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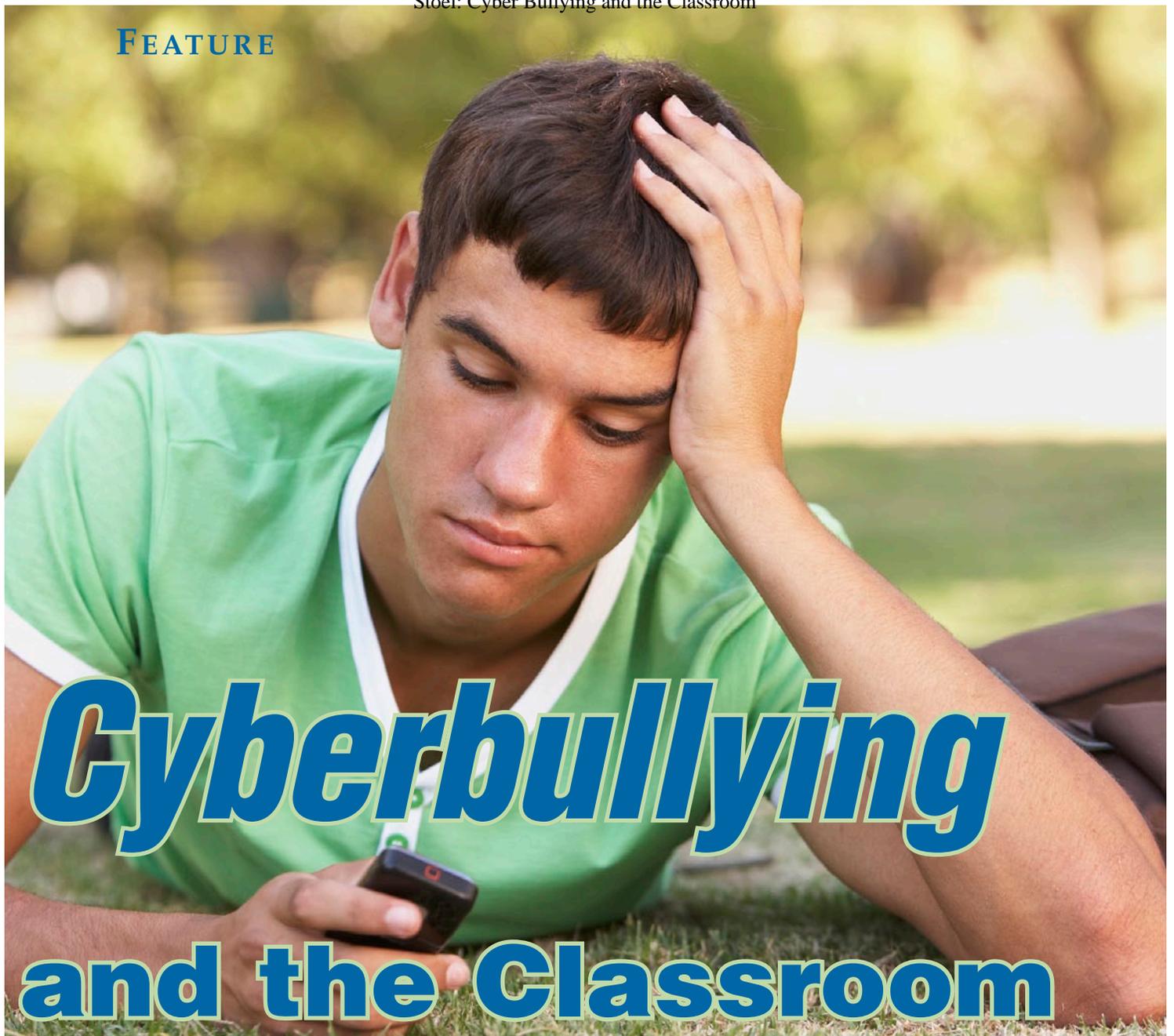
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FEATURE



Cyberbullying and the Classroom

By Courtney Stoel, GVSU Student

The Bullying Problem Goes Digital

School needs to be a place where students can feel safe, as well as be a place that fosters optimum learning. Bullying is a problem that can undermine the quality of education children receive. Traditional bullying is taking on a new direction. In an age of growing technology, cyberbullying has become an area of great concern, especially in the schools (Mason, 2009). Cyberbullying can be defined as a "pervasive intimidation method that can happen to any youth using electronic communication tools" (Juvonen & Gross, 2008, p. 497). According to Juvonen and Gross, one third of students 12 to 17 years of age are victims of cyberbullying. This includes students being threatened or embarrassed because of information about them sent over the internet or posted on social networking sites. A 2006 study showed that cyberbullying

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among teens and preteens has increased 50 percent in the last five years due to the increased social networking sites and instant/text messaging ability (Pergolizzi, Richmond, Macario, Gan, Richmond, Macario, 2009). According to the study done by Pergolizzi, et al., four out of five seventh and eighth grade students feel that cyberbullying is a problem in their school. According to Li (2006), one out of five middle school students are cybervictims.

Importance of the Problem

Cyberbullying has several negative effects on adolescents, including a decreased quality in their academic performance (Mason, 2008). Victims of cyberbullying are often likely to disengage from school causing their academic standing to dwindle (Bhat, 2008). Cyberbullying can also have tremendous psychological effects on adolescents in that they experience feelings of sadness

and depression (Li, 2008). Incidents of cyberbullying are been shown to be related to emotional distress (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Mason, 2008), psychological trauma, and can cause the young person to feel like there is no safe place to get away (Bhat, 2008). In extreme cases, cyberbullying can lead to serious violence and even potential suicide (Mason, 2008). It is vital for school counselors and teachers to work together alongside parents to better understand the problem and come up with ways to prevent cyberbullying in their school.

Background of the Problem

According to the Internet World Stats, in 2007 there were 1,319,872,109 internet users in the world (Bhat, 2008). The United States was first among the top twenty countries with the most internet usage. Not only is internet usage increasing, but the use of cell phones

by young people is also on the rise. In 2006, close to 50 percent of adolescents reported owning a cell phone, and of these adolescents, over 50 percent said they texted regularly (Mason, 2008). With increased interest in the use of the internet, instant messaging, text messaging, blogs, and chat rooms as well as social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, there has been a shift from the traditional form of bullying to an electronic form of bullying—cyberbullying (Chibbaro, 2007).

Traditionally, bullying would be categorized as being deliberate (Hoff & Mitchell, 2008) and has been equated to more physical acts of violence (Mason, 2008). Cyberbullying is more indirect, and takes bullying to a whole new level because it usually involves adolescents conspiring against their peer or group of peers, and facilitating deliberate and repeated threats by posting cruel texts, and or graphics using phone, internet, or another form of technology (Mason, 2008). According to a study done in 2008, the most common avenue for cyberbullying was through the use of instant messaging (19%) and message boards (16%) (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). This same study found that those who are heavy internet users are more likely to experience cyberbullying. According to another researcher, computers and cell phones were the most common avenue through which cyberbullying takes place (Mason, 2008).

Cyberbullies are able to hide their identity through the use of screen names, leaving the victim feeling vulnerable. The use of technology makes it possible for cyberbullying to be done secretly and easier to share with their peers more quickly (Li, 2009). With the advances in technology, supervision of teens has become extremely difficult and has given cyberbullies a sense of power and control (Bhat, 2008). Similar to bullying, cyberbullying is centered on the abuse of power and control over another person who is perceived to be vulnerable and weaker, making it very difficult for the person being bullied to defend him- or herself (Mason, 2008).

Research would indicate that students who use an indirect method of bullying are not able to take the perspective of others and have low empathic responsiveness, which increases the level of bullying (Ang & Gho, 2010). The use of technology reduces the sensitivity that a young person has for another individual and his/her surroundings. Research would also suggest that cyberbullying most frequently occurs because of relationship issues. According to Hoff and Mitchell (2008), the most common relationship issues that result in cyberbullying are breakups (41%), envy (20%), intolerance (16%) and ganging up (14%). Students between the ages of 12 and 16 cannot handle social tensions and schools are responsible for teaching children to handle social tensions in a positive way.

Since so many occurrences are outside of school, it is difficult for teachers,



administrators and even school counselors to know that it is an issue (Mason, 2008). Many students have the attitude that adults in school will not do anything about cyberbullying if they were told about it (Li, 2006). Bystanders also feel that if they tell their parents about it, their internet usage will be taken away from them (Jevonen & Gross, 2008). Those who witness bullying or who are bullied, fear telling teachers or school staff members because they think either it will only make the situation worse, they will not be taken seriously, and/or they fear retaliation from the bully (McElearney, Roosmala-Cocq, Stephenson & Stephenson, 2008). Many victims and bystanders of cyberbullying do not report incidences to teachers or administrators.

In addition, there are also legal considerations to take into account. Many adolescents argue that cyberbullying is an exercise of their First Amendment right to free speech. However, it has been upheld in court that schools have the right to punish a student for cyberbullying if it is done on school grounds and/or it is interrupting valuable class learning (Mason, 2008). If cyberbullying occurs off school property and is not interfering with classroom activities, the school cannot impose consequences for the student who is bullying another student. The court has stated that threatening or offensive speech does not need to be tolerated in the schools and cannot go ignored by school staff. Furthermore, concerning cyberbullying, the court has ruled that schools should teach students to act appropriately in society (Mason, 2008).

With the increased usage in technology in the classroom, cyberbullying has become an issue of concern for teachers and administrators. The increase in the use of technology has made it easier for cyberbullying to occur in the classroom. Because of the legal ramifications, schools have been encouraged

to set guidelines for the appropriate use of computers. Students in some districts are required to sign “acceptable use policies,” agreeing to acceptable use of the internet (Mason, 2008). Other schools have intervened more at the classroom level by implementing cyberbullying into life skills training, where they already learn the value of effective social skills and conflict resolution skills.

While school administrators feel somewhat helpless in trying to stop cyberbullying (Beale & Hall, 2007), they need to start protecting their students from relational aggression as it relates to the world of technology. Schools have a mandated responsibility to give their students a quality education and when students are daily faced with cyberbullying, it affects their learning in a profound manner (Bhat, 2008). ☑

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