

CYBERBULLYING: VIRTUAL WORLD, REAL HURTS

Abstract

As states are creating legislation to address bullying in schools, and schools are responding with policies and enforcement to curb bullying, cyberbullying, a new generation of bullying is emerging as a formidable challenge. This study examines student attitudes and behaviors in the emerging reality of cyberbullying in four school districts in the state of Arkansas.

Cyberbullying can be defined as the “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the medium of electronic text” (Patchin & Hinduja 2006). It can take a number of forms or tactics such as flaming, harassment, denigration, impersonation, outing and trickery, exclusion, and cyberstalking (Willard, 2006).

As this phenomenon emerges and affects more and more students, it will also significantly affect the culture of schools as well. Further, it will challenge school officials’ ability to respond to it because of its nature. Many perpetrators are anonymous, and much of the bullying occurs off campus and does not involve school equipment. Many states are passing legislation to address the issue, and school districts are drafting policies as well. While it is newly emerging in case law, it is unclear how litigation will proceed with respect to students’ free speech rights, sexual harassment issues, and civil rights. It is clear that thus far causes of action have only begun to emerge, and schools are grappling with how much they can regulate off-campus speech and behaviors which have insidious effects on students who are on campus.

Further, as students suffer from the pervasive and insidious effects of cyberbullying, schools, and especially school counselors, will need to equip themselves with knowledge and skills to address an emerging form of an old nemesis.

This study survey over 1,800 students in grades 4 through 12 in Arkansas schools. Along with a review of the literature in this emerging area of student conflict, these data provide an “on-the-ground” picture of students’ experiences in cyberbullying. How extensive is the phenomenon? What are the implications for legislators and policy-makers as they attempt to address this social issue? These questions and others are

addressed in this ongoing study to provide tentative conclusions which could provide direction and legitimacy to current efforts to address cyberbullying.

Introduction

School bullies have persisted for generations as they've exploited imbalances of power or strength to inflict aggressive behaviors on more vulnerable students. Aggressive behaviors have included teasing and taunting, hitting, gestures, and social exclusion.

While traditional forms of bullying persist, technology is providing a means by which a new generation of bullies is emerging. Not surprisingly, as children become more proficient with various forms of technology, they are finding ways to channel similar aggressive behaviors toward more vulnerable students (Kowalski, 2005).

Technology provides several channels for students to exploit: Email, web pages, instant messages, social networks, blogs, and cell phones. One study's data suggest that an estimated 91% of children ages 12-15 years and 99% of teens ages 16-18 use the Internet (UCLA Internet Report, 2003).

While the schoolyard bully resorts to more immediate and obvious tactics such as physically striking, name-calling, and verbally threatening, the cyberbully resorts to more subtle yet powerful tactics. The subtlety and pervasiveness of cyberbullying presents new challenges to school officials and parents as they confront this emerging phenomenon. Further, the relatively underdeveloped area of case and statutory law and district policies contributes to a confusing and ambiguous body of resources.

The questions that emerge in this relatively new phenomenon provide a basis from which research projects and policies can develop.

Review of Research and Law

Bullying isn't what it used to be. The power play is no longer limited to the playground, the bus stop, or the hallway. Indeed, the fight has jumped to the digital world of the Internet, cell phones, and other electronic devices. The psychological dynamics seem to remain intact, however, as students find new and more efficient ways to exercise

their power over other students. Carr (2005) suggests that "like their more traditional counterparts, cyberbullies fill their need for power by hurting and humiliating their victims....Technology adds a cruel new dimension, however, as cyber bullies can harass their victims 24-7. Protected and emboldened by anonymity, cyberbullies spew their hatred by spreading rumors and communicating threats via cell phone text messaging, email, blogs, chat rooms, and web sites." Patchin and Hinduja (2006) define cyberbullying as the "willful and repeated harm inflicted through the medium of electronic text."

Several observers describe cyberbullying as a multi-dimensional activity with several tactics from which students may choose. These tactics include flaming, harassment, denigration, impersonation, outing and tricking, exclusion, and cyberstalking. (Ascione, 2005; Campbell, 2005; Brady & Conn, 2006; Willard, 2006).

Willard (2006), particularly, has delineated these tactics. Flaming is an "online fight" using vulgarities and threats much like a face-to-face confrontation. Harassment, she says, involves repeated insulting and offensive messages sent to students. Willard describes denigration as "dissing someone online." Denigration might include websites with explicit insults and damaging characterizations. Impersonation, she says, involves posing as someone online or on a cell phone and sending messages or creating a web site that could get someone in trouble or harm their reputation. Making personal information public is outing or trickery and is designed primarily to humiliate or embarrass. Exclusion, Willard suggests, is the equivalent of "black balling" someone or excluding them from an online group they would like to be a part of. Finally, Willard characterizes cyberstalking as repeated threats or intimidating statements that make a person fearful (Willard, 2006, pp. 1-2).

Data from research suggest that the majority of cyberbullying occurs during middle school years, ages 9 to 14 (Aftab, 2004; Qing Li, 2007). Qing Li suggests that perhaps this peak in cyberbullying can be explained by "biological and social changes experienced by adolescents" (p. 1777). Further, Qing Li asserts that few school administrators are aware of that cyberbullying is occurring among their students (p. 1778).

The nature of cyberbullying creates new challenges for school officials as they attempt to address the phenomenon and its effects on school culture and specific students within the culture. Indeed, cyberbullying intertwines questions of free speech with anonymous perpetrators (Qing Li, 2007). States are currently considering or enacting legislation to address cyberbullying just as many have done with traditional bullying. Similarly, schools are beginning to draft policies to address cyberbullying as well as traditional forms of bullying. Case law in the area of bullying that occurs off-campus and in the area of cyberbullying is relatively immature and only emerging as a more defined body of law. It remains somewhat problematic as courts decide how to address behaviors that occur off-campus, especially behaviors that originate and remain off-campus (i.e., cyberbullying).

Several cases involving cyberbullying illustrate its insidious and sometimes deadly nature:

1. A boy who broke up with his girl friend was subjected by that girl friend to a website which attempted to smear his character and image. The web site included threats, rumors, and imaginative horrors (Qing Li, 2007).
2. After a quarrel, a boy used a software program to graft a girl's head onto a pornographic image on a web page. (Qing Li, 2007)
3. Ghyslain Raza, a overweight fifteen-year-old boy in Quebec made a film of himself as Darth Maul wielding a golf ball retriever as a light saber in a Star Wars fight scene in 2002. Classmates posted the video and millions downloaded it, and the media called him "the Star Wars Kid." (Snider & Borel, 2004; Brady & Conn, 2006).
4. An overweight boy was photographed in a locker room, and the photo was posted on the Internet (Mitchell, 2004).
5. Ryan Patrick Halligan was bullied for several month online as classmates sent him text messages calling him gay, taunting him, and threatening him. As an eighth grader, Halligan was unable to deal with the peer issues, and eventually, in despair committed suicide in 2003 (eSchool News Online, 2007).

Schools are facing more and more litigation involving cyberbullying. Brady and Conn (2006) illustrate a 2006 case, *Drews v. Joint School District No. 393*. In this case, Casey Drews, a high school student, is experiencing social problems and is apparently socially awkward with her peers. Two events combined to lead to denigration, a form of online cyberbullying. Casey was overheard threatening a student on her cell phone. Sometime earlier, Casey's mother had taken a picture of her kissing another girl as a joke. Students got hold of the photo and posted it online with denigrating remarks. This led to Casey's dropping off the basketball team and being home-schooled. Casey and her parents sued the school claiming deliberate indifference under Title IX for sexual harassment, violations of her civil rights under Section 1983, and violation of her privacy rights under FERPA.

These causes of action represent the most likely targets of student and parent complaints with respect to cyberbullying. Schools will need to be alert to not only the interpersonal, psychological, and cultural implications, but they will need to be aware of the legal implications that will very likely arise from these cases.

Methodology

The sample for this study includes over 1,800 students who were surveyed in Arkansas schools in grades 4 through 12. The school districts involved in the study include both rural and urban and various sizes ranging from several hundred to several thousand students. The districts are in various geographical regions of Arkansas. Students were selected because they attended classes in the districts which received the surveys. While they had the option not to complete the survey, virtually all students completed the survey which they returned to their teacher who, in turn, submitted them for the study.

The survey, which was adapted from those used by Willard (2007) and Qing Li (2007), included descriptive questions about students' age, gender, and grade in school. Students also provided information about personal habits with respect to using technology (i.e., Internet, email, cell phones). Further, students indicated what personal experiences they had had with electronically transmitted threats, taunts, and other inappropriate behaviors. They also included information about their and others' responses

to these inappropriate behaviors. Most of the questions provided limited choices for answers although one allowed for an open-ended response (“If you were being cyberbullied, what would you do?”).

Each survey’s data were analyzed to provide a holistic as well as an analytic representation of cyberbullying in Arkansas. Data analysis included frequency analysis of students’ responses to determine a descriptive picture of what students believe, perceive, and practice with respect to cyberbullying.

Results and Discussion

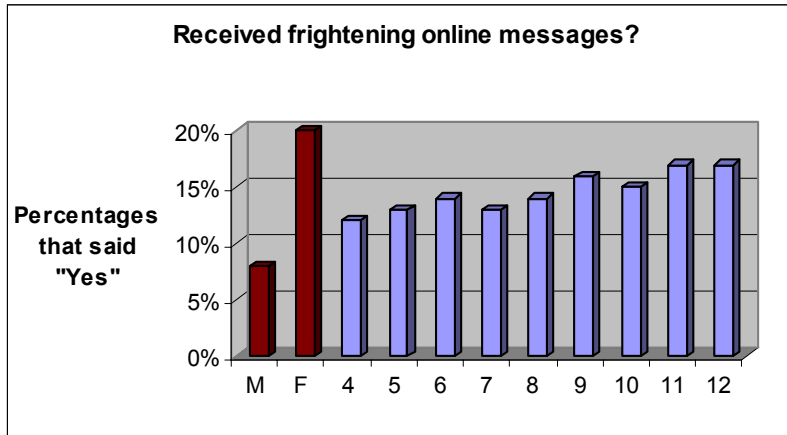
Who were the students included in this research project? The number of students who participated in the study was 1,819 in grades 4 through 12. They represent four school districts situated in four geographical areas of the state of Arkansas. The districts range in size from slightly over 1,000 to nearly 9,000 students. Forty-eight percent of the students who responded were male, and 52% were female. The following represents the frequency for grade level responses:

4	12%
5	13%
6	13%
7	13%
8	11%
9	13%
10	9%
11	13%
12	2%

Students were selected to participate through expediency, that is, they attended classes in which selected teachers administered the surveys. While students represented a large sample, and virtually all completed surveys in affected classes, the sample is not a random sample, but it provides useful and comprehensive descriptive data.

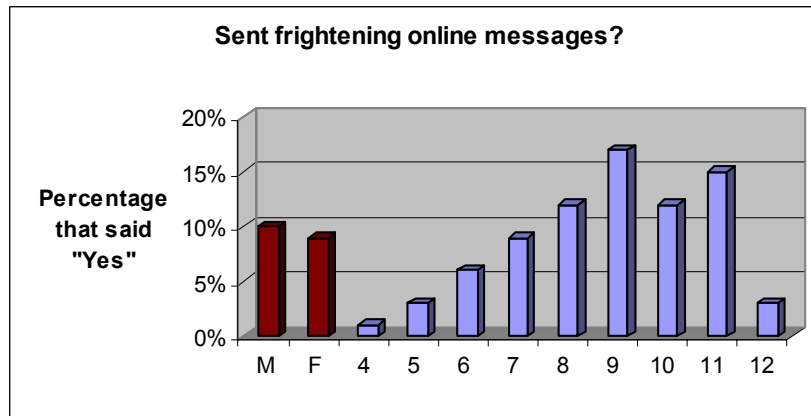
Specific questions on the survey are presented with a brief discussion appearing below each.

In the past year, have you ever received online messages that might make some one else uncomfortable or frightened you?



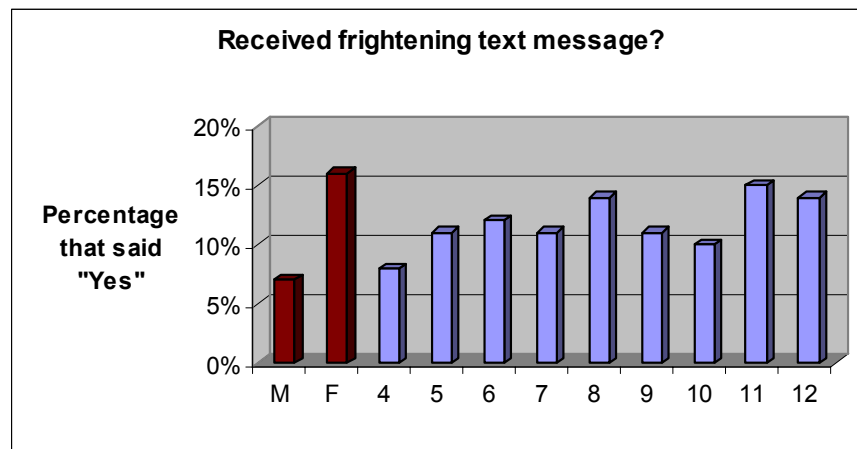
More than twice as many female students (20%) responded that they had received online messages that made them uncomfortable or frightened them compared to 8% of male respondents. This could be attributed to male bravado, or it may suggest that females tend to be the targets of cyberbullying more often than are males. The frequency trend suggests that as students move from grades four through 12, the likelihood that they will receive a message that makes them uncomfortable or frightens them will increase, but the largest percentage reporting this (17%) in grades 11 and 12 is still relatively small.

In the past year, have you sent nasty or mean online messages that might make someone else uncomfortable or may even frighten them?



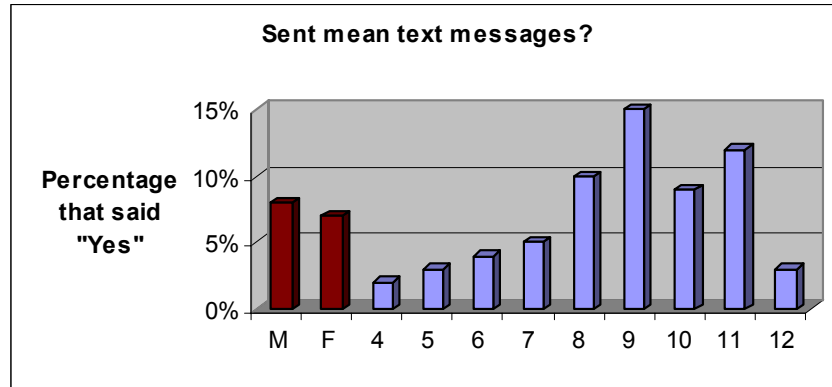
Few students reported that *they* had sent a message online that might frighten or make someone uncomfortable. This may be attributed to reluctance to admit a wrong, or it may suggest that this is an emerging phenomenon with relatively few participants. Male and female respondents were both low (10% and 9%, respectively), suggesting little difference between genders. An obvious trend toward it being more likely that a student might engage in this behavior as he or she moves into higher grades becomes obvious. Strangely, students in twelfth grade who indicated they had engaged in this behavior fell back to levels similar to students in fifth grade. Students in grade nine appeared most likely to engage in this behavior although the percentage is still relatively low (17%).

In the past year, have you ever received text messages that made you uncomfortable or frightened you?



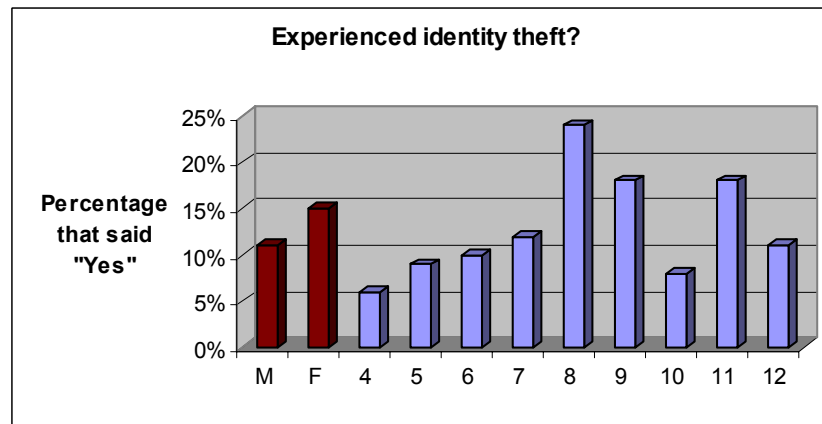
More than twice as many females reported receiving a text message in the last year that made them uncomfortable or frightened them than did males. Again, this may be because of male bravado, or females may use text messaging as a tool of intimidation more often than males do. Frequencies of reports that students had received such messages were fairly consistent beyond fourth grade with a low in tenth grade (10%).

In the past year, have you ever sent nasty or mean text messages that might make someone else uncomfortable or may even frighten you?



While no discrepancies exist between what males and females report with respect to *sending* intimidating message via text messaging, students in grades eight through eleven seem to be most likely to send such messages with a modal frequency in grade nine (15%). Interestingly, very few (3%) twelfth graders report sending such messages. These results are very similar to percentages (although slightly smaller) of students reporting they had sent nasty or mean online messages that might someone else uncomfortable or frighten them.

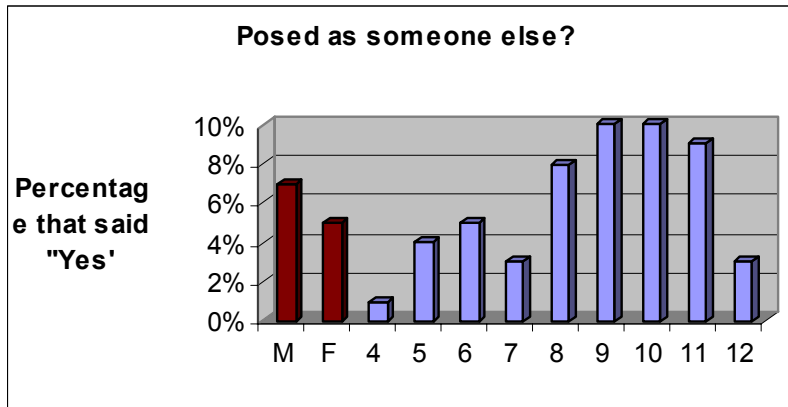
In the past year, have you ever experienced someone pretending to be you and sending or posting material that hurt your reputation?



More female students (15%) than male students (11%) reported someone pretending to be them and sending or posting materials that hurt others or their reputation. Students in grades eight through 11 (with the exception of grade 10) were more likely to say they had experienced someone pretending to be them with a high in

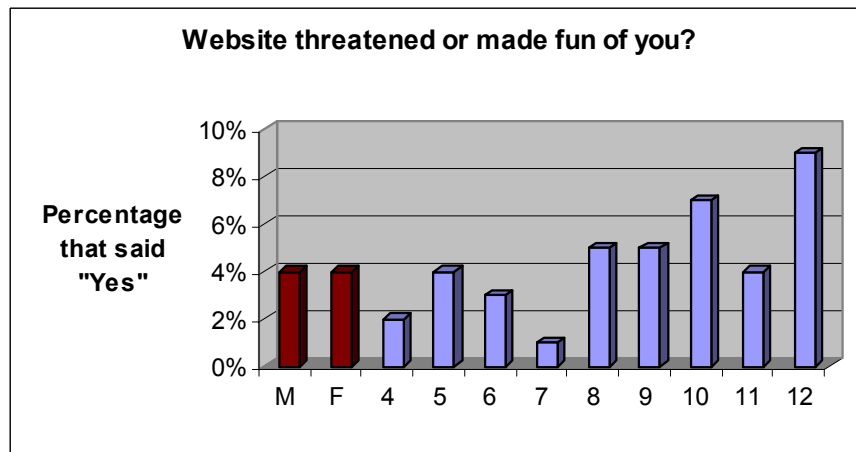
grade eight (24%). Interestingly, fewer students in grades 10 and 12 reported experiencing someone pretending to be them.

In the past year, have you ever pretended to be someone else and send or post material that hurt others or their reputation?



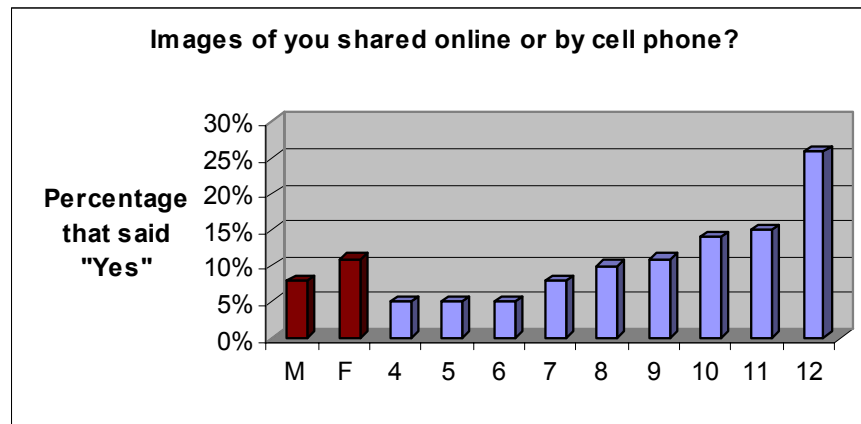
A higher percentage of males (7%) reported that they had posed as someone else and posted harmful material online than did females (5%). Students in grades eight through eleven were more likely to say they had participated in pretending to be someone else than students in other grades. This result is similar to students who reported that they had experienced someone doing to same *to* them.

In the past year, have you ever seen a website or profile that made fun of you, threatened you physically or otherwise, or made you uncomfortable because it was personally referring to or directed toward you?



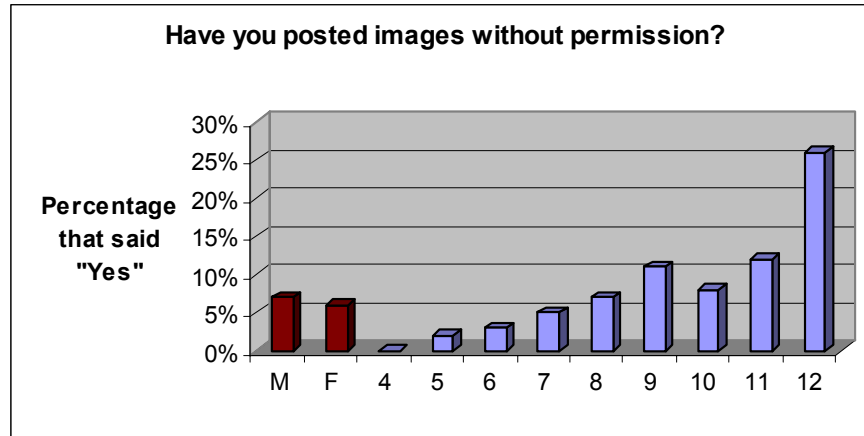
Very few students in any grade reported that they had seen a website or profile that made fun of them, threatened them, or made them uncomfortable. A higher percentage of students in grades eight through 12 reported seeing such a website or profile although the percentages were still relatively small (5-9%). There was no difference between frequencies of responses from males and females.

In the past year, have you ever had images of you shared without your permission online or on a cell phone?



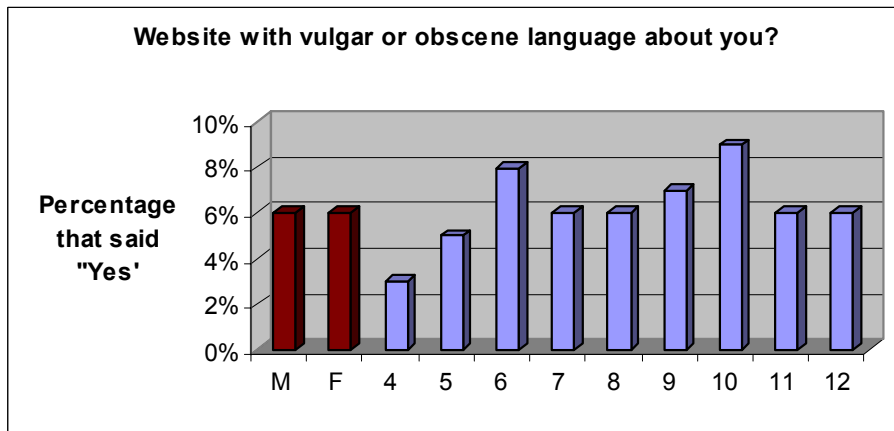
A higher percentage of female respondents (12%) reported that they had had images of themselves shared without permission online or on a cell phone as compared to males respondents (8%). Percentages of students reporting they had been a victim of this activity tended to trend more positively the higher the grade level with a spike in grade twelve (26%).

In the past year, have you ever posted someone's images without their permission online or on a cell phone?



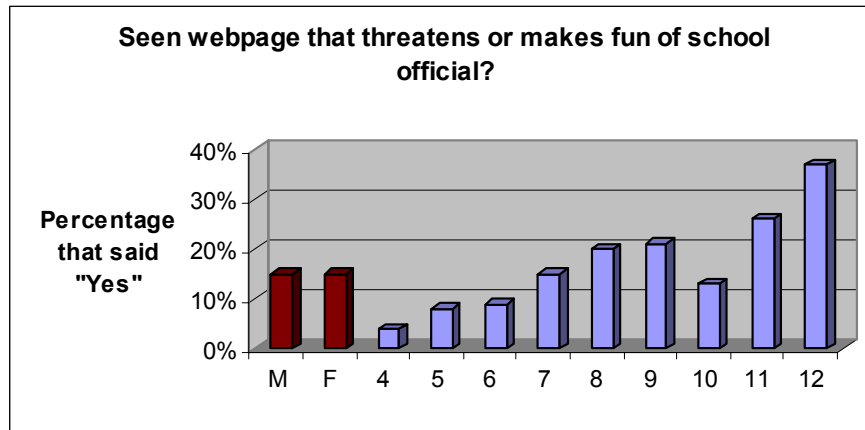
Similar to the percentage of students reporting they had been a victim of someone using their image without permission online or on a cell phone, more students in grades nine through twelve reported participating in such an activity (11-26%). A similar spike occurs in grade twelve (26%).

In the past year, have you ever seen a website that used vulgar or obscene language about you or toward you?



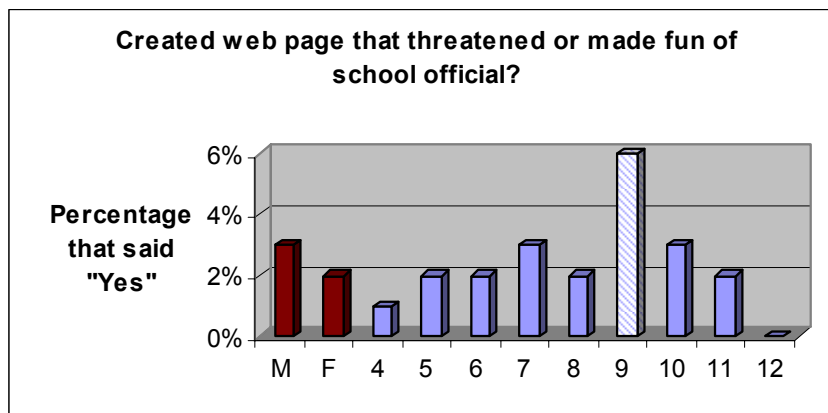
Very few students reported seeing a website that used vulgar or obscene language about them in the past year (3-9%) in grades four through twelve. Males and females responded at the same percentage level.

In the past year, have you ever seen a web page that threatens or makes fun of a teacher or a school official?



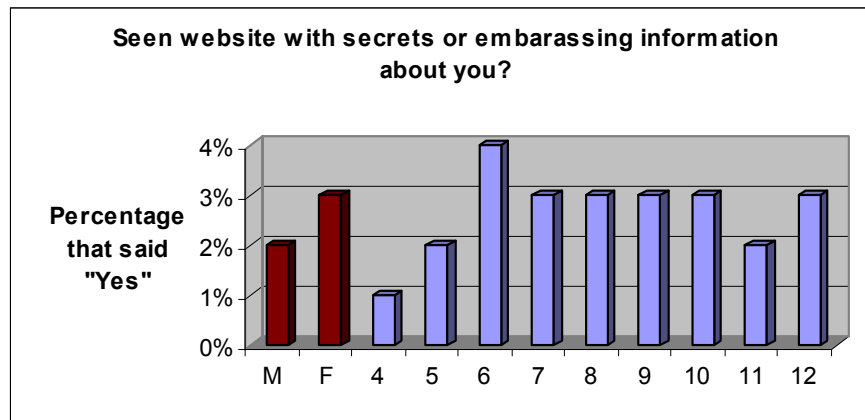
While both males and females responded in exactly the same percentages saying they had seen a web page that threatened or made fun of a teacher or school official (15%), the trend of percentages of students saying yes increased by grade levels with the exception of a dip (13%) in tenth grade. Indeed, eleventh and twelfth graders reported that they had seen such as page in much larger percentages (26% and 37%, respectively). It may be that the older students were more aware such pages existed and therefore saw them, or perhaps they had more participation in such creations and therefore looked at them although data does not seem to suggest that older students participated in the creation of these pages any more than younger students (see below).

In the past year, have you ever created a web page that threatens or makes fun of a teacher or a school official?



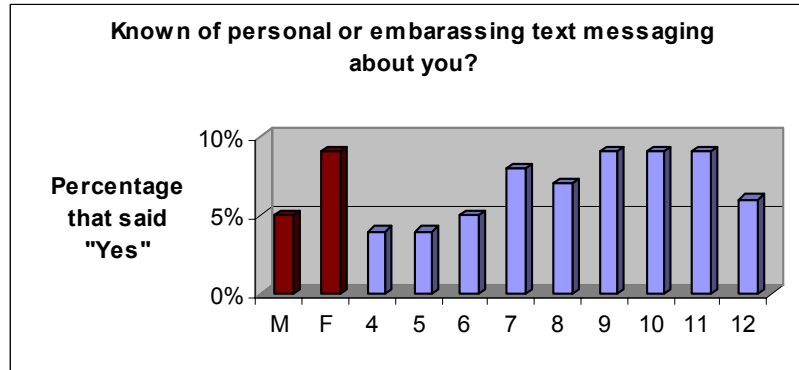
Very few students reported creating a web page that threatened or made fun of a teacher or school official. While the survey was anonymous, students may have been reluctant to volunteer information they perceived to be incriminating. Whatever the case, the percentage of students reporting they had participated in such an activity was very low (range of 1% to 6% over fourth through twelfth grades). An anomaly occurred in grade nine with 6% of students reporting they had participated.

In the past year, have you ever seen a website that shares secrets or embarrassing information about you?



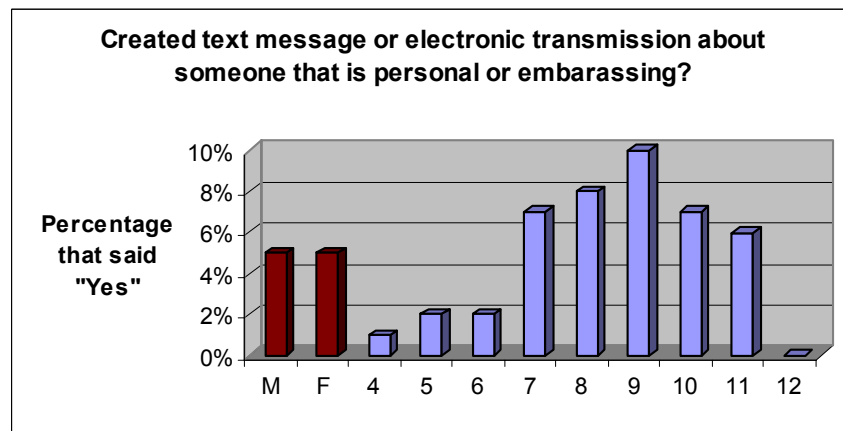
Very few students responded that they had seen a web site that contained embarrassing materials (1%- 4% over grade levels). There was very little difference between male and female responses. Interestingly, grade six reported the most positives, but its percentage was still only 4%.

In the past year, have you ever known of text messaging or other electronic transmission of information about you that is personal or embarrassing?



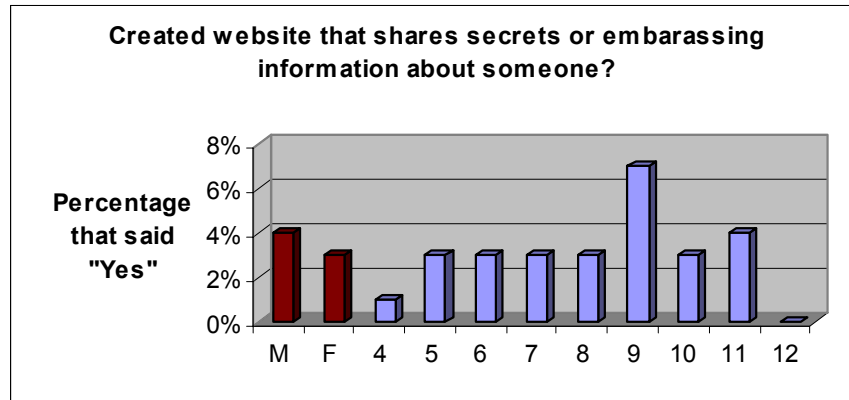
Relatively small percentages of students reported that they were aware of any text messaging or other electronic transmissions of information that was personal or embarrassing in the last year (4%-9% over grades four through twelve). Nearly twice as many female respondents reported they were aware of such messages or transmissions as did male respondents (9% and 5%, respectively). Percentages increased in the grades nine through twelve perhaps because of more awareness.

In the past year, have you ever created a text message or other electronic transmission of information about someone that is personal or embarrassing?



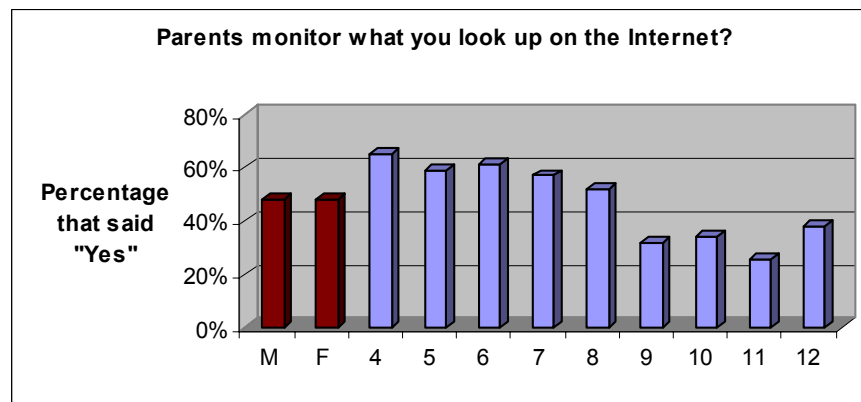
Relatively small percentages of students reported *they* had created a text message or other electronic transmission that contained personal or embarrassing materials (1%-10% over grades four through twelve). An apparent increase occurs in grades seven through nine (7%-10%) with grade nine having the modal response (10%). Interestingly, grade nine was also the grade reporting the most awareness of such transmissions (see above). There was no difference between the frequency of male and female responses.

In the past year, have you ever created a web site that shares secrets or embarrassing information about someone?



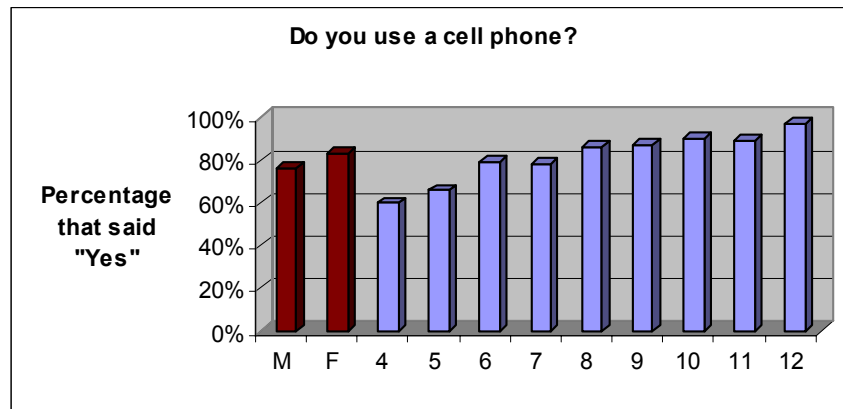
Very few students reported having created a web site which contained personal or embarrassing information about someone. The modal appears in grade nine with 7% reporting they had participated in this activity. There is virtually no difference between the frequency of male and female responses (4% and 3%, respectively).

Do your parents monitor (check) what you look up on the Internet?



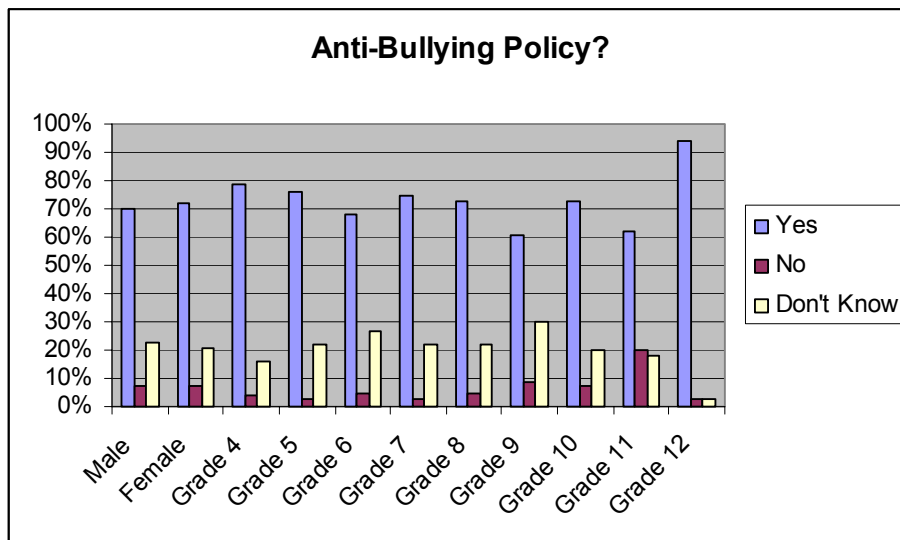
Student responses suggested that as they get older and progress through grades parents are less likely to monitor what they look up on the Internet. While there is some fluctuation among high school students in grades nine through twelve, generally they are less likely to have parents monitoring what they browse. There is no difference between what males and females reported.

Do you use a cell phone?



Slightly more females indicated they use a cell phone than do males (83% and 76%, respectively). Generally, as students progressed through grade levels, they were more likely to use a cell phone. Virtually all twelfth graders reported using a cell phone (97%). It is important to note that the wording of the question suggested mere use and not necessarily ownership. Students overwhelmingly reported, however, that they use a cell phone in all grades that participated.

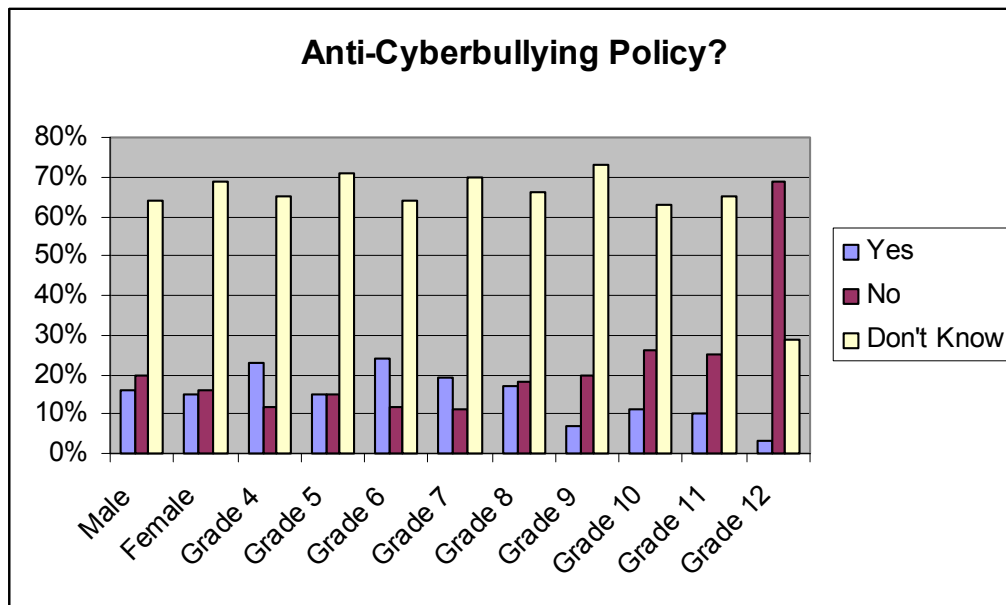
Does your school have an anti-bullying policy?



A majority of students in every grade level reporting indicated they believed that their school had an anti-bullying policy. Arkansas law requires schools to post signs to this effect, and perhaps this measure, at least in part, served to raise the students' awareness of the policy. In every grade level that participated, at least 61% (grade 9) and

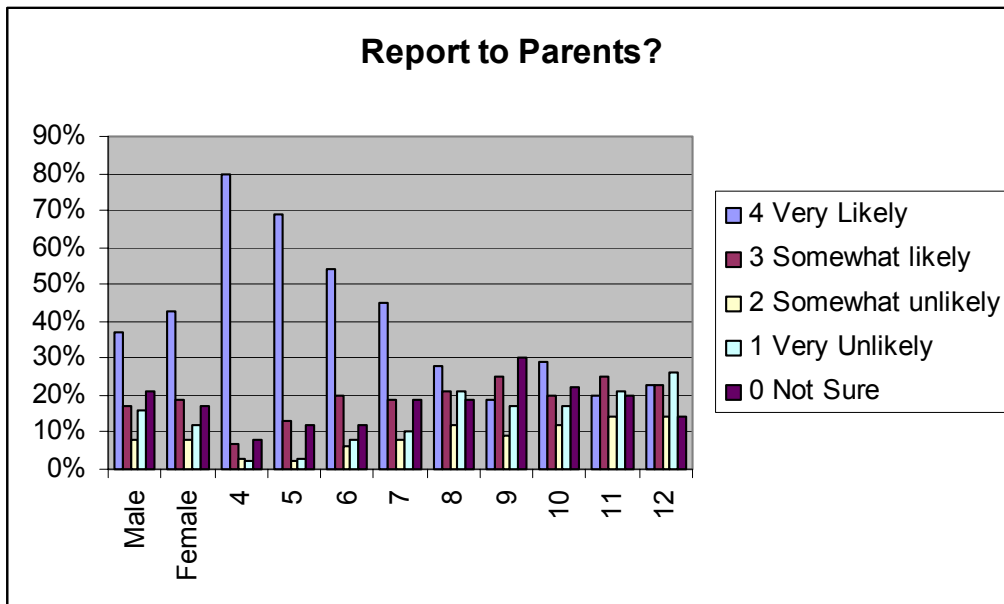
up to 94% (grade 12) reported they were aware of such a policy. There was virtually no difference between male and female respondents. It is interesting to note that while twelfth graders reported most frequently that were aware, students in elementary school grades reported with high frequency that they too were aware.

Does your school have an anti-cyberbullying policy?



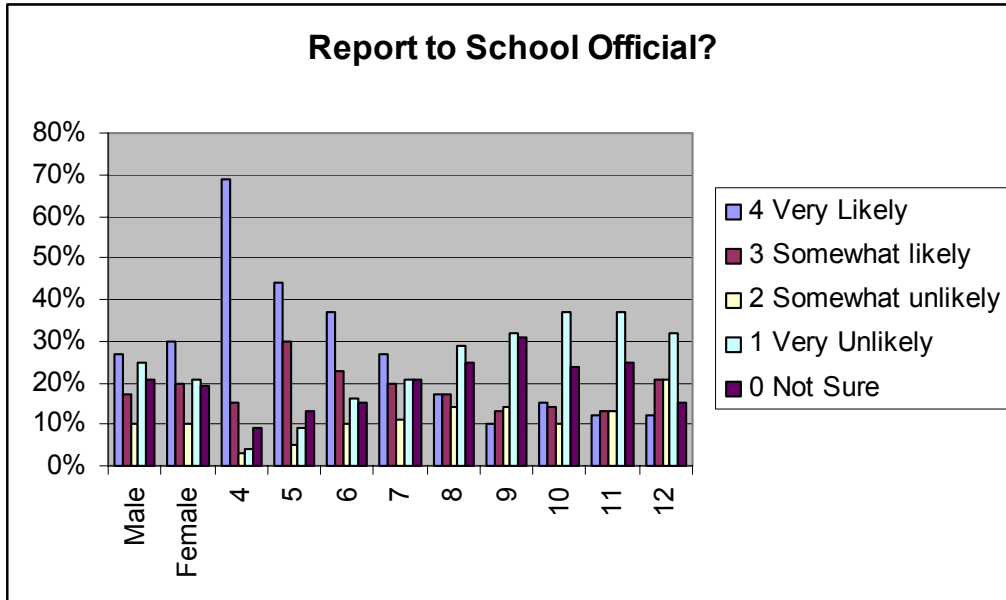
Students reported relatively fewer positive responses to this question about an anti-cyberbullying policy than they did to the question about anti-bullying suggesting that they were not aware of a policy addressing cyberbullying as opposed to bullying. It may be that the anti-bullying policy incorporated both types, newer policies addressing cyberbullying were not in place, or students were simply unaware of newer policies. In every grade level that participated, no more than 24% (grade 6) reported they were aware of such a policy. A high percentage of students in each grade indicated that they didn't know if there was such a policy. Interestingly, the lowest percentage of students that reported they were aware of such a policy was of twelfth graders (3%). There was virtually no difference between the frequency of male and female responses. Clearly, students are not as aware of anti-cyberbullying policies as they are of anti-bullying policies.

If you were being cyberbullied and it continued, how likely would it be that you would report it to your parents?



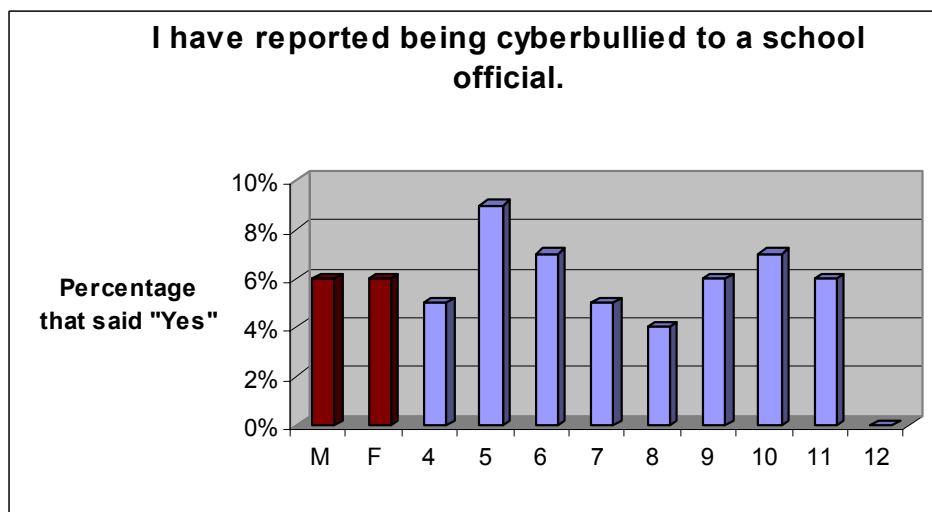
More females respondents than male respondents (62% and 54%, respectively) indicated they would likely report to their parents if they were being cyberbullied and it continued. Significant numbers of both males and females (21% and 17%, respectively) indicated they weren't sure what they would do in this instance. The percentage of students saying they would likely report cyberbullying to their parents diminished as they went up the grade levels (87% for fourth graders, 46% for twelfth graders). This would be expected because younger children would be more likely to turn to parents than teenagers in a peer-oriented culture.

If you were being cyberbullied and it continued, how likely would it be that you would report it to a school official?



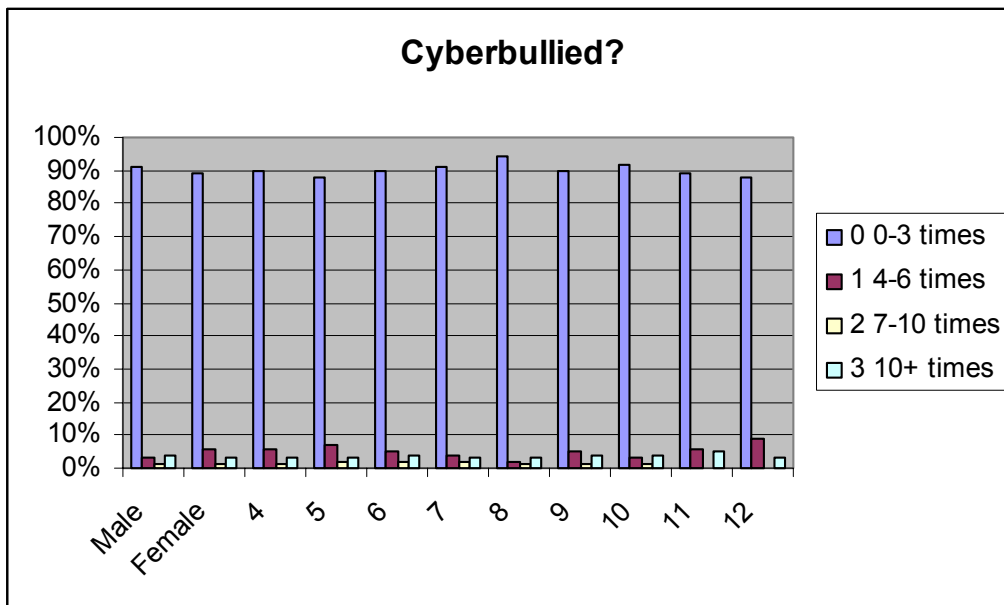
Students were overall less likely to report cyberbullying to a school official than they were to a parent, but the trend remained somewhat similar in that as students progressed through grade levels, they were less likely to report cyberbullying to school officials (84% said they would in fourth grade; 33% said they would in twelfth grade). Interestingly, twelfth graders were more likely than ninth, tenth, and eleventh graders to make such a report. Again, females were more likely to make a report (50%) than were males (44%). Both genders again reported some degree of uncertainty about what they would do in such a situation (males – 21%; females – 19%).

I have reported being cyberbullied to a school official.



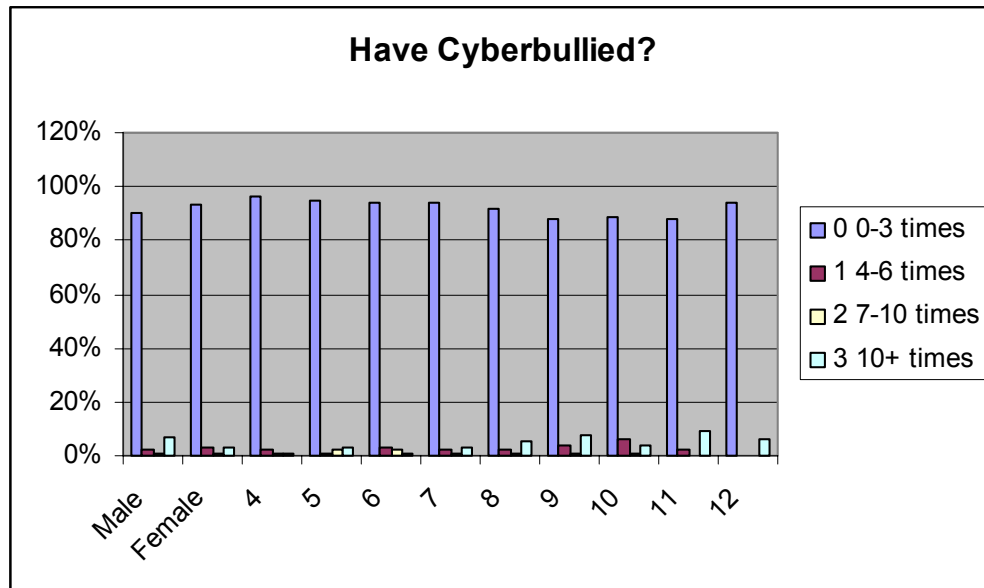
Only a small percentage of students have reported being cyberbullied to a school official. All percentages for gender and grade levels were below 10%. The highest percentage of students indicating that they had reported to a school official that they had been cyberbullied was 9% by students in grade 5. Male and female responses were the same. No student in grade twelve indicated they had made such a report.

I have been cyberbullied.



A relatively small percentage of students in all reporting grades and in both genders reported being cyberbullied in the past year. Both males and females made virtually the same report, and percentages in grade levels differed only slightly from fourth grade through twelfth grade. This could suggest that students are reluctant to identify themselves as victims, they do not understand what cyberbullying is, or cyberbullying is not occurring in significant numbers among the students surveyed.

I have cyberbullied.



Relatively few students at any grade level and in either gender reported they had cyberbullied someone in the past year (0-3 times). Unfortunately, this is not broken down to determine whether the students were indicating they had not *ever* cyberbullied or that they had cyberbullied one to three times. This would indicate a need for revision in the instrument to make this determination. Whatever the case, relatively few students reported that had cyberbullied although 7% of males reported they had cyberbullied more than 10 times while only 3% of females made the same report suggesting that pervasive cyberbullying might be perpetrated more by males than females. More students in grades nine through twelve reported that they had cyberbullied more than ten times than in the lower grades. Eight percent of ninth graders, and 11% of eleventh graders reported they had cyberbullied in the past year more than ten times. Overall, few students reported that they had cyberbullied, but there were a small percentage, particularly in the upper grades, and particularly among males, that reported they had cyberbullied more than 10 times in the past year.

Conclusions/Implications

Cyberbullying is an emerging phenomenon in schools, and as this preliminary analysis of data suggests, it is still somewhat early to conclusively say what the pervasive

effects will be. No doubt as emerging technologies and a growing body of case law become more clear, school officials will have additional guidance to form policies and practices. School counselors and administrators will continue to deal with traditional forms of bullying as well as the more insidious and elusive form called cyberbullying.

As the data are analyzed in this study, it appears that for the most part, students who participated had not personally encountered forms of cyberbullying, or, if they had, it was minimal. However, some interesting point do arise from the data that are worth noting.

For the most part, students in grades four through eight did not report being cyberbullied or that they had participated in cyberbullying. Students in ninth grade seemed most likely in several cases to be participants or victims in cyberbullying. Generally, as students progressed to higher grades, they were more likely to be aware of behaviors that could be characterized as cyberbullying.

Interestingly, students at all grade levels seemed unaware of policies about cyberbullying suggesting that the policies do not exist or that students are not aware of them if they do.

In most cases, data presented little difference between males and females as they reported on different items. Girls reported being more likely to be intimidated or frightened by cyberbullying, but this could be attributed to male bravado. Of course, it may be that females are more likely to be victimized by this form of bullying.

Implications of this study suggest that school personnel, especially administrators, teachers, and counselors, need to be aware of the psychological nature of cyberbullying. Moreover, personnel need to make students aware of the insidious nature of this activity and its potentially harmful effects. Further, schools will need to grapple with how to draft and implement policies in this area in light of the relatively sparse case law so far. This study, while tentative, provides a glimpse into the world of cyberbullying and suggests that responsible school personnel open the door farther and take a more informed look around. Anti-bullying laws and policies may indeed be curbing the fight in the school yard, but the fight has simply moved to the digital world, and it still hurts just as much if not more.