MIDDLE SCHOOL COUNSELORS’ ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN CYBERBULLYING

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines middle school counselor’s experiences with cyberbullying, specifically with teenage girls between the ages of 12 – 14. By examining the philosophical assumption that communication through technology can result in the creation of false identities of other people, this study seeks to find out how prominent cyberbullying is among middle school girls. The theory that this study focuses on is Computer-Mediated Communication which is a theory that communication takes place through textual messages using computers and involves two or more groups of people. This research design utilizes two forms of quantitative research as well as applied research. The quantitative research begins with a survey questionnaire distributed to all middle school counselors in the Washoe County School District in order to gain a better understanding of the types of cyberbullying situations middle school counselors deal with. The quantitative research also examines existing research on past cyberbullying situations. The applied research aspect of this study looks at how school counselors address cyberbullying and what can be done to stop these situations from happening. This study examines this issue from the school counselor’s perspective and offers suggestions for further research on prevention and intervention policies that school counselors can use in these situations.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Being bullied in school is something that many people are very familiar with and have experienced at some point in their lives. From name-calling to teasing and even physical fighting, many kids have dealt with or have participated in some form of bullying. However today’s latest technological advances have created a new form of bullying which has enhanced the youths’ avenues for bullying fellow classmates. The use of cell phones and email accompanied by social networking Web sites such as MySpace and Facebook have allowed the school-yard bullying to continue during class as well as after school. This newer form of bullying is known as cyberbullying and has become more common in schools and because many children have access to their own cell phones and computers it can be hard for parents and schools to monitor.

Communication through computers and other technologies such as cell phones and email are very common in today’s culture. This communication differs from verbal and written communication and can change the way that messages are received. In terms of cyberbullying, communication through technology allows individuals to bully someone else or say hurtful things without the face-to-face confrontation. In addition to how students are communicating with one another, it is also important to examine the communication between the middle school counselors and students when dealing with cyberbullying. The purpose of this study is to examine the roles and responsibilities of middle school counselors in cyberbullying situations, specifically with teenage girls between the ages of 12 – 14. Since cyberbullying can take place off of school property but still involve students, where is the schools’ responsibility in dealing with these situations? Another goal of this study is to develop a better understanding of cyberbullying from the specific experiences of middle school counselors and how the school attempts to prevent these situations from happening.
Case Study

Hoffman (2010) reported a case from Benjamin Franklin Middle School in Ridgewood, New Jersey in which a girl’s parents were horrified to find several text messages detailing sexual threats sent to their daughter from a 12-year-old male classmate. When they confronted the principal, his response was that this event occurred out of school and on a weekend and that they could not discipline the boy for these actions. The principal instead suggested they contact the boy’s parents or the police. Benjamin Franklin’s seventh-grade guidance counselor, Meredith Wearley, experienced many problems created online which included fights via text message that ended friendships, secrets posted on Facebook and online retaliation from kids being bullied at school (Hoffman, 2010). Hoffman listed many cases and explained that rulings in a handful of related cases around the country give mixed signals. A few families have successfully sued schools for failing to protect their children from bullies however other cases have been taken to school boards where the rulings stated that the school had nothing to do with the incident because it happened off of school property.

Dealing with cyberbullying can be difficult. Hoffman (2010) explained that some schools encourage students to report any cyberbullying activities before they get out of control however some students do not want to share this kind of embarrassing information with school counselors and think they can handle the situation themselves. There are many cases of cyberbullying but the involvement from schools and school counselors vary from case to case. The problem lies in determining who is responsible for stopping these situations, especially when they are carried out online or through text messages off of school property. The problems extend onto school property but the lines seem blurred on what actions can or should be taken.
Definition of Terms Used

**Cyberbullying:** the electronic posting of mean-spirited messages about a person (as a student) often done anonymously (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2012).

**Social Networking:** an online community of people with a common interest who use a website or other technologies to communicate with each other and share information, resources, etc. (Dictionary.com, 2012)

**Facebook:** the name of a social-networking service and Web site, launched in 2004 (Dictionary.com, 2012)

**Myspace:** a popular social-networking website (Dictionary.com, 2012).

**Twitter:** the name of a social-networking service and Web site that limits the length of messages one can post to a certain number of characters. (Dictionary.com, 2012).

Cyberbullying can take different forms (Willard, 2007):

- **Flaming.** Online fights using electronic messages with angry and vulgar language.
- **Harassment.** Repeatedly sending nasty, mean, and insulting messages.
- **Denigration.** “Dissing” someone online. Sending or posting gossip or rumors about a person to damage his or her reputation or friendships.
- **Impersonation.** Pretending to be someone else and sending or posting material to get that person in trouble or danger or to damage that person’s reputation or friendships.
- **Outing.** Sharing someone’s secrets or embarrassing information or images online.
- **Trickery.** Talking someone into revealing secrets or embarrassing information, then sharing it online.
- **Exclusion.** Intentionally and cruelly excluding someone from an online group.
- **Cyberstalking.** Repeated, intense harassment and denigration that includes threats or
creates significant fear. (Willard, 2007)

Organization of Remaining Chapters

This thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter two consists of a review of existing literature on cyberbullying, the philosophical assumptions and theoretical basis as well as the research question sought out in this study. Chapter three explains the scope and methodology used in this study. Chapter four examines the data and results from the study conducted and discusses the findings as it relates to the research questions. Chapter five summarizes the entire study, discusses the limitations and offers recommendations for future studies in this area.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The focus of this literature review is on two areas of research relevant to this topic. This review will start by examining Computer-Mediated-Communication as it relates to the rise of internet usage and communication through social media networks as well as technological devices. Then the review will examine the previous research on cyberbullying and the middle-school counselor’s role in this process as well as current school policies, prevention and actual laws relevant to the issue.

Philosophical Assumptions

Our society uses communication to form certain perceptions about different issues and the mass media influences consumer behavior in many ways. Communicating a message in a certain way can change the way people think about or view a particular concept, product or attitude.

Alfino, Caputo and Wynyard, (1998) examined how a McDonald’s advertising campaign created a story. Caputo explained, “McDonald’s success is based on its ability to tell a story, a story that does not make sense from a logical perspective but rather from an aesthetic one,” (Alfino, Caputo & Wynyard, 1998, p. 50). The mass media influences consumer behavior in many ways. The way we communicate causes our society to do certain things, buy a certain product or feel a certain way. It’s not in the message itself but how the message is communicated to us. Marshall McLuhan (2001) explained that “The medium is the massage. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments” (McLuhan, 2001, p. 26).

In terms of cyberbullying, students create false impressions of other students in an environment that can be uncontrollable and use technology as a way to make others believe
certain things. Griffin (2011) highlighted German philosopher and theologian, Martin Buber where he explained his approach of relationships between people. Buber stated, “In I-It relationships we treat the other person as a thing to be used, an object to be manipulated” (Griffin, 2011, p. 79). Buber further explained that this type of relationship lacks the mutual respect that humans should have and cyberbullying is a situation where someone is treating another person as an object instead of a person. Teenagers and in this case, middle school students, are very impressionable and believe the things they read or see on the internet. The online medium allows access to everyone all over the world and creates an image of someone that they cannot take away. This study examines the use of technology and how the traditional form of face-to-face bullying has taken on a new dynamic through an online medium. The research aims to examine how middle school counselors approach this subject and attempt to control or prevent these events from taking place. In a society so ingrained in mass media and social networking, cyberbullying can be very damaging to a child.

Theoretical Basis

The purpose of this study is to examine middle school counselor’s experiences with cyberbullying, specifically with teenage girls between the ages of 12 – 14. This study will seek to find out how prominent cyberbullying is among middle school girls and also what the school counselor’s roles and responsibilities are in these cases. This study aims to gain a better understanding on this issue from the school counselor’s perspective and to provide information on prevention and intervention policies that either help or enable the actions that school counselors can take in these situations. The school counselor’s communication between the students, parents and the school is extremely important and this study will examine how and what information is communicated. Griffin (2011) discusses the theories of Computer-
Mediated-Communication (CMC) and Social Information Processing (SIP). CMC is a theory that communication takes place through textual messages using computers and involves two or more groups of people. CMC has become a more common theory because of the increase in computer and internet usage (Griffin, 2011). In a study focused on CMC versus verbal communication Walther, Deandrea and Tong (2010) asked the question, “Do the characteristics of text-based CMC exaggerate or ameliorate expectations about controversial partners in comparison to interaction involving multiple cue systems” (Walther et al., 2010, pp. 364-365). The concept of online communication as it relates to cyberbullying is interesting because the difference between communicating with someone through a technological device presents different characteristics than communicating with someone face-to-face. Griffin (2011) goes on to explain the theory of SIP which was developed by Joseph Walther in 1992 as an interpersonal communication theory explaining how people get to know each other online and how they develop relationships in a computer-mediated environment. Walther, Deandrea and Tong (2010) explained that in the SIP theory users alter their language to express messages and basically that there is a different language used when communicating through CMC. These theories are relevant to this study because they examine how people communicate through computers. Cyberbullying takes place online and results in relationships that become hurtful to students. Our society creates social settings through websites and builds relationships through a virtual world. People develop relationships based on the information provided. In some cases, people can build positive relationships from this form of communication but in the case of cyberbullying, students are receiving false or hurtful information about other students and basing their relationships and impressions off of this information. These theories will help examine how relationships grow
when students gain information about each other and use that information to create false impressions of people.

The Literature

The theory of Computer-Mediated-Communication as it relates to cyberbullying is of growing concern and this review will focus on three key aspects. The first aspect is the policies, prevention and procedures practiced by schools and specifically school counselors. The second aspect will examine perspectives and behaviors on cyberbullying from the point of view of the students, parents and school counselors. The third aspect will focus on the topic of cyberbullying laws and where the line is drawn between harassment and the First Amendment.

Prevention and School Policies

Many of the studies on cyberbullying focus on raising awareness for this particular issue as well as what schools can do to prevent cyberbullying and what policies should be put into place to stop it. Pilkey (2011) conducted a study aimed to provide a voice for victims of cyberbullying and to provide information on the impact on children and their families. In a similar study focusing on school policies and procedures in relation to cyberbullying, Wiseman (1999) used a mixed-methods research approach using quantitative data followed by qualitative data to examine what cyberbullying policies middle school principals are using in the state of Nevada. Wiseman (1999) surveyed 66 principals followed by three randomly chosen interviews. Results from the quantitative study:

- Revealed that student education, parent communication, school climate, language about off-campus behaviors, a known continuum of disciplinary consequences, formal procedures for investigating incidents, consequences for wrongful accusation, procedures for reporting cyberbullying, procedures for notifying parents of victims and perpetrators,
Middle School Counselors’ Roles and Responsibilities in Cyberbullying profession procedures for referring victims and perpetrators for counseling, procedures for providing parent education, procedures for notifying the parents of the steps being taken to ensure the safety of their children, and signs being posted throughout the school should all be a part of an effective cyberbullying program (Wiseman, 1999, p. 5).

Results from the qualitative portion identified six major aspects to an effective cyberbullying program:

1. The importance of a reporting procedure.
2. Curriculum integration.
3. Student-centered productions through mediums such as Broadcast Journalism.
4. A focus on prevention rather than solely on punishment.
5. The importance of punishment as a part of an effective policy.
6. Keeping up with changes in technology. (Wiseman, 1999, p. 6)

Wiseman (1999) was able to identify the key elements to a successful cyberbullying program within a middle school setting as well as determine the percentage of middle schools in Nevada actually utilizing a successful cyberbullying program. Sbarbaro and Smith (2011) suggested that bullying prevention techniques be implemented into the schools systems. They stated that, “Schools including injury prevention programs and lessons on bullying will enable students to improve their decision making skills related to unintentional injuries, intentional injuries, and social problems” (Sbarbaro & Smith, 2011, pp. 149-150). In a study conducted by Shariff and Johnny (2007) research found that schools do not have enough knowledge about the complexities of cyberbullying and that school administrators often ignore these problems with the thought that this issue is an off-campus problem. Because of this, Shariff and Johnny (2007) found that schools usually overlook cyberbullying as an important aspect of their policies and
regulations. Robinson (2010) found that most of the cyberbullying situations were occurring in the students’ homes. The school counselors who participated in the study recommended that parent education is one of the main factors in eliminating or reducing these problems. “The school counselors suggested this can be accomplished through Parent Teacher Association Meetings, parent workshops and informational pamphlets” (Robinson, 2010, p. 78). Through their study on what school administrators and parents can do to prevent and eliminate cyberbullying, Beale and Hall (2007) recommended that one of the first steps is to understand the amount of electronic bullying that is occurring at home and at school. They suggested ways to determine the “prevalence, attitudes toward, and gaps in perception and knowledge of cyberbullying include focus groups, class meetings, and surveys sent to teachers, parents and students” (Beale & Hall, 2007, p. 10). Similar to these recommendations, through a study conducted on online safety, Lazarinis (2010) suggested that some restrictions should be put into place in order to make the internet a safer place for children. “School policy makers, internet providers and content providers need to be sensitized and to co-operate in order to provide tools which will effectively reduce exposure of students to hazardous content” (Lazarinis, 2010, p. 167). It seems that in each of these studies, it is apparent that both the schools and parents need to be involved in order to recognize when cyberbullying is taking place and need to understand how to work together to prevent and stop it completely. In a recent study aimed to address cyberbullying in the home, school and the community, Pilkey (2011) explained that cyberbullying should be the shared responsibility by all in an effort to decrease the pain felt by victims of cyberbullying. And Tangen and Campbell (2010) concluded through research that school staff, teachers and administrators need to take a more direct approach in presenting
cyberbullying prevention programs and in how they can encourage students to report cyberbullying.

Perspectives and Behaviors

Other research examines the perspectives and types of behaviors associated with cyberbullying in an effort to look at the underlying problems. In one study, Agatston, Kowalski and Limber (2007) found that students, particularly female students, view cyberbullying as a problem but one rarely discussed at school and that students did not view the school or its administrators as helpful resources for dealing with cyberbullying. Wiseman (1999) recommended further research be done including focus groups where students are encouraged to talk about personal feelings on cyberbullying and that a larger sample size could be used.

Limitations to this study included the higher socioeconomic status of the schools where two of the three principals who participated in the one-on-one interviews represented. The two principles indicated that there were more cyberbullying incidents due to the fact that students had smart phones (Wiseman, 1999). Wiseman (1999) suggested that further research could be conducted comparing cyberbullying in schools of low, middle and high socioeconomic status.

Sbarbaro and Smith (2011) actually did conduct a study examining bullying and cyberbullying behaviors among economically and educationally disadvantaged middle school students. Sbarbaro and Smith (2011) conducted an exploratory study during a three-week summer school program made up of seventh, eighth and ninth grade students. Two surveys were given to the sample group which included children of migrant families as well as economically and educationally disadvantaged students (Sbarbaro and Smith, 2011). Results found that 84 percent of students stated they had been bullied with the majority stating that the bullying took place at school. Results also found that as the students’ grade level increased, the greater the increase in
cyberbullying, mostly while playing online video games such as Xbox or Wii where hurtful comments about someone were posted online (Sbarbaro and Smith, 2011).

Kite, Gable and Filippelli (2010) actually examined this perspective further in their study of middle school students’ knowledge of conduct, consequences and behaviors regarding social networking sites. Through a self-administered survey, Kite et al. (2010) specifically examined students’ conduct and its consequences when online. One disturbing result from the survey found only 44 percent of students said that they would tell a parent or teacher if threatening things were said about them on a website. (Kite, et al., 2010). Carlisle (2011) conducted a study which builds on this result and focused on building healthy relationships and developmental assets in middle school students. Carlisle explained that, “Cyberbullying is especially difficult for parents and educators to monitor as the bullying can occur in any place or at any time, by simply using a communication devise” (Carlisle, 2011, p.22). Carlisle (2011) found many middle school students did not possess positive attributes required to have healthy relationships with others. The purpose of this study was to encourage middle school students in the study to “discover, develop, and demonstrate the positive attributes needed to engage in healthy relationships with their peers and teachers” (Carlisle, 2011, p. 24). The researcher developed a strategy to increase the positive attributes including problem-solving, service learning and cooperation to obtain the objective.

In another study Mark (2009) focused on student, educator, and parent perceptions of cyberbullying in three Hawai’i middle schools and identified the differences between face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying. Mark (2009) explained that “in face-to-face bullying there is a clear power differential, usually where the stronger bully torments the weaker victim. In cyberbullying the power lies in anonymity” (Mark, 2009, p. 11). However in a different study,
Beran and Li (2007) suggested that cyberbullying actually can be an extension of face-to-face bullying. Beran and Li (2007) explained that when a child succumbs to a bully at school, they are more at risk of being further attacked in an online setting where the bullying can continue outside of school. Willard (2007) agreed that the two can be related and that “sometimes, the student who is victimized at school is also being bullied online” (Willard, 2007, p. 4). Willard (2007) also explained that at other times cyberbullying starts as retaliation from a victim who is being bullied at school. Mark (2009) also explained that cyberbullying can occur at any time or location and that cyberbullies not only target their victims at school but also among social networking sites. The results of this quantitative study taken from a 35-item questionnaire, found that one out of five students were victims of cyberbullying (Mark, 2009). Mark (2009) also found through interviews with 12 middle school students, three parents and three middle school counselors that cyberbullying is an existing problem among Hawai’i middle schools; however students are much more aware of this problem and perceive it to be more severe than parents and educators.

Bullying in either the form of face-to-face bullying or cyberbullying is harmful to children and presents a substantial problem in our society today. Lerner (2011) conducted a study on cyberbullying in both America and Japan and argued that one difference in cyberbullies are that they believe they are better than their victims and feel entitled to intimidate others. Lerner (2011) also suggested that because of the anonymity associated with CMC, cyberbullying creates a technological advantage over face-to-face bullying.

Cyberbullying Laws

Mark (2009) discussed the differences between cyberbullying and face-to-face bullying and Draa and Sydney (2009) also argued that cyberbullying can have an even greater
psychological impact on someone because the attacks are in the form of verbal online communication which can be very dangerous. Murrhee (2010) takes this topic in another direction with her study on an aspect of cyberbullying which has become somewhat controversial in how it relates to the law, in particularly the first amendment. Grounded in two separate cyberbullying incidents where teenage girls both committed suicide after being victims of cyberbullying, this study examined the conflict that occurs “when state legislatures and school districts adopt anti-cyberbullying policies that pose a threat to free speech” (Murrhee, 2010, p. 311). In one case, the news media put pressure on the state legislature to create an anti-cyberbullying law that prohibits cyberbullying. Murrhee (2010) explained that while cyberbullying is sometimes compared to schoolyard bullying, the key difference is the use of technology, computers and cell phones which are staples of today’s youth. Murrhee (2010) examined the notion that while schools are allowed to restrict and monitor on-campus student speech, it is difficult to determine where on-campus speech ends and off-campus speech begins. In fact King (2010) argued that in order to make the internet safer, people need to be cautious in regards to the First Amendment. King explained that, “while the problem of cyberbullying urgently requires a solution, policymakers should avoid the temptation to enact knee-jerk legislation that may be overly broad or create unintended consequences that restrict the freedom of expression” (King, 2010, p. 848). Hinduja and Patchin (2011) recognized in their study that one of the main issues educators must deal with in regards to the prevention of cyberbullying is the rights that the school has to control students or to discipline students for inappropriate behavior.

**Literature Review Summary**

Through this review of literature regarding cyberbullying, the previous research mainly focused on the current prevention and school policies that are in place, the behaviors and
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attitudes associated with cyberbullying, as well as some research on cyberbullying laws. There are still many unknown aspects of cyberbullying and debatable thoughts on where the line should be drawn on whether schools should be involved if this is happening off campus.

Research Questions

The following research questions aim to find out the current middle student counselors’ roles and responsibilities in cyberbullying. The following questions will be based on the study conducted among middle school counselors who are surveyed and interviewed.

RQ1: What are the middle school counselor’s roles and responsibilities when a student is a victim of cyberbullying?

RQ2: What prevention policies should be put into place in an effort to prevent and stop cyberbullying?

RQ3: What are the differences face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying from a CMC perspective?
CHAPTER 3: SCOPE & METHODOLOGY

The Scope of this Study

The way in which cyberbullying is communicated to students and parents is of particular interest because cyberbullying is a situation that can take place both on and off of school property. Typically, situations that occur off of school grounds are not monitored by the school and are considered a private matter that should be dealt with by a student’s parents. However, this situation may overlap and cross those privacy boundaries. Griffin (2011) discussed Sandra Petronio’s communication privacy management theory (CPM). Griffin (2011) explained Petronio’s theory which suggested that having vague privacy boundaries can end poorly and discussed an example of a patient/doctor relationship. “Having no recognized mutual boundaries and only a vague idea of the patient’s expectations, advocates resort to using their own privacy rules to guide what they say. The result is turbulence and a patient who is often embarrassed or unhappy” (pp. 176-177) In this case, having vague boundaries between the middle school counselor’s relationship the student and parent could lead to a lack of action in stopping or preventing cyberbullying. This lack of communication and clear knowledge of privacy rules could lead to the student suffering more than necessary.

The scope of this study was to determine what roles and responsibilities are required by middle school counselors when dealing with a student who is a victim of cyberbullying. The study also aimed to review specific policies and procedures being used by middle school counselors when dealing with a cyberbullying situation. This study aimed to examine existing research on this topic as well as previous cyberbullying cases to determine which practices have been successful and which have not been successful as ways for middle school counselors to approach this subject. The sample of this study included the middle school counselors in the Washoe County area of Northern Nevada. According to the Public School Review website there
are nineteen middle schools in the Washoe County School District. The size of this study was limited to the Washoe County School District to determine what this particular middle school district has experienced and what their current policies and procedures are when dealing with this situation.

The Methodology of this Study

The methodology selected for this study utilized two forms of quantitative research as well as applied research and was then followed by qualitative research using an interview process. The quantitative research began by creating a survey questionnaire distributed via email to the middle school counselors in Washoe County that can be found in Appendix A. Rubin, Rubin, Haridakis and Piele (2010) explained the different types of survey research. “As a descriptive technique, we can use survey research to identify current attitudes or opinions about issues or persons, such as political candidates” (Rubin et al., 2010). The goal of the survey was to gain a better understanding of the types of cyberbullying situations middle school counselors deal with on school grounds as well as what situations they deal with that take place at home or away from school property. The questions were aimed to gather information regarding school policies and procedures set in place to deal with cyberbullying. The survey included both open-ended questions and closed ended questions with ordered responses. Examples of survey questions include:

- Do you hear students talking about cyberbullying?
- Do you find that cyberbullying takes place more with female students?
- What messages, if any, are communicated to students about cyberbullying?
- In your experience what are the most common forms of technology used in cyberbullying?
In your experience what social media websites are most commonly used in cyberbullying?

What are the school’s policies on dealing with situations that might be happening off of school property?

What policies would you like to see put into place in an effort to stop cyberbullying?

What methods have you found most helpful in preventing cyberbullying?

What methods have you found most helpful in stopping a cyberbullying situation?

Do you communicate with parents about cyberbullying?

The other step in the quantitative research process was to examine existing research in which other sources and previous statistics were reviewed and combined to examine past cyberbullying situations. This information was helpful to examine past cases of cyberbullying and to gain a better understanding of what actions took place or didn’t take place. These findings were compared to the findings from this study.

The applied research aspect of this study was to examine how school counselors address cyberbullying and what more can be done to stop these situations from happening. This method fits within this study because as Neuman (2005) explained, “the primary audience for and consumers of applied research findings are practitioners such as teachers, counselors, and caseworkers, or decision makers such as managers, committees, and officials” (p. 25). Evaluation research was the chosen method of applied research in an attempt to examine current policies and to determine whether or not they are effective.
After the surveys were received, a qualitative research method was used by contacting three of the respondents for interviews. Rubin et. al. (2010) explained that, “Interviews allow one-on-one contact between the researcher and the research participant for longer periods of time than survey questionnaires” (p. 221). The goal of the interview process was to gain further information on specific types of cyberbullying cases that these middle school counselors have experienced. The three respondents were chosen based on their past experience with cyberbullying in order to learn more about their individual situations. Interview questions included a more in-depth approach than the survey such as questioning specific circumstances and outcomes of their experiences. The interviews took place in a structured conversation setting with prearranged questions and were recorded for accuracy.

Neuman (2005) explained that using a survey can be a complex and expensive process which includes coordinating many people and suggested that the administrator of the survey be very organized and keep accurate records. In order to effectively and efficiently keep track of all surveys sent out and returned, an excel spreadsheet was made to record who a survey was sent to and also when a completed survey was received. The survey also included detailed directions as well as confidentiality and voluntary disclosures for the respondents. There were minimal risks involved with this study as all responses remained anonymous.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure that the study was conducted as thoroughly and ethically as possible, the middle school counselor’s interviewed for this study were made aware that their identities and answers would remain confidential. When dealing with children and in this case, a very
sensitive subject, it is best to not use or discuss actual names of students but instead, discuss general situations that those being interviewed have experienced.
CHAPTER 4: THE STUDY

Data Analysis

The basis of this study used quantitative research through the collection of surveys and was then followed by qualitative research using an interview process. Neuman (2005) explained that when collecting data a researcher, “will need to organize and manipulate the quantitative data to get them to reveal things of interest about the social world” (p. 343). The survey used both closed ended questions as well as open ended questions and was aimed at understanding the middle school counselors’ roles and responsibilities in cyberbullying. The data analysis of the quantitative portion of this study was collected through email. Every middle school counselor in the Washoe County School District in the Reno and Sparks, Nevada areas were emailed the survey along with a letter stating that the survey was completely voluntary and ensured that their identities would remain anonymous. There were 33 middle school counselors listed in the Washoe County School District.

Once the surveys were received, five middle school counselors were contacted for face-to-face interviews in hopes of gaining at least three face-to-face interviews. The face-to-face interviews were aimed at building a better understanding of cyberbullying situations from middle school counselors with specific experience dealing with this issue. Two middle school counselors agreed to face-to-face interviews. The interviews were conducted at the schools at times convenient for each counselor. Interviews were recorded for efficiency and again the counselors were made aware that their participation was completely voluntary and ensured that their identities would remain anonymous.

Results of the Study

Out of the 33 middle school counselors invited to participate in the study 14 responded by emailing back the completed survey. All but one respondent answered no to the question of
whether cyberbullying was a bigger problem than face-to-face bullying with one respondent explaining that the two go hand-in-hand and most times if someone is being bullied, it is happening in many forms. Results also indicated that cyberbullying was more common with female students. 92% of respondents indicated that Facebook was the most commonly used social media website for cyberbullying and 100% of respondents reported that cell phones were the most commonly used form of technology in cyberbullying. The following graph shows the answers to the closed ended questions of the survey with each specific question indicated below the graph.

Q1: Do you hear students talking about cyberbullying?
Q2: Is cyberbullying a bigger problem than face-to-face bullying at your school?
Q3: Do you find that cyberbullying takes place more with female students?
Q4: Are students afraid to talk to school counselors about cyberbullying?
Q5: Do you communicate with parents about cyberbullying?

This graph shows consistency in the answers from each counselor who indicates that experiences and behaviors of cyberbullying are similar throughout the different middle schools.

The communication between middle school counselors, students and parents was of particular interest in this study. One school has held lessons on cyberbullying and face-to-face bullying that focused on consequences and awareness. The respondent explained that if a
student is found participating in either form of bullying, school police will get involved and that they have learned about state laws and consequences through a “bullying” week put on by Washoe County. All respondents indicated through open ended answers that the consequences and awareness are communicated to students regarding this situation in an effort to prevent either form of bullying. When asked what the school’s policies are when dealing with situations that are happening off of school property, respondents explained that it becomes a City of Reno or Sparks Police Department issue although one respondent indicated that even if a problem is happening off of school property, the school will still get involved. Respondents also indicated that they would like to see parents get more involved and limit or monitor students’ access to cell phones and the internet. Two respondents indicated that they worked for lower-income schools where many of the parents did not have access to the internet so it was more difficult for those parents to monitor their child’s internet use. One respondent also explained that they would like to see tougher laws on cyberbullying that are actually implemented to hold children accountable. All respondents said that parent involvement was the best form of prevention in cyberbullying situations.

The face-to-face interviews were conducted at two different middle schools in Washoe County. Both interviews were recorded for accuracy and both respondents were made aware that their identities would remain anonymous. The participants were asked six questions which led to in-depth conversations about their experiences with cyberbullying. The interview questions are included in Appendix B. One respondent explained that face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying go hand-in-hand because typically when one form of bullying is started, it extends to other forms of bullying. For example a student might start off being picked on in class or in the hallways of the school which can then lead to mean texts via cell phone or even online bullying through
Facebook. This respondent also explained that cyberbullying is more common with female students but male students participate as well, just in different forms. The respondent explained that female students are more likely to send mean text messages through cell phones using name-calling and teasing as their form of bullying whereas male students are more likely to record physical fights at school and then post them on Facebook or send them out through email. The other respondent also agreed that face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying go hand-in-hand and that the two become intermixed. The respondent explained that while teachers and counselors can more easily see face-to-face bullying going on, they are still able to sometimes track cyberbullying because once a student posts it online, it is easier to document. This respondent also explained that the most difficult cyberbullying cases to deal with are the ones where a student feels threatened to speak out. Both respondents explained that middle school students are still at an age where “telling” on someone is very popular and that many students are very open about what is going on in school. The second respondent did have a situation however where the student did feel threatened by other students and was very scared to speak out. The counselor was able to get to the bottom of the situation after some time but those cases are the toughest. Both respondents made it clear that cyberbullying was a big factor in their particular schools and it is something that they try to stay on top of as much as possible.

Discussion

The results of this study indicated that behaviors of cyberbullying are mostly consistent throughout each middle school. Based on the theory of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) which is a theory on communication through textual messages, the use of text messages, cell phones, computers and social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter, there are now several more forms to incorporate in the bullying process. As indicated by the results of this study, face-to-face bullying still exists; however; now students are able to carry the bullying on
in many different ways. Griffin (2011) explained Joseph Walther’s theory that “CMC users can adapt to this restricted medium and use it effectively to develop close relationships” (p. 139). However, in the case of cyberbullying, students are using computers and other forms of technology to create negative relationships and to create false impressions of students they are bullying.

The results of this study also coincide with some of the existing literature researched in that cyberbullying is affecting middle school students and the use of social networking websites and technology have created other forms of communication for bullying. For example, as explained before in another study, Beran and Li (2007) suggested that cyberbullying sometimes acts as an extension or continuation of face-to-face bullying. The respondents from this study indicated that although face-to-face bullying is still a larger problem than cyberbullying, the two go hand in hand and only allow bullying to continue after school and in other forms. The results also examined the roles and responsibilities of middle school counselors as well as their communication with students and parents on this issue. The respondents from this study indicated that they are willing to communicate with both students and parents regardless of whether or not the situation is taking place on or off of school property. The respondents also indicated that the best form of prevention is the parents’ involvement and encouraged communication of laws, consequences and awareness.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study was my lack of time due to the fact that I was completing both COML 501 and COML 680 during the same semester. Since COML 501 is a pre-requisite to COML 680, I had to research two different topics at the same time. This condensed time limited the scope and reach of the study. Another limitation to this study was the lack of response from the surveys sent out to all middle school counselors in the Washoe County School District. The survey was sent out twice yet only 14 out of 33 were collected. This is a recommendation that would go in the next section. The study could have been more in-depth with more completed surveys. The other limitation of this study was the fact that cyberbullying is a relatively new problem and as previously discussed, hard to monitor and there are mixed results in different cyberbullying cases. Previous research yielded mixed results and opinions on how cyberbullying should be dealt with. This mixed response made it difficult to establish any solution to this problem.

Recommendations for Further Study

Further research is recommended on this topic that could possibly result in more definite strategies and policies in the prevention of cyberbullying in middle schools. Additional research should be conducted on several different age groups as well as the differences in each gender when associated with cyberbullying. Future researchers could also focus on policies that have worked in middle schools that could possibly be used in other schools to further prevent this situation from happening. In addition to researching what policies have worked, researching how school counselors communicate these policies to students and parents would also provide helpful information. Several middle school counselors in this particular study indicated that parental involvement was key in the prevention of cyberbullying so further research could be conducted
on how parents can stay involved, work with the schools and monitor the use of cell phone and computer use as a form of bullying. Further research should also be conducted on how communication affects cyberbullying. The way that messages are communicated through different technologies affects the understanding of the communication. The way a message comes across when communicated face-to-face can be different than the way the message is received through different forms of technology. Technology cannot decipher tone and certain meanings whereas face-to-face communication takes into account body language and tonality in one’s voice. There is also a certain anonymity factor with cyberbullying because the online aspect does not require a name behind the message. The theory of Computer-Mediated Communication as previously discussed could be further researched in conjunction with cyberbullying in order to further study this idea.

Conclusions

The basis of this study was to examine the problem of cyberbullying and the roles and responsibilities that middle school counselors take on in this situation. When beginning this study, the philosophical assumptions from German philosopher Martin Buber where used to better understand the role that communication plays in relationships. Buber’s philosophy explained that certain relationships result in humans treating others as objects instead of people (Griffin, 2011). This philosophy relates to this study as it revolves around the idea that communication through the use of certain technologies such as computers and cell phones have resulted in a new form of bullying in which students torment others and create false identities of one another. The online medium allows these messages to be broadcast to many people at one time. This study examined the use of technology and how the traditional form of face-to-face bullying has taken on a new dynamic through an online medium. This study also included a
theoretical basis which focused on Computer-Mediated Communication and how this theory related to cyberbullying. Griffin (2011) discussed the theory of Computer-Mediated Communication which explains that communication between two or more people takes place through messages using computers and how this medium alters what we traditionally think about relational communication. Since cyberbullying is conducted in an online and sometimes anonymous medium, students are able to bully one another from behind a computer or cell phone instead of in a face-to-face setting. The communication through technological devices allows for students to bully others without recourse.

The results of this study coincided with much of the literature that was reviewed on this topic in that the middle school counselors that participated in this study had somewhat mixed ideas on what should or can be done in cyberbullying situations. Although one key element that remained consistent was the encouragement from the schools for parental involvement in the prevention of these situations. The majority of the middle school counselors surveyed responded with suggestions that parents should monitor their children’s cell phone and internet use as a way of prevention and discipline. This study was able to examine one group of middle school counselors and their experiences, policies and prevention methods with cyberbullying. This is an important topic in our society today and more research and experience will most likely result in tougher policies and laws in these situations.
References


Dictionary.com retrieved from: http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/social+network


http://www.publicschoolreview.com/county_middle_schools/stateid/NV/county/32031
Appendix A

Survey Questionnaire

1. How long have you been a middle school counselor?
2. Do you hear students talking about cyberbullying? Yes or No
3. Is cyberbullying a bigger problem than face-to-face bullying at your school? Yes or No
4. Do you find that cyberbullying takes place more with female students? Yes or No
5. What messages, if any, are communicated to students about cyberbullying?
6. In your experience what are the most common forms of technology used in cyberbullying? (Cell phones, Email, Chat Rooms, etc.)
7. In your experience what social media websites are most commonly used in cyberbullying? (Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, etc.)
8. What are the school’s policies on dealing with situations that might be happening off of school property?
9. What policies would you like to see put into place in an effort to stop cyberbullying?
10. What methods have you found most helpful in preventing cyberbullying?
11. What methods have you found most helpful in stopping a cyberbullying situation?
12. Are students afraid to talk to school counselors about cyberbullying? Yes or No
13. What do you do if you know a student is being bullied online and does not want to discuss it?
14. Do you communicate with parents about cyberbullying? Yes or No
Appendix B

Interview Questionnaire

1. What have you personally experienced with cyberbullying situations at your middle school?

2. Do you think parental and school involvement helps prevent cyberbullying?

3. Why do you think cyberbullying is more common with female students?

4. Are there certain things you can’t do or situations you can’t get involved in?

5. What is the most difficult cyberbullying case you have dealt with?

6. Do you see cyberbullying getting worse with more technological advances?
Appendix C

Mentor Agreement Form

MENTOR AGREEMENT (To be submitted with Thesis Proposal)

You have been asked to serve as a Mentor for Jennifer O’Hare, who is completing the requirements for her Masters Degree in Communication and Leadership Studies. As a mentor you are asked to share ideas with this student and read the next to final draft of their thesis. You are not expected to directly supervise this student’s work but rather meet with them as a “young colleague.” If you are willing to serve as a Mentor for him/her, please sign this agreement.

I am willing to serve as a Mentor for Jennifer O’Hare as she/he completes her/his thesis. I realize I do not need to supervise their work in any direct fashion and will only serve as a more experienced colleague with a younger colleague. I will provide help in the way of suggestions, ideas and resources and am willing to review drafts of their written work. I also agree to read the next to last draft of the student’s thesis and will sign my name on the title page of their final draft. My signature on the thesis only indicates that I have read it and is no indication of the quality of the work. I will not be asked to assign a grade or make any evaluative comments to the course convener.

Signature ____________________________________________

Title: Adjunct Professor

Email and telephone number: morehouse@gonzaga.edu / 509.313.6116

Date: ______________________