A new decade for social changes
Can teachers be victims of cyberbullying?

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Abstract. Cyberbullying is a social phenomenon that takes place with the help of technology and that causes suffering to victims. Children being attracted to it and not having enough knowledge about the safe use of technological devices have become potential victims of this phenomenon. In order to prevent and reduce this phenomenon, most researchers have turned their attention to combating online bullying among teenagers. But, they lose sight of the fact that cyberbullying does not take into account gender, age or status and neglect the teachers. According to the few studies on online aggression against teachers, the effects of this phenomenon are similar to those experienced by children, such as: anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, frustration, weight loss, insomnia, somatization, low motivation, and low professional performance. In order to identify the level of victimization among teachers, we conducted a focus group with 12 teachers from primary, secondary and high school education. The analysis of the answers revealed that online aggression against teachers is generally present in middle and high school education and is influenced by digital skills. This article aims to highlight the need to create a positive school climate that helps teachers, students and parents to communicate assertively and develop harmonious relationships.

Keywords. cyberbullying, students, teachers, parents, aggression

Introduction

Technology has become a part of our lives. It is used in all fields of activity, from education to health, as it makes our work easier, helps us to communicate faster, to inform ourselves, to learn, but also to have fun. Like anything else, in addition to these advantages, it also has a number of disadvantages when it is used improperly. Specifically, technology becomes a threat to our well-being [1] when it is used to harass, threaten, ridicule, exclude, or defame others. The use of technology for these negative purposes is called cyberbullying. This phenomenon is characterized by: use of technology, frequency, intentionality, anonymity and unequal power ratio [2].

- Frequency refers to the constant aggression of the victim over several days at any time. In other words, the victim is assaulted several times a week by one or more aggressors, who use various devices and methods of aggression designed to cause suffering.
- Intentionality appeals to the aggressor's express desire to cause suffering to the victim. Aggressors are not able to perceive or empathize with the victim's suffering, because otherwise they would stop this behavior.

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The anonymous character refers to the difficulty of identifying the perpetrator and punishing him [3]. The anonymous character also creates an unequal power relationship between the victim and the aggressor. Thus, as long as there are no consequences, any person can play the role of aggressor.

These features of cyberbullying are supported by the development of technology that gives the aggressor the freedom to choose the best device for aggression (phone, tablet, computer, laptop), but also the social networks that easily provide information about everyone to anyone. Therefore, it is important for Internet users to pay attention to the privacy settings of social networks and to limit public posts that contain personal information.

**Ways and causes of online aggression**

Cyberbullying can be carried out in a variety of ways, because it evolves as technology progresses, and so we can talk about: messages, phone calls, emails, websites, blogs, sharing video and photo content etc. [4]. Thus, they can be classified as aggressions carried out by the telephone (messages, calls) and the Internet (e-mail, messaging, content posting on various sites [5], masquerade, flaming, exclusion, denigration, harassment and sexting [6]. Regardless of the method chosen by the aggressor, the effects are similar and cause suffering for victims.

Summarizing all this, we can talk about four types of aggressive behavior [7]: written / verbal texts, visual content, social exclusion and creating fake profiles. Currently, the factors that influence the phenomenon of cyberbullying are more and more diverse, varying from one case to another. There is no pattern of aggression, as it affects all social groups, regardless of gender or age. General causes that contribute to the development of online aggression include: the accelerated evolution of technology [8], lack of online security rules, lack of digital literacy of Internet users, anonymity and unhealthy school climate [9].

- Technological innovations and the speed of the internet make the communication process easier. But, unfortunately, they do not offer a series of digital literacy courses or impose a series of security rules that eliminate the development of these types of aggression.
- The absence of limits or constraints regarding the use of the Internet offers the possibility for anyone to harass online from anywhere, anytime and anyone [17, 18].
- Technology is evolving rapidly, which is why all kinds of applications appear every day. Unfortunately, we cannot keep up with this evolution and, regardless of age, we face problems with the correct handling and use of technology. To avoid this gap, it is important to attend digital literacy courses. In these courses, participants should learn which privacy settings to pay special attention to.
- The aggressor's ability to keep his identity hidden in the online environment encourages him to assault anyone at any time, going unpunished [20]. In addition, this possibility of remaining unidentified gives the aggressors more control over the victim [21].
- The school climate is another factor of cyberbullying, if the aggressor has a weak sense of belonging to the group of colleagues [22]. Thus, all interactions with colleagues and teachers influence his behavior. If these actions are not qualitative, the aggressor will feel rejected, unloved and will try to integrate by adopting negative behaviors.

**Effects of cyberbullying**

The effects of cyberbullying are devastating for all participants in this phenomenon (victims, aggressors, witnesses), influencing them physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, educationally and professionally [10]. Specifically, we can talk about anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, suicidal ideation [10], anger, frustration, weight loss, insomnia, somatization [11],
low motivation [8], low academic or professional performance [12]. In the cases where cyberbullying continues for long periods of time and the victim does not follow therapy to overcome the trauma, the effects of the phenomenon will affect her/him the entire life.

**Teachers online aggression**

Cyberbullying is frequently identified with children and adolescents and not with adults. This is due to the fact that students are seen as vulnerable and defenseless against this phenomenon, while adults are considered to have the necessary skills to manage these aggressions. Unfortunately, in addition to students, another social category is deeply affected, namely teachers. According to research, 3 / 4 teachers are assaulted online [13].

Cyberbullying is often a continuation of school bullying at home in the online environment. Thus, teachers spending so much time with students and trying to resolve conflicts at school as effectively as possible, have come to turn from witnesses to victims of their own students or parents. In particular, teachers who work with students between the ages of 6 and 14 [14].

Cyberbullying has become a way for parents and students to take revenge on teachers for those times when they feel upset, disturbed, or wronged. Also, with the COVID-19 pandemic, the interactions between parents, students and teachers took place with the help of technology. This way of informal communication has created opportunities for students and parents to harass teachers [13]. The most used methods for their aggression are: e-mails, messages, phone calls, letters, defamatory websites [15]. These consist of aggressive, threatening and disrespectful discussions with the teacher that lead to increased stress [16], frustration [17], loss of confidence in professional skills and even sick leave due to burnout [13].

Like students, teachers avoid talking about being bullied online. Most of the time, they refuse to talk about their experiences if they feel that they are being bullied because of personal characteristics. Instead, they are more willing to talk about the experience of aggression that they consider to be related to the institution in which they work [15].

**Research method**

In order to investigate the extent to which teachers are victims of online aggression, we led a focus group with 12 primary, secondary and high school teachers.

The objectives of this focus group were: to identify the extent to which teachers are assaulted online by students or their parents, to identify the contexts in which these aggressions occur, the causes, but also the differences between the genders.

The focus questions of the group were semi-structured and focused on the following topics: the relationship between teacher-student-parent in the online environment, the forms of online aggression, the causes and methods of managing the phenomenon.

The focus group took place online and was recorded. The answers were transcribed and then analyzed. The discussion was moderated by us, and its total duration was an hour and a half. Participants were informed about the confidentiality of personal data and stated their willingness to participate voluntarily.

**Participants**

The participants were randomly selected from the urban environment, thus 4 teachers from primary education, 4 teachers from secondary education and 4 teachers from high school. In terms of gender, 6 men and 6 women, aged between 25 and 49 years.
Results

Regarding the first topic, the teacher–student–parent relationship in the online and offline environment, the teachers stated to a large extent that the relationships between them and the parents are good, but that they are influenced by certain school periods. For example, the period of exams, competitions, or extracurricular activities. "Often, parents are upset with teachers when the child does not learn and receives a bad grade. I often receive aggressive text messages or phone calls from parents of students asking me why I gave a certain grade to a student or a certain score for an exercise."

Primary school teachers say that their interactions with students are quite limited, as the little ones do not have mobile phones or do not have the necessary skills to use them properly.

Secondary and high school teachers said that the relationship with students in the online environment is quite popular. "Students often contact me to ask me questions about homework or the lesson taught. I enjoy their interest in learning, but sometimes it gets too tiring when I get messages at inappropriate hours or even on holidays."

"It happens to receive phone calls, e-mails or anonymous messages with offensive or threatening content, especially during exams."

We noticed more intense activity in the online environment between teachers and middle school and high school students. They already have their own gadgets and the knowledge they need to use them. At this age, students learn to manage their emotions, and sometimes feel that sending an inappropriate message to the teacher will help them overcome failure faster.

When it comes to gender differences, male teachers have never felt bullied through online interactions with parents or students. It is very interesting to investigate this phenomenon in the future.

Regarding the possible causes of this behavior, the teachers participating in the focus group stated that this behavior of children sending malicious or threatening messages to teachers has many causes: inefficient management of emotions, desire for revenge, anger, fear of failure, low self-esteem, lack of responsibility for learning, but also the lack of clear sanctions for those who do so.

We can also talk about the possibility of doing this in an anonymous way, without the students being discovered by anyone and being punished. In addition, there are students who do this just to have fun with their classmates. "In the COVID-19 pandemic, when the lessons took place online, I saw a lot of my colleagues who became a source of digital content on TIK-TOK or in memes. I didn't feel safe at all."

Regarding the causes of cyberbullying exercised by parents, the teachers identified the following: the parent’s desire to find an excuse for the grade obtained by the child, parental competitiveness, the desire to have the best child in school, to take revenge on the teacher, to give him a lesson, and not to his/her child a low grades in the future.

The ways in which teachers are assaulted by students and teachers were: messages, phone calls, e-mails and posts on social networks for the purpose of defamation. Teachers who were assaulted online said most of the parents were female.

Regarding the management of cyberbullying cases, teachers stated that they do not have a solution to prevent or effectively manage such aggressions. It is impossible for teachers to give up online communication with parents or students. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, communication with parents and students was conducted using technology, and face-to-face interactions were prohibited. "I can't force parents to come to school to discuss an issue that needs to be addressed right away, because it can escalate."
Conclusion

In conclusion, cyberbullying is a social phenomenon that can affect anyone at anytime. There are no limits regarding the place, time or person.

Unfortunately, nowadays, cyberbullying tends to take on increasing proportions and tends to equal the prevalence of cyberbullying among students. As we have seen from the analysis of the answers, female teachers did not feel safe during online classes, they were often assaulted by both parents and students. The ways of aggression were varied, being influenced by the school events in which the student participated.

An interesting finding was that none of the male teachers felt assaulted during the online interactions with their students or parents. The number of participants in this focus group is very small, and the result cannot be generalized.

The fact that teachers have no method to combat cyberbullying is a serious problem both for their mental health and for the educational climate. The Ministry of Education must take immediate action.

In order to reduce cases of cyberbullying among teachers and students, schools must ensure a positive school climate, promote the growth of well-being among teachers and students, but also genuine and assertive communication between parents and teachers. All these are important, as the well-being of teachers contaminates the well-being of students and their motivation for learning.

Limits of the research

We identified as limits of this research the following aspects: the small number of participants in the focus group, lack of sincerity of the participants, and the subjectivity in the processing and analyzing the answers.

In the future, the research may be extended to a larger number of participants, possibly from urban and rural areas, in order to make much stronger comparisons and to find out more features of this phenomenon among teachers.

References


