Abstract

SIMMS, KIMBERLY DENISE. Secondary Assistant Principals’ Perceptions of Cyberbullying in a Rural County in North Carolina. (Under the direction of Dr. Lance Fusarelli and Dr. Kevin Brady.)

The study took an in-depth look into cyberbullying through the eyes of secondary assistant principals in charge of discipline. It looked intensely at the growing problem of cyberbullying among adolescents and the utility of policy to combat it. Emphasis was placed on exploration of cyberbullying in the Kerr County School District with a focus on the magnitude of the cyberbullying problem, how incidents were currently being handled and ways that that updated policy that explicitly included cyberbullying would advance the district’s Safe Schools Anti-Bullying goals. The eight assistant principals (four from the middle schools and four from the traditional high schools) that handle discipline participated in one-on-one semi-structured interviews that produced evidence that led to understanding of the case and answered the research questions.

Findings showed that administrators characterized cyberbullying as a growing problem in the Kerr County district. The most common practices used to deal with the complex cases of cyberbullying were creating a climate that valued respect, mediation, parental involvement (i.e. loss of electronic privileges/closing of accounts), revocation of school issued computers, assignment of consequences according to school handbook, and reporting to law enforcement officials. The administrators believed updating policy was a viable solution to the problem. The administrators supported updating policy that would explicitly include cyberbullying (i.e. online harassment via email, text message, Facebook,
MySpace, etc.) offenses. The administrators identified the following as ways the ways that updating existing anti-bullying policies to explicitly include cyberbullying (i.e. online harassment via email, text message, Facebook, MySpace, etc.) would advance the districts Safe Schools/anti-bullying goals:

- Communicate that there are effective measures to deal with cases of cyberbullying
- Decrease incidents of cyberbullying in school and without
- Provide a basis for good recordkeeping of all cyberbullying incidences
- Publicize rules and sanctions freely
- Let victims know there is a solution
- Put perpetrators on notice that there are consequences
- Empower victims by providing recourse
- Allow students to reap the benefits of technology while curbing the spread of online cruelty
- Foster awareness: help parents understand the importance of monitoring their child’s online activities

Lacking in the district were data examining cyberbullying from the school administrators’ perspectives. This study was designed to fill this research void and can be used to inform school leaders, politicians, and community members regarding the problem of cyberbullying in Kerr County Schools and policy reform.
Secondary Assistant Principals’ Perceptions of Cyberbullying in a Rural County in North Carolina

by
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Biography

Kimberly D. Simms was born May 16, 1962 in Wilson, North Carolina. She graduated from R. L. Fike High School in 1980. Upon graduating from high school she enrolled in North Carolina Central University with hopes of becoming an educator and in May of 1984 she received a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology. In 1987, while teaching in Durham Public Schools as a special education teacher, she returned to NCCU’s graduate program, where she researched social skills of autistic children, and received her Master in Special Education in May of 1990. With a developing interest in educational administration, she returned to North Carolina Central University from 1990-1991 and obtained a principal’s license. After receiving this endorsement, she was employed by Vance County Schools as an administrator and has served there for nine years. During her tenure as an administrator in Vance County, she entered North Carolina State University to pursue a doctoral program in the Department of Leadership, Policy and Adult and Higher Education. Upon completion of the doctoral degree she has aspirations of expanding her career horizons and wishes to pursue a career as a higher education professional.
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Most importantly, I would like to thank my daughter, Rachel, for her unconditional love and encouraging me to follow my dreams. I hope that this accomplishment will inspire her to soar. I hope above all that I have led by example that anything is possible when you put your mind to it.

Finally, I celebrate the many other sources of inspiration: my sister Wanda for helping me to identify attitudes, habits, behaviors, perspectives and strategies to succeed and my parents for their wisdom and instilling in me the importance of education.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

The girl’s parents, wild with outrage and fear, showed the principal the text messages: a dozen shocking, sexually explicit threats, sent to their daughter the previous Saturday night from the cellphone of a 12-year-old boy. Both children were sixth graders at Benjamin Franklin Middle School in Ridgewood, N.J.

Punish him, insisted the parents.

“I said, ‘This occurred out of school, on a weekend,’ ” recalled the principal, Tony Orsini.

“We can’t discipline him.”

Had they contacted the boy’s family, he asked.

Too awkward, they replied. The fathers coach sports together.

What about the police, Mr. Orsini asked.

A criminal investigation would be protracted, the parents had decided, its outcome uncertain. They wanted immediate action.

They pleaded: “Help us.”

Schools these days are confronted with complex questions on whether and how to deal with cyberbullying, an imprecise label for online activities ranging from barrages of teasing texts to sexually harassing group sites. The extent of the phenomenon is hard to quantify (Hoffman, 2010 p. A1). School administrators are faced daily with the daunting challenges of a most complex social system within the ranks of the students they serve. Technology only makes it that much more complicated.
Background on Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is bullying through email, instant messaging (IMing), chat room exchanges, Web site posts, or digital messages or images sent to a cellular phone or personal digital assistant (PDA) (Kowalski et al., 2008). Cyberbullying can take many forms. However, there are eight forms that are the most common: flaming, harassment, denigration, impersonation, outing, trickery, exclusion and cyberstalking.

Cyberbullying is occurring both within the school environment and off-campus. Sometimes students are using the district Internet system – during school, during afterschool activities, or at home if the district has a laptop program or allows students to access the district system from home. Students may also use personal digital devices while at school, such as cell phones, digital cameras, PDAs, and personal computers to engage in cyberbullying. In increasing numbers, students are bringing personal digital devices to school with the expectation that these devices will be used in the classroom for instructional activities. Misuse of the district Internet system and personal digital devices on campus is clearly a concern that must be addressed by schools.

More frequently, students are engaging in cyberbullying activities off-campus but the harmful impact is being felt at school. There are many emerging reports of school fights and other altercations, as well as reports of students who are so significantly emotionally harmed that they are avoiding school, forced to change schools, or are simply failing. Also, there are increasing reports of youth suicide associated with cyberbullying. It is this combination of
online harm and on-campus interactions that presents significant concerns and risks to the safety of the students.

**Statement of the Problem**

Young people have fully embraced the Internet as both an environment and as a tool for socializing. Via the Internet and other technologies, they send e-mail, create their own Websites, post intimate personal news in blogs (online interactive journals), send text messages and images via cell phone, contact each other through Ims (instant messages), chat in chat rooms, post to discussion boards, and seek out new friends in teen sites.

Unfortunately, there are increasing reports of teenagers (and sometimes younger children) using these technologies to post damaging text or images to bully their peers or engage in other aggressive behavior. There are also increasing reports of teens posting material that raises concerns that they are considering an act of violence toward others or themselves. Feinberg and Robey (2008) found that 45% of preteens and 30% of teens are cyberbullied while at school.

Students use/misuse personal digital devices, including cell phones, PDAs or personal laptops, while on campus. Students even engage in inappropriate activities while using the district Internet system, while in school or when off-campus if access to the district Internet system is allowed. Students are engaging in these activities outside of school—but because the participants are also together in school, this off-campus activity may be impacting the school climate or interfering with the ability of students to be successful in school.
There are a number of cyberbullying behaviors that fall under existing policies, though these offenses occur with relative infrequency. Most would agree that certain forms of cyberbullying do not require formal discipline, (i.e. minor teasing), but there are times when cyberbullying behavior crosses the line, so much so that disciplinary action is required and specific policies need to be in place that explicitly identifies these offenses.

Now, school and state-level officials and even creators and managers of Web sites are taking action. New policies are being crafted that deal with cyberbullying, either incorporating electronic harassment into existing bullying policies, or spelling it out as an entirely new threat. In doing so, they are often crafting language that allows educators to intervene even in off-campus incidents if the activity affects the school environment.

Change only happens when a point of agreement is reached among various constituencies about the need for change. School administrators as local advocates are considering the extent to which this pervasive and potentially dangerous problem of cyberbullying is interfering with students’ educational progress and many are coming together to share their perspectives with policy makers about the need for policy reforms.

Although schools are governed by a complicated set of interrelated federal and state laws, the majority of policies and practices regarding school disciplinary practices are crafted at the state and local levels. Specifically, policies regarding discipline, suspension, and expulsion most often are determined by a combination of state policy and local school district policy. The focus on policy as a vehicle for change has generated volumes of research on bullying; however, the focus of these studies has been on the traditional forms. Researchers have
studied and identified the behaviors a traditional bully will employ to bully others. Researchers know the common characteristics of the bully, and they are starting to understand how to intervene and stop the cycle of traditional bullying (Carpenter & Fergusson, n.d.).

Evidence exists of considerable problems with bullying and bullied children in secondary schools. In the largest survey in the United Kingdom to date 10% of pupils reported that they had been bullied “sometimes or more often” during that term, with 4% reporting being bullied “at least once a week.” The impact of the introduction of policies on bullying throughout a school seems to be limited. The commonest type of bullying is general name calling, followed by being hit, threatened, or having rumors spread about one. Bullying is thought to be more prevalent among boys and the youngest pupils in a school (Salmon, James, & Smith, 1998).

Most recently, Seals and Young (2003) gathered data addressing the prevalence of bullying among students in grades seven and eight. The 454 participating students represented urban, suburban, and rural school districts, and most were African American and White. Twenty-four percent of students reported either bullying or being bullied. Nearly 14% of students reported being called mean names, and others reported being hit or kicked, being teased, or being threatened. Most incidents of bullying occurred at lunch or recess, but many occurred on the way to or from school as well as in class. In their national study of 15,686 students in grades 6 through 10, Nansel and associates (2001) reported nearly 30% of students indicated more than occasional involvement as a bully and/or victim of bullying.
As part of a larger study, Casey-Cannon, Hayward, and Gowen (2001) conducted a qualitative investigation of the experiences and perceptions of relational bullying among middle school girls (ages 13 and 14) from Northern California. The majority of participants reported experiencing either overt (i.e., physical or verbal) or relational bullying. Participants also reported emotional reactions including sadness, anger, and rejection. Behavioral responses included ignoring the bully, approaching an adult for help, being assertive, and bullying back (i.e., reactive bullying).

The study of cyberbullying, on the other hand, is in its infancy. This is because researchers are just beginning to understand the full scope of the problem, and because technology is advancing at such rapid speed, researchers are not able to stay ahead of the various types of bullying made possible through these emerging technologies. The problem is that research on cyberbullying is very limited, and research on policy-based solutions to combat it is even more limited (Carpenter & Fergusson, n.d.).

**Definition of Terms**

Cyberbullying is a grouping of hostile and inflammatory activities via communicative technologies that are used repeatedly, and deliberately, to harm others. Because of the open-endedness of cyberbullying as a phenomenon, the working definition cannot be viewed as a single entity. A comprehensive definition of this phenomenon must encompass all of its elements. In order to define cyberbullying and describe its scope adequately an understanding of the elements associated with cyberbullying must be present. Below is an
overview of the elements that are associated with cyberbullying. The following reflect the most common forms of cyberbullying, though this list is not exhaustive (Willard, 2008).

*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 in 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.

In this study, cyberbullying is being defined as the sum of the elements that makes up the phenomena, therefore any or all of the elements mentioned above must be kept in mind.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of secondary school administrators in Kerr County Schools about the growing phenomenon of cyberbullying among students, how instances of cyberbullying are handled, use of policy to combat it, and ways that updated policy would advance the district’s Safe Schools/Anti-Bullying goals.
Research Questions

The research questions that are central to this study are:

1. How do Kerr County Schools’ secondary school administrators perceive cyberbullying to be a problem among their students?

2. In light of policy ambiguity, how do assistant principals in charge of discipline handle instances of cyberbullying?

3. In what ways would updating existing anti-bullying policies to explicitly include cyberbullying (i.e. online harassment via email, text message, Facebook, MySpace, etc.) advance the district’s Safe Schools/Anti-Bullying goals?

Significance of the Study

With the advent of new communication technologies has come a host of online forms of aggression, abuse, and harassment that occurs on and off school campuses. The proposed research was to determine if the Kerr County Schools has a cyberbullying problem, whether there is a need to update existing anti-bullying policies to explicitly include cyberbullying to address it, and discover ways in which updated policy will advance the district’s Safe Schools/Anti-Bullying goals.

It is recognized that the pattern and the problem are clear. With the advancement of technology cyberbullying is exploding. Schools have long suffered from the strain of ever-changing disciplinary issues, an affliction that has led to an almost endless series of trendy-sounding “research-based programs”- emotional training, violence prevention curriculums, anti-bullying programs, and the like – as “preventive measures” and “early interventions” for
pervasive school discipline problems. School bureaucrats have been falling over one another in their rush to implement. Each begins with great fanfare only to wither out from frustration, neglect, or implementation failure. This study will look at the challenging phenomenon of cyberbullying through a policy lens. This study can also be used by other researchers, practitioners, parents, and policy makers to inform policy and practice to curtail cyberbullying among adolescents.

While the escalation of cyberbullying should be reason enough to study this phenomenon, the more pressing issue should be that of policy development to combat it. In recent times, much has been said about the role that schools should play in combating cyberbullying. School safety and student well-being is an area that is under continual scrutiny. One important observation is that the problem with the current system is that legal constraints have left administrators with limited power but full responsibility for any problems that occur. There is a feeling that current bullying policies are not comprehensive enough to effectively address the growing complexity of cyberbullying. Administrators have to be certain that disciplining the student for cyberbullying would not violate the First Amendment. And sometimes in cyberbullying cases that is not easy to answer. The question, “Where do you draw the line?” has to be asked. You have to prove that something is “significantly disruptive”. However, in most cyberbullying cases, though we are mostly dealing with words, the emotional impact inflicted upon the victim usually causes such a disturbance that the student arrives at school with emotional baggage and the conflicts are
most often played out at school. The inclusion of cyberbullying in existing policy is absolutely necessary.

The major significance of this study was that it examined the problem of cyberbullying, its prevalence, and the need for explicit policy that addresses it. It described the motivations, depicted the constraints, and elicited a prognosis for reinventing bullying policy to include cyberbullying. Taking all of the above into consideration, it added to the literature on cyberbullying and policy which is very limited despite the rapid growth of the phenomenon.

**Conceptual Framework**

In order to understand the complexity of cyberbullying issues and the need for a policy-based solution, I researched policy processes. Having begun construction of my knowledge from the bodies of literature surrounding the policy process, I needed a model that showed how the application of the public policy process can facilitate the efforts of stakeholders to articulate their policy desires and to encourage the adoption and acceptance of particular policies. I also needed one that emphasized the influence of stakeholders on policy development. The purpose of such a conceptualization is to show how an organization responds to a perceived problem and a theory about how to improve the condition through successful policy development.

The conceptual framework needed to provide a clear link from the literature to the research goals and questions, inform the research design, provide reference points for discussion of literature, guide the methodology and analysis of data, and provide a structured
approach when communicating the findings. In order to meet these conditions, this study employed a model that has shown promise in understanding the way social problems are framed for political discussion. In my research, I adopted the conceptual framework of problem definition which suggests that policy-making starts as “a response to a perceived problem of a constituency” (Hayes, 2009, para. 13). The very fact that some group brought a problem into a political arena acknowledges that a situation falls short of expectations, that a potential solution exists, and that this remedy is a legitimate activity of government. Most likely, a preferred policy prescription will be advocated by those who have brought their grievance to the political process in the first place (Hayes, 2009).
In many respects, problem definition is the single most important part of the policy process, since the manner in which problems are defined often determines whether they get on policy agendas, the alternatives that are considered and adopted, and the way in which the policy is implemented and evaluated (Dye, 1992).

What issues require or demand a policy response by superintendents and school boards is affected, in part, by people’s beliefs. Our national, state, and local political culture plays a significant role in the problem definition and agenda setting process. By political
culture, we mean the dominant values and beliefs of people in an area, whether it is a school district, state, or nation. Political culture “consists of assumptions about the political world” (Elkins & Simeon, 1979, p. 127).

Rochefort and Cobb (1994) argue that, “Cultural values, interest group advocacy, scientific information, and professional advice all help to shape the content of problem definition” (p. 4). Problem definition and redefinition are used often as tools by opposing sides to gain advantage in policy arenas such as school board meetings. Policy actors who are successful in deciding how problems are defined and how agendas are set wield enormous power in the policy making process. Petracca (1992) asserted that, “How an issue is defined or redefined, as the case may be, influences: (1) the type of politicking which will ensue around it; (2) its chances of reaching the agenda of a particular political institution; and (3) the probability of a policy outcome favorable to advocates of the issue” (p. 1).

Advocacy for proposed policy changes referenced in this study must align with the district’s long-range safe schools goals. It is important to understand the district’s commitment to providing an environment that is free of bullying and harassment. In response to the growing problem of cyberbullying, the primary assumption is that administrators will respond in this fashion: define the problem, explore solutions, influence the forces (school boardmembers) that affect the development of the policy, and advocate for policy-based solutions to combat the problem.

Two key issues that are necessary for educators and policymakers to have in hand before considering policy-based solutions to combat cyberbullying are the extent and severity
of the problem (Brown, Jackson, & Cassidy, 2006). Patchin (2008) stated that schools cannot just go by media reports as to how big a problem cyberbullying is (or is not). They must establish a baseline in their own district as to the scope, frequency, extent, and contributing factors of cyberbullying among their students. As such, conducting research towards this end is essential. Finally, districts (and the powers that be) appreciate facts, and so requests for more resources to deal with issues such as cyberbullying displayed through actual, localized data should be received much more willingly.

These general questions need to be answered in order to understand what is going on in a situation and to clarify how you are or may be involved. They are the initial questions in the first phase of the development of public policy-policy definition. You cannot begin to seek a solution to a problem if you have not defined it or believe it significant enough to warrant attention (Smith, 2003).

Several factors affect the problem definition and agenda setting process, including the “extremity, concentration, range, and visibility of problems” (Peters, 1986, p. 46 as citied in Fusarelli & Sanders, 2006). The more people affected by a problem, the more likely the item will receive priority on the legislative agenda, particularly if the effects are concentrated and serious or extreme. As it relates to cyberbullying, experts contend that cyberbullying is different and potentially more dangerous than the harassment typically associated with school-age youth. The proliferation of cyberbullying is of growing concern, and its effects are enormous. There have been reports of cyberbullying leading to suicide, school violence (including school murder), school failure, and school avoidance. Results of a recent survey
conducted by the *National Crime Prevention Council* indicate that, nationwide, more than 40% of teens have been victims of taunts and threats via social network web sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, Instant Messages, or text messages from cell phones. Furthermore, one in eight reported feeling scared enough to stay home from school due to these messages (Hejja, n.d.).

In this case, the questions were best answered by Kerr County School administrators that handle discipline and come face to face with the phenomenon of cyberbullying and its effects on the learning environment and school culture. Their perspectives helped determine the need for amending policies to address this problem.

In *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*, Michael Lipsky introduces the theory of street level bureaucrats, in which he portrays a view of the power implementers possess and their effect on public policies. Particularly, Lipsky argues that street-level bureaucrats, as front line workers in service delivery, face an ongoing duality between being responsive to their clients’ needs and ensuring policies are properly implemented. The dilemmas posed to these actors force them to adopt reactionary strategies in order to cope with the challenges of the job. Indirectly, however, those adaptive strategies in essence become a form of decision making in the public policy realm (Lipsky, 1980).

Public service workers, though generally regarded as low-level or front-line employees, have a pivotal role in delivering government services and “goods”. Particularly are the employees who have constant direct interactions with public citizens, yet possess a significant degree of discretion in execution of their work (Lipsky, 1980). Lipsky calls these
employees “street-level bureaucrats” public service workers who are confronted with real world challenges in the public sector, yet face inadequacies of under-funded government systems. A broad spectrum of civil positions primarily constitute these street-level bureaucracies—including teachers, police officers, lawyers, doctors, health workers and more. In this study, the assistant principal’s handling discipline and being faced with the daily challenges of cyberbullying would fit Lipsky’s profile of the street level bureaucrat.

Superficially, street-level bureaucrats constitute a level of implementation of public policies—they are tasked with ensuring policies are carried out. Yet as individuals, public service workers represent a small-scale level of policymaking. They decide the specific operation and execution of policies. On a larger scale, Lipsky argues the combined actions and decisions of street-level bureaucrats in their bureaucracy amalgamate to form an agenda and heavily influence the direction of policy (Lipsky, 1980).

Administrators can work together and engage others in advocating for change in the districts anti-bullying policy. No greater challenge exists today than creating safe schools or restoring schools to safe places of learning. Without safe schools, teachers cannot teach and students cannot learn. A safe school is foundational to the success of the academic mission. The challenge requires a major commitment and involves placing school safety at the top of the educational agenda.
Study Design

Qualitative research is the design that was used for this study. It sought to look for answers pertaining to cyberbullying in the natural setting in which it is found. Some desirable characteristics of this design is that it gives a total or complete picture, seeks to understand people’s interpretations, and the data are the perceptions of the people in the environment. This is consistent with the goal of this research, which is to obtain personal perspectives. The case study method was employed to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. The subjects were the secondary administrators in the Kerr County School District. Interviews were used as the data gathering method to produce evidence that led to understanding of the case and answered the research questions. The interviews of these subjects yielded a collection of detailed information about the perceptions of this particular group of administrators on the need for policy reform concerning cyberbullying. The research did not attempt to discover a universal, generalizable truth, but rather emphasis was placed on exploration of the problem of cyberbullying in the Kerr County School District and the need for policy reform to address it. Steps were taken to ensure that the research findings accurately reflected people’s perceptions, whatever they were. Peer review and reflexivity was used to improve the credibility of the study.

Researcher Subjectivity

In qualitative research, subjectivity refers to the ways that research is shaped by the particular perspectives, interests, and biography of the researcher. When subjectivity is seen to be acting in such a way that it invalidates the findings of the research, it is often referred to
as “bias.” However, subjectivity can also benefit the analysis, such as when a researcher’s deep involvement with the topic of research offers her insights others might not have. To control for bias, this researcher will engage in “reflexivity,” the process of reflecting on one’s own subjectivity and how it might shape each aspect of the research. This section will highlight these reflections.

Subjectivity Statement

I am a 49 year old black female, with clear recollection of my junior and high school experiences. I have very fond memories of my school experiences, though at times, I remember being bullied by others. Despite these few negative experiences, I still loved school and wanted to become an educator. I was influenced by many close relatives who were teachers. I graduated from high school and went to college to pursue that career. I obtained a B.A. in psychology and a M.Ed. in special education as well as my principal’s license. I taught for ten years and have been an administrator in Kerr County for the past seven years.

As an administrator one of my primary duties is to handle disciplinary problems/conflicts among students. After becoming an educator, I was surprised to see that the social side of school had not changed very much at all since I was a student. The same issues and problems that were faced over thirty years ago are still prevalent today, with bullying being one of the mainstays. Bullying at school is an age-old problem with a new twist for this generation of “cyber babies”.

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Although there has been a strong thrust to get educational technology into the hands of teachers and students, many obstacles to appropriate use still exist. I have witnessed firsthand the impact of students using computers. It has had not only a positive but also a negative impact on the learning environment and safety issues within our schools. Young people have fully embraced the Internet as both an environment for and as a tool for socializing. Via the Internet and other technologies, they send e-mail, create their own Web sites, post intimate personal news in blogs (online interactive journals), send text messages and images via cell phone, contact each other through IMs (instant messages), chat in chat rooms, post to discussion boards, and seek out new friends in teen sites.

Unfortunately, there are increasing reports of teenagers (and sometimes younger children) using these technologies to post damaging text or images to bully their peers or engage in other aggressive behavior. There are also increasing reports of teens posting material that raises concerns that they are considering an act of violence toward others or themselves.

Cyberbullying is creating an epidemic of problems. As an administrator in fulfilling my duties of disciplining students, I have seen a sharp rise in the misuse of technology, and some of its misuses are at the core of student conflicts. When cyberbullying cases arise they cause a substantial disruption at school. As an administrator over discipline, when I become aware of cyberbullying I have to spend time discussing the situation with the student, bringing in the student’s parents or guardians for a conference, mediating conflicts, preventing potential fights or other forms of retaliation, or even contacting or advising
parents to contact social networking sites regarding the material in question. I have to spend an inordinate amount of time trying to convince students that their actions have real-life consequences, in addition to potential disciplinary action. In certain instances, I have had to collaborate with the school resource officer to advise students that cyberbullying victims have the right to press charges or sue their bullies or I talk to them about college admission counselors and future employers’ ability to search for and locate their online activities. I inform them that they can be expelled from social-networking sites for violation of terms of service, which universally prohibit bullying, harassment, and impersonation along with other inappropriate content.

This has caused me to seek how I might work with the school district to control bullying/cyberbullying. Having been a victim of traditional bullying as a student, I can fully relate to the psychological damage that can occur. As an administrator, I know well the disruptions to school functions that it can cause; therefore, I am committed to being a part of the solution to the bullying/cyberbullying problem in my district.

Chapter Summary

Although characteristics of traditional bullying participants have been identified and studied for years, research on cyberbullying policy is limited. To address this gap in the literature, I proposed a study on cyberbullying and the need for policy to address it. I used a qualitative approach to obtain the perspectives of practicing administrators in the Kerr County School District on cyberbullying, the need for policy reform to address it, and ways in which updated policy would advance the district’s Safe Schools/Anti-Bullying goals.
This chapter gave an overview of the growing problem of cyberbullying, stated the problem at hand, and specified the guiding research questions. Additionally, this chapter identified a conceptual framework to outline a possible course of action for policy changes to combat it. The next chapter will include an examination of the literature, present a synthesis of previous research, and lay the foundation for understanding and appreciating the value of my proposed research.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

This section will review existing research on cyberbullying, the prevalence of it in schools, and the need to respond to it through school board policy. A search of educational journals through electronic computer databases such as ERIC, PsychINFO, and Google Scholar was conducted to obtain prior research. It is important to acknowledge at the outset that the body of research on school board policies to combat cyberbullying is quite limited, despite this growing problem. To compensate for this limitation, I will offer a review of cyberbullying and its prevalence, combined with an overview of a policy process model that focuses on responses to a perceived problem of a constituency and advocacy to achieve specific policy reform. This approach is necessary to ensure that the review will be organized around and related directly to the research questions posed in chapter one. Significant literature relevant to the use of policy to combat cyberbullying will be presented and differing views will be explored.

Previous Research

In a review of general reports, media reports, documented school incidents, individual anecdotes and direct observation of behaviors, Rigby (2002) indicated that bullying behavior existed within the schoolyard long before it became a focus of empirical researchers. Dan Olweus is considered the “pioneer” researcher that first brought aggressive school behaviors to empirical attention in the early 1970’s (Olweus, 1993). Olweus’ work (1993) on traditional
bullying in the late 1970’s set the tone for future work in the study of school bullying. He brought to light the common occurrence of child on child aggressive behaviors at school and the detrimental effects these behaviors had on those who were involved in them (Coloroso, 2003).

More recently the academic disciplines have shown a sharp increase in more directed research seeking to understand bullying behaviors occurring in the workplace, classroom, and via new communication technologies (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Rigby, 2002). Possibly most notable, research has also increased with regard to the recognition of bullying as an invasive school issue, with harmful long-term effects often being documented for many students and school communities (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Li, 2006; Mason, 2008). With recent widespread use of new technologies, school students today have expanded traditional bullying techniques into the virtual environment. This is known as cyberbullying, and includes the use of mobile phones, Ipads, online chat, email, websites and instant messenger (Im's) social networking sites to bully others (Aricak et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2008).

Cyberbullying is a relatively new phenomenon, and literature on this topic is only starting to uncover and explore the nature, definitions, incident rates, and the effects of it on adolescent students.

**Cyberbullying**

With the spread of technology, a new form of bullying has emerged that can occur anywhere and can take a toll on its victim. Cyberbullying is a growing form of bullying that involves sending or posting hurtful, embarrassing, or threatening text or images using the
Internet, cell phones, or other electronic communication devices. Other forms of cyberbullying include creating Web sites that contain harmful or highly personal materials or images that may damage the victim’s reputation or friendships, distributing questionnaires that poll classmates about a student’s physical traits, and excluding victims from online groups. Since many students have access to the Internet outside of school, cyberbullying can occur at any time of day, and its effects can be difficult to avoid (Preventing Cyberbullying in Schools, 2009).

Most cyberbullying is done away from school (Dehue et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2008), although more cyberbullying may occur during school than many adults realize. For example, in a telephone survey of preteens (6-11-year-olds) and teens (12-17-year-olds) (Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, 2006): 45% of preteens and 30% of teens who had been cyberbullied received the messages while at school; 44% of preteens and 70% of teens who had been cyberbullied received the messages at home; 34% of preteens and 25% of teens who had been cyberbullied received the messages while at a friend’s house. As cyberbullying often takes place outside of school, it is a more difficult form of bullying for schools to address. Some cyberbullying activities occurring off-campus are causing significant emotional harm to students. When students are emotionally harmed they may present a danger to themselves and to others. If school officials fail to effectively respond to these situations when they are at the “harmful speech” level, there is a risk that they will eventually have to respond to school failure, school violence, or student suicide.
Prevalence of Cyberbullying

School administrators are responsible for ensuring that all students are provided an opportunity to attend school free from fear and intimidation. This includes ensuring that students are using school network or mobile devices in a manner that does not cause harm to others. One of the first steps to eliminating cyberbullying is to assess the level of electronic bullying occurring both at home and at school. It is naive to assume that cyberbullying is not taking place. It is equally important to make certain that teachers, staff, parents, and students clearly understand the scope and seriousness of cyberbullying and the consequences of violating school rules regarding harassment, intimidation, and antagonistic behavior (Beale & Hall, 2007).

Research studies have produced different answers to the problem of cyberbullying. Rates of cyberbullying vary depending on the definition of cyberbullying that is used, the ages and characteristics of children surveyed, and the time frame involved. There are only a few studies that have focused on electronic bullying. Kowalski and Limber (2007) define electronic bullying as being bullied via mobile phone or personal computer. They surveyed 856 children and youth 11–19 years of age and found that 16% had been bullied via mobile phone text messaging, 7% via Internet chat rooms, and 4% through e-mail. Ybarra and Mitchell interviewed 1,501 regular Internet users 10–17 years of age to compare characteristics of aggressors, targets, and aggressor/targets. They were interested in the degree to which respondents had been victims of or had perpetrated online harassment or rude and threatening online comments. They found that 19% of the sample was involved in
online aggression, 4% as online victims only, 12% as online aggressors only, and 3% as aggressor/targets only (Kowalski & Limber, 2007).

Subsequent existing literature on electronic bullying comes from the limited research in the areas of Internet safety and Internet violence. In a national telephone survey ($N = 1,501$), Finkelhor, Mitchell, and Wolak (2000) found that 6% of adolescents in Grades 6 through 10 who used the Internet reported they had been harassed in the past year. Of youth who reported being harassed online, 33% of incidents took the form of instant messages, 32% occurred in chatroom exchanges, and 19% were included primarily in e-mails. In cases in which the victims knew who the perpetrators of the electronic bullying were, more than 63% of the bullies attended school with the victims. However, these reports are from a national survey that was limited to Internet behavior and did not include questions about cell phones or other electronic devices. It must also be noted that the research findings were published in 2000 and since that time access to technology has been steadily increasing, so it would be reasonable to expect that these numbers would be much higher today.

A later study, with a representative sample of U.S. adolescent girls, found that 15% of their sample had received threatening e-mails, and 3% admitted to having sent peers threatening e-mails (Berson et al., 2002). In England, surveys of adolescents showed that 25% had been bullied over the Internet, and 16% had been bullied via cell-phone text messaging (Jerome & Segal, 2003). The incidence rates of electronic bullying are certain to continue to increase as children gain more access to personal electronic devices and website-building software, unless prevention and intervention strategies can be identified.
(Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). In a Cox Communications (2009) survey 13-18 year-olds were asked how often they had ever been involved in cyberbullying; 15% said they had been cyberbullied online, 10% had been cyberbullied by cell phone, 7% said they had cyberbullied another person online, and 5% had cyberbullied another person by cell phone.

A study by Fight Crime: Invest in Kids (2006) investigated how often children (6-11 year-olds) and teens (12-17-year-olds) had been cyberbullied during the previous year. One-third of teens and one-sixth of the children reported that someone said threatening or embarrassing things about them online. In a survey of middle school students, Hinduja and Patchin (2009) found that 9% had been cyberbullied in the last 30 days, and 17% had been cyberbullied during their lifetime; 8% had cyberbullied others in the last 30 days and 18% had done so during their lifetime.

Other studies have produced slightly different rates of cyberbullying. In a study by Kowalski and Limber (2007) with students in grades 6-8, 18% said they had been cyberbullied at least once in the last couple of months and 6% said it had happened two or more times; 11% had cyberbullied others at least once in the last couple of months, and 2% said they had done it two or more times.

In a nationwide survey of 500 teenagers conducted by Opinion Research Corporation on behalf of FightCrime.org, 36 percent stated they had been threatened or had malicious or embarrassing remarks made about them on-line. In an Internet-based study conducted by Patchin and Hinduja, 29 percent of respondents, primarily from English-speaking countries, reported having been the target of cyberbullying. In the same Patchin and Hinduja study, 47
percent of the respondents under 18 years of age reported having observed cyberbullying while online.

Justin Patchin, and Sameer Hinduja, and other researchers for from the Cyberbullying Research Center have been exploring and researching cyberbullying since 2002. To date, they have conducted seven studies which included over 12,000 adolescents from over 80 schools. Their research is summarized here. Other research has been going on in recent years. The studies available today indicate that:

- The average figures from available studies indicate that about 20% of teens have been the victim of cyberbullying at some point in their lifetime. According to a 2008 study, 72% of school-aged children have been bullied while online (Juvonen & Gross, 2008).
- The percent of youth who admit to cyberbullying others at some point in their lives range from about 11% to as high as 20%. (http://www.puresight.com/Research-Reports/cyberbullying.html)

In a 32 county study conducted throughout Colorado by Williams and Guerra, over 3,000 students in grades 5, 8, and 11 were surveyed regarding their experiences regarding physical, verbal, and Internet bullying. Twenty-one percent of the students surveyed in this study reported having been the victim of a cyberbully with the incidents of cyberbullying peaking during their middle school years.

Bullying during the middle school years is especially common as children attempt to establish their place and their social circle among others. Unfortunately, that may mean singling out another child. Bullying tends to peak in 6th and 7th grade, and then gradually
decline over the next few years. Bullying is on the rise, fueled by technology (O’Donnell, n.d.). Cyberbullying is a growing problem because more and more kids are using and have completely embraced the Internet and Internet-based interactions. Many kids go online every day for school work, to keep in touch with their friends, to play games, to learn about celebrities, or for many other reasons. Because the Internet and cell phones have become an important part of their lives, it is not surprising that some kids have decided to use the technology to be malicious or threatening to others. The fact that there is a measure of anonymity, and that it is easier to be cruel using typed words rather than spoken words face-to-face also contributes to the problem. And because some adults have been slow to respond to cyberbullying, many cyberbullies feel that there are little to no consequences for their actions.

Cyberbullying Research Center (2007) referenced a study that surveyed a random sample of approximately 2000 youth between the ages of 11 and 16 from a large school district in the southern United States. Data were collected in June of 2007 from 30 different middle schools. Even though less than 10% of middle-school students reported being cyberbullied in the previous 30 days, approximately 43% reported experiencing one of several experiences that could be defined as cyberbullying. Among the most commonly experienced included: receiving an email that made them upset (18.1%, not including spam), receiving an instant message that made them upset (15.8%), and having something posted on their MySpace that made them upset (14.1%).
When asked about specific cyberbullying behaviors, many middle-school students admit to engaging in a variety of inappropriate online behaviors. One-third of the sample admitted to engaging in at least one of the listed activities in the previous 30 days. Posting something online about another person to make others laugh was the most common response with close to 23% of students admitting to such behavior (Cyberbullying Research Center, 2007).

Additionally, in a study conducted by Kowalski and Limber, 3,767 students in grades six through eight were given an anonymous paper and pencil questionnaire asking them about their experiences with both traditional bullying and cyberbullying. Eighteen percent (678 students) of the students in the Kowalski and Limber study reported having been cyberbullied at least once within the previous two months. Of the 18% of the students in the Kowalski and Limber study who reported being cyberbullied, 67% (454 students) reported being bullied through instant messaging, 25% (170 students) had been bullied in chat rooms, and 24% (163 students) had been bullied through email messages.

In a study related to the Kowalski and Limber study (2006), Agatston and Carpenter surveyed 257 middle school students. The Agatston and Carpenter study showed that 18% of the students reported having been cyberbullied at least once in the previous two months.

The Pew Internet and American Life Project reported that 32% of all teenagers who use the Internet indicate that they have been targets of a range of annoying and potentially menacing online activities, including receipt of threatening messages; having their private
emails or text messages forwarded without their consent; posting embarrassing pictures without their permission; or having rumors about them spread online (Lenhart, 2007).

In the past year, a million children were victims of cyberbullying on Facebook, according to a recently released Consumer Reports survey. About 20 percent of students age 11 to 18 surveyed in 2010 by the Cyberbullying Research Center said they’d been cyberbullied at some point in their lives.

Typically, victims of cyberbullying have embarrassing pictures of themselves posted online without their permission, are the targets of lies or vicious gossip or are victims of impersonation. The rate of victimization is expected to increase as more teens use smartphones and share information on social-media sites (Poremba, 2011). Given its increasing prevalence, there are actions that school administrators can and should take to decrease cyberbullying and its effects.

*Effects of Cyberbullying*

Bullying can have a devastating effect on the lives of teenagers. According to an Associated Press 2009 survey, 60% of young people who have been bullied report destructive behavior such as smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, using illegal drugs or shoplifting (compared to 48% of those not bullied). The same study indicated that the targets of digital abuse are twice as likely to report having received treatment from a mental health professional (13% vs. 6% of others), and nearly three times more likely to have considered dropping out of school (11% vs. 4% of others).
A 2009 study from the Cyberbullying Research center found that bullied students are 3 times more likely to drop out of school and 1.5-2 times more likely to have attempted suicide. (http://www.adl.org/combatbullying/bullying-recommendations.asp)

With mobile phones and internet connections now the social norm, cyberbullying victims are constantly connected to their tormentors. They often feel they have no control over the material that others post about them, which can be seen by the world (Draa & Sydney, 2009, p. 42).

Disinhibited cyberbullies may be encouraged to launch more relentless attacks on victims for their own entertainment. At its worst, bullying can result in victims deciding to end their own lives, and cyberbullying has been attributed as the reason behind a number of suicides. In 2006, 13-year-old Megan Meier hanged herself after she was bullied by the mother of another girl posing as a 16-year-old boy on MySpace (“How Lori Drew”, 2007). The mother involved, Lori Drew was charged with misdemeanor counts of accessing computers without authorization but later acquitted by a judge (“Lori Drew cleared”, 2009). 13-year-old Ryan Halligan also hanged himself in 2006 after rumors spread throughout his school about his sexuality and he was publicly humiliated by a female student who had pretended to like him online (Flowers, 2006). Harassment via question-and-answer website Formspring.me, which allows people to send users anonymous messages, has been touted as a possible factor in the death of 17-year-old Alexis Pilkington in 2010 (Eltman, 2010).

Disinhibited cyberbullies may not consider the tragic ramifications of their behavior or may detach themselves from the consequences on the basis that their actions are intended as
amusement. They will therefore continue to cyberbully until they fully understand the significance of their behavior.

**Responding to Cyberbullying**

These factors taken together have put many schools in the difficult position of having to respond to cyberbullying through policy. Many states already have existing criminal and civil remedies to deal with cyberbullying. Extreme cases would fall under criminal harassment or stalking laws or a target could pursue civil action for intentional infliction of emotional distress or defamation, to name a few. Bullying (whatever the form) that occurs at school is no doubt already subject to an existing bullying policy, but in order to avoid any loopholes, schools should bring their bullying and harassment policies into the 21st Century by explicitly identifying cyberbullying as a prohibited behavior. Kowalski and Limber (2007) supported the notion in the discussion section of their study *Electronic Bullying Among Middle School Students*, that school administrators should work to educate students, teachers, and staff about electronic bullying, its dangers, and what to do if it is suspected. They also should ensure that school rules and policies related to bullying include electronic bullying.

**Cyberbullying Policy**

The literature was consulted to consider whether policies support the prevention of cyberbullying. Though policy may be only a part of the cure for cyberbullying, the adoption and enforcement of a clear and effective anti-bullying policy that explicitly addresses cyberbullying sends a message that all incidents will be addressed immediately and
effectively, and that such behavior will not be tolerated. Several studies spoke eloquently
about policy development to combat cyberbullying.

Directions for policy development to address the diverse aspects of cyberbullying
often suggest a holistic approach. Campbell (2005), for example, believes holistic school
policies stressing the values of care and kindness and restorative justice approaches are the
most effective preventive tools in tackling cyberbullying. However, and consistent with the
importance of localized context, she believes that each school must adopt its own policies
and guidelines tailored to its own individual requirements and context.

Further, she emphasizes that policies must be in force on a continual basis in order for
them to be effective, and some policies may need to extend beyond school boundaries, given
the realities of students’ use of the computer at home. It should be added, though, that this
needs to occur within a locally informed process whereby educators make meaning of such
policies in practice with reference to their own jurisdictional culture (Levison & Sutton,
2001).

In the dissertation, Cyberbullying in Schools: A research study on school policies and
procedures, Brian Wiseman (2011) states that the problem with many initial school district
policies is that they simply ban cyberbullying and outline punishment for engaging in the
behavior. While this is a necessary component of any policy, merely engaging in a military
style zero tolerance policy can be ineffective and potentially even counterproductive (Shariff,
2004). Hindujah and Patchin (2007) believe it is currently unclear whether or not threats of
punitive sanctions have any effect at all. However, it is clear that schools and districts must
have some form of written policy in place if they intend on implementing any form of punishment for cyberbullying.

Belsey urges school boards to change the boundaries of school policies to capture all Internet use, including classroom, home, and cellphones. If schools set out explicit online protocols that should be followed on school grounds and family dwellings, caregivers may assume, along with teachers, some of the responsibility for monitoring their children’s online behavior more diligently (Gillis, 2006p.35).

From the book, Cyber Bullying: Bullying in the Digital Age, Susan Limber (2007) states in her recommendations that districts should develop clear rules and policies about cyberbullying. These policies can be incorporated into any existing bullying policies, “acceptable use of technology” policies, or through a separate policy specific to cyberbullying. Information about the policy needs to be shared with staff, parents, and students.

In the article, Cyberbullying: What Schools Can Do, Winter and Leneway (2008) asserted that schools should also have policies on cyberbullying explained clearly in the school’s handbook and in the Acceptable Use Policy or AUP, which is a legal document signed by both student and parent in which the parent and student agree to follow the rules established by the school. By specifically addressing cyberbullying, the school now has authority to take appropriate action to deal with the dangerous or abusive conduct (stopcyberbullying.org).

McKenzie (1995) points out that a comprehensive board policy should address what schools should do when students, teachers, administrators, staff, and volunteers are
confronted with any type of unacceptable communications, either written and/or oral or have contact with aberrant individuals, and then elaborate on the various facets of privacy and access rights violations. Operational policies (policies in practice) can then be crafted to deal specifically with the particular unacceptable communications such as cyberbullying.

Beale and Hall (2007) reiterated that schools should also make sure to include an anti-bullying policy that includes cyberbullying. Computers in the school should be highly monitored and schools should incorporate policies about acceptable technology use. The policies about computer and technology use should be updated as needed to explicitly prohibit using the equipment for any form of bullying. The policy should specifically state what could possibly constitute being a form of cyberbullying and what consequences will occur if a student does engage in cyberbullying.

In contrast to the strengths of cyberbullying policy discussed above, the literature also pointed out several factors that have weakened cyberbullying policies. District policy pertaining to cyberbullying should distinguish between bullying initiated on school campus using district equipment and systems and bullying initiated by students off campus during non-school hours. Districts have the authority to monitor their own systems and to take away computer privileges and impose discipline for improper use. However, off-campus conduct raises First Amendment concerns and requires a greater burden of proof and caution regarding the imposition of discipline. Education Code 48950 provides a free speech right based on what a student may do outside of the school environment. That is, if the off-campus speech or communication is protected free speech, no discipline may be imposed unless,
pursuant to Education Code 48907, the expression is “obscene, libelous or slanderous” or “material which so incites students as to create a clear and present danger of the commission of unlawful acts on school premises or the violation of lawful school regulations or the substantial disruption of the orderly operation of the school” (Governance and Policy Services, 2007).

It has been said that the public policy issues for cyberbullying in particular involve tensions between the values of freedom of speech, the best interests of the child, and parental and school protective authority over the child. Given that complexity of the problem, as well as conflicting values, the development of effective policy requires a collaborative effort involving all stakeholders – policymakers, school officials, parents and youth – and at all the levels of governance referenced above. Since this type of bullying phenomenon is relatively recent, educators, academia and legal specialists are just now beginning to understand research and opine on this serious scholastic blight. Only in recent years have studies begun on elementary and secondary school children in order to comprehensively appreciate the severity of cyberbullying (Belsey, 2006).

Davis (2011) states that school leaders across the country are dealing with more-routine cases daily and often feel they have little legal advice or precedent to guide them in their decision making. Case law regarding student speech, particularly off-campus speech, is outdated, many legal experts say (Davis, 2011). School leaders say it is unclear just what actions they can take in some cyberbullying cases. And recent rulings in cases that have dealt with some forms of cyberbullying have not clarified the matter (Davis, 2011). To further
complicate matters for school officials, many states now have laws that specifically address cyberbullying, often requiring schools and districts to adopt anti-cyberbullying policies and programs but providing little guidance or funding for doing so (Davis, 2011).

At present, there is no uniform consensus among states and school districts across the United States on how to best address the problem of cyberbullying. Since cyberbullying is a relatively new issue, courts on both the federal and state levels have not had the opportunity to establish legal precedent that could serve as a benchmark for states and school administrators (Ricardri, 2010).

This is not to suggest that state legislators and school administrators have done nothing to address the problem of cyberbullying:

- A South Carolina law requires school districts to define bullying and outline policies and repercussions for the behavior, including cyber-bullying.
- In Oregon, lawmakers have lined up behind a proposed bill that would require all of the state’s 198 school districts to adopt policies that prohibit cyber-bullying.
- New York has joined at least thirteen other states in drafting legislation to deal with cyber bullying. The proposed legislation “would arm education law by including electronic communication in the definition of harassment, creating procedures to investigate harassment, and establish a statewide registry for bullying, cyber bullying and hazing complaints.”
- New Jersey passed anti-bullying legislation that added electronic communication to the definition of bullying in school policies. While the law refers to bullying in
schools, new state guidelines say school administrators “may impose consequences for acts of harassment, intimidation or bullying that occur off school grounds, such as cyberbullying,” but only when those acts substantially disrupt school (Ricarrdi, 2010).

- In 2007, the Arkansas legislation passed a law allowing school officials to take action against cyber bullies even if the bullying did not originate or take place on school property. The law gave school administrators much more freedom to punish those individuals who sought to harass their fellow students.

- 2006 saw Idaho lawmakers pass a law that allowed school officials to suspend students if they bullied or harassed other students using a telephone or computer.

- Iowa has passed several laws that force schools to create anti-cyber bullying policies which cover bullying “in schools, on school property or at any school function or school-sponsored activity.”

- The suicide of a 13-year old girl Megan Meier who was the victim of an internet hoax greatly raised the awareness of cyber bullying and its consequences in the state of Missouri. Governor Matt Blunt went so far as to create a task force whose sole purpose was to study and create laws regarding cyber bullying. As a result the Internet Harassment Task Force now stands as a shining example for other states around the country. Missouri has also toughened their laws on the matter, upgrading cyber-harassment from a misdemeanor to a Class D felony.
• The governor of Rhode Island is currently trying to pass a bill that would force repeat cyber bullying offenders to appear in family court, where they would be charged as delinquents under the terms of the state’s laws for young offenders.

• Vermont has added a $500 fine for cyber bullying offenses to their already stringent laws on the matter. There is currently a bill being discussed that would increase the reach of the school’s powers regarding cyber bullying when the action puts the individual’s ability to learn (or health and safety) at risk. (http://www.cyberbullyalert.com/blog/2008/10/cyber-bullying-state-laws-and-policies/)

• North Carolina, the setting of this study, has an anti-bullying statue aimed at school behaviors, but in 2009 it also passed “An Act Protecting Children of this State by Making Cyberbullying A Criminal Offense Punishable as a Misdemeanor.” N.C. Gen. Stat.§ 14-458.1.

The N.C. H.B.1261 states: Any person who violates this section shall be guilty of cyberbullying, which offense shall be punishable as a Class 1 misdemeanor if the defendant is 18 years of age or older at the time the offense is committed. If the defendant is under the age of 18 at the time the offense is committed, the offense shall be punishable as a Class 2 misdemeanor; http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/Sessions/2009/Bills/House/PDF/H1261v3.pdf (S.B. 526; http://www.bullypolice.org/NC_law2009.pdf)

North Carolina also became the first state to make cyberbullying against teachers by students illegal. In a broad anti-bullying legislation move called The School Violence
Prevention Act of 2012, as of December 1 this year, any student posting online attempts to cyberbully, intimidate, or torment a school employee and teacher will be guilty of a misdemeanor. The legislation is seen as a way to expand a previous bill protecting students and parents from online bullying. The new legislation will impose jail time or a $1,000 fine on anyone attempting to bully a teacher online. Activities considered cyberbullying include but are not limited to: posting altered pictures, signing a teacher up for a pornography website, and creating a fake profile to harass a teacher.

(http://www.voxxi.com/north-carolina-cyberbullying-teachers/)

On the other side of the issue is the free speech argument. Steven Brown, executive director of the Rhode Island branch of the American Civil Liberties Union, said, “it will be difficult to draft legislation that doesn’t infringe on free speech rights. How much authority does a school have to monitor, regulate, and punish activities occurring in a student’s home?” Others reason that parental supervision, not legislation, is the only effective method of controlling cyberbullying (Ricarrdi, 2010).

Although cyber bullying can and does originate on school property via computers located in classrooms or the library, more often than not, cyberbullying takes place at home. However, its impact is no less serious. “The most harmful incidents of cyber bullying involve extensive online harmful actions taken at home that impact school, because school is where the students are physically together (para. 15).” What are the legal ramifications for schools (Ricarrdi, 2010)?
The answer to this question hinges on a 1969 case known as *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*. In Tinker, the Court stated that students do not “shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate.” However, the Court acknowledged “the special characteristics of the school environment” by permitting school officials to prohibit student speech if that speech “would substantially interfere with the work of the school or impinge upon the rights of other students, including the right to be secure.” Furthermore, “Tinker does not require a demonstration of actual disruption, it requires a reasonable factual basis to anticipate disruption at school” (Ricarrdi, 2010).

School administrators cannot take punitive action against a student or group of students simply because they post an unpleasant remark or opinion on a website. Administrators can take action if the posted material might disrupt school safety. It is important for school administrators to carefully assess the situation and provide evidence justifying any disciplinary action (Ricarrdi, 2010).

The Cyberbullying Research Center (2010) asserts that school administrators are in a precarious position because they see many examples in the media where schools have been sued because they took action against a student when they shouldn’t have or they failed to take action when they were supposed to. Schools need help determining where the legal line is. School, technology, and privacy lawyers disagree about what should (or must) be in a policy. It’s no wonder many educators are simply throwing their hands up.
Despite the prevailing legal limbo of student-based cyberbullying, educators need to be alert to the possibility that insulting or offensive postings on the internet may incite or encourage subsequent in-school violence. Where off-campus speech or expression materially and substantially disrupts school operations or poses the real and immediate threat of such disruption or consequent student harm, most school district administrators should rely on the prevailing *Tinker* standard as justifying their intervention. Absent such severe disruption in the educational process, school administrators should consider the following four guidelines for responding to the growing student cyberbullying problem.

First, school officials need to review their Internet Acceptable Use policies to make sure they prohibit online name-calling, bullying, and harassment. Terms should be carefully defined, and examples given, with the disclaimer “including but not limited to.” Second, school officials need to be proactive in contacting and notifying the parents and legal guardians of students who are suspected of initiating or participating in cyberbullying activities.

Third, schools need to take responsibility for educating students, parents, and the local community about the potential dangers of cyberbullying, by organizing and offering school assemblies and after-school workshops on ways to effectively monitor young people’s online activities. Parents should be encouraged to ask their children if they use or access social networking sites, and if so, they should monitor their children’s profiles, postings, and “friends” listings and photographs.
Finally, today’s school officials must take seriously their responsibility to monitor their students’ overall use of technology. Despite the legal limitations associated with disciplining cyberbullies, local school officials need to develop a climate whereby young victims of cyberbullying feel safe reporting these issues. School officials also need to educate themselves on the technologies that their students are using on a daily basis as a primary means of communicating with others (Brady, 2008).

The text in this review presented a balanced view of a policy-based solution. It established transparency and recorded the strengths and weaknesses of anti-cyberbullying policy. Policy development was supported, though there were those that issued an important caveat: those policies are crafted in such a way that student’s First Amendment rights are not violated. Overall, there was agreement among the notables in the field on combating cyberbullying with policy.

*Problem Definition Framework*

A significant issue when conducting research is the process of trying, rejecting, and finally adopting a framework to serve as the conceptual basis for the study. One must consult the literature and rely upon these sources to advise on the most pertinent or relevant as it relates to his or her particular study. For this study, it needed to be one that emphasized the processes by which an issue gets recognized and is placed on the agenda for revision or development of new policy; one with an emphasis on the stages towards adoption when there is a perceived problem of a constituency and a firm desire to address it.
The process of public policymaking has commonly been depicted in terms of a natural logical sequence. Through the accumulation of information, a troubling social condition comes to light and is documented. Next, it is the job of public officials to assess that problem and its causes and to respond as efficiently as possible through such means as new legislative enactments. Attention continues until the distressing concern is alleviated (Dye, 1984, p. 31).

It was important to find the existing theories and research that were key sources for understanding this natural process. The research led to a much more comprehensive and well-documented theory of this behavior. The literature pointed me to what policy researchers call “problem definition”. Problem definition is widely regarded as the first stage of the policy cycle, a stage that lays the fundamental groundwork for the ensuing struggle over the construction of useful policy alternatives, authoritative adoption of a policy choice, implementation, and assessment (Brewer & deLeon, 1983). Definition in this sense is not merely a label for a set of facts and perceptions. It is a package of ideas that includes at least implicitly an account of the causes and consequences of some circumstances that are deemed undesirable, and a theory about how a problem may be alleviated (Defy, 1984; Gusfield, 1981).

By the frame imposed on circumstances, problem definition highlights some aspects of the situation, throwing other aspects into the shadows. It pushes forward some potential solutions while neglecting others (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987). Regardless of the
precipitating factors, problem definition determines how people think about the problems that are (and are not) on the public agenda.

Hayes (2009) suggests that policy-making starts as “a response to a perceived problem of a constituency” (para. 13). The very fact that some group brought a problem into a political arena acknowledges that a situation falls short of expectations, that a potential solution exists, and that this remedy is a legitimate activity of government. Most likely, a preferred policy prescription will be advocated by those who have brought their grievance to the political process in the first place.

Policy action at the local level is vital. To advocate for policy action, individuals must acknowledge that a situation falls short of expectations, that a potential solution exists, and that this remedy is a legitimate activity of government (Hayes, 2009). These actors who share a similar perspective and views articulate their policy desires and encourage the adoption of policies.

These principles will apply to a wide array of research conducted on specific social issues. In this sense, this conceptual framework is an unusual meshing of theory and practice, taking the work of scholars and demonstrating its practical application to the steps that policy advocates must take.

In general terms, a problem exists when there is a situation that presents doubt, or when a question is offered for consideration, discussion, or solution. Overall, there is a problem whenever there is a requirement or expectation that is not being, whether due to inadequate training or policy. Recognition that a problem exists is the first step in the policy
process. One must simply ask whether there really is a problem. Is there something that needs to be fixed? The problem definition is framework which emphasizes the processes by which an issue gets recognized and is placed on the agenda for revision or development of new policy is best aligned with the objectives of this research, which is to ascertain whether cyberbullying in the Kerr County school district is a problem and whether policy reform would advance it’s Safe Schools/Anti-Bullying goals.

Chapter Summary

The internet has revolutionized the way we communicate, interact and disseminate information in our modern society. Since the advent of the World Wide Web and, more recently, Web 2.0 applications such as blogs and social networking websites, more and more people are taking advantage of the internet’s many benefits to express themselves; discuss issues; find answers to their questions; share content; stay in touch with family, friends and acquaintances; and meet new people, among other things (Kim, et al., 2010, p. 226). However, the ease with which ordinary people can participate on the internet also makes it increasingly likely that it, like any other technology can and will be misused (Kim, et al., 2010, p. 229). Cyberbullying has become a significant issue in recent years, particularly among school students and young people, adding a new dimension to traditional bullying and in some scenarios resulting in the suicide of victims (Kim, et al., 2010, p. 230). While it is often easy to point the finger at these new unregulated technologies, to do so would not only disregard all the advantages that they provide, but also fail to address the real problem, which lies with the bullies themselves. Willard (2007, p. 13) explains that educating students about
“family, school, and legal limits on online speech, negative influences on online behavior, and Internet privacy protection” is a prerequisite for tackling cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying represents a unique phenomenon and has only recently begun to receive attention in academic circles. Research establishes that cyberbullying is on the rise and calls for immediate attention. Such cyberbullying incidents are becoming more and more common as our youth become ever more tied into electronic media and online social networking sites. With such startling numbers, it is clear that schools must be prepared to address bullying that occurs via the internet, texting, or social networks like Facebook and Twitter as they presents some unique challenges.

There is major concern over the potential negative consequences if this trend continues to increase and spread without a viable solution. Numerous physical and mental ailments can ensue from online harassment in youth and adults all over the world. Whereas traditional bullying is confined usually within school boundaries, cyberbullying can take place at any time or place, even in the privacy of one’s home. Therefore, students who are electronically engaged can be cyberbullied at any time. Options for escape are extremely limited, with the principal options being either to cease using the Internet or ignore the harasser. Preliminary research by Willard suggests cyberbullying may produce even more damage to youth, with such consequences ranging from low self-esteem, anxiety, anger, depression, school absenteeism, poor grades, an increased tendency to violate against others, to youth suicide (Willard, 2006). It is important to emphasize the lasting effects of the “power of the written word” with regard to cyberbullying (Campbell, 2005 p. 71).
Campbell explains, conventional bullying may be severe at the time of the incident, but over time memory fades and words and taunts become vague. Notwithstanding the seriousness of conventional bullying, cyberbullying, on the other hand, can involve the written word which lasts forever. Therefore, students may revisit the written taunt over and over again and re-live the experience. This may cause a prolonged sense of victimization which may lead to depression and other physical and mental disorders. If the author(s) of the taunts is unknown, the anonymity, combined with the fact the victims may be forced to limit or even temporarily eliminate their online use because of continual harassment, may make a youth’s life unbearable.

The study of cyberbullying is at an early stage, providing evidence of the need for efforts targeting this area. To date, there has been a growing concern over the increasing prevalence of this issue and its impact on students. According to Draa and Sydney (2009, p. 42), the psychological impact of cyberbullying can be far greater than that of traditional bullying due to the nature of its platform. As with offline bullying, cyberbullying victims may have low self-esteem, become depressed, achieve poorer grades, and engage in violent behavior. They may also be reluctant to tell anyone in case the bullying escalates. However, unlike bullying that occurs in an offline environment such as school or work, cyberbullying can take place 24 hours a day, seven days a week, removing the home as a safe haven (Draa & Sydney, 2009, p. 42).

These factors clearly demonstrate the need to gain a better understanding of the problem. Given its increasing prevalence, there are actions that school administrators can and
should take to decrease cyberbullying and its effects. Administrators along with school boards, superintendents, disciplinary officers, parent representatives and students should collaborate to assess the level of cyberbullying in the school or district in order to determine the need for development or refinement of anti-cyberbullying policies and initiatives.

Perhaps the only effective way to reduce instances of cyberbullying, then, is to properly educate people of all ages about it. To that end, Willard (2007, p. 11) proposes a continuous school and community based approach. She advises an extensive survey of students to identify their concerns about bullying, including the rate of incidents, the impact of it and their feelings towards reporting cyberbullying (Willard, 2007, p. 12). She also states that teachers and administrators require professional development to learn to deal with cyberbullying; the schools in turn can deliver workshops and resources to parents and the community.

Finally, Willard advises that students be educated about the limits to online freedom of expression and privacy protection, as well as social skills to improve their empathy, ethical decision-making and conflict resolution (Willard, 2007, p. 13). Only when the community has a firm grasp and understanding of cyberbullying can we begin to tackle it head on.

The challenge is how to have a swift solution to combat this issue. Cyberbullying policy, while imperfect, may be the best solution we have. Cyberbullying policies can be a viable solution if done the right way. Some of the research approached policy with caution concerning off-campus conduct that might raise First Amendment concerns and require a greater burden of proof regarding the imposition of discipline, but nevertheless, it supports
the development of policy to combat cyberbullying. Therefore, further research on the prevalence of this issue, its impact on students, and cyberbullying policy is essential.
Chapter 3
Methodology

Planning is essential to the success of research efforts. It is important to determine what will be done and how the results will be used before research begins. I was seeking information to fill a gap in the knowledge of addressing cyberbullying problems through policy-based solutions. This was accomplished by collecting and analyzing data from interviews with secondary school administrators regarding cyberbullying, ways that instances of cyberbullying are handled, the need for policy to address it, and ways in which updated policy will advance the Kerr County School District’s Safe Schools/Anti-Bullying goals.

This chapter provides a description of the methodology to be used in the study. It describes the steps for conducting the project. The following elements will be discussed: research design, research questions, site selection and sample, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

Research Design

The purpose of this section is to document both the developmental evolution of and the alignment between the design chosen and the research framework. The importance of alignment between research components is critical to research success. Every decision is made that is relative to one of the components should be thoughtful and deliberate in order to ensure that it aligns with the components that both precede and follow it.
Methodological Option

One important methodological option in conducting research is the use of qualitative methods for data collection and analysis. My proposed study will utilize the qualitative research design to explore the perceptions of secondary school assistant principals’ of cyberbullying and the need for policy in Kerr County Schools to combat it.

The question of when to use qualitative case study versus some other designs essentially depends on: what the researcher wants to know, how the problem is defined and, the questions it raises (Kenny & Grotelueschen 1980). In deciding on the appropriateness of using a qualitative case study these advantages were considered:

- Case study methods are applicable to real-life, contemporary, human situations.
- Case study results relate directly to the common readers everyday experience and facilitate an understanding of complex real-life situations.

According to (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994) it allows a researcher to capture and describe the complexity of real-life events.

In addition, the looser formats of case studies allows researchers to begin with broad questions and narrow their focus as their research progresses rather than attempt to predict every possible outcome before the study is conducted. By seeking to understand as much as possible about a single subject or small group of subjects, case studies specialize in “deep data,” or “thick description”–information based on particular contexts that can give research results a more human face. This emphasis can help bridge the gap between abstract research...
and concrete practice by allowing researchers to compare their firsthand observations with the quantitative results obtained through other methods of research (writing@CSU, 1993).

Use of the case study seems to be the most appropriate to investigate the phenomenon of cyberbullying within a real-life context, therefore this method will be used.

**Type of Case Study**

Yin (2003) and Stake (1995) use different terms to describe a variety of case studies. Yin categorizes case studies as explanatory, exploratory, or descriptive. The nature of the research questions in this study led to an exploratory case study design. The research questions that guided this exploration were:

1. How do Kerr County Schools’ secondary school administrators perceive cyberbullying to be a problem among their students?
2. In light of policy ambiguity, how do assistant principals in charge of discipline handle instances of cyberbullying?
3. In what ways would updating existing anti-bullying policies to explicitly include cyberbullying (i.e. online harassment via email, text message, Facebook, MySpace, etc.) advance the districts Safe Schools/anti-bullying goals?

The exploratory strategy choice was born out of the need to explore the cyberbullying problem in the Kerr County secondary schools to answer the research questions above.

**The Site**

During the fall of 2011, I conducted a qualitative research study of secondary school assistant principals in a school district in a small rural city in North Carolina. Pseudonyms
are used for the school district as well as the schools. For purposes of this research the school district will be known as the Kerr County School District. The district is comprised of ten elementary schools, two middle schools, two traditional high schools, one early college high school, and one alternative school. The middle schools serve an economically and racially diverse group of 6-8th grade students and the high schools serve an economically and racially diverse group of 9-12th graders. The populations of both middle schools are very similar. They both serve between 700-900 students. There is more variation in the populations in the high schools. One has about 900 students and the other has approximately 1200 students.

Figure 2 below outlines the demographics of each school represented in this study. In the narratives, Middle School 1 is referred to as Holmes Middle School, Middle School 2 is referred to as James Middle School. High School 1 is referred to as Southside High School and High School 2 is referred to as Northside High School.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total # of Students</th>
<th>Free Lunch</th>
<th>Reduced Lunch</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Amer. Indian</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle School 1</td>
<td>752</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School 2</td>
<td>778</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School 1</td>
<td>885</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School 2</td>
<td>1,120</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2**

Demographics of the Schools
The secondary schools were the obvious choice for this study because technologies such as the internet and mobile phones play an important role in the life of adolescents and teenagers. They offer numerous possibilities for information, entertainment, and social contacts with their peers. There are, however, also some negative aspects related to these forms of media. Research indicates that cyberbullying among youth is becoming a serious societal and educational concern. Although there is variation in the figures, all the research indicates that cyberbullying is a feature of many young people’s lives.

There is also concern that the level of cyberbullying is increasing. The media, educators, and parents have been paying great attention to the phenomena for the past few years because researchers have revealed the relatively high prevalence of cyberbullying among youth. For example, approximately 30% of youth (N=384) surveyed in 2004 reported their victimization, and 11% have cyberbullied others (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009). The more recent study shows that 72% of the youth (N=1,454) were victimized at least once in the past year, and 13% of them reported frequent victimization (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). It is known that cyberbullying takes place both in and out of school. Much of it takes place off-campus, most typically in the child’s home.

The fact that cyberbullying takes place predominantly off-campus means that the behavior could pose difficulty for administrators to address at school. While behavior that takes place at school is clearly under the jurisdiction of the school district (and its policies), behavior that takes place at home is usually viewed as being under the jurisdiction of parents.
One important exception to this rule is off-campus behavior or speech that makes a “real threat” or “substantial disruption” upon the school climate. For each cyberbullying case, school administrators must decide if the harassment is making, or will make, a substantial disruption before disciplining a cyberbully.

However, because of the serious emotional effects of cyberbullying, most adolescents usually react to situations that affect them emotionally with intensity and unpredictability, and regardless of where the offenses take place they bring the emotional baggage with them to school. Peer conflicts usually will be played out in and around school, creating enough of a disruption to draw attention to the case and for the school to proceed with disciplinary measures.

Because of the aforementioned factors, it is the opinion of this researcher that the secondary schools are best suited to reveal the type of information that will be sought and to provide the conditions in which the information will be gathered.

The Administrators

Criterion sampling was the strategy best suited for participant selection in this study. Criterion sampling is the setting of criteria and picking cases that meet the criteria (http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/tutorial/Mugo/tutorial.htm). In this case, the recruitment process was self-selecting because of the administrative duties and assignments in Kerr County Schools, for example, assistant principals were selected for this project simply because they are charged with handling student discipline as a primary duty and would have first-hand knowledge of the topic under review. For the purposes of this study, I
only focused on the perspectives of the secondary assistant principals over discipline in the two middle schools and the two traditional high schools. The eight assistant principals (four from the middle schools and four from the traditional high schools) that handle discipline will participate in one-on-one semi-structured interviews.

As it relates to participation, the Kerr County School Board encourages agencies and individuals to conduct research on issues related to the effective operation of schools and student performance. The school district may assist in research projects when the research results ultimately benefit students. The Superintendent supports the involvement of central office administrators, school administrators, teachers, and parents. Staff members are encouraged to participate in and cooperate with such research projects but ultimately, the participation of these assistant principals were voluntary.

**Data Collection**

In-depth, qualitative interviews are excellent tools to use for collecting data in qualitative studies. An in-depth interview is an open-ended, discovery-oriented method that is well suited for obtaining perspectives of the key informants. The goal of the interview was to deeply explore the respondent’s point of views, feelings, and perspectives. In this sense, the interviews yielded information that was used to answer the research questions and determine if the data supported the conceptual framework.

One key element in conducting useful research is gathering reliable information. The basis for doing that is designing questions that get the kind of information from which valid conclusions can be drawn. The in-depth interviews not only involved asking questions, but
the systematic recording and documenting of responses coupled with intense probing for deeper meaning and understanding of the responses. This approach enabled the interviewer to establish rapport with the respondent and to observe as well as listen. In the structured interview, the participants were asked the same questions in a precise manner. In order to understand the whole matter surrounding the topic at hand, a few open-ended questions that were not asked in a precise, structured way was asked of the participants as a supplement. This allowed for the inclusion of facts, opinions, and personal insights.

**Interviews**

One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with the secondary assistant principals at both middle schools and both traditional high schools. An interview guide was used to focus the interviews. The questions were developed by the researcher and two of the doctoral committee members (Dr. Lance Fusarelli and Dr. Kenneth Brinson, Jnr.). They were designed to draw out multiple sources of information to provide as complete a picture as possible. The interviews were structured, but contained a few opened-ended discussions and focused dialog that served the specific purpose of obtaining the views of secondary school administrators about the prevalence of cyberbullying and the need for policy development in Kerr County Schools.

**Interview Guide**

The guide contained the following questions:

**Understanding the Issue**

1. Is there a cyberbullying problem in Kerr County Secondary Schools
2. What makes this such a serious problem?
3. Who is affected?
4. How?
5. Are any particular groups disproportionately affected?
6. What kinds of cyberbullying cases are you handling? Tell about 2-3 cases.
7. How do you deal with it?
8. Do you formulate your own policies, rely on existing policies or from the experiences of your colleagues?

Potential Allies

1. Is there public concern about this issue?

Potential Solutions

1. What possible solutions exist?
2. What do you want to see happen?

Board’s Position on This Issue

1. What has the bullying policy been to date?
2. What is the likelihood of change, given the current political climate?
3. Do you believe the school board sees cyberbullying as a problem? Why or why not?
4. Do you lean on or refer to existing policies or procedures in dealing with cyberbullying?

The interviews, although open-ended, were structured around the research questions defined at the start of the case study and allowed me to gather credible evidence, or clues, that were relevant to my research. The interviews served the specific purpose of obtaining the views of secondary school administrators about the prevalence of cyberbullying and the need for policy development in Kerr County Schools. After obtaining the participants’ consent, the interviews were audiotaped using a cassette recorder and the length of the interview ranged from 45–60 minutes each.

During the session, questions were asked about cyberbullying, its prevalence at their respective schools, their views on the need for district-wide policy to combat it, and ways in
which they feel updated policy would advance the district’s Safe Schools/Anti-Bullying goals. Written notes were taken during the interview and field notes were recorded after the interview was completed. The field notes recorded impressions that assisted with the interpretation of the interview data. Stories told during open-ended interviews were noted and flagged for potential use in the final report.

**Data Analysis**

“The purpose of analysis is to reduce data to an intelligible and interpretable form so that the relations of research problems can be studied, tested and conclusions drawn” (Kruger et.al 2005, p. 218). In most qualitative analyses the data are preserved in their textual form and “indexed” to generate or develop analytical categories and theoretical explanations (Pope, Ziebland, & Mays, 2000). Analyzing data is an important step in the research process. It is the time that you reveal important facts about your topic, uncover themes and patterns that you might not otherwise have known existed, or provide data to support your conceptual framework. By doing in-depth data comparisons, you can begin to identify relationships between various data that will help you understand more about your respondents and answer your research questions.

The research questions of this study centered on how Kerr County Schools’ secondary school administrators perceived cyberbullying to be a problem among their students, ways that instances of cyberbullying were handled, and ways that updating existing anti-bullying policies to explicitly include cyberbullying (i.e. online harassment via email,
text message, Facebook, MySpace, etc.) would advance the district’s Safe Schools/Anti-Bullying goals?

In keeping with this practice, at the conclusion of the fieldwork, each audio taped interview was transcribed verbatim into text by a professional transcriptionist. The transcripts (data) were examined thoroughly to look for answers to each of the research questions. An analysis of the content of the interviews was done in order to identify main themes that emerged from the interviews of the respondents. Repetition of ideas on a particular topic from the administrators led to the identification of the main themes. Codes were assigned to the main themes. After the major themes were identified, interview responses were classified under the different themes. Different opinions were identified. These various opinions were summarized and the themes or patterns that emerged were synthesized. Careful attention was given to direct quotes or individual narratives to add richness to the final report. Code names (pseudonyms) were assigned to the respondents and are listed below in figure 3.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administrators</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Yrs-Total</th>
<th>Yrs- Kerr County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle School Administrators</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pullium</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blakley</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawson</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redd</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Administrators</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrey</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhodes</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denton</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jace</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 3**

Profile of the Administrators

The chart above underscores some important features of the administrators, such as their number of years as an administrator as well as the number of years that they have served in the Kerr County School District. Properly segmenting the administrators by relevant professional data is an essential foundation for knowing a little more about who they are.
are. Naturally, this data must be combined with behavioural and attitudinal data to get the most accurate view of the subjects. The administrators are known throughout the study under these pseudonyms and their thoughts and perceptions are expounded upon in Chapter 4.

**Trustworthiness of the Study**

A case study must produce valid and reliable results in order to be useful for the development of future research. It is imperative that careful attention be paid to establishing the validity of the results of the study. The role of personal experience on the part of the researcher engaging in qualitative data analysis can be a potential threat to trustworthiness. Triangulation is often used to indicate that multiple methods are used in a study to double check the results. The underlying premise of this technique is that one can be more confident with a result if different methods lead to the same result. Strategies such as peer review and reflexivity were used to increase the trustworthiness of the findings in this study.

**Peer Review**

Peer review was used as a method for establishing the validity of this study’s findings. Colleagues were given the raw data along with the researchers’ interpretive notations. Discussions transpired to determine whether the researchers’ conclusions are reasonable. This was thought of as a form of “checks and balance” type of system. It is difficult for researchers to spot every mistake or misinterpretation in an enormous collection of data. This is not necessarily a reflection on those concerned, but an opportunity for improvement may be more obvious to someone with special expertise or who simply looks at
it with a fresh eye. Therefore, showing work to others increased the probability that weaknesses or errors were identified and corrected.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity was considered as another element to enhance credibility and control biases. Being reflexive in doing research is part of being honest and ethical. Reflexivity requires an awareness of the researcher’s contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process, and an acknowledgment of the impossibility of remaining outside of one’s subject matter while conducting research. Reflexivity then, urges us “to explore the ways in which a researcher’s involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research” (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999, p. 228).

Personal reflexivity involves reflecting upon the ways in which our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, and social identities have shaped the research. I am sure my current assignment in the Kerr County School District as an administrator over discipline influenced my data collection and analysis. As with all qualitative researchers, personal experiences influence selection of topics, the site of interest, and all aspects of the study. The topic of cyberbullying is all too familiar to me. Disciplinary referrals with cyberbullying at the core of them are encountered by me on a regular basis. I have seen a drastic change over the last three years in how technology has exacerbated the number of conflicts amongst students. However, my assignment to just one school gives me a limited view of the problem of cyberbullying at large. The panoramic view from the informants will be my primary goal with the conversations communicated in their voice. I will not interview students formally for
this study, but their personal stories shared with me in the past have contributed to my interest in this topic.

Adolescence is a particularly hard time for children. They are experiencing all kinds of changes in their bodies and in their feelings. They often feel confused and misunderstood as they are struggling to leave behind their childhood and become adults. Adolescence has commonly been characterized by issues such as rebellious behavior, school performance problems, negative attitudes, disobedience and disrespect, peer pressures, drug and alcohol abuse, depression, and issues of sexuality. With that being said, the adolescent stage is difficult enough without the added dimension that is introduced into their lives through the cruelty of cyberbullying.

Bullying has always been a problem in schools. I can still remember all too well being a bully’s target as a high school student. Back then it only occurred at school, but now kids can be tormented by their bully 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, through their computers and their cell phones. The bullying can occur anywhere, anytime, over and over again. As long as the victim keeps using these devices, the online harassment continues. Emails and text messages can include nasty messages, teasing remarks, jokes, and offensive pictures.

The victims can be ridiculed and embarrassed through online posts and chat room discussions involving their peers. Videos can be posted about them online, always available for anyone to see and share. They can repeatedly endure harassing phone calls and anonymous threats. It really becomes a never-ending nightmare for them. These victims feel totally alone, trapped and desperate for a solution. Most of them simply don’t know what to
do when it happens to them. For some, the effects can be especially damaging and the results can be disastrous. Extreme cases of cyberbullying have led to teen suicide and long-term emotional damage such as diminished self-esteem, self-confidence, and emotional stability. They can fall into social isolation and possibly fall into destructive behavior. Affected kids may even become bullies themselves, victimizing other children and making things even worse. The risks are just too great to ignore. This is what motivated me to do this research because I am interested in acquiring a greater understanding of this phenomenon and through my increased knowledge, I can be a part of the solution.

**Ethical Considerations**

In every discipline, it is considered unethical to collect information without the knowledge of the participants and their expressed willingness to participate and informed consent to such information collection. Basic ethical considerations were afforded the participants in this study. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from each participant and each was notified of their rights as it relates to the participation in the study and the interview. They were made acutely aware of the type of information that is being sought of them, why this information is being sought, and how it will be used. Each interview was conducted in a manner that was comfortable for the respondent, and in a private area where she or he was able to speak openly and honestly. To guard confidentiality the respondents’ answers from the interviews were not discussed with anyone and the respondent’s name were deleted in the notes and transcripts and replaced with a pseudonym.
There is no way to link a specific transcript to a specific respondent. At the conclusion of the study, all documents were shredded.

**Limitations of the Study**

Every study, no matter how well it is conducted, has some limitations. It is always possible that future research may cast doubt on the validity of any conclusions from a study. Case studies are sometimes viewed as having the most limitations. You cannot draw general conclusions from case studies. There is always doubt about the generality of the findings. This case study only involves the perceptions of secondary school administrators from one district in one state. The perceptions of this group may not reflect the behavior of most people. Thus, we could not conclusively know how others may perceive the issue of cyberbullying and the need for policy-based solutions.

Another limitation of the study is that the researcher and the sample group of secondary school administrators are colleagues in the school district in which the phenomenon of cyberbullying will be investigated. In other words, the researcher will try to obtain the views, opinions, and perceptions of an “insider” while remaining an “outsider”. Talk and interaction have long been the stock-in-trade of administrators, but discussing problems and issues in the district with a colleague is not the same as conducting research. The relationship established between two colleagues conversing is distinct from that established between a research participant and a researcher. Qualitative research is an endeavor in which roles can be easily confused. Accordingly, the terms colleague and research participant will not be used interchangeably. Similarly, steps must be taken to
ensure that the roles are very clear. Though the above mentioned are considered limitations, there are some aspects of this familiarity between the parties that will be beneficial. When acting as an interviewer, the researcher will have the benefit of being guided by an understanding gained through our kinship as educators and administrators that will allow me to discern subtleties within participant responses.

**Chapter Summary**

In the fall of 2011, I conducted a qualitative study using the case study method to investigate the perceptions of secondary administrators of cyberbullying, the need for policy development in Kerr County Schools to combat it, and ways in which the updated policy will advance the district’s Safe Schools/Anti-Bullying goals. Secondary administrators were the logical choice as participants because most cyberbullying is perpetrated against middle and high school students. This study was performed to provide an understanding of this growing phenomenon. I conducted a thorough and complete investigation, interviewing secondary administrators that handle the district’s discipline and have firsthand knowledge of the issue under review. They were interviewed using formal and informal techniques to discuss any firsthand knowledge, stories, opinions, and perceptions of cyberbullying. Their responses were documented.

A content analysis was done on the raw data. An analysis of the content of the interviews was done in order to identify main themes that emerge from the interviews of the respondents. This information was used to answer the research questions and determine if the data supports the conceptual framework. Strategies such as peer review and reflexivity
was used to increase the trustworthiness of the findings in this study. Mindful of the sensitive nature of these types of studies and the individuals that are recruited to participate, it was approached in a serious and detailed manner, with ethical safeguards in place.

Ethical safeguards were utilized to protect the rights of the research participants. The principle of voluntary participation requires that people not be coerced into participating in research. Closely related to voluntary participation is the requirement of informed consent. Essentially, this means that all research participants were fully informed about the procedures and risks involved in research and gave their consent to participate. Two standards were applied in order to help protect the privacy of research participants. A guarantee of the participants’ anonymity and confidentiality was assured, in that identifying information was not be made available to anyone who is not directly involved in the study nor will their responses be revealed.

Limitations of the case study method were acknowledged in terms of generalization and the findings were documented in a final report. Another limitation of the study is the familiarity and collegiality between that the researcher and the sample group. The researcher’s status as an “insider” and “outsider” may be considered a limitation and will be acknowledged as such due to the potential for bias. However, it could be argued that the study could benefit from both perspectives. When clear boundaries have been established and the role of an “outsider” has clearly been established for the researcher, the researcher’s status as an “outsider” can bring about more authentic knowledge because of the objectivity and detachment which the research could be approached as a non-member of the group. On
the other hand, group membership provides special insights into matters based on one’s own knowledge.
Chapter 4
Findings

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to determine if the Kerr County school district was perceived to have a cyberbullying problem, ways that instances of cyberbullying are handled, usefulness of policy to combat it, and ways in which updated policy would advance the Safe Schools/Anti-Bullying goals. The research questions for the study were:

1. How do Kerr County Schools’ secondary school administrators perceive cyberbullying to be a problem among their students?

2. In light of policy ambiguity, how do assistant principals in charge of discipline handle instances of cyberbullying?

3. In what ways would updating existing anti-bullying policies to explicitly include cyberbullying (i.e. online harassment via email, text message, Facebook, MySpace, etc.) advance the district’s Safe Schools/Anti-Bullying goals?

This chapter discusses the findings from the interview responses by the eight secondary assistant principals that handle discipline. The views of assistant principals are presented for an understanding of how they perceived cyberbullying in their schools, how instances of cyberbullying are handled, the usefulness of policy to combat it, and ways in which updating policy would advance the district’s Safe Schools/Anti-Bullying goals.
Findings/Results

Research Question 1: How do Kerr County Schools’ secondary school administrators perceive cyberbullying to be a problem among their students?

To answer question 1, a priori codes were developed before examining the data. The codes were: 1) Not a problem, 2) A growing problem, 3) A serious problem, 4) An epidemic. These codes were then applied to the data as it related to the perception of cyberbullying as a problem. The findings uncovered a strong prevailing feeling among administrators, both middle school and high school, that cyberbullying was a growing problem in the district.

When asked to characterize the cyberbullying problem, they consistently expressed that there was a growing problem.

Dawson, a middle school administrator, said:

I would call it a growing problem, because I’ve dealt with it more and more as the years have gone on.

Jace, a high school administrator, said:

I think it’s a growing problem. I think we’ve seen it …we’ve been here five years, I think I’ve seen more of it now, the way it affects the kids…more kids are drawn into this type of communication than when we first got here.

Only one administrator’s view showed exceptions to the consistency of these findings, characterizing it as a serious problem.

Pullium, a middle school administrator, stated:
I would say it’s a serious problem. One other way that I see it being a problem is that everybody has cell phones nowadays, so everybody is texting. Parents sometimes know things before we know it because the children are texting their parents this is happening, that has happened.

When asked what makes this growing problem so serious, the administrators elaborated further and several common themes emerged:

- Greater intertwinement of technology with students’ lives
- Availability and easy access
- 24/7 “No refuge”
- Conflict origination/instigation
- Carry over effect-home to school
- Compromised student safety
- Feelings of vulnerability/fear distrust of people and technology
- Relational bullying among females
- Trivialization of cyberbullying

In reference to the themes, the following excerpts underscored their views on the growing problem and what made it so serious:

**Greater intertwinement of technology with students’ lives**

Blakey: I mean, they must all go home at night and go on it just to see what the news of the day is. It’s all they think of. Who doesn’t like who, and who did this, and who did that.
Redd: Bullying is nothing new. I’m going into my 40th year and there’s always been bullying. You may see one note per month, where now, they’re constantly on their cell phones, they’re constantly on their computers and it’s never-ending.

**Availability and easy access**

Rhodes: It is a growing problem, but I think it’s a growing problem, again, because of the access that they have to technology. Even if we didn’t have our laptops, the cell phones, I mean, they have access to those media through cell phones. Also, the programs themselves: Facebook, Twitter, they’re becoming more and more easy to use and so it’s easier and easier for the students to pick up how to do certain things on them. So it is an issue. Is the issue going to go away? No. Even if we were to block the sites here, when they take the laptops or the cell phones home, they’d still do it and then we’d still see the repercussions of it. So is there anything we can do about it other than educating them not to do it? I don’t see any way.

Denton: Yes, there’s a problem with cyberbullying, of course in the world today, Everybody has access to the computer or either some type of computer-aided device which allows them to do social networking and just be able to communicate with everybody all over the world, so yes there is a problem in Kerr County.

**24/7 “No refuge”**

Rhodes: But yeah, there’s a real big problem because I would say when cell phones—when the average kid started getting cell phones, it’s not like you could just get on the cell phone and talk forever. Once your time is used up, then … but now with
Facebook and stuff, it’s unlimited, so they can text till their hearts’ content. They can get on Facebook till their hearts’ content. So there’s no end to it.

Blakley: No, I don’t think they know this, just the absolute ramifications it causes throughout the whole day. In other words, when this team back here has got one of those Facebook things going on, they jitter all day. I don’t teach—they don’t learn anything because their whole mind is focused on that; what they saw on Facebook, who said what to whom, who’s going to do this and that and blah, blah, blah. They’re not—there’s no way that they are focused on what they need to be doing; math, science, such things like that. I know they’re not. I can see them when they are that agitated. I know when they are focused on doing their work. They are not. It affects instruction and it affects the mindset of the kids.

Conflict origination/instigation

Pullium: I would say so. I think that a lot of our students are on the internet and they’re using Facebook and MySpace—and more so Facebook nowadays—and they are alot of times getting stuff started at home when they’re on the computers. They are talking about what happened in the community. They are talking about what happened today at school. So being that they are friends with each other and everybody, everybody gets to see what everybody is posting and so it just goes from there; that information is posted on Facebook, then comes to school and then there’s the whole big issue around whatever was posted on Facebook.
Blakley: Again, my girl that I call the Reporting Hub, I mean, she is the server. I mean, that child is unbelievable. She posted on Facebook that this one girl wanted to fight another girl. Then we dealt with it all day trying to keep these parties apart. It was simply this one girl posting that the other was saying, “Well, this girl said to me this, that girl said this,” and then putting it all on Facebook so that everybody could read all the comments and then everybody commented on it, it just kept boosting the fight and boosting the fight, and finally at the end of the day at dismissal—I mean, we were vigilant, but at dismissal they went across the street, out in the middle of Spring Street over there, and they just let it fly.

Carrey: Most of the time when something happens at home on the home computer it travels right to school the next day so it becomes an issue that we have to deal with in the morning.

Rhodes: I would go as far as to say that the older kids, the seniors and the juniors, kids probably between 16 and 18, somewhere in that range, they’re more apt to act out on what they read on the social media sites. They’re the ones that are going to get into the arguments at school. They’re the ones that are going to start a fight by walking up to the person and asking them about what they posted on the website.

Pullium: A lot of times for the kids that I’ve been dealing with, it transfers to the home and so you have the kids fighting in the community, you have the parents fighting in the community, all based on he said, she said kind of stuff on
Facebook.

Compromised student safety

Denton: Well of course the safety of our students is compromised by this cyberbullying for the simple reason that they are not mature enough to know what not to put on the internet and what to put on the internet. This computer is just too easy of a method of communicating and it lacks rules that regulate what is able to be put on there.

Redd: The biggest threat is online bullying, where often students will bring harm to others as a result of what’s posted online. These derogatory remarks lead to confrontations and fights and someone could actually get hurt.

Feelings of vulnerability/fear distrust of people and technology

Pullium: They are recording teachers. They are recording conversations that they hear. So that information then goes home to parents and then you have parents that are up here because “my child recorded this teacher” or “my child recorded this administrator and this is what I heard.” I think in doing so we’ve created a culture of distrust. In doing so everyone is very careful with what they say. In doing so, everyone is very careful even with fights because the kids are recording the fights. So you have teachers who are apprehensive about even breaking up a fight because they don’t want to be on YouTube.

Redd: I was watching the news the other day where a teacher was fired because a parent told a child to take the cell phone to school and record the teacher and the
teacher was yelling and it was recorded. So I think we’re going to get to a place
where teachers won’t feel the freedom to really be themselves in the classroom. They
won’t feel the need to address issues that need to be addressed because of the fear
some child may be recording them. Not necessarily that they’re going to say
something or do something that they shouldn’t but you have to be concerned with
parents coming in for parent conferences or having a conference with the student, you
have to be concerned with whether or not someone is recording you. You get to a
point where you’re just going to throw your hands up and say, “Well, I don’t really
want to deal with this, I’m not going to deal with this, it is what it is, I’ll let
administrators handle it.” When the first point of disciplining the child should come
from the teacher, but we tie those teachers’ hands because they’re so scared.

The administrators in the Kerr County school district felt that cyberbullying was a
growing problem because increasing numbers of students are using and have completely
embraced interactions via computers and cell phones. Reportedly, the youth that these
administrators serve go online every day for school work, to keep in touch with their friends,
to play games, to learn about celebrities, to share their digital creations, or for many other
reasons. Because the online communication tools have become such an important part of
their lives, it is not surprising that some kids have decided to use the technology in malicious
or menacing ways towards others. The fact that teens are connected to technology 24/7
means they are susceptible to victimization or to become perpetrators of cruelties toward
others around the clock.
Relational bullying among females

Because of the anonymity, it is also easier to be hateful using typed words rather than spoken words face-to-face. Girls are clearly at the forefront of this technological bullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Pacheco was quoted in Fraga’s article, “Cyberbullying is a growing problem among youngsters,” (2009) “Girls go after the emotional jugular, they’re worse than the boys”. In the same article, Kevin Lee, the Dartmouth youth advocate stated, “My experience is that it’s more prevalent among girls…They are more susceptible to the effects of cyberbullying. Plus, girls are online more frequently than boys.”

The advent of social networking sites and text messaging has allowed young girls the opportunity to take on a role traditionally reserved for boys. The girls have become bullies, or, more specifically, cyberbullies, as exemplified by multiple quotes of middle school administrators.

Dawson: Just an impression with no data, I would say my females because that just seems to be the ones that do the typing on there.

Redd: “My girl drama”…Most of the times it would be those females.

Blakely: “It’s girls…It’s the girls’ deal.”

The high school administrators echoed a similar sentiment:

Denton: Well of course you see, in my opinion, I see more females (“female to female”). They are quick to say that somebody is doing something they have no business doing. And of course, it starts back and forth. They post things about a group
or a particular girl on the internet site, of course that girl becomes angered and fires back, then it goes on and on and on. A lot of times other students are dragged in and of course a lot of secrets are let out of the bag. It’s just a ruckus once it really hits the fan.

Jace: “I would say it’s our at-risk female population.”

Carrey: “I would say female.”

The administrator’s views were consistent with a key finding in the literature.

*Trivialization of cyberbullying*

According to studies conducted by the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State College, the most common motives for cyberbullying are anger and the belief that cyberbullying is a joke. Many youths are not aware how serious it can be. This was quite evident in a case that Redd, the James Middles School administrator, shared:

Many times the students, they don’t understand the seriousness—my middle school children, generally. Just the other day, I had—a person called in, very concerned that while we were having our little honor roll party in the gym, and we give them lots of goodies—chips, cookies, drinks, one of my 8th graders took a picture of a 6th grade girl eating chips and said, “Look at this fat girl eating chips.” Somehow, that picture was sent. It went viral in our little community in our school. It caused a big problem with that family. I can understand. The young man looked at me and said, “I didn’t know anything was wrong with that, Miss Redd”. He seemed so sincere. “I just saw her eating the chips and I thought it would make for a good joke.” Then I had to of
course talk to him about it, “How do you think that the girl felt when she realized you had taken a picture.” First of all, he shouldn’t even have his phone in the building, much less in the gym during an honor roll party. So we’re having the middle school children abusing these items.

Denton summed it up this way:

By it being such a problem, one way that it can be toned down would be harsh punishment if it does happen. One time it worked where, if students fought then there was a “no tolerance rule” and the “no tolerance rule” would probably have to apply to the bullying, there’d be no tolerating bullying using the internet or any other computer-aided device. You cannot post it or else this is what’s going to happen. A possible sentence in jail or something like that could be used to just pretty much get people’s attention, because a lot of times people play and they say different things just jokingly. Now in these days and times we have to take everything seriously.

Youths who are angry often do not think before they send a bitter text message or type an attacking e-mail and instant message to someone. Once the electronic message is sent, there is no way to retract it, and the damage is done. Teens generally do not know they can be charged with criminal harassment and stalking for sending intimidating electronic messages.

In reference to this Redd said:

I talked to the perpetrators who really didn’t understand the extent of which they hurt. I’ve called them in my office. After we talked about it, they would tell me they
wouldn’t do it again. They’d say, “Miss Redd, I want to thank you. I didn’t mean to hurt them like that.” But it is so easy to click that, to make that one little move with your finger and send. Once it’s sent, you can’t get it back. Then it goes viral to somebody else. Students do not think; middle school children don’t think like that. Yeah, I think that we just have to help them to realize the harm and the pain they’re causing. Many of them tell me that if someone were to kill themselves as a result of something they said that it would hurt them, _et cetera._

Many victims are unsure of how to cope with being attacked online, retreat into a shell and become hesitant to reach out to their parents. Victims do suffer in silence. There is a degree of embarrassment, confusion, not having the maturity to handle this kind of problem (Fraga, 2009).

Since this problem is just now coming to the forefront and some adults have been slow to respond to cyberbullying, many cyberbullies feel that there are little to no consequences for their actions.

*Composite of Local Cases*

The administrators were asked to share some cases they’d handled that stood out to them to add strength to what was already known about their experiences with cyberbullying through previous feedback. This subsection highlights some additional cases developed from rich descriptions with specific quoted references from the transcripts of the administrators.

Blakley: We’ve had—I can think of two this year. But there was one extraordinary one last year where a third party posted pictures of two different girls who supposedly
liked the same boy and did what’s called the “versus”—this kid versus this kid—and then sent it out there to everybody to vote and make comments on the pictures of the two girls as to which one the boys should pick based on the scoring of these two girls’ pictures, two little seventh grade girls. The comments that kids posted and posted their names to these comments talking about, “She’s got man’s hands. Why would you want to talk to a girl like that?” You know, the two girls were rivals, for this boy—yes he was a seventh grader; eight grader now.

Jace: I think one that we dealt with and I don’t know if this was the beginning of this year or last year, we had two Hispanic females and one had actually created a fake Facebook page and was using the name of the other girl. So she was making comments to people pretending she was this person. So this person, when she came back to school, all these girls were upset at her and she really had no clue why they were mad. It took quite a bit of investigating, talking to different people until we finally found out who the actual person that had created that Facebook page was. That was probably one of the most complex ones we dealt with just because we had a kid that … at first, we viewed her as the bully because we saw all the posts with her picture beside the posting and you’re the one … and then we’re seeing that she was more of the victim because she had not made any of the post that were actually out there. So she was actually being victimized by somebody else. So it was kind of … it was strange to go from one extreme to the other with the same student within a matter of just about an hour or so.
Carrey: The wow factor, I would have to say was another Hispanic situation with the cyberbullying. Pretty much they were upset because somebody had a new outfit and they became jealous, saying “I want to splash you, make you feel small, make you feel no good, make you feel less than what you really are.” It really became so bad that the other person involved just wanted to go home, didn’t want to come back to school no more, didn’t want to do anything because she got tired of being bullied cyberly.

These local cases evidenced some features that were very consistent with the literature.

While it is true that there are many issues facing administrators today, there is no doubt that cyberspace presents a major challenge for adults who are concerned about the safety and well-being of adolescents. Whether it happens at school or off-campus, it disrupts and affects all aspects of students’ lives. Cyberbullying has grown in concert with increased rates of Internet use by adolescents and the problem for schools has grown as well. The Kerr County leaders felt that there must be immediate acceptance that cyberbullying is one such growing problem that will only get more serious if ignored.

**Research Question 2:** In light of policy ambiguity, how do assistant principals in charge of discipline handle instances of cyberbullying?

In response to question 2, the analysis of data from the secondary administrators identified several ways that the assistant principals handle instances of cyberbullying. Because cyberbullying can range from rude comments to lies, impersonations, and threats, responses may depend on the nature and severity of the cyberbullying.
Redd, Assistant Principal at James Middle School, has her own rule of thumb for mean-spirited behavior online:

“If it comes in my building, if it has several of my girls crying or if it disrupts the learning process here at James Middle in any way, then I feel certain that there’s something that we can do.”

This position reflected the views of many school officials that electronic harassment that happens off campus can affect a student’s education – and therefore be a punishable offense.

Six themes emerged that encapsulated common practices used to deal with the complex cases of cyberbullying:

- create a climate that values respect
- mediation
- parental involvement-loss of electronic privileges/closing of accounts
- revocation of school issued computers
- assignment of consequences according to school handbook
- report to law enforcement officials

The following excerpts from the administrators provided an overview of some of the common practices identified through data analysis:

Create a climate that values respect

Carrey, Assistant Principal, Northside High School, stated:

It really became that the other person involved just wanted to go home, didn’t
want to come back to school no more, didn’t want to do anything because she got
tired of being bullied cyberly.

The administrator worked to resolve the problem in the following way:

Well, we brought both parties in and pretty much laid it on the line, the wrongness of
cyberbullying and making any person feel less than what they are. We gave them a
little history on what it is and the cause and effect. Then we gave them a warning.
After giving the warning, we contaced the parent. Let the parent know, “I’ve talked to
your child. I’ve told your child if anything of this nature occurs anymore that we will
look at a long-term suspension,” because it is like cancer. It constantly eats up and
makes things worse.

Pullium, Assistant Principal, Holmes Middle School:

I’ve had counselors meet with students just to discuss what happens when you’re
being negative on Facebook, what happens when you are spreading gossip. It’s taking
away from your education because you’re focused on what’s happening on the
computer instead of what’s happening in your math class or your science class.

This administrator emphasized the importance of the role that school support personnel
played in combating the problem.

Mediation

Dawson, Assistant Principal, Holmes Middle School:

Well, obviously mediation. If their problem’s not terribly severe, if it’s just some
general drama, I will usually mediate with the kids and explain to them why
somebody will sit here in front of your face and not say anything near what they will 
say online. I get the kids to kind of recognize one another’s humanity in that forum 
and realize what’s going on. Why they’re doing it and try to show them that it is 
wrong, morally wrong to treat one another that way. Yeah, like I say, mediation 
techniques.

Blakey, Assistant Principal, James Middle School:

We sit down in here with our seventh graders and I have the guidance counselor hear 
both sides of the thing and try and get to the, “Who said it.” “Well, they said, she 
said, that they said.” That’s about as clear as it gets, Then we say, “Wait a minute, 
okay, who exactly said that?” “Well, I heard so-an-so talking to so-and-so and they 
said, she said, they said.” So what we do is that we sit the parties down and we try to 
get them to get their issue whatever it is on the table. “You don’t have to like each 
other; you aren’t even on the same team. You don’t see each other all day. Did you 
used to be friends and now you’re not?” That’s usually what you find out. They used 
to like each other, but somebody came between them—you know how those girl 
clique things go.

Parental Involvement-Loss of Electronic Privilege

Jace, Assistant Principal, Northside High School, stated:

A lot of our Hispanic parents, they want to be such a part of the kid’s education but 
they have that hindrance because of the language barrier. Then we did something that 
was a little bit strange but it actually worked. We talked with the parent and we
explained to them that we did not want to see those students with a Facebook page at all. Not that the school has the right to say, “You can’t have one,” but the parents were very supportive and saying, “You’re not going to have one because the school has said that it causes problems here.”

Carrey, Assistant Principal, Northside High School:

So the parents have gotten involved to see, ask us is there any way you can block this website because I don’t want them to get on it at home, I don’t want them to get on it period. So now that the parents know that we are retrieving their laptops due to misuse, the parents have really stepped up to the plate to say, “We’ve got to fix this problem.”

The administrators worked collaboratively with parents as it related to loss of electronic privileges at home. They were not in a position to demand or insist but often recommended or encouraged this disciplinary option.

Handbook

When asked about the meeting out of the consequences in complex cases, Jace, Assistant Principal, Northside High School, responded:

Mm-hmm. Of course we try to go by the handbook. We deal with these issues because they are disruptive behavior to the school. So we addressed it first as a disruptive behavior. Then once we got the parents involved they were very shocked to see what was going on. It was a little difficult, because not only we were dealing with the Facebook issue we’re also dealing with the language barrier as well.
**Revocation of school issued computers**

Denton, Assistant Principal, Southside High School, stated:

> Now if it happened during school, of course, the handbook has rules, regulations and guidelines for acceptable use of the internet, so we can punish the student if they are not using it in an acceptable way by taking his or her laptop.

Rhodes, Assistant Principal, Southside High School, stated:

> Okay, this is not working, we’re going to collect all the laptops, get carts, and just do class sets.

Both high schools participate in 21st Century Schools’ grant funded “Laptop Program“. It provides students with a tool to expand their learning opportunities. With such opportunity comes responsibility. The use of the district’s network and computers by students while on or off school property is a privilege. The district provides a set of guidelines for security and acceptable use, and violations of these guidelines are handled in accordance with the Technology Use Policy and Student Code of Conduct Policy outlined in the Parent and Student Handbook. Both high school administrators relied heavily on the right to revoke the privileges of the use of school issued laptops as a disciplinary measure.

**Law Enforcement**

Denton, Assistant Southside High School, asserted:

> Basically, if it’s something serious, if its law breaking, or somebody’s life is in danger, I make a report to law enforcement, if it’s serious enough!
Pullium, Assistant Principal, Holmes Middle School:

I think that as far as the school system is concerned, I think it’s almost as if our hands are tied. There’s only but so much we can do. We can report situations to the appropriate individual or people, but at the same time our hands are tied because we can only do so much. If the parents don’t handle it on their end, there’s only so much we can do other than conferencing with the student to say you shouldn’t be doing this, this isn’t appropriate, bringing forth that moral and ethical thing for kids like you don’t talk about someone’s parent on Facebook or you don’t say mean, hurtful things kind of thing. But as far as anything else is concerned unless they are, for example, making threats of some sort and then we may be able to get law enforcement involved.

Two important additional themes that emerged concerning what administrators wanted to see happen in terms of combating cyberbullying were:

- Education for students concerning acceptable use
- Increased parental monitoring of Internet use

Denton said it best:

Yes, but I really feel like the community itself is not taking the time to educate students as we are here in the school about the acceptable use of the internet because a lot of times of course things get posted outside of school. It’s basically because of the lack of supervision I believe, once the students are out of their parent’s sight. We strongly urge the parents to monitor what his or her child is doing on the internet sites
because of course, it’s some things they should be aware of that’s happening on there.

According to the administrators, there was no “one size fits all” where discipline for cyberbullying was concerned. Of utmost importance was the need to establish and maintain a school climate of respect and integrity where violations result in informal or formal sanction.

The most important preventive step that administrators took was to educate the school community about responsible Internet use. The administrators insisted that students needed to know that all forms of cyberbullying are wrong and that those who engage in harassing or threatening behaviors would be subject to discipline. Partnering with parents to stop and solve cyberbullying problems was viewed as being effective.

On a final note, there seemed to be a strong need to get everyone involved – youth, parents, educators, counselors, and law enforcement in order to effectively handle the complex cases of cyberbullying that they encounter in their schools.

**Research Question 3:** In what ways would updating existing anti-bullying policies to explicitly include cyberbullying (i.e. online harassment via email, text message, Facebook, MySpace, etc.) advance the districts Safe Schools/Anti-Bullying goals?

To answer question 3, the secondary administrators were presented with a copy of the current bullying policy: “Bullying is a violation of Rule8: Intimidation, Disrespect, Threatening, Insulting, Abusive or Discourteous Words or Acts, Bullying, and Any Other Acts of Harassment (Ref. VCSBP JFC VI)” for review and contemplation. Upon review, the administrators acknowledged that the current policy did provide a foundation, but there had
been no review or updates in several years. They felt that a current review and analysis of the policy was necessary to ensure that it incorporates the latest research and techniques for the most effective handling of cyberbullying cases. The administrators questioned the efficacy of the current bullying policy in Kerr County Schools and felt that it was insufficient in regards to the total scope of cyberbullying. It was suggested it be more specific and defined.

Denton:

Well of course it would be some changing to this because there are a lot of things that are not defined. They need to be clearly defined. When you say for example: in our policy discourteous words or acts, they cannot do too much acting over the computer, so the words and other acts of harassment needs to be more defined than in our policy. It needs to be set out saying that if this has been done by electronic means, this is what you need to do.

Blakely highlights a prevailing feeling around policy:

I think there is only one little—there is a line devoted in this expansion that may just be in the beginning stages of the technological use of things. So much of this is more the face-to-face, but, of course, the intimidation, the disrespect, the threatening, all of that can be done either face-to-face or it can be done in text.

When asked if she felt that the policy, as it was written, was sufficient for handling cyberbullying, she replied:

I think it is. I just think that it is just not that well written. I think that if it had bullets in it, and this statement right here, “No student shall use electronic or any other
means to harass principal, teachers, school employees, student or anyone else. In other words, use electronic items. Then it’s not limited to these things. I think with that statement in here, and this definition under Rule 8, I don’t have any problem with it.

After more thought she went on to say:

I do think it’s clarity that’s needed. So there is the actual face-to-face type of stuff, and where that takes place. Then there is the verbal and non-verbal, it interferes with the learning environment, and then the specific prohibition of this bullying, intimidating and harassment and finally, the electronic harassment.

In regards to making the updates she pointed out:

I would just do it so that you had this piece right there, and then this was a bullet right here, this was a bullet, then it would help to clarify what—and this definition needs to go up to the top and then this needs to be pulled out and focused on. You know how we have that gang policy that’s gotten bold in it and bulleted? That would make this so much better. You could expand it, “This includes but it is not limited to …” and put the most up-to-date on Twitter, Facebook all those things. Yeah.

Verifying that a problem does exist is a key step in the policy analysis process. In keeping with this perspective the administrators were asked if they believed the school board saw cyberbullying as a problem, in order to determine the likelihood or the timeliness of a solution. The administrators split equally on their views. Four of the administrators felt that
the school board was aware that cyberbullying was a problem that was interfering with the learning environment.

Denton: Yes, but in the field we see it a lot more when you have to deal with it.

Jace: I think it’s an issue that is now on the rise with them. I think anybody that deals with the kids sees the problem a little bit sooner than people that don’t deal directly with kids. We see it first hand and sometimes it might take a year or two years to trickle to that area. But I think they see it as a growing issue.

Pullium: I think that they are aware of it. I think they are unaware of the severity of it. I think they know it happens, but I don’t think they know to the extent in which it happens. I don’t think they know how much we deal with issues that stem from the misuse of technology. I don’t know that they understand how serious kids take what’s written about them. How serious parents take what’s written about them by another student or another student’s parent. I think that a lot of times it’s not something that we ever can resolve, because like I said they end it for a minute and then it pops back up again when you least expect it.

Carrey: I believe they do. I think because everyone now talks about Facebook and Twitter and there are things on TV why folk committed suicide and stories about kids just doing a whole bunch of threatening and bullying on the computers. I think they’re very well aware.

One administrator felt that there was a little awareness but was hesitant to take a strong yes or no position.
Dawson: I think they are a little bit aware of it, but I don’t think they are fully aware. The remaining three definitely felt that the school board was not aware of the problem as it existed.

Rhodes: I don’t believe so. I know they’ve been told anecdotes about what goes on in the school systems, but have they seen it for themselves or in person or do they know of someone who is near and dear to them that has been affected? I don’t think so.

Blakley: I don’t think they know. No, I don’t think they know this, just the absolute ramifications throughout the whole day. In other words, when this team back here has got one of those Facebook things going on, they jitter all day. I don’t teach—they don’t learn anything because their whole mind is focused on that; what they saw on Facebook, who said what to whom, who’s going to do this and that and blah, blah, blah.

Redd: Yes it does exist, but I’m not sure if the School Board knows, they don’t see the day-to-day.

There was a strong unanimous feeling that the key to changing policy was to make people realize that cyberbullying is an issue that affects the educational climate. They all felt that advocacy for updating policy that would explicitly include cyberbullying (i.e. online harassment via email, text message, Facebook, MySpace, etc.) offenses was necessary and there was a role that they could play.

Administrators were queried about the likelihood of change given the current political climate. Of the administrators that addressed the likelihood of change there was unanimous
agreement that change was likely and the importance of this was summed up by the
Northside High School administrator, Jace. He stated the following:

I think they would be very open to it. I think, again, in my opinion of the school
board, they have to depend on the people that are in the school to let them know what
they need and what has to be done to address certain issues. So I think as the
administrators inside the school, it’s our duty to pass the information along saying
that these are the types of things we need to have strengthened or certain things have
just changed over the years and this kind of stuff needs to be added into policies
because I don’t know when this was originally adopted, but I’m sure a lot has
changed over the years from when it was originally adopted until some of the stuff
that we’re seeing now.

The administrators recognized the past efforts of the school board in combating
bullying and acknowledged those efforts, crediting them with creating policies that seemed
reasonably designed to match the scope of the problem at the time of adoption. They were
hopeful that their advocacy would raise awareness and present the opportunity for school
board officials to review new data, reevaluate policies and revise them where appropriate.

They identified ways that the district’s Safe Schools/Anti-Bullying goals might be
advanced by explicit, updated policy. Eight broad categories were found. They were:

- Communicate that there are effective measures to deal with cases of
cyberbullying
- Decrease incidents of cyberbullying in school and without
• Provide a basis for good recordkeeping of all cyberbullying incidences
• Publicize rules and sanctions freely
• Let victims know there is a solution
• Put perpetrators on notice that there are consequences
• Empower victims by providing recourse
• Allow students to reap the benefits of technology while curbing the spread of online cruelty
• Foster awareness: help parents understand the importance of monitoring their child’s online activities

In regards to communicating that there are effective measures to deal with cases of cyberbullying, Jace said of victims, “I can really go to someone and they could help me.”

When speaking about reduction in disciplinary infractions, Rhodes said:

Well, as far as administrators, we would have less discipline to deal with. We’d have more time to get into the classrooms to see what type of teaching, what type of curriculum was being used, and just making sure that the Xs and Os were being taken care of. Instead, we’re bogged down with discipline.

Redd said, “It will cut down on the number of infractions as it relates to recordkeeping.”

Jace said:

If it was more detailed, and we could go straight to, “Okay, Item I was a violation, that’s what they did,” it would save us time. We wouldn’t have to negotiate or
discuss, “Well, was this really a violation of the policy or not?” Then, all the schools in the county would be uniform. They would all be doing the same thing, which will increase the accuracy of the data that you’re getting because right now, I may be classifying something as bullying, but somebody at another school may be saying, “Okay, this went a little further, so I’m going to classify this as simple assault.

As far as rules, sanctions and empowerment, this exchange with Jace articulated it well:

Possibly, I think it would also make kids be more aware and conscious of what they post, understand that there are rules behind it and understand it that the consequences might be a little more black and white. I think it would just … it would help show kids that certain things are just unacceptable. But in the meantime, by doing that, I guess kind of like as you say, you also … you do protect some kids and they might feel a little more safe at school understanding that there are consequences, which will probably prohibit and lessen the number of cyberbullying issues that we’re dealing with.

About technology benefits, Rhodes concludes:

Well, as far as the schools’ initiatives for increasing technology in the schools, I think their heart was in the right place. Their intentions were good. I think we needed to study it a little bit more. I think eventually, we will work through this to a point where we’ll get to a place where we can use these items for instruction and not for the other extracurricular activities that the students are using it for.
Finally, as it related to parents, Dawson said “we strongly urge parents to monitor what his or her child is doing on the internet site” and Jace said, “I think the educating, talking to the parents when we did the orientations and talking to them about the proper use of a laptop, how to check histories, how to check passwords and things like that. Then all of the sudden a lot of the parents are very supportive and they want to do more.”

Summary

The object of the research was to answer carefully crafted research questions concerning the characterization of cyberbullying as a problem, the ways that administrators handled known cases and the need for updated explicit policy. The analysis of data offered insight into the administrator’s views. From a summative point of view, cyberbullying was characterized by the administrators as a growing problem with an ever increasing number of adolescents having access to the internet through their mobile phones. The 24-hour nature of social networking sites like Facebook meant that children could be persecuted by their bullies on a constant basis. They felt it was incumbent on both parents and schools to take a proactive approach in tackling this very damaging problem. The middle school and high school administrators were concerned about the level of cyberbullying and the damage and disruption it causes at school.

When faced with cyberbullying, the administrators noted the lack of coherent discipline responses as one major challenge to handling incidents. They felt their efforts were considerably hampered by disciplinary fragmentation due to reliance upon cross-category sanctions to fit their notions of what was appropriate for complex cyberbullying cases.
Though the district had a bullying policy that alluded to cyberbullying, the administrators felt that it was currently insufficient as it was. They were advocates of a policy that would be more specific to the cyber world. The prevailing feeling was that the school’s Anti-Bullying policies must contain language specific to cyber bullying. The administrator’s indicated that much of the bullying occurs at home but then continues at school when someone sends or forwards emails or texts while at school. They emphasized that it was imperative that the policy give schools the teeth to handle the problems at school.

The question of whether the school board saw cyberbullying as a problem was posed to measure the current state of affairs and future efforts to improve policy. The administrators split equally on their views, but there was consensus among them in that they were key informants on cyberbullying issues in the district.

Most districts and schools have developed safe schools plans in compliance with the No Child Left Behind Act. Kerr County’s plan addresses a full range of safety issues, including bullying prevention. The administrators felt that updated policy would advance these Safe Schools Anti-Bullying goals by creating safe, caring, participatory and responsive schools. It would support the development of socially and emotionally healthy children. It would intentionally teach children to become more socially and emotionally competent, ethically inclined, and sensitive to the needs of others.
Chapter 5
Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations for Research and Practice

Introduction

The intent of the study was to ascertain secondary assistant principals’ perceptions of cyberbullying in their school district and the utility of policy to combat it. This case study was designed to collect and present information about a particular group of secondary school administrators in the Kerr County school district. It looked intensely at this particular group and drew conclusions from their perceptions about cyberbullying. There was no focus on a discovery of a universal or generalizable truth; instead, emphasis was placed on exploration of cyberbullying in this district. This chapter presents a discussion of the study findings based upon the qualitative analysis conducted and presented in chapter four. The conceptual framework will be overlaid on the findings. The literature review and the researcher’s experience as an administrator informed the discussions on implications for practice and recommendations for future research on cyberbullying.

Review of the Findings

The research analysis provided an in-depth look into cyberbullying through the eyes of secondary assistant principals in charge of discipline. The results of the study were based on feedback from the administrator’s interviews. The key findings were:

- The administrators perceived there to be a cyberbullying problem in Kerr County secondary schools.
• They relied upon creating a climate in their schools that valued respect, mediation, parental involvement (i.e. loss of electronic privileges or closing of accounts), revocation of school issued computers, assignment of consequences according to school handbook and reporting serious cases to law enforcement officials as a means to handle cyberbullying cases.

• The administrators believed updating policy was a viable solution to the problem.

• The administrators supported updating policy that would explicitly include cyberbullying (i.e. online harassment via email, text message, Facebook, MySpace, etc.) offenses.

• The administrators identified the following as ways the ways that updating existing anti-bullying policies to explicitly include cyberbullying (i.e. online harassment via email, text message, Facebook, MySpace, etc.) would advance the districts Safe Schools/Anti-Bullying goals:

  • Communicate that there are effective measures to deal with cases of cyberbullying
  • Decrease incidents of cyberbullying in school and without
  • Provide a basis for good recordkeeping of all cyberbullying incidences
  • Publicize rules and sanctions freely
  • Let victims know there is a solution
  • Put perpetrators on notice that there are consequences
  • Empower victims by providing recourse
• Allow students to reap the benefits of technology while curbing the spread of online cruelty
• Foster awareness: help parents understand the importance of monitoring their child’s online activities

Discussion

Administrators’ Perspectives

The administrators’ perspectives were ascertained through carefully crafted research questions designed to shed light on the issue of cyberbullying in the secondary schools of the Kerr County School District. Research question 1 inquired as to how Kerr County Schools’ secondary school administrators perceived cyberbullying to be a problem among their students? To answer question 1, a priori codes were developed before examining the data. The codes were: 1) Not a problem, 2) A growing problem, 3) A serious problem, 4) An epidemic. These codes were then applied to the data as it related to the perception of cyberbullying as a problem. The findings uncovered a strong prevailing feeling among administrators, both middle school and high school, that cyberbullying was a growing problem in the district. The administrators in the Kerr County felt that cyberbullying was a growing problem because increasing numbers of students were using and have completely embraced interactions via computers and cell phones. Reportedly, the youth that these administrators serve go online every day for school work, to keep in touch with their friends, to play games, to learn about celebrities, to share their digital creations, or for many other reasons. Because the online communication tools have become such an important part of
their lives, it was not surprising to the administrators that some kids have decided to use the technology in malicious or menacing ways towards others. The fact that teens are connected to technology 24/7 means they are susceptible to victimization or to become perpetrators of cruelties toward others around the clock. When asked if any groups were disproportionately affected by cyberbullying, all eight of the administrators identified females. This was compatible with the prominent thought in the current literature. The literature specifies that because of the anonymity, it is also easier to be hateful using typed words rather than spoken words face-to-face. Girls are clearly at the forefront of this technological bullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Fraga’s article, “Cyberbullying is a growing problem among youngsters,” (2009) states “Girls go after the emotional jugular, they’re worse than the boys”. In the same article, a youth advocate said, “My experience is that it’s more prevalent among girls…They are more susceptible to the effects of cyberbullying. Plus, girls are online more frequently than boys.” The advent of social networking sites and text messaging has allowed young girls the opportunity to take on a role traditionally reserved for boys. The girls have become bullies, or, more specifically, cyberbullies. The administrators felt that many adolescents lacked a basic understanding of the seriousness of cyberbullying and held a faulty belief that cyberbullying is a joke. The administrators articulated very clearly that a great number of conflicts that erupted between students had technological origins. When investigating peer conflicts, they often uncovered misuse of social media at the core of the problem. They shared stories of incidents that originated outside of school but traveled into the school and created disruptions and fights, stemming from flaming, harassment, denigration,
impersonation, and trickery carried out on electronic devices. Finally, another contributor to the growing problem of cyberbullying that the administrators spoke of was the growing fear, mistrust and vulnerability of teachers. The teachers feared that their day to day words or actions would be secretly audiotaped or videotaped out of context by students and would be used against them some way.

In light of policy ambiguity, ways that assistant principals in charge of discipline handled instances of cyberbullying was the aim of research question 2. In response to question 2, the analysis of data from the secondary administrators identified several ways that the assistant principals handle instances of cyberbullying.

Because cyberbullying could range from rude comments to lies, impersonations, and threats, responses depended on the nature and severity of the cyberbullying. The common discipline practices used by the administrators were creating a climate that values respect, mediation, parental involvement (i.e. loss of electronic privileges/closing of accounts), revocation of school issued computers, assignment of consequences according to school handbook, and reporting to law enforcement officials in the most serious cases. According to the administrators, there was no “one size fits all” where discipline for cyberbullying was concerned. Of utmost importance was the need to establish and maintain a school climate of respect and integrity where violations result in informal or formal sanction.

The most important preventive step that administrators took was to educate the school community about responsible Internet use. The administrators insisted that students needed to know that all forms of cyberbullying are wrong and that those who engage in harassing or
threatening behaviors would be subject to discipline. Partnering with parents to stop and solve cyberbullying problems was viewed as being effective.

They pointed out, of utmost importance was the need to establish and maintain a school climate of respect and integrity where violations result in informal or formal sanction. They felt that a lack of coherent discipline responses was the major challenge to handling incidents. Their efforts were hampered by disciplinary fragmentation due to reliance on cross-category sanctions to fit their notions of what was appropriate for complex cases. They emphasized a strong need to get all stakeholders involved- parents, educators, counselors, and law enforcement in order to effectively handle the complex cases of cyberbullying that they encounter in their schools. Overall, they felt they were able to handle the cases, but suggested that the district’s current policy was insufficient and that it needed to be more specific as it related to cyberbullying cases.

In response to the third research question addressing ways updated, explicit policy that included cyberbullying would advance the district’s Safe Schools/Anti-Bullying goals. The administrators felt that the district policy was currently insufficient as it was. They were advocates of a policy that would be more specific to the cyber world. The prevailing feeling was that the school’s Anti-Bullying policies must contain language specific to cyberbullying. The administrators indicated that much of the bullying occurs at home but then continues at school when someone sends or forwards emails or texts while at school. They emphasized that it was imperative that the policy give schools the teeth to handle the problems at school. The administrators recognized the past efforts of the school
board in combating bullying and acknowledged those efforts, crediting them with creating policies that seemed reasonably designed to match the scope of the problem at the time of adoption.

The question of whether the school board saw cyberbullying as a problem was posed to measure the current state of affairs and future efforts to improve policy. The administrators split equally on their views, but there was consensus among them in that they were key informants on cyberbullying issues in the district. This characterization of themselves as key informants was consistent with the profile of the street level bureaucrat defined in Lipsky’s work as public service workers who are confronted with real world challenges in the public sector. A broad range of workers fell into this categorization (i.e. teachers, police officers, lawyers, doctors, health workers, etc. and in this case the administrators that had firsthand knowledge of the problem. They were hopeful that their advocacy would raise awareness and present the opportunity for school board officials to review new data, reevaluate policies and revise them where appropriate. There was a strong feeling among them that the key to changing policy was to make people realize that cyberbullying is an issue that affects the educational climate. They all felt that advocacy for updating policy that would explicitly include cyberbullying (i.e. online harassment via email, text message, Facebook, MySpace, etc.) offenses was necessary and there was a role that they could play.

They identified ways that the district’s Safe Schools/Anti-Bullying goals might be advanced by explicit, updated policy by creating safe, caring, participatory and responsive schools. It would support the development of socially and emotionally healthy children. It
would intentionally teach children to become more socially and emotionally competent, ethically inclined, and sensitive to the needs of others.

Integration of Literature and Findings

Prior to data collection, the literature was consulted to consider whether cyberbullying was a problem, whether explicit policies supported the prevention of cyberbullying and whether updated policy advanced the Safe Schools/Anti-Bullying goals.

Cyberbullying Problem

The literature showed increasing reports of teenagers (using these technologies to post damaging text or images to bully their peers or engage in other aggressive behavior. There were also increasing reports of teens posting material that raised concerns that they were considering an act of violence toward others or themselves. A well-known prevalence study conducted by Cox Communications (2009) surveyed 13-18 year-olds and asked how often they had ever been involved in cyberbullying. 15% said they had been cyberbullied online, 10% had been cyberbullied by cell phone, 7% said they had cyberbullied another person online, 5% had cyberbullied another person by cell phone. According to a nationwide survey of 500 teenagers conducted by Opinion Research Corporation on behalf of FightCrime.org, 36 percent stated they had been threatened or had malicious or embarrassing remarks made about them on-line. In the article, “School-Based Cyberbullying Interventions,” Brown and Demaray (2011) concluded that cyberbullying is a growing problem and cannot be ignored by school administrations.
The literature surrounding the prevalence of cyberbullying among teens was supported in that the Kerr County administrators acknowledged that cyberbullying was problematic in the district and a growing concern for secondary school administrators.

Understanding the Issue

Cyberbullying is a growing problem, although few parents are aware that cyberbullying even exists. They are rarely aware of the dangers posed by cyberbullying. Unfortunately children carefully keep cyberbullying from their parents, sometimes until it is too late.

Children as young as nine years old are finding themselves harassed via blogs, Web sites, text-messaging and instant messaging. Many retaliate by becoming cyberbullies themselves.

Kamaron Institute School Surveys (2007-2009) indicated that:

- Middle school and high school girls were about twice as likely as boys to display cyberbullying behaviors in the form of email, text, and chat
- Middle school and high school girls were twice as likely as boys to report receiving email, text messages or chat room messages that teased, taunted, and ridiculed.

(http://kamaron.org/Cyber-Bullying-Articles-Facts)

The administrator’s views were consistent with these research based findings. Cyberbullying can take many forms. It can be a Web site where children can vote for the ugliest, most unpopular or fattest girl in the school. It can involve sending private and very personal information or images to others or posting them online for the public to see. Former best
friends can betray the other’s trust or passwords. And password hints can be easy to guess for a fellow classmate or young neighbor, leaving their entire account open for vandalism. Interactive-gaming is another way cyberbullies target their victims, setting them up for embarrassment and harassment.

And as new technologies are developed or adopted, cyberbullies can abuse them as well. Blogs, now very popular web diaries kept by children and teens, are a hotbed of cyberbullying and cruelties. And photo and video cell phones are used to shoot pictures of potential victims in locker rooms, shower stalls, bathrooms and dressing rooms. Sometimes they are used to shoot pictures of the victim at a party, kissing their boyfriend or girlfriend. These images are then posted online, sent to classmates or even to parents in an attempt to intimidate or embarrass the victim.

Web site guest books are easy prey, as well. Within minutes of a well-launched cyberbullying campaign, an innocent guest book at a child’s Web site can become littered with hateful messages. The ways cyberbullies use to hurt others are limited only by their imaginations and bandwidth.

(http://www.stopcyberbullying.org/parents/youth_empowered_solutions.html)

According to studies conducted by the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State College, the most common motives for cyberbullying are anger and the belief that cyberbullying is a joke. Another reason for cyberbullying is that many youths are not aware how serious it can be.
Youths who are angry often do not think before they send a bitter text message or type an attacking e-mail and instant message to someone. Once the electronic message is sent, there is no way to retract it, and the damage is done. Teens generally do not know they can be charged with criminal harassment and stalking for sending intimidating electronic messages. The administrators’ characterization of cyberbullying as a growing problem in this study is consistent with what is known from the empirical literature.

Policy-Based Solutions

Several studies spoke eloquently about policy development to combat cyberbullying. McKenzie (1995) pointed out that a comprehensive board policy should address what schools should do when students, teachers, administrators, staff and volunteers are confronted with any type of unacceptable communications, either written and/or oral or have contact with aberrant individuals, and then elaborate on the various facets of privacy and access rights violations. Operational policies (policies in practice) can then be crafted to deal specifically with the particular unacceptable communications such as cyberbullying. From the book, Cyber Bullying: Bullying in the Digital Age, Susan Limber (2007) stated in her recommendations that districts should develop clear rules and policies about cyberbullying. These policies can be incorporated into any existing bullying policies, “acceptable use of technology” policies, or through a separate policy specific to cyberbullying. Information about the policy needs to be shared with staff, parents, and students. The administrators in this study were in favor of policy to curtail cyberbullying. The recommendations offered by
school administrators in this study regarding the use of policy to combat cyberbullying are consistent with those found in previous studies.

Explicit Policy

In the article “What Administrators and Parents Can Do” Beale and Hall (2007) made two very important recommendations: 1) Make certain the school or school board’s anti-bullying policy includes harassment perpetrated with mobile and Internet technology; 2) The school’s acceptable use policy should be updated to specifically prohibit using the Internet for bullying. The policy should spell out what constitutes cyberbullying and specify the anticipated negative consequences.

The guide developed for the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) by Childnet International and in consultation with the DCSF Cyberbullying Taskforce, states that it is important to review and update existing anti-bullying, behavior and pastoral care policies to include cyberbullying. Ensure that learners, parents, and staff are all aware of the procedures and sanctions for dealing with cyberbullying, including bullying that takes place out of school (http://www.kidscape.org.uk/assets/downloads/dcsfcyberbullying.pdf).

Safe Schools Plans

Willard (2007) strongly recommended that school districts incorporate prevention and education strategies into safe schools plans to address cyberbullying and related online risks and that the planning activities involve school employees, law enforcement, community organizations, parents, and students. This may be accomplished through an amendment to a state statute addressing safe schools planning. Columbine forced North Carolina’s schools to
take even more precautions, adding crisis plans, working more closely with law enforcement agencies and focusing more on prevention.

Today, the N.C. Department of Public Instruction requires each school district to prepare an overall safety plan, with a student code of conduct. State officials review all plans every three years. School districts have their own crisis management plans and individual schools are required to prepare a safe school plan (Paige, n.d.). North Carolina’s “Safe Schools” policies are consistent with Willard’s recommendations in the literature.

**Evaluating the Conceptual Framework**

*Efficacy of the Conceptual Framework*

At the onset on this research, careful attention was utilized to determine the adequacy of a model and its ability to guide the methodology of the study. The framework of problem definition was chosen because of its usefulness in understanding the way social problems are framed for political discussion.

The conceptual framework of problem definition, which suggests that policy-making starts as “a response to a perceived problem of a constituency” (Hayes, 2009, para 13) guided the study. In many respects, problem definition is the single most important part of the policy process, since the manner in which problems are defined often determines whether they get on policy agendas, the alternatives that are considered and adopted, and the way in which the policy is implemented and evaluated (Dye, 1992). The problem definition framework created a sound foundation for meeting the objectives of this research which was to gather preliminary information that would help define problems. In response to the growing
problem of cyberbullying, the primary assumption was that administrators would respond in this fashion: define the problem, explore solutions, influence the forces (school board members) that affect the development of policy, and advocate for policy-based solutions to combat it. Problem definition is fundamental to public policy making. Focusing on problems is important. In this case, problem solving is a critical task of school boards if the educational environment is threatened in any way. Decision-makers are often unclear about what problems exist. The findings in this study support this view insofar as there was some disagreement about how key leaders in Kerr County Schools perceive cyberbullying to be a problem—its dimensions, scope, and what can/should be done about it.

Application of the Conceptual Framework to Results

Secondary school administrators in the Kerr County School District were interviewed to ascertain how cyberbullying was a problem in their district and their perspectives on the need for updating policies to combat it. A conceptual framework of problem definition, adapted from Hayes (2009), was used as a guide for this investigation. The four tenets of this theory were used to predict an organization’s response to a perceived problem. The conceptual framework was applied to results of the study below:

Framework of Problem Definition

Response to a Perceived Problem of a Constituency

Tenet 1

Framework: Situation falls short of their expectations
Findings: The findings uncovered a strong prevailing feeling among administrators, both middle school and high school, that cyberbullying was a growing problem in the district. Whether it happens at school or off-campus, it disrupts and affects all aspects of students’ lives. Cyberbullying has grown in concert with increased rates of Internet use by adolescents and the problem for schools has grown as well. The Kerr County leaders felt that there must be immediate acceptance that cyberbullying is one such growing problem that will only get more serious if ignored.

Tenet 2

Framework: Potential solution exists

Findings: The administrators questioned the efficacy of the current bullying policy in Kerr County Schools and felt that it was insufficient in regards to the total scope of cyberbullying. They felt that it was not well written and needed to be more specific and defined. They strongly supported the notion of updating the current policy as a viable solution to the problem.

Tenet 3

Framework: Remedy was a legitimate activity of government-the School Board

Findings: The North Carolina general statues confirmed that the remedy was a legitimate activity of the School Board. Recent legislation expands on these responsibilities by requiring local boards to adopt a policy to promote an environment free of bullying and harassing behavior and mandating that school personnel implement strategies included in the policy. *N.C. Gen. Stat. §§ 115C-407.5 through 407.8*
Enhancing school safety is first and foremost in the hands of policy makers. If good, caring, and safe schools are to emerge from school improvement efforts, policymakers must understand the nature and scope of what is involved. They must revise policy that perpetuates narrow-focused, categorical approaches since such policy is a grossly inadequate response to the many complex factors that interfere with positive development, learning, and teaching. School improvement policy must be expanded to support development of a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive approach to addressing barriers to learning and teaching (Adelman & Taylor, 2007).

**Tenet 4**

Framework: Preferred policy prescription will be advocated

Findings: Though the district had a bullying policy that alluded to cyberbullying, the administrators felt that it was too vague as it was. They were advocates of a policy that would be more specific to the cyberworld. The prevailing feeling was that the school’s Anti-Bullying policies must contain language specific to cyberbullying. The administrators supported advocacy for updating policy that would explicitly include cyberbullying (i.e. online harassment via email, text message, Facebook, MySpace, etc.) offenses.

The conceptual framework was tested by comparing the findings with the predicted behavior of the model. All the data from the study comply with the major tenets of the problem definition model as shown above. The Kerr County secondary assistant principals
defined cyberbullying as a problem, supported advocacy of an inclusive policy to combat it, and agreed that the remedy was a legitimate activity of the school board. The administrators strongly felt that the sum total of these advocacy efforts would advance the district’s goal of providing a safe and orderly environment for all students. Evidence gathered in this research can help to refine our understanding of cyberbullying. The district can use these results to inform the policy process as it relates to cyberbullying as a step towards achieving the desired level of safety for students. It can provide practitioners with valuable tools with which to combat computer abuses. Further research into the relationships between cyberbullying and its effects on students and school climate may be useful.

**Implications for Practice**

An important aspect of this research is considering the implications it might have for other researchers, practitioners, students, parents, and policy makers to inform policy and practice to curtail cyberbullying among adolescents. The implications for practice from this study touch many facets of the cyberbullying problem, but most specifically the ways in which it will advance the Safe Schools/Anti-Bullying goals.

There is a role federal, state, and local policymakers can play in controlling cyberbullying. The overarching implication is that specifically crafted policy is needed to address cyberbullying. There is a need for public servants to work for the broader public interest by engaging as partners with government officials and policy makers in meaningful dialogue and problem solving. The effected administrators can draw from the problem definition framework for practical guidance. It can help them understand the public policy
process, the importance of public participation, and the need to collaborate with other stakeholders and citizens to implement appropriate advocacy strategies.

School officials, administrators, educators, counselors, students, parents, and internet service providers all have a role to play in controlling cyberbullying as well.

School officials can:

- Take disciplinary action against cyberbullies
- Have an acceptable use policy and have it signed by the parents and the students. It typically deals with what is and is not permitted use of the schools technology and computer systems.
- Inform all involved that it is a legal contract binding the parents and the school (and the students themselves once they are of legal contracting age).
- Conduct an audit of its technology uses
- Enforce policies related to student-owned electronic devices (i.e. netbooks, tablets and iPads, laptop computers, smartphones (e.g., iPhones, Blackberrys, Evos), Nintendo, and other portable electronic devices that are Web-enabled in some capacity) and their display and use on campuses.

Educators can:

- Participate in specific types of pre-service and in-service professional development to increase the awareness of the cyberbullying phenomenon
- Teach responsible and ethical use of technology
Guidance Counselors can:

- Survey students to assess cyberbullying in their particular schools
- They can distribute or make available publications about the dangers of cyberbullying
- Provide classroom guidance on topics including cyberbullying and its effects
- Provide mediation between victims of cyberbullying and their perpetrators or any students that have used computers, cell phones, or electronic communications on Facebook outside the school, that are dealing with turmoil and hurt feelings that comes back to school
- Have speakers come in to discuss cyberbullying with staff and students to explain the potential of school rules, consequences, family reaction, legal trouble, and the community court system
- Counsel students in regards to understanding self and others, coping strategies, peer relationships, effective social skills, communication, problem-solving, decision-making and conflict resolution

Students can:

- Limit availability of personal information
- Avoid escalating the situation—Responding with hostility is likely to provoke a bully and escalate the situation. Depending on the circumstances, consider ignoring the issue. Often, bullies thrive on the reaction of their victims.
• Employ appropriate reactions (i.e. blocking inappropriate the messages on social networking sites or stop unwanted emails by changing the email address).

• Report abuse

Parent/Community Partners can:

• Encourage positive digital citizenship

• Set guidelines for and monitor use of the internet and other electronic media (cell phones, PDAs, etc.)

• Keep lines of communication open by regularly talking to children about their online activities so that they feel comfortable telling you if they are being victimized

• Watch for warning signs or any changes in behavior that may indicate cyberbullying is occurring

• Document the activity—Keep a record of any online activity (emails, web pages, instant messages, etc.), including relevant dates and times. In addition to archiving an electronic version, consider printing a copy.

• Report cyberbullying to the appropriate authorities–school officials, internet service providers (ISP) or law enforcement

Internet service providers can:

• have nuisance call centers set up and/or have procedures in place to deal with such instances
• make reporting incidents of cyberbullying easy, and thus have clear, accessible and prominent reporting features

• take down any content from hosting sites that is illegal or have broken the terms of service of the site in other ways

• take action against the bully’s account (e.g. blocking their account)

Cyberbullying is an unacceptable and negative force and there needs to be a concerted effort across society to address it. The mission of every school district should be to reduce the rates of violence through collaborative efforts and to develop and implement a strategy that advances the goals of their Safe Schools Plan. The Safe School Plan, which is designed to create safe, respectful, and inclusive learning environments, will require collaborative action. This plan is based on the strong belief that everyone has a role to play. Where all community members work together to promote the well-being of students and works to create positive school climates through measures such as bullying prevention, positive behavior and social competence. Together, parents, children, teachers, ISP’s and law enforcement authorities can help prevent cyberbullying and make schools safe and supportive places for all students.

**Implications for Future Research**

The study of cyberbullying is at an early stage, providing evidence of the need for efforts targeting this area. To date, there has been growing concern over the increasing prevalence of this issue and its impact on students. It is apparent that cyberbullying is on the rise in school districts across the country. Cyberbullying starts as early as elementary school.
It runs rampant in middle school, and continues to haunt kids through high school. While it generally originates from home computers, it almost always ends up on campus (Winchester, 2009).

While this study represents a good beginning, it has only provided a snapshot of the cyberbullying problem. It is my hope that it is only a springboard for further dialogue and research about cyberbullying in schools.

The research from these sites in the Kerr County school district answered many of my initial questions but some questions remain unanswered. Throughout the course of this study we have learned about the operating definition of cyberbullying, the prevalence of it, the use of policy to combat it, and promising public policy practices for advocacy.

The next logical question to be answered is the effects of this pervasive phenomenon. It is recommended that future research focus on the effects of cyberbullying on students and school culture. Fortunately, important work in this area is currently underway. The literature has produced compelling evidence that suggest an effect on both. Cyberbullying on social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook has had negative effects on children at school. Cyberbullying disruption during the school day adds to the complexity of maintaining school operations, safety, and academic achievement. With the advancement of technology, there is a gap in the literature on the disruption in schools, particularly on school’s culture, from cyberbullying.

Future research should focus on studies that directly evaluate cyberbullying’s impact on students and school climate. This research should be carried out by researchers and those
directly affected by and knowledgeable of cyberbullying and how it affects students and impacts school culture. An exploratory case study could be used to obtain data on the relationship of cyberbullying to the culture of the school. Special populations should also be targeted for obtaining the relevant information. Affected students could be interviewed. Perceptions of administrators could be obtained. The framework could be based on the concepts of indirect aggression and reinforcement, suggesting cyberbullying is likely reinforced in social networking sites and with peers in the school. For data analysis, notes and transcripts would be reviewed and analyzed. A study such as this may promote positive social change by providing insight into the ways school employees may minimize physical and mental health issues that cyberbullying may cause students and affect school culture.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, first, more research on cyberbullying is needed, particularly with the rapid pace of technological innovation. We need to know more about all forms of cyberbullying, and especially what works in the areas of prevention and response.

Second, we need policy that is thoughtful and supported by all stakeholders. If school boards are serious about doing something to stop cyberbullying, they must move beyond the rhetoric, collaborate with schools, parents, and law enforcement to tackle this problem. Cyberbullying policies are currently the focus of much legal wrangling, with some student suspensions being upheld and others overturned. A detailed, comparative legal analysis of recent state and federal court decisions needs to be undertaken to provide
guidance for district leaders and school board members in designing legally-defensible cyberbullying policies.

Third, focusing on improving the climate at school can have a significant impact on a host of problematic behaviors. If students believe that they are cared about at school, and they value those relationships with their teachers, counselors, and administrators, they will in turn refrain from engaging in behaviors that would risk damaging those relationships. That said, bullying and cyberbullying are not just school problems, they are societal problems. Everyone has a role and responsibility to do something, and it can start right here with inquiry into the issue.
References


Appendices
Appendix A

One-on-One Interview Guide

Understanding the Issue

1. Is there a cyberbullying problem in Kerr County Secondary Schools
2. How would you characterize the problem: NP, GP, SP or EP?
3. Who is affected?
4. How?
5. Are any particular groups disproportionately affected?
6. What kinds of cyberbullying cases have you handled? Tell about 2-3 cases.
7. How did you deal with it?
8. Do you formulate your own policies, rely on existing policies or take from the experiences of your colleagues?

Potential Allies

1. Is there public concern about this issue?

Potential Solutions

1. What possible solutions exist?
2. What do you want to see happen?

Board’s Position on This Issue

1. Do you believe the school board sees cyberbullying as a problem? Why or why not?
2. Is the current policy sufficient for handling cyberbullying cases? What is the likelihood of change, given the current political climate?
3. Should administrators advocate for updated policy to combat the problem.
4. In what ways would updated policy advance the district’s Safe School’s/Anti-Bullying goals?
Appendix B
Kerr County School’s Bullying Policy

Bullying is a violation of Rule 8: Intimidation, Disrespect, Threatening, Insulting, Abusive or Discourteous Words or Acts, Bullying, and Any Other Acts of Harassment (Ref. VCSBP JFC VI).