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Bullying, Cyberbullying, and Sexting: School Counselors’ Perceptions and Roles in Intervention

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Abstract

This study examined school counselors’ perceptions of bullying, cyberbullying, and sexting and their reported involvement in intervention. The correlation of policy and professional training on incidence level is discussed. Findings from the study reveal that over two thirds of school counselors surveyed report bullying to be a problem at their school. Cyberbullying is indicated as even more of a problem than bullying at the middle and high school levels. Close to one third of school counselors surveyed at the middle school and high school levels report sexting to be a problem. Wide variation in counselors’ roles in the intervention process is reported. Implications for schools, counselors, and counselor educators are discussed.

Keywords: bullying, cyberbullying, sexting, counseling
The problem of bullying in today’s digital age manifests itself not only in physical confrontations and aggressions but increasingly through online attacks. The repeated, unwanted aggressive behavior, whether played out in the school cafeteria or in the virtual hallways of social media, harms not only the intended victim but also influences a school’s climate and culture. It is no wonder, then, that schools have implemented various strategies and approaches to address bullying, cyberbullying, and sexting among students.

What is the role of the school counselor in intervening in bullying situations? While there exists a myriad of peer-reviewed articles related to the topic of bullying, such as peer victimization, sexual, racial, and homophobic harassment (Hong & Espelage, 2012; Poteat, Mereish, DiGiovanni, & Koenig, 2011), counseling the bully towards change, school-wide interventions (Bosworth & Judkins, 2014; Maher, Zins, & Elias, 2014) and using data to drive practices (D’Esposito, Blake, & Riccio, 2011; McAdams & Schmidt, 2007; Young et al., 2009), no national study currently exists on school counselors’ perceptions of bullying, cyberbullying, and sexting. Nor have there been any studies that have examined the role school counselors report to be asked to play in addressing such situations by school administration. Yet, counselors are often called into the front lines to intervene. Therefore, it is evident that more research is needed that examines counselors’ perceptions of bullying, cyberbullying, and sexting and their role in intervention if we are to make progress in creating a safe and positive learning environment for all students, on and off campus.

Scholarship investigating aggression between peers in school has been growing steadily since Dan Olweus published his early work on bullying, Aggression in the Schools: Bullies and Whipping Boys, in 1978. Several studies emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s that replicated Olweus’ work (1977, 1978, 1996, 2003) and established his terminology and methodology as the most influential in this field. Most of the early bullying studies attempted to quantify the prevalence and nature of bullying behaviors (Adair, Dixon, Moore, & Sutherland, 2000; Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Liang, Flisher, & Lombard, 2007), identified “bullies” and “victims” (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Ma, 2001; Solberg, Olweus, & Endresen, 2007), and measured the effectiveness of intervention programs (Black & Jackson, 2007; Edmondson & Hoover, 2008; Pepler, Craig, Ziegler, & Charach, 1994; Rahey & Craig, 2002).

Meanwhile, the literature on cyberbullying emerged around 2006 and followed similar trends in documenting prevalence (Li, 2007, 2010; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006), impacts (Slonje & Smith, 2008; Smith et al., 2008), experiences (Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2012), as well as prevention and intervention approaches (Paul, Smith, & Blumberg, 2012; Sokal, 2012; Tangen & Campbell, 2010; Toshack & Colmar, 2012; Wölfer et al., 2014; Wong-Lo, Bullock, & Gable, 2011). As with bullying and cyberbullying, the research on the relatively-recent phenomenon of sexting has sought primarily to quantify how many students are engaging in this behavior and its relationship to risky sexual and relationship behaviors (Dake, Price, Maziarz, & Ward, 2012; Hua, 2012; Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2012; Peskin et al., 2013; Rice et al., 2014; Rice et al., 2012; Strassberg, McKinnon, Sustaita, & Rullo, 2013; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). Only one study we identified on sexting compared parents and professional educators’ perceptions of cyberbullying and sexting (Nguyễn & Mark, 2014).
Given that 95% of youth are now online, the need to systematically examine the issue of cyberbullying and sexting proves paramount (Pew Research Center, 2013). The dearth of research that specifically examines bullying, cyberbullying, and sexting behaviors from the point of view of school counselors is quite surprising, too. After all, school counselors often work most closely with students and staff involved in such incidences. Therefore, this study helps to address this deficit.

Conducted with approximately 1,500 members of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), this study examined counselors’ perceptions of bullying, cyberbullying, and sexting. The study sought to reveal factors associated with counselors’ perceptions of these behaviors as well as the roles counselors report to play in handling such situations in their school. Specifically, this study addressed three main research questions:

1. To what extent do school counselors perceive bullying, cyberbullying, and sexting as a problem at their school?
2. Are factors including school policies and protocols, administrative responsiveness, professional development opportunities, or counselors’ own backgrounds associated with their perceptions of bullying, cyberbullying, or sexting?
3. In what ways do school counselors report being asked to intervene in bullying situations by their school administration?

Method

Participants
The 1,455 participants in the study were registered members or affiliates of the American School Counseling Association in 2013. Of those who responded to the demographic questions, 87% (n = 1262) were female and 13% (n = 189) were male. In terms of experience, 40% (n = 573) had more than 10 years of experience as a school counselor, 25% (n = 367) had between five to ten years, 15% (n = 216) had between three to five years, and 20% (n = 293) had less than 3 years. Thirty-eight percent (n = 556) reported having supervisory responsibilities.

Regarding school setting, 43% (n = 629) reported working in a suburban school setting, 32% (n = 458) worked in a rural setting while 25% (n = 362) worked in an urban setting. In terms of grade levels, 30% of respondents (n = 439) worked at the elementary level, 23% (n = 337) worked at the middle school level, 36% (n = 521) worked at the secondary or high school level, and 10% (n = 151) of the respondents worked in multi-grade level schools.

Instrument
A survey was designed to explore school counselors’ perceptions of bullying, cyberbullying, and sexting in addition to asking about school policies and professional training of staff. Survey questions were written by an expert in the counseling field who possessed extensive research in legal and ethical issues [Stone]. Content and face validity were established and tested and refined with practicing school counselors and with pre-service school counselor trainees. On October 26, 2012, 94 public school counselors, representing elementary, middle, and high school, and 14 graduate school counseling
students responded in writing as to the clarity of the questions. A comment section was provided for each question and responders were asked to remark on the clarity of questions. All suggestions were considered and items were added, dropped, or changed to provide focus and clarity. The newly revised questions were read by staff members of the American School Counselor Association and suggestions were considered with items added, dropped, or changed.

The final survey consisted of a total of 29 questions. Using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neutral, 4 = disagree, and 5 = strongly disagree), respondents were asked questions related to the extent of the problem behavior (bullying, cyberbullying, and sexting) in their school, the policies and approaches of the school and district in addressing these problems, administrative responsiveness to dealing with these behaviors as well as whether or not the school or district provided professional development.

In addition, respondents were asked how often they witnessed and reported bullying, whether or not they were mandated by a school board policy to report bullying incidents, and how often they had been approached by a member of the school to discuss a sexting incident involving a student in the last year. Additionally, five questions sought to explore the extent to which administrators involved counselors in addressing a bullying situation. Five questions concerning demographic variables were also included, such as: the main school setting (elementary, middle, secondary/high school, or multi-level), years of experience, gender, whether or not the counselor had supervisory responsibilities, and whether the school in which the counselor worked was urban, rural, or suburban.

Cronbach’s (1951) alpha coefficient of internal consistency was utilized as a reliability estimate for 22 questions on the scale associated with bullying, cyberbullying, and sexting. Results of Cronbach’s Alpha was 0.746, which indicates a good level of reliability (Field, 2005; George & Mallery, 2003).

Procedure

The survey was electronically circulated to ASCA’s membership database consisting of 48,703 school counselors and their affiliates. All recipients of the e-mail were invited to participate in a survey about bullying, sexting, and cyberbullying in the school in which they worked. Of those who received the e-mail invitation, 9,262 opened the invitation and 1,505 clicked on the link. Of those who clicked on the link, 1,455 elected to participate and provided valid entries (97% who opened the survey link completed and submitted the survey). The demographics of the database and the subgroup that opened the e-mail invitation to participate are not known. ASCA collected the data using Survey Builder and then provided the raw data to the authors for analysis.

The e-mail invitation stated that the results would be used in the third edition of *School Counseling Principles: Ethics and Law* (Stone, 2013). A link entitled “Take the Survey” appeared at the bottom of the e-mail. The survey was open for 2 days from April 15, 2013, and closed on April 17, 2013, and 1,455 participants ultimately responded to the survey.

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1 The authors use the gender neutral pronoun ‘they’ in this article to be inclusive of individuals of all gender identities and expressions.
Research Design

This exploratory study involved an examination of quantitative data collected through the use of a cross-sectional Web-based survey. Using a case available analysis, descriptive statistics, including percentages, were computed on all survey items to examine the general trends related to school counselors’ perceptions of bullying, cyberbullying, and sexting in the school in which the counselors worked. Inferential statistics were employed to explore how factors related to school policies, professional development, and counselors’ backgrounds were associated with their perceptions of bullying behaviors. Sampling ASCA members and affiliates, who possessed the knowledge of school contexts and professional qualifications essential for the study, enabled the identification of trends that might occur in the larger population of school counselors.

Data Analysis

In order to extrapolate meaningful data, survey questions concerning school policies, administrative responses and professional development were condensed from a 5-point Likert Scale (1 = Strongly Agree to 5 = Strongly Disagree) to a dichotomous scale (1 = Agree and 2 = Disagree). The Mann-Whitney U test, a rank-based non-parametric test, was utilized to determine whether there were significant differences in respondents’ reports of bullying, cyberbullying, or sexting according to variables such as school policies, administrative response, and opportunities for professional development.

The Kruskal Wallis H test, a non-parametric test often utilized as an alternative to the one-way ANOVA, was utilized to explore how factors related to school counselors’ background were associated with the respondents’ reports of problem behavior (bullying, cyberbullying, and sexting). Background variables included: the main school setting (elementary, middle, secondary/high school, or multi-level), years of experience, gender, whether or not the counselor had supervisory responsibilities, and whether the school in which the counselor worked was urban, rural, or suburban.

Data analyses for this study were conducted by non-parametric tests because a Likert scale was used in the survey instrument and there was no assumption that the data was normally distributed. Due to the fact that it is an exploratory analysis, non-parametric statistics offer a more conservative analysis and are thus appropriate for this study (Gibbons, 1993).

Results

Perceptions of Bullying, Cyberbullying, and Sexting

Many school counselors across grade levels perceived bullying to be a problem at their school. Findings revealed that 69% (n = 1,003) of school counselors across all grade levels agreed that bullying is a problem at their school. Specifically, 61% of elementary, 78% of middle school, and 71% of high school counselors in the study reported bullying to be a problem at their school (see Table 1). Similarly, 68% (n = 982) of school counselors agreed that cyberbullying is a problem. Meanwhile, close to one third of counselors (n = 465) agreed that sexting is a problem at the school in which they work. To determine the extent of bullying perceived at the school in which they work, the
majority of respondents (93%, n = 1,338) indicated that they relied on individual student reports of being bullied or witnessing bullying.

Table 1

Responses to the Question: Bullying, Cyberbullying or Sexting Is a Problem at My School by Grade Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Elementary</th>
<th>Middle School</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Multi-Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>(61%)</td>
<td>(78%)</td>
<td>(71%)</td>
<td>(67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 268</td>
<td>n = 263</td>
<td>n = 366</td>
<td>n = 101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>(16%)</td>
<td>(9%)</td>
<td>(9%)</td>
<td>(11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 69</td>
<td>n = 29</td>
<td>n = 48</td>
<td>n = 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyberbullying</td>
<td>(36%)</td>
<td>(83%)</td>
<td>(84%)</td>
<td>(70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 159</td>
<td>n = 280</td>
<td>n = 434</td>
<td>n = 105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>(36%)</td>
<td>(5%)</td>
<td>(6%)</td>
<td>(7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 159</td>
<td>n = 16</td>
<td>n = 33</td>
<td>n = 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexting</td>
<td>(6%)</td>
<td>(42%)</td>
<td>(47%)</td>
<td>(33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 25</td>
<td>n = 143</td>
<td>n = 245</td>
<td>n = 50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>(76%)</td>
<td>(23%)</td>
<td>(15%)</td>
<td>(34%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 334</td>
<td>n = 78</td>
<td>n = 78</td>
<td>n = 51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Neutral responses were excluded from this table.

Differences in school policies and administrative responses. Significant differences in the perceptions of bullying behavior were found between counselors who indicated that their school had intentional, well-thought-out policies and protocols related to bullying and those that did not. Counselors who agreed that their school had intentional and methodical procedures or protocols for handling acts of bullying were significantly less likely to perceive that bullying was a problem at their school (see Table 2).

Similar trends could be found when examining the differences in school policies and school counselors’ report of cyberbullying. School counselors who reported having a district cyberbullying policy (n = 876) were significantly less likely to perceive cyberbullying as an issue, $U = 88692.0$, $z = -2.364$, $p < .018$. Further, school counselors who reported that the school district’s cyberbullying policy was effective (n = 303) were also less likely to perceive cyberbullying as an issue at their school, $U = 39110.00$, $z = -6.45$, $p < .0005$.

Results from the survey also showed a variety of responses to how counselors perceive the administration deals with the student incidences of bullying. For example, 42% (n = 603) of respondents indicated that their school administration will occasionally bring the perpetrators of bullying together to address a bullying situation, while 22% (n =
indicated that their school administration never or almost never brought them together. Similar variations in perceptions of how the school administration involves school counselors in working with the bullies as part of the disciplining of bullying were also revealed in the survey. Thirty-five percent of respondents (n = 509) reported that they worked with bullies occasionally as part of the discipline process. On the other hand, 24% (n = 343) of respondents reported that they never, or almost never, worked with the bullies as part of the discipline process.

Table 2

Differences in Reported Levels of Bullying by School Policies and Administrative Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policies and Approaches</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean Rank</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>z</th>
<th>Asymp. (Sig) 2-tailed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My school has an intentional and methodical procedure for handling acts of bullying.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>993</td>
<td>638.24</td>
<td>88135.00</td>
<td>-6.06</td>
<td>p &lt; .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>498.70</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My school has a practical, well-thought-out, research based protocol for handling acts of bullying</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>637</td>
<td>568.94</td>
<td>98138.00</td>
<td>-7.267</td>
<td>p &lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>445.42</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My school uses a very informal approach when handling acts of bullying</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>554</td>
<td>557.29</td>
<td>155005.00</td>
<td>-4.078</td>
<td>p &lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>637</td>
<td>629.66</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Responsiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My school administration is responsive to acts of bullying</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>1234</td>
<td>672.49</td>
<td>33334.00</td>
<td>-5.81</td>
<td>p &lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>448.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My school administration is effective at responding to cyberbullying</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>680</td>
<td>478.85</td>
<td>71842.00</td>
<td>-3.35</td>
<td>p &lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>416.93</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Note: Likert Scale for question: Bullying [Cyberbullying] is a problem at my school: 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Disagree, and 5 = Strongly Disagree.
Not only did counselors report wide variation in how administrators asked them to respond to such situations, close to half (n = 663) of the counselors surveyed indicated that administrators occasionally involved school counselors in working with bullies instead of, or in place of, disciplining the bully. Moreover, more than 15% (n = 245) of respondents indicated that the administration involved them every time or almost every time instead of or in place of displacing the bully. The survey also revealed that more than 25% (n = 372) of respondents reported that the school administration asked them to do conflict resolution when the problem was actually a bullying situation and not a conflict.

Professional development opportunities. Results revealed that professional development opportunities were associated with differences in school counselors’ reports of bullying, cyberbullying, and sexting behavior. Respondents who agreed that district professional opportunities were available to all educators were significantly less likely to perceive bullying behavior than those who do not, $U = 149961.00$, $z = -3.04$, $p < .002$. Meanwhile, no significant differences were found in regards to the perception of cyberbullying or sexting behavior by district professional development opportunities.

Significant differences in the reporting of bullying, cyberbullying, and sexting were found among counselors who agreed that their school, rather than their district, offered professional development opportunities for all educators. School counselors who agreed that their school provided all educators professional development opportunities were less likely to perceive that bullying ($U = 144171.00$, $z = -3.218$, $p < .001$), cyberbullying ($U = 142281$, $z = -2.852$, $p < .004$), or sexting ($U = 149770.00$, $z = -2.01$, $p < .05$) was a problem at their school.

School counselors’ background factors. Significant differences in perceptions of bullying behavior were found according to the grade level in which the counselor worked, school setting, and gender. For example, differences in perceptions of bully behaviors were found between counselors working at different grade levels, $H(3) = 34.29$, $p < .001$. Pairwise comparisons were performed using Dunn’s (1964) procedure with a Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons. The post hoc analysis revealed that school counselors working at the middle school level were significantly more likely to perceive bullying ($U = 58066.50$, $z = -5.704$, $p < .0005$), cyberbullying ($U = 29498.50$, $z = -14.81$, $p < .0005$), and sexting ($U = 26474.00$, $z = -15.89$, $p < .0005$) as a problem at their school in comparison with school counselors working at the elementary school level. No other significant difference were found among grade level.

In terms of school setting and gender, school counselors in rural settings were significantly more likely than counselors in urban or suburban settings to perceive that bullying was a problem, $H(2) = 7.44$, $p = .024$. And female school counselors were more likely to perceive that bullying was an issue than males, $U = 106127.00$, $z = -2.7$, $p < .008$. The survey did not include transgender as an option in the demographics section; therefore, we do not have data on this population.

Discussion

This national study conducted with close to 1,500 members of the ASCA database revealed that the majority of school counselors perceive bullying to be a problem at their school, across all grade levels. More importantly, counselors report an increased threat in
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the virtual world, with an even greater number of school counselors at the middle school and high school levels perceiving cyberbullying to be a problem. Meanwhile, nearly half of the school counselors at the high school level perceived sexting to be a problem. This suggests that many of these incidences occur out of the sight of administrators or other school professionals. With the pervasiveness of online technology, school safety cannot be limited to an on-campus setting but needs to include the myriad of ways students today interact, including in online environments.

What factors are perceived to help mitigate bullying behavior? Our study found that school counselors who reported that their school had a practical, well-thought-out, research-based protocol to handle acts of bullying were significantly less likely to perceive bullying as a problem at their school. Further, school counselors who felt that their administration had clear policies for acts of bullying and cyberbullying and were responsive in enforcing such policies were also less likely to perceive these issues as problems at their school.

Meanwhile, findings revealed wide variation in the way counselors’ perceived their administration’s handling of acts of bullying, including the role of the school counselor in such situations. For example, in our study, close to half of the school counselors surveyed reported that their administration will sometimes bring the perpetrators of bullying together to address a bullying situation. However, research shows bringing the perpetrators together in an intervention such as group therapy may inadvertently cause students’ behavior to worsen. Because group members often imitate each other, this type of intervention aimed to help students regulate their own emotions and change their behavior may, in fact, encourage further antisocial or bullying behavior (Farrington & Welsh, 2007).

Our study found that 15% of counselors indicated that every time, or almost every time, their school administration involved them in working with bullies instead of disciplining the bully. Additionally, more than a quarter of school counselors agreed or strongly agreed that their school administration asks them to do conflict resolution when the problem is actually a bullying situation. These findings are problematic when considering that bullying is not a conflict but is rather a form of victimization where a power imbalance is present. It is also illegal in all 50 states. Illegal activity in secondary education is a discipline issue not a counseling issue. Using conflict resolution to address the situation may send unintended messages that the victim is somewhat to blame for the incident(s) and must play a part in the resolution of their own victimization, rather than expecting that the inappropriate behavior on the part of the bully stop. Further, bringing a victim and their perpetrator together can be very upsetting and even traumatizing to the one who has been bullied and is another reason why conflict resolution or peer mediation is not advisable, beyond the crucial fact that there is no evidence that these methods work (Limber & Snyder, 2006).

Beyond school policies and administrative responses, our study also found a correlation between professional development and school counselors’ perceptions of bullying, cyberbullying, and sexting. Findings showed that professional development opportunities at both the district level and school site were associated with lower reported incidences of bullying. However, findings also revealed that professional training at the specific school site (rather than at the district level) was significantly correlated with lower reports of cyberbullying and sexting. Therefore, it appears that staff training,
individualized for the specific school site, may have a greater impact on reducing cyberbullying and sexting than more generalized training at the district or state level.

**Implications for School Counselors**

This study clearly shows that counselors who report that they work in schools with effective school policies and procedures, a responsive administration, and the opportunity for professional development at the school level are less likely to perceive bullying, cyberbullying, and sexting as a problem at their school. These findings parallel other such studies, including the study by Sherer and Nickerson (2010) of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), who suggested that the three anti-bullying strategies most in need of improvement were staff education and training, bullying reporting procedures, and school-wide positive behavior support plans.

Meanwhile, the wide variation of roles that counselors report being asked to play by their administration, as revealed in this nationwide study, may be undermining school counselors’ ability to effectively respond to bullying situations. This may also make it more difficult to support positive behavior change and growth among students. Given that school counselors are often involved in resolving bullying incidences, it is imperative that the school administration involve counselors in the discussion and creation of well-defined school policies. A strong policy would help ensure that their professional expertise would shape school practices and improve communication and understanding of roles and responsibilities among administrative and counseling staff.

Our study also suggests that school policies should include a comprehensive approach to the bullying issue that addresses both on campus and online spaces where students interact. Protocols and research-based practices, including a menu of effective administrative responses to these acts of bullying and high quality and ongoing professional development will be key. The federal government has created a Web site of research-based interventions that can be accessed at [www.stopbullying.gov](http://www.stopbullying.gov). Meanwhile, professional development offered at the specific school site, rather than the district level, may be more effective at reducing incidences of bullying, cyberbullying, and sexting. Such programs must include the involvement and collaboration of the school counselor who plays an important role in helping to support students’ well-being both on and off campus—as interactions with peers spill over into virtual spaces.

Further, it will be important that counselors work together with administration to define the role that they play within any type of interventions regarding bullying, cyberbullying, or sexting. Because school counselors have advanced degrees in their field, it can be expected that they collaborate as leaders within their school administration and work together to identify what types of interventions are appropriate for both the victim as well as the bully. The bully may have also been a prior victim of abuse or neglect and bullying involvement in any capacity is associated with suicide ideation and behavior (Holt et al., 2015). Therefore, all students involved in such incidences may benefit from professional therapy or other rehabilitative services. School counselors are trained to be able to identify appropriate community resources and refer students to obtain outside help that may be needed in cases such as these.

Aside from working reactively to bullying, cyberbullying, and sexting situations as they arise, school counselors are trained to provide guidance lessons and other activities to help educate students about the impact of bullying and the harm that it can do
to others. Mindfulness, including health and wellness programs that help to cultivate resilience, empathy, self-control, and perspective taking—essential non-cognitive skills associated with academic and social success—may help to create a positive school climate (Duckworth, Gendler, & Gross, 2014; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Discussions about such climate must take into account not only the physical space students inhabit but their virtual spaces and personas as well. School counselors can take the lead in the development of these programs as the school administration focuses on establishing and enforcing rules and systematic protocols to create safe spaces on campus and in virtual environments, as much as possible, for students to learn and thrive.

Given the increasing workload for many school counselors across the nation and the immensely high counselor to student ratio, it is imperative that school counselors do not try to go at this issue alone. Building and working together as a team with the school administration and school district, requesting professional development funds to bring in speakers or training, and attending workshops and conferences can help a school counselor build a network of resources. Further training on how counselors may use online technologies to help and support students in this space may also be especially impactful as we recognize that students’ lives are increasingly lived both in a physical and virtual world.

In terms of training in technology, it is here that counselor education programs can best support counseling candidates by ensuring that programs remain current with the technologies and the trends. The counseling education curriculum must remain dynamic to support the fast changing realities of the social world that students inhabit, both physically and virtually. Furthermore, counseling programs can support candidates in researching school and district policies with respect to their role as a counselor in a bullying situation. Role playing and other communication practices, developed and led by counselor educators, can assist new school counselors in effectively opening dialogue and taking leadership roles in developing school-based interventions. That way, counselors can participate most effectively in situations involving, bullying, cyberbullying, and sexting incidences and provide the support and help that students need.

Limitations and Further Research

In terms of the procedure, the limited amount of time the survey was available may have restricted the final sample size in the study. Further, the study included only ASCA members who elected to take the survey rather than a random selection of school counselors. Therefore, we encourage further studies to examine how the findings in this survey might be utilized to develop qualitative studies or case studies that seek to confirm and further explore these trends.

Conclusion

It is clear from this study that school counselors across every grade level perceive bullying to be a problem at their school. Counselors working in middle school and high school report cyberbullying to be an even larger problem than bullying. Almost half of the school counselors working in high schools indicated that sexting is a problem. It is evident from the findings that bullying and harassment are not limited to the classroom or campus, but can invade students’ private spaces outside of school. Given these trends, it
is imperative that counselor training include addressing student safety in the digital realm and that practicing school counselors be offered up-to-date professional training at their school site, which our study suggests may be more effective than training at the district level.

School administrations must work collaboratively with school counselors to create comprehensive school policies and protocols for addressing these incidences of bullying, cyberbullying, and sexting both on and off campus. Our study revealed that school counselors are asked to play very different roles in bullying situations across schools and districts nationwide. While an individualized approach is often helpful in intervening in a bullying situation, our study makes it clear that many school counselors are expected to play a role in discipline or policy enforcement that can undermine their effectiveness in supporting students’ ability to make positive behavior changes. In fact, it may inadvertently make a situation worse, rather than better. Therefore, care must be taken to ensure that counselors seek to help the student rather than enforce discipline, marking a clear distinction in the counselor and administrative role in these situations.

References


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