

Cyber bullying among Students with Serious Emotional and Specific Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

Objective: This replicative exploratory study sought to investigate the impact of cyber bullying among the seriously emotional disabled (SED) and specifically learning disabled (SLD) youth ages 12-19 grades 7-12, in comparison with their non-disabled student peers. The study focused on thirty SED and SLD students and 22 students without disabilities. **Methods:** Students (n= 30) with SED and SLD who were between 12–19 years of age completed a questionnaire containing questions related to bullying and victimization via the internet and cell phones. Other questions concerned socio-demographic characteristics (IQ, age, gender, diagnosis), self-esteem and depressive feelings. **Results:** The replicated study found that between four and 9% of SED and SLD students reported bullying or victimization of bullying at least once a week. Significant associations were found between cyber bullying and IQ, frequency of computer usage and self-esteem and depressive feelings. Additionally, the replicated study also found no associations between cyber bullying and age and gender. **Conclusions:** There is a limited research on the extent to which cyber bullying among students with SED and the SLD in special education and mainstream settings. Strategies are needed to reduce it and to establish coping mechanisms for the victims. They should also create awareness of the issue to avoid future cases of cyber bullying among this particular age group.

Introduction

Bullying is an unwanted and unwelcome behavior which is persistent and intended to hurt another person. It is mainly portrayed by school children and it usually is repeated over a period of time. Its main aim is to reinforce existing or perceived power imbalances between males and females. Olweus (1993) describes that bullying can be revealed in several ways such as threats, rumors, physical and verbal attacks or even exclusion of an individual from a certain group purposively. People bully others for reasons such as popularity, desire to get or divert attention and authority, and avoidance of facing inadequacies and responsibilities. As suggested by Raskauskas & Stoltz (2007) Cyber bullying is the form of bullying conducted through electronic sources. It could be email, instant messaging as well as digital messaging and imaging. Youth, especially teenagers, are the most affected by this form of bullying. Any form of bullying leads to demoralization, alienation and de-motivation. At a significant level, it causes denial. Those with disabilities are more at-risk for this type of victimization. According to Saylor & Leach (2009) they experience cyber bullying of a higher rate than that experienced by their non-disabled peers due to their conditions of disabilities. This paper outlines a replicative study concerning cyber bullying among students with Serious Emotional Disabilities (SED) and those with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD). The study compared these two groups to their non-disabled counterparts in a school in the same campus. It begins with a general overview of types of disabilities then detailed explanation of the research that will be replicated and eventually, the replicative study.

Types of Disabilities

According to Sheard, Clegg, Standen & Cromby (2001) there are many types of disabilities among human beings. Some are in-born whereas others come as a result of accidents.

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Some types of disabilities include; intellectual, emotional, developmental and learning disabilities. Intellectual disabilities deal with issues of Intelligent Quotient (IQ) whereas emotional disabilities deal with issues of Emotional Quotient (EQ) such as attitudes. Developmental disabilities are those that are viewed from the growth of human body. Some people develop faster than others due to reasons such as food scarcity. Learning disabilities are associated with the ability of an individual to read and write. As reported by Nabozoka & Smith (1993) those who cannot read and write well on their own are said to have learning disabilities. These disabilities affect students in different ways especially in their interaction with non-disabled students. It is important to investigate such disturbances and to develop strong measures that can assist stakeholders in removing them.

Cyber Bullying Among Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disability in Special Education and Mainstream Settings

Bullying is common among students and it can affect a male or female student emotionally and socially. Didden, Scholte, Korzilius, de Moor, Vermeulen, O'Reilly, Lang, & Lancioni (2009) suggest that it has often been argued that male students are perpetrators of bullying and female students are victims. However, several research findings show that both females and males can propagate bullying and both can be victims. Although, this is subject to debate, there is a general agreement among researchers that males and females use different strategies to bully their peers. This study was done to explore cyber bullying among male and female students who have intellectual as well as developmental disabilities. Unnever & Cornell (2003) assert that students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and those with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) face numerous challenges in school. After conducting a literature review, Didden et al (2009), the investigators revealed that there are no published research findings regarding the characteristics as well as frequency of cyber bullying among male and female students with disabilities. The researchers undertook the task of studying cyber bullying among young males and females (12-19 years) with disorders in intellect and (or) development.

Method

Participants and Procedure

One hundred and fourteen male and female students ages 12-19 years of age who had disorders regarding intellect and (or) development were sampled. This was done at the Herman Broeren School in South Netherlands. The sample comprised of males and females with an IQ of 50 and above, and those who could read the questions and all information on questionnaires without any difficulties. One hundred fifty students met these criteria but several reasons led to a reduction of the original sample. 30 parents refused to grant their children permission to participate, some children never turned up for the exercise whereas others were ill. This led to a reduction of the sample size to one hundred and fourteen children, all of whom had some knowledge about internet, cellular phones and (or) computers. They had an IQ ranging from 52-118. Two specific disabilities, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder were identified among other disorders. Seventy-two percent of the participants were males whereas 28 were females and 97% of the respondents were citizens of the South Netherlands by birth. They were all required to complete questionnaires from their classrooms in the presence of the investigator as well, as a teacher. Students were informed about the topic under study and they were assured of confidentiality in the data that would emerge. Demographic data of all the students was retrieved from individual files.

Data Collection

Data was collected using questionnaires. Every questionnaire had four parts each with open-ended and closed-ended questions designed in a manner that would enable students to respond appropriately.

- ❖ The first section required the respondents to fill in socio-demographic variables regarding their age, gender and IQ.
- ❖ The second section assessed individual self-esteem through nine questions developed by Scholte, Overbeek, ten Brink, Rommes, de Kemp, Goossens & Engels (2009) in a questionnaire. It was possible to rate the responses on a 3-point Likert-type scale. There were three options ('true', 'sometimes true' and 'not true').
- ❖ The third section assessed depressive symptoms by use of 12 questions.

- ❖ The fourth section was the most extensive part and it assessed cyber bullying through questions regarding cellular phones and internet. A 5-point Likert-type scale was used to rate the responses and the following tabular results were obtained

Table I: Percentages of Victims and Bullies via Cell Phones for Males and Females

Bullying via cell phone

	Victim			Bully		
	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total
Anonymous text message	9 (8%)	1 (1%)	10 (9%)	7 (6%)	2 (2%)	9 (8%)
Bullying via text message	3 (3%)	0 (0%)	3 (3%)	5 (4%)	2 (2%)	7 (6%)
Sending photos	3 (3%)	2 (2%)	5 (4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Sending films	2 (2%)	0 (0%)	2 (2%)	2 (2%)	0 (0%)	2 (2%)
Sending many text messages	4 (4%)	0 (0%)	4 (4%)	3 (3%)	0 (0%)	3 (3%)
Frequent calling	12 (11%)	5 (4%)	17 (15%)	4 (4%)	2 (2%)	6 (5%)
Ignoring phone calls	13 (11%)	8 (7%)	21 (18%)	19 (17%)	7 (6%)	26 (23%)

Table II. Experiences of Students who were Victimized or Bullied via the Internet

Experiences on internet	Victim		Bully	
	Occurred about once a month	Once or more times a week	Occurred about once a month	Once or more times a week
Hurting	19%	5%	6%	4%
Harassing	21%	12%	14%	1%
Insulting	21%	8%	13%	2%
Name calling	27%	6%	18%	5%
Making fun of	29%	9%	22%	5%
Ignoring	14%	12%	24%	8%

Results

IQ. There was a positive relationship regarding bullying through the internet and IQ ($r=0.25, p<0.01$) and the verbal IQ ($r=0.26, p<0.01$). The students with a higher IQ bullied more over the internet.

Gender. There was no major difference in cyber bullying between females and males in terms of being involved in bullying or victimization through cellular phones and the internet.

ADHD and ASD. There was no significant difference between the two groups and a control group apart from cellular phone bullying. The males and females with ADHD practiced bullying more often through cellular phones than those from the two other groups, $X^2 (2) = 8.91, p<0.01$.

Self-esteem and depressive feelings. There was a negative relationship between internet victims and self-esteem ($r=-0.35, p<0.01$) and a positive relationship between internet victimization and depressive feelings ($r=0.37, p<0.01$).

Discussion and Conclusion

The study revealed that cyber bullying via internet and cellular phones were prevalent. There was a relationship between IQ, self-esteem, ADHD and depressive feelings, and frequent computer use. There were some limitations in the study. As asserted by Shariff (2008) the conclusions made may not be valid since the responses of students were not compared to other groups like teachers. It is important to develop an effective approach that integrates parents and teachers in dealing with cyber bullying in special schools. Teachers ought to gain more awareness regarding bullying through electronic media among students who have developmental disabilities. Parents ought to monitor their children's usage of electronic sources. Special programs should be used to teach the special students about internet as well as other electronic media and advise them accordingly. This recommendation was also proposed in a study conducted by Perkins & Williamson (2010).

The Replicative Study

A replicative study shows a repetition of the original research study. It uses different situations and different subjects to determine whether the results of the prior research can be used to draw generalizations among different participants in different circumstances.

The participants may vary in terms of age, race, culture, religion and social class. It uses similar methods as those used by the previous research and it is crucial in supporting a theory. Replication is significant in assuring researchers and people interested in research findings that the results obtained are valid, reliable and can be used for future research. In this case, the original research was conducted among a group of male and female students with intellectual disabilities and disabilities with regard to development. Didden et al (2009) collected data using questionnaires, and relationships as well as correlations were established or disputed. The replicative study focuses on a group of male and female students, who have emotional and specific learning disabilities. Data was also collected using questionnaires and relationships as well as correlations were established or disputed.

Cyberbullying among Students with Serious Emotional and Specific Learning Disabilities

Olweus (1993) suggests that these particular youth that are bullied by their friends and school mates at different timeframes are due to their specific disabling conditions. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Public Law, Pub.L. 101-476, is a United States federal law that governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services to children with disabilities. It addresses the educational needs of children with disabilities from birth to age 18 or 21 in cases that involve 14 specified categories of disability. As suggested by Mishna (2003) more is yet to be done to integrate them fully into our communities. Researchers need to review the details of cyber bullying to understand how it affects the different categories of disabled youth. This replicative study is aimed at understanding how youth ages 12-19 with SED and SLD relate with their non-disabled peers. These particular youth may be aggressive at times, inattentive, have impaired social interactions and an inability to deal with daily routine followed by their non-disabled peers. At times they face alienation from other students, and depression as a result of this alienation. Martlew & Hodson (1991) describe cyber bullying as the use of information as well as communication technologies in supporting a deliberate and repeated hostile behavior by a person or persons, to harm other people. According to Bauman (2009) the study established that cyber bullying is common among the SED and SLD students, just as it occurs among other students. They face serious problems such as alienation due to behavioral and learning problems. Often they may be bullied through emails, teasing and videos. They can be subjected to stigmatization due to their disability. Students with disabilities and those without were surveyed and it emerged that the male and female students with the highest rates of victimization (100%) and bullying (50%) were those with disabilities. The study was exploratory and it was meant to gather data about cyberbullying among the SED and SLD and compare it to their peers who have no disabilities.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

Thirty students in grades seventh through 12th ($n= 30$, 100% participation) from a charter school for the disabled and 22 students in grades seventh through 12th ($n= 22$) from a general education school within the same campus were selected for the study. This study was conducted in the Southeastern region of North Carolina, within a suburban school district. Most of the SED and SLD students in grades 7-12 were attending classes in the charter school for the disabled.

Data Collection

Data was gathered using questionnaires. Each disabled and non-disabled student was given a questionnaire. This was done in two separate groups among students at the middle school the high school grades. The non-disabled students filled their responses at the same time. The questions in the questionnaires were read aloud by the investigator to the SED and SLD students. There were two bilingual teachers who assisted the English as Second Language (ESL) SLD students to respond to the questions, as well. The non-disabled students filled the questionnaires in their own without any assistance unlike the SED and SLD students.

- ❖ Students were required to complete their demographic information. They responded by filling in their gender, grade and race or ethnicity.
- ❖ They also answered questions regarding the source of bullying (who was the bully). They answered questions about self-esteem and morality.
- ❖ Students responded to questions regarding use of electronic sources mainly Instagram, Facebook, and cellular phones.

18 subscales were identified by the investigator to handle the data. They had internal consistency coefficients ranging from 70-97

Results

Technology Use

	SED/SLD students	Non-disabled peers
Internet at home	87	64
Have a cell phone	41	68
Visited YouTube	87	96
Posted on YouTube	23	41
Have Instagram account	43	82
Post photos on Instagram	33	64
Have Facebook account	24	10
Have Facebook profile photo	20	5

How often have you been cyber bullied?

	SED/SLD students		Non-disabled peers
Never	35%	Never	18%
Once	41%	Once	73%
2 or 3 times	17%	2 or 3 times	9%
2 or 3 times/month	7%	2 or 3 times/month	0%
Once/week	0%	Once/ week	0%

- ❖ 13% of the students in every group were upset by cyber bullying.
- ❖ Chi-square tests revealed a significant difference for amount of time spent on internet during school days ($X^2 = 10.850, df = 4, p < .028$).
- ❖ There was no relationship among siblings' having accounts (Instagram and Facebook) and the participant having the accounts. There was a positive correlation between having the two accounts ($r = .39, p < 0.05$).
- ❖ There was no significant difference regarding conventional bullying among the SED/SLD their non-disabled peers. This shows that the three categories experience bullying on almost equal measures.
- ❖ There was no significant relationship between parents' control and attitudes regarding technology, and cyber bullying.
- ❖ There was no relationship between possession of internet at home, possession of a cellular phone, the time spent on activities online or on cellular phones and cyber bullying.
- ❖ There were no significant relationships between the attributions of self-blaming as well as moral disengagement and bullying.

Parents rarely involve themselves with their children's internet and cellular phone affairs. 57% of the SED/SLD parents do not talk about safe technology with their children, 53% do not review the websites visited by children whereas 38% do not limit time used by their children on the internet. 55% of the SED/SLD do not talk to their parents about their online activities. 45% do not show their parents profile information, 13% have had about 5 different email addresses and accounts and 80% have never shared their passwords with friends. The study had some limitations. There were small samples of the target population thereby limiting analysis of the descriptive results. Insufficient number of responses from parents prevented collection of sufficient data for analysis. There was a unique school setting and the results generated cannot be generalized to fit urban, rural, traditional and modern SED/SLD and mainstream/general education schools.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study found that cyber bullying is a problem among the SED and SLD students. When compared to the non-disabled students, SED and SLD students reported a large number of cases, which were more frequent. The SED and SLD students prefer electronic sources which have real-time communication (Instagram and Facebook chat) to other sources like cellular phones which have text messaging features. The study disputed previous findings that suggested a relationship between conventional bullying and the victimization of an individual, as well as cyber bullying and the victimization. Instead, it gathered findings that detected a strong positive correlation between conventional bullying and victimization on one hand, and on the other, between cyber bullying and the victimization.

Parents' oversights regarding use of technology by their children lacked in the research. The investigator recommends that parents should have immense knowledge regarding their children and technology. The study concluded that there is limited empirical data regarding bullying among the SED and SLD students and no data exists about cyber bullying among them. Therefore, the study provides a basis for more investigations on the topic.

Comparison of the Two Studies

The two studies had significant similarities. The focus of the two studies was cyber bullying, a common type of bullying that has become prevalent among youth in the United States. They targeted male and female students with certain disabilities. They used similar data collection methods to gather information about cyber bullying and how it affects youth ages 12-19 with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The two arrived at the same conclusion; that cyber bullying is evident among people with disabilities and it affects them in several ways. It was also noted that parents play a major role in enhancing this type of bullying. Moreover, the two studies sought to investigate similar electronic sources; internet and cell phones. They also recommended involvement of parents in reducing cyber bullying.

Recommendations

According to Lewis & Sugai (1999) cyber bullying occurs almost on a daily basis in schools. Therefore, action must be taken to eliminate this problem in our community. The following is being suggested as a recommendation to deal with the problem:

- ❖ Uphold the dignity of each student in special schools and mainstream schools.
- ❖ Involve all stakeholders who interact with children in curbing cyber bullying at school and home. Parents and teachers should come in to assist in ending cyber bullying. Parents should monitor use of electronic media by children at home, whereas teachers monitor the same at school.
- ❖ New programs should be developed in school to teach students the impact of cyber bullying and mitigation measures.
- ❖ The public administration in every country should create awareness regarding existence of the vice and possible solutions to deal with it.
- ❖ Public policy makers should come up with effective policies regarding cyber bullying. These should be implemented and closely monitored to ensure they achieve their aims and objectives.
- ❖ Criminal punishments should be meted on those who perpetuate cyber bullying especially on students with disabilities.
- ❖ Specific programs targeted on those with disabilities should be developed by school administrators to guide the students with disabilities on how to deal with cyber bullying.
- ❖ School administrators ought to develop specific programs for integrating students with disabilities into mainstream schools. They should devise methods that will impart information on the normal students without compromising the special students.

Conclusion

Supportive methods need to be developed to work with children and youth ages 12-19 in grades 7th through 12th, with or without any form of disability. This particular age group is the most sensitive to cyber bullying due to the high usage of electronic and or Internet communication. Such students are more sensitive to the negative effects of cyber bullying and may take adverse measures when they believe that they have been affected. All students are unique in their own way. Generally, it is those that are most closely aligned to the situation such as family members including parents and teachers, who recognize the more internalized effects of these situations on their individual children. Acceptance, understanding, and positive interaction needs to be taught to these children and youth. Schools, families, and communities need to. For example, as reported by DoSomething.org (2015) 70% of students have seen frequent cyber bullying through an online or other electronic source. As suggested by DoSomething.org (2015) posting positive comments instead of negative ones can boost individual and school-wide morale. Starting a Facebook page for students to submit positive acts they see in school to promote a culture of positivity on and offline, is one way to assist students in changing negative behaviors.

In this way, students with and without intellectual disabilities, physical impairments, and emotional disabilities will be able to cope with their peers, as well as the rest of the society in a more effective manner. This replicative study serves as demonstration to all members of the society to acknowledge that cyber bullying is practiced among students of all ages and genders, internationally.

Thus, strategies are needed to eradicate it and to establish coping mechanisms for the victims. They should also create awareness of the issue to avoid future cases of cyber bullying among potential perpetrators within this particular range of 12-19 years of age.

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