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The School System's Role in Cyberbullying

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Abstract: The digital age has expanded the problem of bullying onto online platforms, which serve as adult-free havens for children to congregate and inflict pain on one another. This paper examines the role of the school system in cases of cyberbullying occurring off-campus. I argue that the school system carries a tremendous responsibility to monitor and prevent cyberbullying because of its commitment to education and teaching good citizenship for a global society, its obligation to offer aid and protection to those in need, and its duty to provide an academically conducive environment for kids to learn. The potential infringement on 1st amendment student rights, the responsibility of parents to monitor and teach children right from wrong, and the problematic integration of cyberbullying education into current school curriculum are addressed as objections and discredited through counterclaims and using Utilitarian perspectives. This paper demonstrates why holding the school system responsible for Internet safety education is the most beneficial strategy for cultivating a safe environment in our increasingly online society. The responsibility, empathy, and maturity needed to prevent cyberbullying are best taught consistently and within existing school curricula. The school system should have the power to educate and protect its students because the aspects of good citizenship that are tied to Internet education should be treated as indispensible traits integral to a well-rounded education.
Introduction

The social concept of bullying is nothing new; for many decades, children have been teasing and tormenting each other about their looks, weight, intelligence, and just about anything else that differentiates them from each other. More recently, however, the concept of bullying has been transformed by communication technologies and has expanded into what can be considered a much more damaging evil. Cyberbullying is defined as “a social problem of harassment, intimidation, bullying, and unjustified aggressiveness, using digital devices” (Ortega-Ruiz and Nunez). Twenty-first century cyberbullies are empowered by the notion that they are protected behind a computer or cell phone screen that allows them to inflict pain on others with the click of a mouse or push of a button. Examples of cyberbullying including posting embarrassing or incriminating pictures or videos of another on the Internet, revealing harmful information or slandering one another, and creating fake or anonymous accounts on websites in order to harass one another. This variation of childhood cruelty is particularly damaging because what is published in cyberspace will remain there indefinitely, potentially haunting the future of any involved student. Moreover, few rules prevent cyberbullies from attacking victims online because what happens in cyberspace is considered to be outside of the scope of power of the school system, causing parts of the Internet to be an adult-free haven and vehicle for harassment.

What occurs in the schoolyard is clearly the responsibility of the school system. When a physical fight or verbal dispute takes place, perhaps over a classroom disagreement, it is the school’s job to interfere and discipline those involved to maintain order and prevent more serious problems. In the new age of cyberbullying, though, the rights of schools have been questioned
when the bullying does not occur physically on the grounds of the school. What power does a school have to dictate the speech and choices of students after hours?

In this essay, I will argue that a school system carries a tremendous ethical responsibility to monitor and prevent cyberbullying among its students. In the beginning of the paper, I will claim that schools are responsible for honoring their commitment to education of the world’s youth because they have an obligation to the community, including teaching them how to prosper in a global society that frequently operates online. Good citizenship should be treated as an indispensible trait that needs to be acquired through education, and in a digital age, the online aspects of our culture should encompass this too. The school system should be held accountable for providing aid and resources to students who are in need. Lastly, as an academic institution, a school should present and maintain an academically conducive environment that encourages students to learn and grow in a safe place.

Within the context of this paper, the aforementioned ‘School System’ as it refers to individuals will be defined as any adult faculty member at an educational institution. It will be argued that the school’s responsibility to prevent cyberbullying encompasses providing education and actively discouraging student participation in its practice, as well as monitoring it by watching for signs of victimization and interfering when necessary. This paper contributes to the philosophical discussion on the issue of cyberbullying in that it emphasizes the importance of education and attention to the subject matter as opposed to simply addressing the school’s right or duty to punish cybercrimes. I provide a very practical approach for the integration of this dialogue into existing school curricula that only requires the school system to give credence to the topic in order to implement it. This will help better our society by raising children with heightened integrity.
Arguments

Upstanding the Commitment to Education and Teaching Good Citizenship for a Global Society

By pursuing their career with children and making themselves mentors to the young people of our society, all faculty involved in the school system have made a commitment to provide children with a comprehensive education. The core subjects of academia, such as math and science, cannot be considered the complete educational package. Students need a strong moral foundation on which to build throughout their lifetime. Traits such as responsibility, maturity, empathy, and selflessness are essential components of the well-rounded student ready for global citizenship.

Many are eager to write off cyberbullying as the responsibility of parents to teach, but studies have shown that perhaps there are better people for the job. Moreno, Egan, and Bare present a study showing that an ideal candidate for teaching Internet safety would have experience teaching about other safety issues and be willing to invest in the topic. School faculties seem to fit this description, and definitely ought to invest in the matter since it would benefit their world. Although it is not yet considered a fundamental part of education, online behavior is an intrinsic part of the culture being fostered by the 21st century. Elemental to the practice of Internet safety are the aforementioned traits of responsibility and maturity. The school system has a duty to promote these because they have the resources to discipline and enforce the rules in a deliberate environment in which impressionable children spend their time.

In order to educate for responsibility, the school system must teach about obligations and duties while fostering values and motivations that elicit a genuine desire from students to assume them. As opposed to expecting compliance from students who blindly follow rules, schools should alter curricula in order to stimulate “authentic, personal moral reasoning” (Rowe 2006).
Students must be taught why the rules are in place and learn to have respect for the welfare of others. This development of pro-social behavior contributes to a fulfilling life and a successful educational system. By deliberately teaching behaviors and attitudes of mutual respect for others, the school can ensure that students become good citizens in all aspects of their lives (Ortega-Ruiz and Nunez).

As soon as possible, children should be exposed to the Social Contract Theory, which they are bound to as citizens of society. Through this theory, Hobbes explains that rational people in a society will accept rules tied to social living that they benefit from so long as everyone else accepts them, too, in order to live in a fair world (Rachels). This theory allows children to learn why their positive societal contributions are necessary. Applying the Golden Rule to life scenarios for children is an effective way of instituting morality and this can be easily reinforced by the school system; children should be taught to treat others how they would want to be treated and understand how this mentality can spread.

Offering Aid and Protection to Those in Need

As ethical actors in society, when members of the school faculty see a student suffering, they have a moral obligation to stop, monitor, and prevent this. They ought to do this because as adults, they have influence and natural power over the situation; assisting the students would not cause harm to the adult or any inconvenience that is not justified. This interference is especially important in cases of cyberbullying because teenagers are unlikely to report incidents, fearing further torment or not believing that adults removed from the situation can help. By taking a stand against cyberbullying behavior, school policies that address the issue will be a natural deterrent against future cyberbullying and a way to encourage students to report the problem.
The current school system method of ignoring the problem of cyberbullying does no
good for the student body, still suffering from the torment of their peers, but instead having no
rules or regulations within the school to protect them from victimization. Due to the attribution
that this epidemic is not the responsibility of the school, the system is turning a blind eye to those
in need. Interventions aimed at the prevention and monitoring of cyberbullying need to transform
neutral attitudes toward the problem into negative attitudes (Ortega-Ruiz and Nunez). This is a
minor change in attribution that can make a major difference. The school system has a duty to
make this change to acknowledge the very real problem of cyberbullying.

Giving this power to the school system is beneficial because it protects all children,
aggressors and victims alike, from endangering themselves. The aggressors of a situation who
exhibit questionable behavior should be targeted for education because not only is their behavior
damaging the well-being of others, but they are also hurting their own ethical development
(Ortega-Ruiz and Nunez). Providing emotional support can help establish a sense of trust within
the school to protect its students, creating a more productive academic system with fewer at-risk
children.

The school is an indispensable resource to solve the problem of cyberbullying because no
other place will have a congregation of students together in a methodized environment. School
faculty can implement extracurricular activities that develop friendships and heighten self
esteem, introducing the importance of teamwork and communication. Educational resources are
easily adaptable to fit the needs of many students, and cyberbullying is often correlated with
social problems or issues at home. Utilizing mentorship and volunteering programs, schools can
and should try to counsel students dealing with these issues.
Creating an Academically Conducive Environment

Cyberbullying behaviors can cause severe trauma for students in a classroom setting, where they are expected to develop a strong foundation of knowledge for higher learning. This causes a sense of isolation, fear, hopelessness, and depression among victims, which can go on to increase delinquency (Froeschle, Mayorga and Castillo). There is an increased risk of physical altercation and fear of other students; it has been reported that victims of cyberbullying are eight times more likely to report bringing weapons to school (Billitteri). Not only is this behavior detrimental to individual students, but it is also poisonous to the climate within a school. Especially at impressionable ages, environments that allow social tensions and interactions to become more significant than the academic material learned will neither galvanize complex thought processes nor elicit the highest performance possible. This lack of focus can lead to students harboring agitation towards one another, only to unleash that anger on the Internet outside of school, which contributes to a vicious cycle.

There is tremendous psychological evidence to support the idea that in order for cyberbullies to harass others, they count on an environment that is anonymous and adult-free (Froeschle, Mayorga and Castillo). The school system absolutely has a power to put a stop to this behavior and should do so by establishing policies that extend beyond the classroom to encompass control over behavior that has a negative impact on the classroom experience. One suggestion on how to go about this is to write a policy that addresses the problem of cyberbullying and to ask families to sign it every year. This provides a binding document that gives the school legal power to interfere in online conflict and maintain an academically conducive environment (Billitteri).
Objections to the Arguments

Infringing on Student Rights (Freedom of Expression and Speech)

A good argument for the case of schools staying out of cyberbullying conflicts is that getting involved in such matters infringes on the rights that public school students possess. Students have the right to free speech and to freedom of expression. While these are restricted on school grounds, because students may not cause disruptions to the school environment, it is widely claimed that schools should not monitor student expression after hours. Taking control would contribute to the idea that students are stifled and not allowed an elective persona, even outside of school. Many things can affect student school performance that happen after hours, such as a student’s diet, parenting styles, and socioeconomic status, but the school does not and should not have control over these things, so student speech should not be controlled either.

Furthermore, it is simply not right, nor plausible, to punish a student because another took offense to something written, even though it was not intended to be directly harmful. The public school system deals with a diverse group of families with diverse values regarding how to raise children. Since the perpetrators are, after all, children, they should be taught about their wrongdoings instead of just punished.

In schools where policies have been enacted to allow faculty to search student devices if brought onto the campus and thought to have been used to cause harm to another, the guidelines in place for these policies are highly criticized for fear of the school having too much access to the student’s life (Ahrens).

Although families argue that what is done off campus is a private matter and not the concern of schools, this argument is discredited by the idea that nothing exists solely “off-
“campus” since it is inevitably brought on campus by students. Disputes among students involve matters of rights, duties, and social justice, which are important to the development of individual intellect as well as the well being of the public (Rowe). Schools have a duty to take every opportunity available to provide a context in which citizenship learning can be taught and enforced.

Students who publish their condemning and hurtful opinions online, furthermore, are forfeiting their right to privacy; an online education would surely teach them this, and the fact that many arguments against cyberbullying education lack this logic is indicative of where the argument stands. What is published on the Internet can never fully be erased, and by making a public statement using communication technologies, there is no going back from the words that are stamped alongside one’s name.

My argument emphasizes that schools should not be looking to punish students and infringe on their rights, but rather to educate them about their decisions and how those decisions affect others before harm can be done. It is necessary to give the school power and responsibility to educate, monitor, and prevent as baseline and plausible system rights. One can lead a horse to water, but one cannot make him drink; the school system can provide an education and many preventative measures, but if students stray from this and go on to commit cybercrimes, their potential punishment in a court of law is due and just, and not at all a violation of personal rights. By providing education, the school does not overstep any moral boundaries.

Cyberbullying Education is the Responsibility of the Parents

Some believe that the school has no responsibility to prevent and monitor online cyberbullying because this is the responsibility of the parents. By giving students the tools and
knowledge to problem solve and think for themselves, the school system has done their part for student education. Intervention in social issues can be dangerous; if a policy is established that allows action against cyberbullying, cases that are not stopped will be blamed on the school system, causing a slippery slope effect that makes them liable for damages.

Since they choose to bring a child into the world who has to function in a society, many believe parents should accept responsibility for teaching lessons relevant to the times. Parents should assume more of a role in monitoring and educating their children’s online behavior by explaining concepts of privacy, cause and effect, and empathy towards others. It is claimed that parents can do this better than a teacher because of the time and attention they have to dedicate to their children. In addition, they are the ones who provide Internet access to the child, therefore they should be the ones to educate and monitor online behavior. If moral education as well as academic education is the responsibility of the school system, what is the responsibility of the parents? Children’s emotional and moral development needs love, care, attention, and persistence that only parents can be effective in providing. Moreover, it is perceived as neither the school system’s job nor right to dictate what values a student should possess.

I whole-heartedly agree that parents need to play a bigger role in cyberbully prevention. However, parents who are behind the times, underestimate their children, or are simply not concerned with online education produce students who are highly detrimental to the system and cannot be stopped under current school policies. Who should take responsibility to stop this? Children need to be educated, and we cannot rely solely on parents to get the job done correctly. Those who approach the topic should be trained and consistent to secure the well-being and proper education of students.
This autonomy makes people apprehensive; individuals do not want a system to tell them how they ought to behave, especially in the midst of such social controversy over online privacy. From a Utilitarian perspective, however, giving the school system power to monitor and prevent cyberbullying would cause the most good for the most people. While some families may feel their rights are violated and their free will is infringed on, all families will benefit from a better-educated, more efficacious, and more self-aware student body. Even the families who claim to not want to be included in the system’s prescribed educational plan are included in this benefit; if this is still not up to par with their societal standards and interpretations of legal rights, other educational options for their children are available, such as private or home schooling. It isn’t, however, necessarily difficult for a child to not say hurtful things on the Internet. Digital wrongdoing is widely avoidable with the proper instruction, which only a consistent system can provide. This is why schools ought to fight for the right to play a role in online education.

_Cyberbullying Education Does Not Fit into the Schools’ Curriculum_

School board officials, concerned with teacher wages and meeting state expectations in regards to educational goals, have made the case that cyberbullying education, prevention, and monitoring doesn’t fit anywhere in the schools’ curriculum. While teachers uniformly support online safety education hypothetically, practical problems still arise in the development of material (Moreno, Egan and Bare). Whether or not resources for this are available to the school to implement programs like those suggested, school districts cannot seem to come to a conclusion on which grade is the best to start teaching children about Internet safety, as well as what part of the curricula this material could best be integrated. Since this issue is such a new-age problem, it is possible that adults do not feel qualified or experienced enough to teach about
this topic, causing further apprehension about making official installations for it in the school curricula.

Thankfully, longer schooldays and additional coursework are not necessary to achieve the goal of teaching children how to use communication technologies safely and effectively. This type of lesson can be integrated into existing subject areas, such as reading classes in elementary school. Stories teach reading comprehension, grammar, and writing, but they also have inherent themes that intrigue students and prompt discussion. Narratives teach moral and social rules that children model in their lives. By being purposeful about selected content, teachers can mold lesson plans to encompass lessons on online safety and cyberbullying. Identifying with characters in a story improves student abilities to identify and empathize with others, decreasing aggressive behaviors (Froeschle, Mayorga and Castillo). Another resource to be utilized within the school system is counselors, paid and trained to offer emotional support and guidance with more time to contribute to high-demand issues, such as cyberbullying.

The idea that online education does not fit into a school’s curriculum is irresponsible, since schools offer online access to students for projects and encourage students to join the online community by assigning them projects that require it. In any environment in which there is room for an online community, there should morally be room for online education to take place.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the school system has a duty to monitor and prevent online cyberbullying. As an educational institution, a school should be morally obligated to do everything in their
power to provide a well-rounded education for students that encompasses lessons on good social
citizenship and moral development as a core theme wherever possible. Even though the majority
of cyberbullying does not take place in connection with the school, the classroom is where
students come together and can easily become a hostile place not conducive to learning. In all
regards, the school system should strive to create and maintain an academically conducive
environment to increase student prosperity and comfort. As ethical actors, teachers and
administrators have a moral duty to help those who are clearly in need; the victims and
aggressors of cyberbullying often carry deep-rooted problems that need attention, and the school
has numerous resources to help them. While some may argue that this education is the parents’
responsibility or that dictating values that students should possess is an infringement on student
rights, the Utilitarian perspective justifies the intervention because of the good that it would
provide the entire community, covering ground that parents cannot cover and providing a
consistent and safe place for students to grow. Further developments regarding cyberbullying
research should determine the most effective way to continuously encourage morally sound
behavior in the lives of students outside of the school system in order to produce the greatest
societal benefit possible.
Bibliography


