Cyberbullying: Policy for Digital Protection

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ABSTRACT
Historically, bullying has been an accepted part of adolescence. With key demographic changes in the United States and the evolution of information and communication technologies, more children are falling prey to a new form of bullying. School leaders, policymakers, and politicians are creating laws such as Maryland’s Grace’s Law to combat the digital epidemic of cyberbullying. Unfortunately, many teachers and school administrators are left with the burden of implementing cyberbullying laws without trying to distinguish the cause and take action to prevent it. School systems must develop methods for recording cyberbullying incidents to produce accurate data results. Teachers, school leaders, lawmakers, and government officials must fund and implement cyberethics programs in schools to help students develop into responsible, compassionate global digital citizens.

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Tyler Clementi, Jessica Logan, Ryan Halligan, and Rachel Neblett: this list of random names could be a list of family members, friends, or students in any school, in any district, in any part of the world. The individuals on this list of names have one major thing in common: they were teenage victims of cyberbullying and committed suicide because of the psychic trauma caused by relentless torment and ridicule. The threats and implications of cyberbullying jeopardize the safety and well being of today’s digital generation.

History of Bullying

Bullying behavior has an extensive history in schools. “The word “bully” can be traced back as far as the 1530s (Harper, 2008). In its most basic sense bullying involves two people, a bully or intimidator and a victim. The bully abuses the victim through physical, verbal, or other means in order to gain a sense of superiority and power. These actions may be direct (i.e. hitting, verbally assaulting face-to-face, etc.) or indirect (i.e. rumors, gossip, etc.)” (Donegan, 2012, p. 33-34). The bully exercises power over the victim(s) using force. According to Fowler, “There are two kinds of force: physical and psychic force” (Fowler, 2009, p. 29). Physical force is using or threatening to use physical actions to impose someone’s will on others, while psychic force uses insults, nagging, judgments, and other forms of verbal harassment to impose someone’s will on others. Although cyberbullying manifests with less physical trauma, the psychic trauma can be just as damaging: leading to depression, crime, and suicide.

Historically, bullying was perceived as a rite of passage; a common occurrence associated with adolescence and social development. In the past, the stereotypical facade of a bully was a large, white male that stuffed smaller children into lockers or stole milk money. Nowadays, the demographics of bullies, particularly cyberbullies, are drastically different. New research from the Cyberbullying Research Center at Florida Atlantic University suggests that, “female teenagers are noticeably more likely to engage in cyberbullying than their male counterparts” (Goodman, 2010). Another stunning statistic is most cases of cyberbullying occur outside of school
property. Parents, teachers, school leaders, and lawmakers must understand cyberbullying is an entirely different form of bullying.

The Root of the Epidemic

The bully phenomenon is a side effect of the competitive nature of U.S. schools. “From the time an American child enters grade school, he or she is taught to be the best he or she can. This seemingly innocent lesson can morph as a child develops throughout his or her education. Students often learn corrupt ways to get ahead in the highly competitive educational and social environments that grade school presents” (Donegan, 2012, p. 34). The competitive nature of U.S. education is amplified with larger, diverse student populations. “Bullying occurs anywhere groups of people congregate for periods of time. This includes schools, workplaces, in homes, on playgrounds, in the military and in nursing homes, as just a few examples of locations with the potential for bullying activity” (Bliesner, 2012, para.2). The post-World War II era of the U.S experienced a massive population shift. “Another internal population shift that has been occurring for decades is suburbanization. The rural population has been in decline for a long time, but, in the twenty-first century, the urban population is also dwindling” (Fowler, 2009, pp. 65-66). Since the population is migrating into the suburban belts, a great deal of diversity has been introduced to suburban schools: racial, economic, and cultural. Although diversity can be an enriching factor for the student population, it can also bring about conflict and differing values and beliefs. Another factor leading to extensive bullying is the changing dynamic of the family unit. Often, children in the 21st century are left alone without parental guidance. “In 1994, 24% of children in the United States lived in fatherless homes, four times as many as in 1950. Even those children who are growing up in two-parent households do not experience the idyllic lifestyle frequently depicted in the television situation comedies of the 1960s and 1970s. Because their parents and older siblings often hold down one or two jobs outside the home, and because commuting time has increased, children receive less attention at home than previously” (Fowler, 2009, p. 67). Nowadays, with less parental guidance and supervision, children are engaging in riskier behaviors (digitally and non-digitally) such as bullying.

Bully 2.0: Bullying Goes Cyber

Since the 1990s and the emergence of the Internet, the globalized, digital world has experienced new prosperity in access to information. However, information and communication technologies (ICT) have created new issues lawmakers, teachers, parents, and students must grapple with. “Youth today have adopted a new and distinct form of bullying that has changed the rules of mockery, insults, and harm. A new forum, the electronic venue, has evolved in which youth of all ages spend a considerable portion of their days interacting and dialoguing in cyberspace, where the language has changed and adapted to net-speak, identities can be protected and personalities changed, and youth are faced with new and almost limitless liberties”(Cassidy, Jackson & Brown, 2009, pp.383-384). With the evolution of social media, social networks, and cell phones, cyberbullying has proliferated to epic proportions. “Cyberbullying victimization have varied in the past few years, ranging between 18.8 percent in May 2007 and 28.7 percent in Nov. 2009 with a mean of 27.32 percent based on 7 different studies from May 2007-Feb. 2010” (Donegan, 2012, p.
With rampant instances of cyberbullying occurring across the United States, action is necessary to protect today’s youth from themselves. “Since cyberbullying has become a global phenomenon (Kowalski et al., 2008), educators, academics, policymakers and legal specialists are just now beginning to grasp the enormity of the problems associated with cyberspace behaviors and opportunities, while struggling to develop effective policies and practices to counter the problem” (Cassidy, Jackson & Brown, 2009).

Across the nation, individual states have proposed and passed legislation to prevent cyberbullying. In Maryland, cyberbullying is included in the Maryland State Board of Education Regulation §13A.01.04.03: School Safety. Under this regulation:

- All students in Maryland's public schools, without exception and regardless of race, ethnicity, region, religion, gender, sexual orientation, language, socioeconomic status, age, or disability, have the right to educational environments that are:
  - A. Safe;
  - B. Appropriate for academic achievement; and
  - C. Free from any form of harassment (Maryland Office of the Secretary of State, n.d.).

In April of 2013, the Maryland General Assembly voted unanimously to adopt House Bill 396 (Grace’s Law) making it a crime to harass a minor online. The law prohibits, “a person from using an interactive computer service to maliciously engage in a certain course of conduct that inflicts serious emotional distress on a minor or places a minor in reasonable fear of death or serious bodily injury under certain circumstances” (Maryland General Assembly, 2013). The law prohibits using information and communication technologies from causing mental cruelty to another person. The law was nicknamed after Grace McComas, a Maryland teen who took her own life after extensive, prolonged harassment occurred online. Grace’s mother, Chris observed a startling reality about cyberbullying, “No longer does a bully say something nasty in the schoolyard and the child goes home to his sanctuary. Instead, [cyberbullying] is pervasive and invasive . . . It is gossip and hatred at the speed of electronic media, as close as their cell phone or computer screen” (Ebner, n.d.). Grace’s grieving parents were left with no means to prosecute her bully.

This law had little to no opposition due to such a polarizing story: young teenager bullied to the brink of despair and suicide. Delegate Ben Cardin sponsored Grace’s law with the support of Grace’s parents to protect individuals from harassment on the digital landscape. The new law is being labeled as a victory for lawmakers, but how will these initiatives be funded? Will schools be solely responsible for teaching cyberethics and enforcing anti-bullying policy? How will the countless numbers of teachers be trained with the skills and approaches to combat cyberbullying? How will teachers fit cyberethics instruction into their curriculum; a curriculum geared towards high-stakes testing? From a historical perspective, Maryland has been characterized as a state practicing an individualistic political culture. “Members of this culture believe government should keep a strict minimum its intervention” (Fowler, 2009, p.96). The Maryland lawmakers are leaving it up to local school districts and law enforcement to enforce and uphold the law on the local level. The new law’s impact and the policies generated from school district to school district could potentially create unattended issues such as: an increase in suspension
rates and police investigations in schools, additional lawsuits in court to overturn youth convictions, and backlash from first amendment rights fundamentalists. School districts must craft anti-cyberbullying policies to address the rights of both the victims and the perpetrator of cyberbullying.

A major problem with cyberbullying policies is the lack of funding and guidance for school districts. Since bullying may be an act of discrimination and a violation of civil rights, any agency receiving federal funding must comply with anti-discrimination laws. However, school districts are left with strong state anti-cyberbullying laws to enforce with no money or insight into their enforcement. “To further complicate matters for school officials, many states now have laws that specifically address cyberbullying, often requiring schools and districts to adopt anti-cyberbullying policies and programs but providing little guidance or funding for doing so” (Davis, 2011, para. 9). Patchin agreed with this observation, “Many schools are now in a difficult position of having to respond to a mandate to have a cyberbullying policy, without much guidance from the state about the circumstances under which they can (or must) respond” (Patchin, 2010, para. 1). If an important policy is formulated that impacts so many educational stakeholders, then funding must be provided to implement an effective anti-cyberbullying program.

The Digital Landscape

The experts in the field of education such as teachers, administrators, superintendents, and higher education faculty grew up in a different time, in a different world. The digital generation has never experienced a world without advanced information and communication technologies. “This world is one that changes very quickly. The experience of the children of 1995 was somewhat different from the experience of their younger siblings in 2005. The experience of 2015 will differ from that of 2005. In thinking about the demographic policy environment, school leaders are truly dealing with a moving target. Those who do not stay abreast of these changes risk creating the impression that they are hopelessly out of date” (Fowler, 2009, p.63). The policymakers grew up during a time without social networks, children texting 3,000 texts per month, or easy access to over 1 trillion web pages. They could not possibly fathom how interconnected the digital generation is with the digital landscape. The disconnection between the digital natives (students) and digital immigrants (policymakers) is so vast that old methods for addressing bullying are antiquated and ineffective.

New Law, New Struggles

Teachers, school leaders, and parents are left without guidance in devising a plan to implement the new anti-cyberbullying legislation passed by Maryland’s General Assembly. The lawmakers are labeled the ‘anti-cyberbullying crusaders’ for creating such a law, but the responsibility ultimately falls on the shoulders of the local school districts to translate the law into school system policy. “The passage of a statute and accompanying rules and regulations does not mean the new policy automatically goes into operation” (Fowler, 2009, p.17). Each school district, with its leaders and constituency must put into place practices and measures to enforce the law. Numerous stakeholders will use their values, beliefs, and perspectives to influence the policy implementation. First, administrators and teachers will be concerned due to a lack of training, resources, and experience dealing
with the new anti-cyberbullying law. Next, parents will bring a sense of urgency with a very critical eye to the issue. After all, parents are naturally protective of their children and want them to be safe from bullying. Parents also do not have as much experience navigating and understanding the digital landscape, so it is difficult for them to shield and protect their children. Finally, the school board and superintendent are responsible for establishing the practices and measures essential for enforcing the law. From county to county, these practices and measures may differ in language and enforcement.

**Potential Initiatives Moving Forward**

Policy implementation and evaluation are crucial to determine if anti-cyberbullying statutes such as Grace’s Law or the previous anti-cyberbullying law will make a difference in reducing cases of cyberbullying. The first improvement is changing the way school districts report and document instances of bullying. “There were 4,678 reported cases of bullying in Maryland schools, an increase of 860 from 2010. But only a small fraction of reported – 8 percent of those cases – involved electronic communication. State school officials said the true percentage of cases that involve cyberbullying cases is likely higher, because the reporting form does not ask detailed questions about each incident. Also, officials said, some districts likely underreport cases because it makes their schools look bad” (Ebner, n.d). This small adaptation of reporting protocols could produce better statistics and allow school districts to set system goals to reduce bullying instances. Next, teachers must include cyberethics and digital citizenship into their curriculums. School administrators and curriculum developers must incorporate training programs to help teachers develop classroom methods and approaches to end cyberbullying ‘at the source’ through rigorous education and character development with their students. Finally, cyberbullying prevention programs can extend outside of the school setting. Parent-teacher associations, community partners, and local law enforcement can create local advisory boards to monitor cyberbullying trends, suggest programs to decrease instances of cyberbullying, and organize special events or programs to inform parents of the dangers and ways to monitor for it at home.

With a widespread lack of character education at home, students must be made aware of the psychological damage caused by bullying inside and outside of the classroom. It is the responsibility of school districts and parents to produce global digital citizens that exude positivity and acceptance when dealing with diversity and interpersonal relationships. Even with the advancements in technology and communication, the digital generation must never lose their humanity. For this generation, cyberbullying must transform into cybertolerance.

**Author Bio**

Ryan Schaaf is the Assistant Professor of Educational Technology at Notre Dame of Maryland University and a Faculty Associate for the Johns Hopkins University School of Education Graduate Program with over 15 years of experience in the education field. Before higher education, Ryan was a 3rd grade public school teacher, instructional leader, curriculum designer and a technology integration specialist in Howard County, Maryland. In 2007, he was nominated for Howard County and Maryland Teacher of the Year.
In the past, Ryan has published his own research in the *New Horizons for Learning* and the *Canadian Journal of Action Research* related to the use of digital games as an effective instructional strategy in the classroom. He also supervised and constructed peer-reviewed, Common Core aligned K-12 lesson units for the 21st Fluency Project. Currently, Ryan is one of the featured contributors for the world renowned *Committed Sardines* blog. He has just finished work on his first book entitled, *Using Digital Games in the Classroom*. He enjoys presenting sessions and keynotes about the potential for gaming in the classroom, the characteristics of 21st century learners, and emerging technologies and trends in education.

Ryan is happily married to his beautiful wife, Rachel and has two little boys that are his pride and joy. In his free time he enjoys fishing, exercising, gardening, and volunteering in local schools.
References


