

Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions about Identifying, Managing and Preventing Cyberbullying

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Abstract: Cyberbullying uses technology to deliberately and repeatedly humiliate, harass, or threaten someone with the intention to cause reputational damage, harm, or intimidation. It is a widespread issue that impacts teaching and learning in schools, as well as in the larger community. Cyberbullying has garnered much attention in schools, social media, and also from researchers. Within teacher education programs, how are we preparing pre-service teachers to have the knowledge and skills to identify, manage, and prevent cyberbullying. This paper explores pre-service teachers' beliefs and perceptions of cyberbullying, drawing on data from online discussions. Archived online discussions were analyzed, using a constant comparison method. Pre-service teachers' perceptions and concerns about identifying, managing and preventing cyberbullying are discussed. The paper concludes with three implications for teacher education.

Introduction

Technology enables us to be engaged with information and connected to others. It also provides an avenue for negative communication such as sexting, harassing, outing and impersonating others which are all forms of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is the deliberate and repeated use of technology to humiliate, harass, or threaten someone with the intention to cause reputational damage, harm, or intimidation. This issue has garnered much attention in schools, social media, and also from researchers. According to the Children's eSafety Commission (2016) in an online survey of 1,367 children, 912 teens, and 2,360 parents, 19% of young people aged between 14 and 17 admitted to being harassed or bullied online in the 12 months to June 2016. Many of these attacks include lies or rumors spread, receiving threats, social media accounts hacked or impersonated, or having inappropriate photos posted without their consent. Bhat (2008) reported the consequences of cyberbullying and highlighted the "pernicious nature of the misuse of information and communications technology" (p. 54).

Australia is one of the most connected nations in the world, where cyberbullying has become the second most common form of bullying (Bully Zero Australia Foundation, 2016). The Children's eSafety Commission (2016) reported over 96% of households have Wi-Fi access, 80% of children and teens use more than one device to go online, and teens spend 74% more time online than younger children per week outside of school. The statistics highlighted that most teens and children have moved into the online space. Therefore, teachers, parents, school administrators, and pre-service teachers need to be aware of the potential impact of cyberbullying.

This paper describes an effective and innovative online community where pre-service teachers (PSTs), as part of assessment requirements, interact with their peers, teacher education educators and practicing teachers to discuss a range of topics of importance in today's diverse and digital world, including cyberbullying. The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, to draw on relevant literature to describe the current issues and challenges of cyberbullying that is impacting teaching and learning in contemporary educational settings. Second, to describe a single case study that explored PSTs' awareness and preparedness for identifying and preventing cyberbullying in their professional

experiences and future classrooms. The findings are preseted in relation to three key areas: awareness, management, and prevention of cyberbullying. Third, implications for teacher education are offered regarding creating formalized learning experiences and helping PSTs to develop effective communication strategies to which could be used in their professional practice.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying, unlike bullying, is not restricted to time or location and occurs outside the school grounds and school hours. Chalmers and colleagues (2016) maintained that with the increasing use of school supplied digital technologies the duty of care regarding responsible use of technology may exist outside of school hours. Emphasizing schools duty fo care exists, regardless of the time or location of cyberbullying, have an obligation to identify and manage cyberbullying and to implement prevention strategies to minimize the risk of cyberbullying.

In a review of the incidents of cyberbullying in Australia, Katz and colleagues (2014) found that the majority of cyberbullying was reported to the school as opposed to law enforcement or community organizations. It is important that PSTs have an awareness of cyberbullying and an understanding of the role that teachers and schools have in reducing or preventing cyberbullying, and supporting those involved in cyberbullying. Campbell (2005) reminded us that “[o]ne of the first steps in any prevention program is to ensure that people are aware of the problem” (p. 71), some of the PST in this study had no personal experience with cyberbullying, nor were they aware of the extent of this global issue. It is important the PST understand what constitutes cyberbullying so they can recognize it, tell others (parents, students, peers, and administrators) about it, respond to it and teach prevention strategies to their students.

As PSTs complete their teacher education program, they need to develop an awareness of the potential for cyberbullying within their classrooms and prevention strategies that are available to them in their school and the broader community. From a review of the literature, it became apparent that PSTs need to develop their knowledge and skills in identifying cyberbullying and in addressing it in a school context. The positioning of the research was to create and study a formal learning experience where PSTs grappled with issues associated with cyberbullying. They also learned strategies to implement and resources to access to address cyberbullying. Having this knowledge should enable them to work in more proactive ways to respond to, reduce and prevent cyberbullying incidents.

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to explore PSTs’ awareness and preparedness for identifying and preventing cyberbullying in their professional experiences and future classrooms. PSTs shared their understandings and experiences of cyberbullying through participating in online discussions. These discussions highlighted their awareness of cyberbullying from multiple perspectives (e.g., self, student, and teacher) and described various techniques and programs available for educational use. Through this experience, the PSTs developed an understanding of the strategies that can be used to identify and support students, as well as implement prevention programs in school and classroom settings. Findings from the study help to inform the ongoing discussion and possible pro-active program development in teacher education.

The context of this study was within a secondary curriculum and pedagogy course at a regional university in Australia. Data were collected from an online learning experience which was conducted over seven weeks. The PSTs completed weekly asynchronous online postings in the Learning Management System (LMS) and submitted a reflection on the activity as part of their assessment requirements for the course. As part of the online learning experience, the PSTs completed weekly tasks to encourage their engagement with the material to understand the impact of cyberbullying on middle year’s learners. The secondary PSTs were in the second year of a four year undergraduate degree or the first semester of a postgraduate teacher education program. The PSTs were enrolled in a curriculum and pedagogy course which explored issues related to teaching in the middle years, including cyberbullying.

During week one the PSTs used the online postings to introduce themselves and organize themselves into a group, they also needed to read the novel *Destroying Avalon* (McCaffrey, 2006). The novel, designed for middle years

students, addresses issues of cyberbullying, homophobia and youth suicide. In week two, it required the small groups to prepare a book review including pedagogical questions the novel raised for them. During weeks three and four, PSTs responded to inquiry questions, which the instructor drew from the pedagogical questions PSTs identified in week two. During weeks five and six the PSTs were joined by teacher educators and practicing teachers to create an extended community of learners to discuss the topic. In week seven they were required to post answers to scenario questions, and finally, complete a reflection about their experiences of participating as an online community member.

A qualitative single-case study was used to examine the PSTs' perspectives of cyberbullying. A case study, according to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), "is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (p. 37). The bounding of this case study was that it was one-cohort's online discussion that occurred over a period of seven weeks within one regional university teacher education program. Data were collected from the archived online discussions. After the results of the course had been released, the PSTs' names were removed from the online discussion posts to maintain anonymity. Institutional ethical approval was granted to utilize the naturally occurring data that formed the online discussions for the course. The online posts of sixty-one PSTs' were used in the analysis. A constant comparative approach was used along with Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (nVivo) to identify and categorize three major themes which were identified due to repetition (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). A review of literature indicated that terms such as identification, prevention, management, respond, detection, are common themes to discuss cyberbullying (see Eden, Heiman, & Olenik-Shemesh, 2013; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Nahar, Li, & Pang, 2013) and are also programmatic processes for dealing with cyberbullying in practice.

Findings and Discussion

The findings will be presented under three major themes: Awareness of cyberbullying, Managing cyberbullying, and Preventing cyberbullying. These key ideas or themes are commonly discussed in other studies about cyberbullying. Each theme is presented with quotes from pre-service teachers' online discussions.

Awareness of cyberbullying.

Previous research (Eden, Heiman, & Olenik-Shemesh, 2013) found that incidents of bullying and cyberbullying can be reduced by increasing teacher awareness. Albert (2011) argued that to address the issue of cyberbullying "it is vital to raise awareness through training and education programs" (p. 23). After their engagement with the learning activity, it was evident that PSTs were developing a greater understanding of what is meant by cyberbullying, a range of different types of cyberbullying, and how people experience cyberbullying. As noted by one PST, "*it happens when somebody in a position of more power or anonymity tries to humiliate and wound in physical or psychological ways.*" Another commented, "*bullying being of repeated behaviour that harasses or abuses [sic] another individual by verbal, physical or psychological means.*"

From their experiences and engagement with various resources, they were able to articulate specific attributes of cyberbullying. The following example demonstrates how one PST worked through a process to develop a clearer understanding of the concept.

There have been a lot of useful definitions posted as to what constitutes bullying, cyberbullying and cyber harassment. While the difference between the first two is clear, it still seems to me that the difference between cyberbullying and cyber harassment is unclear and perhaps even unnecessary ... Both are repetitive, systematic and done from a distance, so basically the same ... what I have found more useful from looking at various government and community websites about cyberbullying are the case studies and examples of intervention provided. I feel these give me a better sense of what goes on, what to look out for (in the behaviour of both the bully and the victim) and possible ways of dealing with the issue that have worked in some situations.

Several of the PSTs shared stories of their personal experiences of cyberbullying (and those of their children or family and friends) and insights into how this impacted their identity and behaviours. Many shared how they have encouraged their teenage children to read the novel for them to understand cyberbullying. One PST shared the novel with her daughter and "*since then she has used every spare moment to keep reading, even asking me to go to bed 20 mins*

earlier so she can read ... [it] should make for a good conversation which is what we all want to do with our own kids as well as the kids we teach.”

Through their ongoing conversations, the PSTs were able to increase their awareness and refine their understandings of what defined or is classified as cyberbullying. This included the digital tools that may be used, the risk factors, and consequences of such actions. As one PST revealed, *“I think that the scariest thing about cyberbullying is that children can’t escape it. It used to be that a child could escape bullying by going home, but with technology all around us there becomes no safe place.”*

PSTs believed they had more confidence in dealing with cyberbullying after participating in online discussions. In contrast to this study, Siu (2004) found that “PST report low levels of confidence and preparation to manage the problem” (p. 43). One PST shared how their pedagogical practices were enhanced in a number of ways including:

- *making me more aware of the signs of bullying and cyberbullying so that I can be alert to incidences in my students’ lives;*
- *helping me to teach my students to become self-assured enough to stand up for both themselves and others if they are placed in the position of being cyberbullied or witness an attack on another student;*
- *ensuring that I am fully aware of the cyberbullying policies and procedures in place at the school in which I am employed in the future; [and]*
- *providing me with a skill set with which to initially address episodes of cyberbullying while setting school procedures in motion to help resolve the issue.*

Murphy (2014) indicated that “preservice teachers have limited knowledge regarding cyberbullying awareness and prevention in schools” (p. 65). Contrary to Murphy’s suggestion, the PSTs in this study highlighted how they were exposed to a wide range of prevention programs that are offered at schools. Many described school-based pastoral care programs, support programs, day or night events, and programs that brought community experts into the school. Where other PSTs highlighted the applicable policy imperatives including the School’s Code of Behaviour and the National Safe School Framework (Education Services Australia, 2013). PSTs also described how they accessed various cyberbullying websites to help in developing their understanding of this topic. From the discussion, it could be suggested that the PSTs believed that this learning experience increased their awareness of cyberbullying before their school placements.

Managing cyberbullying.

PSTs did not observe or identify any cyberbullying while in their previous school placements but were aware of the need to identify, report and manage cyberbullying. From the data, it seems they were unsure of the specific steps required in reporting cyberbullying, and some approaches they shared would not be in line with school policy. For example, many suggested that they would try to identify the role-players and contact parents directly about the cyberbullying issue before discussing their concerns with appropriate staff at the school. Also, one PST reported, *“If I was aware of cyberbullying taking place within my classroom I would hold a discussion within the class, get the students to discuss effects of cyberbullying and make sure that students are aware of the consequences.”* The discussion with students is helpful. However, the process for reporting should occur according to school policy. Similarly, Siu (2004) proposed, “If teachers are willing to address bullying in their classroom, they are likely to support school-wide initiatives” (p. 45). As such, PSTs need to acknowledge the whole school approach to addressing cyberbullying and follow appropriate procedures.

The PSTs noted that schools have a responsibility to provide cyberbullying programs and support for students. One PST stated,

It is vital that our schools provide middle year students with comprehensive and tailored education about issues that will most probably impact upon them throughout their schooling. From cyberbullying to peer pressure, it is important that schools get it right - they need to equip students with the information they need to prevent, respond to and cope with such problems.

DeSmet and colleagues (2015) found that the majority of teachers in their study had both low self-efficacy in handling cyberbullying and also had inadequate behaviours or negative behaviors when addressing cyberbullying. In contrast, it was evident from the data in this study that PSTs not only gained awareness of cyberbullying but also an understanding of their responsibility to a whole school approach. A PST added that *“schools need professionals on hand to address these kinds of issues, and most schools I’m aware of have counsellors, chaplains, registered nurses and the like these days.”* PSTs recognized that schools should employ or have access to staff that are trained to respond to cyberbullying incidents. The same PST added, it is the teacher’s responsibility to *“be as informed as they can be, and school PD plays a role in that. Teachers are with the students every day and need to learn to see the signs and know how to be sensitive to dealing with these issues.”*

Many PSTs observed that parents also have a responsibility for identifying cyberbullying. *“Parents need to be sitting down with their children and explaining to them what bullying is and how their actions can affect others. Children need to feel that they can talk to their parents if they are getting bullied.”* Juvonen and Cross (2008) noted that it is hard for adults (parents or teachers) to detect cyberbullying because they are less likely to see it occurring. Adults use technologies in different ways when compared to middle year’s students. Schools have a role to play in helping to inform and educate parents and teachers, as well as students, in identifying, addressing and preventing cyberbullying.

Eden, Heiman, and Olenik-Shemesh (2013) reported that teachers struggle with the shared responsibility of addressing and managing cyberbully amongst the school, family, peers and broader community. Creating and fostering a shared responsibility takes leadership if it is to have an impact. As noted by Murphy (2014), *“It is important to create a joint effort between parents and schools to combat cyberbullying”* (p. 65). Parents, along with teachers, need to have access to relevant and current information and resources both at the time of an incident, as well as, for preventive purposes. This provides an opportunity for school authorities, along with community agencies to work together in creating, along with communicating such information to students, parents, and educators. As future teachers, the implications also remain with PSTs.

Preventing cyberbullying.

PSTs recognized the importance of specifically teaching cyberbullying prevention using a range of resources to foster greater awareness and enhanced responsible use of technologies for communication. One PST proposed that it was part of a teacher's obligation to extend learning to the correct use of online technologies:

I think it is important for us as teachers to educate children as we already set rules and boundaries in the classroom and we teach children about respect and the right and wrong things to do, so why can't there be more emphasis put on teaching children how to communicate correctly for online communication also.

Siu (2004) supported this and suggested PSTs *“identified the need for specific teaching strategies for themselves”* (p. 45). Such strategies may include purposeful classroom activities, establishing class rules and routines, engaging curriculum materials; in addition to ongoing learning through observing other teachers, information from their pre-service courses, and professional development. A PST claimed that to reduce cyberbullying, teachers need to *“actively teach and model the content of the anti-bullying policy.”* When the *“staff model correct behaviour”* including their online communications with students and parents this provides examples of appropriate online behaviours. As a final thought, another PST reminded us that education is not the sole responsibility of teachers and observed: *“we should be educating students in the classroom as to what bullying is, but I think this is something the whole community needs to get involved in.”*

A PST remarked that policy and processes should be developed to *“foster a school culture that clearly and positively promotes a certain approach to social interaction, as well as helping establish working channels of communication and understanding to help report and process cases of bullying.”* In developing that culture, schools need to offer a range of different programs that support teachers in preventing cyberbullying. This is supported by the National Safe Schools Framework (Education Services Australia, 2011) which proposed six guiding principles and nine elements that support a whole school approach for cyberbullying. The nine elements highlight the important role that schools play in bringing together all stakeholders in developing a holistic approach for the prevention of cyberbullying. The

National Safe Schools Framework (Education Services Australia, 2011) is designed to create an environment where “all members of the school community both *feel* and *are* safe” (p. 2).

In a study of 415 Australian high school students, more than half (54%) would not report bullying to adults. Of those that would report, students more frequently said they would tell a parent, followed by a school friend, and then a teacher (Carr Gregg & Manocha, 2011). This demonstrates the need for schools to work with parents to help them understand identification, reporting and prevention strategies to help reduce cyberbullying. According to Beringer (2011), “teachers overwhelmingly responded that schools should provide resources for students and families to help deal with cyberbullying” (p. 35). Similarly, some PSTs recognized the important role that parents play in the prevention of cyberbullying. One PST commented that “*schools and communities can help parents to be better equipped with the knowledge of how to help their children and how to deal with the problems they face. I think schools and parents should be working together to help their children to face and solve these problems.*”

A PST summarizes their learning below, and this comment is indicative of the comments by many PSTs after their experience within the seven week program,

... participation in the online forum concerning cyberbullying has provided me with many additional angles of inquiry/understanding, and resources to more constructively respond to this relatively new (21st century) but very serious threat to middle school students. Without the input of the forum members, and being required to work through their findings, I would have been unaware of many of these insights, issues, and resources.

Implications for Teacher Education

From the data, three implications for teacher education are presented. First, it is evident that PSTs need to have a structured experience to develop an understanding and awareness of cyberbullying. It cannot be assumed they can identify what this looks like, how to manage it, or how to prevent it without explicit engagement with the concept. Li (2007) reported that most pre-service teachers do not feel confident in addressing cyberbullying. This is contradictory to the findings of this study, where the PST participated in explicit learning opportunities and gained confidence in identifying and responding to cyberbullying. By providing PSTs an opportunity to dialogue about cyberbullying and its impacts, they can conceptualize the magnitude of the problem, both in schools and in the larger community. Within teacher education, we need to be explicit regarding the learning experiences and the nature of the information they receive as to move beyond the ability to identify the problem but also be effective in addressing cyberbullying in the moment and with appropriate follow up to support all parties. Having PSTs reflect on their own experiences in conjunction with learning about cyberbullying, helps them to develop their confidence and competence in addressing the issue.

Second, PSTs need to develop an awareness of programs and strategies that can be accessed and implemented within a school environment. Exposure to such programs can assist them to realize they are not alone. PST revealed they are cognizant of school based and broader policies, procedures, and resources which may be used to assist them in responding to cyberbullying. Awareness of these programs and resources can help PSTs to access information and expertise, when and where required. PSTs should experience this during their teacher education studies and while on professional experience.

Third, PSTs need to reflect on their communication strategies so they are not perceived to be cyberbullies, and they can address the issue if they are bullied in their professional lives. As future educators, they need to model appropriate digital communication practices. Further, if they become a victim of cyberbullying (e.g., from students, parents, peers or others), they need to know, as well as be able, to reach out for help. They should implement the same strategies that they would use with students to resolve their personal/professional cyberbullying issue. Also, they should refer to guidelines provided by their local professional teacher association to guide their actions and reactions.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research.

This paper used a single case study to analyze data from one course in one regional university. These results may not be generalizable to all PSTs. Further studies in other courses and other universities would provide a larger data set to provide insight into how formalized learning experiences impact PSTs' perceptions and actions about cyberbullying.

The authors' future research will identify a cyberbullying conceptual framework to assist teachers and researchers in exploring the phenomenon in greater depth. A longitudinal study could be designed to examine PSTs during their first years of teaching and would provide a richer and deeper understanding as to how theory can be applied in practice. Future research could also include a pre- and post-survey to identify specific areas of growth after the PST have engaged in the learning experience.

Conclusion

Cyberbullying is an ongoing and ever growing problem both in schools and in the larger community. This study explored pre-service teachers' perceptions about identifying, managing and preventing cyberbullying based on their contributions to online discussions with peers, teacher educators and practicing teachers. In contrast to other research (e.g. Li, 2007) the PSTs in this study did feel confident in addressing cyberbullying after engaging in the learning activity. Teacher education programs have a role to play in preparing the next generation of teachers to be effective in identifying, managing and preventing cyberbullying in tomorrow's classrooms. Intentional design of learning experiences within teacher education programs should provide opportunities for PSTs to develop a deeper understanding of and confidence in addressing cyberbullying.

As teacher educators, it is our challenge to provide strong models for appropriate digital communication and explicit teaching practices to reduce cyberbullying in schools. We need to prepare PSTs to work in and respond to the dynamics of a contemporary digital world where cyberbullying has an increasing impact. Teacher education programs should provide opportunities for PSTs to develop: awareness of cyberbullying, understanding of how to manage cyberbullying, and knowledge of cyber prevention strategies and programs both within the university setting and during school placements.

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