nansel (2009) conducted a Health Behavior in School-Aged Children survey of a nationally-representative sample of 7,508 American youth in grades 6-10 regarding four types of bullying. Wang et al. (2009) found the following prevalence rates among participants as either a victim of bullying or a bully at least once in a two-month time period: 20.8% physically, 53.6% verbally, 51.4% socially, or 13.6% electronically. The results of this study also indicated that cyberbullying is distinctly different from traditional bullying.
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