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A Service Learning Approach to Cyberbullying Prevention

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Introduction

Despite the best intentions of parents, teachers, counselors, and others, bullying and school violence is a growing problem worldwide. This behavior is unacceptable and antisocial. It can easily undermine the entire school environment, affecting students' academic and social lives, causing victims emotional and psychological distress, and even, in the most extreme cases, death (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Harris, Petrie, & Willoughby, 2002; Hoover & Stenhjem, 2003; Kraut, et al., 1998; National Training and Technical Assistance Center for Drug Prevention and School Safety Program Coordinators, 2004; Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004a, 2004b, as cited in Mason, 2008).

With the availability of new technologies such as the internet and cell phones, new opportunities for bullies have been created. Cyberbullying – the use of electronic devices to bully others – has rapidly become a serious problem in schools (Li, 2006). Cyberbullying can be defined as an individual or a group that willfully uses information and communication involving electronic technologies to deliberately and repeatedly harass or threaten another individual or group by sending or posting cruel text and/or graphics (Beasley, 2004; Berson, Berson, & Ferron, 2002; Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2001; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Trolley, Hanel, & Shields, 2006; Willard, 2005).

Cyberbullying sometimes begins as early as the fourth grade and extends to the university level. However, it appears to be particularly acute during the junior high/middle school period (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1995). Regardless of when it occurs, cyberbullying, like other forms of bullying, is about the systematic abuse of power and controlling another weaker, more vulnerable individual (Naylor, Cowie, & del Rey, 2001). Even though cyberbullying is a relatively new phenomenon,

there is a growing body of research about the topic because of its destructive influence on students' lives and school environments.

Cyberbullying

Although cyberbullying is a fairly new phenomenon, it is becoming a world-wide problem. News stories and personal accounts, although perhaps biased, have reported cyberbullying events occurring around the globe (Li, 2008). Several studies from the United Kingdom (UK) have revealed that cyberbullying is widespread among students there (National Children's Home, 2005; Noret & Rivers, 2006; Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, & Tippet, 2006). A research project involving Canadian and Chinese pupils revealed that both countries have a high percentage of students involved in cyberbullying (Li, 2008). Ybarra and Mitchell (2004b) surveyed Internet use by 1501 youth, aged 10 to 17, in the United States. They found that 12% reported being aggressive to someone online, while 4% were targets of aggression, and 3% were both aggressors and targets. However, Juvonen and Gross (2008) reported much higher numbers from their study of 1,454, 12- to 17-year-olds who completed an anonymous web-based survey. Seventy two percent of those students reported having experienced at least one incident of cyberbullying.

These numbers indicate that cyberbullying is a universal problem and that it is affecting a significant portion of students in countries around the globe. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) reported that 33% of victims indicated that they were upset or extremely upset after internet aggression. Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, and Finkelhor (2006) found that 38% of the cyberbullying targets felt distress. Patchin and Hinduja (2006) studied 384 internet using adolescents' experiences with cyberbullying and found that more than 29% reported being victimized online. The researchers found that many of the victims (almost 60%) were negatively impacted by the cyberbullying. Victims' behavior changed at school, at home, and with friends. This research indicates that cyberbullying is not only occurring, but is affecting students in many negative ways (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006).

Bullies now have an "electronic bathroom wall" which allows them to widely distribute gossip and mean and nasty things about others (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2006, p. 42). All of these findings provide support for the view that cyberbullying causes significant problems for students on and off school grounds (Hoover & Olsen, 2001), and point to the need for school personnel to intervene in this type of harassment (Li, 2006; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006).

Types of Cyberbullying

A review of the literature revealed several different types of cyberbullying. Perhaps the most complete list is Willard's (2005) Seven Categories of Common Cyberbullying Actions. They are:

- (1) Flaming: Sending rude, vulgar, or angry messages about a person to an online group or to that individual via text messaging or email.
- (2) Online Harassment: Repeatedly sending offensive messages via email or other text messaging to a person.

- (3) Cyberstalking: Online harassment that includes threats of harm or is excessively intimidating.
- (4) Denigration (put downs): Sending harmful, untrue, or cruel statements about a person to other people or posting material online.
- (5) Masquerade: Pretending to be someone other than yourself and sending or posting material that makes another person look bad.
- (6) Outing: Sending or posting material about a person that contains sensitive, private, or embarrassing information, including forwarding private messages or images.
- (7) Exclusion: Cruelly excluding someone from a group.

In addition to understanding the types of cyberbullying, parents and school officials need to know how cyberbullying is occurring. Slonje and Smith (2008) identify the following cyberbullying methods in their research: (1) text message, (2) email, (3) phone call, and (4) picture/video clip.

The methods of cyberbullying are arranged in order of preferred usage by the 360 Swedish students in the study (Slonje & Smith, 2008). There is a need for parents and school officials to understand the methods used to cyberbully and the types of cyberbullying, and to inform themselves about this insidious new phenomenon spreading globally.

Themes from the Literature

Although the phenomenon of cyberbullying is new, a growing number of scholars from the UK, China, Sweden, and the United States are researching the problem. While approaching the research problem from slightly different perspectives, many of their findings corroborate the other studies. Thus, a pattern is beginning to emerge about cyberbullying. Perhaps the most comprehensive set of conclusions about cyberbullying to be found at this point is the work of Juvonen and Gross (2008). Their sample was comprised of 1,454, 12- to 17-year-old adolescents who responded to an anonymous web-based survey. The results validated the work of many other researchers who found similar results. Most importantly, Juvonen and Gross reported that:

- (1) Cyberbullying is a common experience among students who are heavy internet users.
- (2) On-line and in-school bullying are similar in form and the experiences overlap between the two arenas.
- (3) While some electronic communication methods and devices (IM, email, etc.) are associated with elevated risk of cyberbullying, they are merely tools, not causes of mean behavior.
- (4) Independent and apart from school-based bullying, cyberbullying is associated with increased levels of distress.
- (5) Students almost never tell adults about cyberbullying.
- (6) Youth do not use the tools provided by communication technologies to prevent future incidents.

A number of authors agree with Juvonen and Gross (2008) in that the links and similarities between online and school-based bullying documented in their study need to be emphasized. In their view, there is no reason why cyberbullying should be “beyond” the school’s scope or responsibility. Instead, schools need to enforce rules against any intimidation of students, whether that takes place on or beyond the school grounds (Juvonen & Gross, 2008, p. 504).

Service Learning

The project reported in this paper used a unique service learning approach to the problem of cyberbullying. The *Cyberbullying* service learning project stretched over a year and took place in the Graduate School Counseling Program at Northwestern State University of Louisiana. Graduate students, studying to be school counselors, participated in this service learning project.

Service learning is a rapidly spreading trend in higher education. Universities and community colleges are incorporating service learning as part of the undergraduate and graduate experience (Anderson, 2003; Cashel, Goodman, & Swanson, 2003; Cleary, 1998; Holton, 2003; Jones & Abes, 2004; Reed, Jernstedt, Hawley, Reber, & DuBois, 2005; Schaffer & Peterson, 1998). As typically used, service learning means a structured learning experience where the individual acquires awareness, knowledge, and skills while promoting a commitment to personal, social, civil, and professional responsibility (Burnett, Long, & Horne, 2005 as cited in Perkins, Williamson, & Pichon, 2009).

In a 1999-2000 survey of 324 universities and colleges, Moser and Rogers (2005) found that 82% offered graduate or undergraduate courses involving some sort of service learning. This service learning trend has extended into Counselor Education Programs (e.g., Arman & Scherer, 2002; Burnett, Long, & Horne, 2005). Service learning is a very useful tool in training aspiring school counselors to deal with real-world issues like cyberbullying.

The process of implementing a service learning component or activity involves four separate and distinct stages: (1) Preparation, (2) Action, (3) Reflection, and (4) Demonstration. These stages will be examined through the *Cyberbullying* service learning project that was implemented.

Preparation

The first stage of a service learning activity involves preparation. Within this stage, several key events occur, including identifying a need, collaborating with community partners, and acquiring new information. “Investigation, discussion, and analysis lead to plans for action” (Kaye, 2004, p. 10). Within the *Cyberbullying* project, the issue of cyberbullying was identified by five area school counselors as a problem within their schools; thus, the focus of the project became evident. After identifying the need and community partners, the focus then shifted to examining how to integrate the project into existing coursework while still meeting the educational requirements of the school counseling curriculum as well as the needs of the local school districts. The following student assignments were proposed in the grant: (1) parent workshops, (2) guidance curriculum units, (3) small group plans, and (4) presentation of guidance lessons.

The project was integrated into four courses: (1) Introduction to School Counseling, (2) Counseling Children and Adolescents, (3) Group Counseling in Schools, and (4) School Counseling Practicum.

The next step within the preparation stage was helping students acquire new information about cyberbullying in order to create the specified learning products. For example, students researched what cyberbullying entailed, ways to prevent cyberbullying from occurring, and how to educate students and parents about the effects of cyberbullying. In conducting this research, students were directed to specific articles and websites related to cyberbullying. Additionally, students were encouraged to find and post additional research articles and websites. During this preparation stage students also responded to several discussion board questions such as, “*How does cyberbullying impact student learning?*” Using the research and discussions as a foundation, students then moved into the action phase.

Action

The key components emphasized in the action phase included providing students a safe environment with unique learning experiences that had value, purpose, and meaning (Kaye, 2004). In the *Cyberbullying* project, students worked in groups to create the learning products for each of the identified courses.

Parent Workshop. Students enrolled in the beginning School Counseling on-line course created parent workshops that school counselors could present to parents in their districts. The students worked in small groups of three to five and communicated with one another about the project via BlackBoard, e-mail, telephone, and fax.

The Parent Workshop the students designed were thirty minute presentations that school counselors could give to parents of a specific grade level (i.e., elementary, middle, or high school). The Workshop included: (1) an Introduction, (2) the Plan, and (3) Counselor “Talking Tips.”

The Introduction consisted of the following elements (1) an introduction stating what the workshop was about, (2) background information establishing the importance of the workshop, (3) a statement of purpose describing how the workshop was to be used, (4) the overall goals of the workshop, and (5) a comprehensive listing of materials needed for the workshop. The Plan was the actual workshop, organized through a powerpoint presentation for parents. The workshop included learning objectives, an introduction to the workshop, activities that actively involved parents, and a conclusion detailing how the school counselor could assess parent learning and suggested ways to follow up with parents. The Counselor “Talking Tips” was a script that corresponded to each of the powerpoint slides.

A total of six workshops were created by students in the course (i.e., two elementary, two middle school, and two high school).

Curriculum Unit. Students enrolled in the Children and Adolescents course designed cyberbullying curriculum units that school counselors could present in large-group classroom guidance lessons. The students worked in groups of three to five and again communicated with one another about the project via BlackBoard, e-mail, telephone, fax, and face-to-face meetings.

Each curriculum unit included the following components: (1) an introduction stating what the unit was about, (2) background information establishing the importance

of the unit, (3) a statement of purpose describing how the unit was to be used, (4) the overall goals of the unit, (5) a comprehensive listing of materials needed for the entire unit, and (6) a listing of additional references and resources. Each unit consisted of three to five guidance lessons on cyberbullying that were to be used in sequence.

Each of the guidance lessons within the unit were required to state the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) standard(s) and competencies and contained learning objectives for the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains. Each lesson consisted of an introduction, developmental activities that actively involved classroom students and targeted multiple intelligences, a conclusion that required students to think about how the lesson applied to life outside of the classroom, and formal and informal assessments. Students were responsible for creating all materials that were mentioned in their lesson plans (i.e., samples of work, questionnaires, assessments and answers, etc.)

A total of eight curriculum units were created by students in the course (i.e., two elementary, four middle school and two high school).

Small Group Plans. Two sets of five sessions (integrated small group counseling plans) were developed by students in the Group Counseling course. One set was designed to be used with upper elementary students and the other set was designed for use with junior or senior high school students. Specific goals for each group session were given in the group plan, as well as all the activities that would take place in the group in that session. The sessions addressed issues such as: what to do if you are cyberbullied, why students cyberbully, and ways to prevent cyberbullying.

Reflection

After the learning products were created in each of the courses, students were asked to complete learning reflections. Reflection “integrates learning and experience with personal growth and awareness” (Kaye, 2004, p. 11) and is an important component of the service learning process.

Students were asked to reflect on both the content that they had learned as well as the process. Four themes were found consistently throughout the reflections: (1) the interest in the topic of cyberbullying, (2) excitement about tackling a “real world” problem, (3) connection to their future work as school counselors, and (4) service learning as an effective teaching tool and as a way to “give.”

Cyberbullying was a topic that resounded with students and held their interest. In many ways cyberbullying can be more devastating than “schoolyard” bullying because the audience is more widespread and the emotional impact can be greater. One student reflected, *I had heard of Cyberbullying, but I did not realize what a widespread problem it is. I was shocked to learn that a full 33% of youth have been attacked in cyberspace. I was especially upset when I saw an autistic child respond to her being videoed with a cell phone during her emotional breakdown on the bus. She knew they were making fun of her and that others would see it.*

The second theme reflected in the students’ work was excitement about tackling a “real world” problem, rather than an abstract or “case study” issue. One student reflected, *Real school counselors will be able to use the lessons and workshop that we produced,* while another stated, *It is kind of neat that school counselors may actually use the lessons we created. I would hope that it would save them some time of having to create their own lesson plans.* One student who was employed within a local school actually shared her

work with the school's counselor. *I gave a copy of our project to our counselor and she was very grateful. I would love to help her present it at some point.*

The third theme found in the reflections was the assignments' connection to future work. *I think that actually completing these projects will help me in my future work as a counselor by teaching me plenty of things I did not know before about teaching and gathering materials. I learned, for instance, how to create a lesson plan. I did not know how to do that before this project; I am not a teacher. Or, in the words of another student, The projects helped me understand how much effort is put into preparing materials for parents, students, and teachers. The counselor has to do research on his/ her topic of discussion, be able to supply references to the individuals that he/ she is serving, and be able to tell them about things (such as cyberbullying) that he or she may have limited knowledge of prior to the lesson.*

The last theme focused on service learning as an effective teaching tool and as a way to "give" back to the community. Students' prior experience with service learning was varied. One student wrote, *In regards to service learning, which is what we did with creating the cyberbullying projects, I did not really know what it was; I had not given it much thought. Though I participated in it in high school, I just viewed it as getting out of school an hour early two days each week. I found out, during creating these products for teaching cyberbullying lessons, that service learning can be comprised of a myriad of things. Service learning does not have to consist of interacting with students or others in the community; it can be creating lessons and workshops that could potentially reach counselors across the nation.* Another student stated, *When I heard it mentioned, I wasn't sure what service learning was. I have a better grasp on that now and see it as a dynamic learning tool.* A number of students mentioned their interest in implementing service learning projects into their schools once they become school counselors. Almost every student enjoyed engaging in the project and appreciated the learning involved, as well as the chance to contribute to the profession as a student. One student reflected, *I have been privileged to work with helpful, sincere and hard-working fellow students this semester. Service learning to them was not just a grade. It was a service.*

Demonstration

Demonstration, the final stage of the service learning process, involves students demonstrating skills, insights, and outcomes to an outside group. Kaye (2004) recommends that students show their expertise through public presentations (e.g., displays, performances, presentations) that demonstrate each of the previous stages (i.e., preparation, action, and reflection). In the *Cyberbullying* project, a group of students presented their learning products at two state conferences and to area school counselors. Also, several of the students who were enrolled in the Introduction to School Counseling, Counseling Children and Adolescents, and the Group Counseling courses are currently completing their Practicum experience within the schools. The students are now using the materials they developed to provide guidance lessons, small group sessions, and parent workshops to their schools. Also as part of the demonstration stage, students created public service announcements that were aired on two local stations and participated in an inservice that was hosted at the university. A national speaker presented at the inservice which was given for school administrators, teachers, school counselors, community leaders, local law enforcement agencies, and parents.

Conclusion

School counselors face a myriad of problems within today's schools; the issue of cyberbullying is merely one example of a serious problem that school counselors deal with daily. This model of service learning integrates real community needs with counselor preparation coursework and has been presented as an alternative to traditional formats of learning which often involve abstract problems and faceless districts. It is hoped this project can add to the growing body of knowledge and ideas about the service learning movement within education, especially within counselor education programs. Service learning is an active and rewarding form of learning which benefits students, universities, and the communities they serve.

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