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Identifying Cyberbullying, Connecting with Students: The Promising Possibilities of Teacher-Student Social Networking

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Identifying Cyberbullying, Connecting with Students: The Promising Possibilities of Teacher-Student Social Networking

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Abstract

Cyberbullying, an emergent problem that most students face but few report, negatively affects students' academic and personal development, disrupts the school environment, and usually peaks around middle school. The Association of Middle Level Education (AMLE) suggests that successful middle schools should, among other things, ensure every student has an adult advocate to guide academic and personal development in an inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive school environment. The Olweus Anti-Bullying Program denotes educators' proactive intervention must first follow recognition of students' misbehaviors and both identification and supervision of problematic school contexts. Without such recognition, identification, and supervision, educators' proactive interventions are likely impossible. This article offers social networking to educators as a method to identify and, to the best extent possible, supervise cyberbullying. This identification and supervision method merges with youth culture and coheres with AMLE's and Olweus' philosophies to positively influence the school's environment and facilitate students' intellectual and personal development. However, it contrasts sharply with various school districts' approaches to confronting cyberbullying. The authors intend for this premise to spark interest in potential pilot studies whereby educators conscientiously and deliberately construct a path to proactive intervention.

"It is appallingly obvious our technology has exceeded our humanity"
– Albert Einstein

Considering the ever-changing nature of technology, how it is employed, and its impact on society, Einstein's quote may be applied to new situations ad infinitum. Many teachers and administrators might concur with Einstein as they confront the various impacts of cyberbullying on their classrooms and schools (Darden, 2009; de Vise, 2008; Feinberg & Robey, 2009; Johnson, 2009; Mustacchi, 2009; Winton, 2009). Similarly, many administrators and parents might agree with Einstein as they learn of teacher misconduct on social networking sites, like Facebook (Helms, 2008; Horvath, 2008; Vanhoose, 2009). Administrators and school boards, worried about potential litigation based on issues that originated on or were documented within social networking sites, have also taken stances in concert to Einstein's claim (Cannon, 2009; CPS, 2009). Articles within American School Board Journal and Principal Leadership verbalize these worries and suggest districts understand legal obligations, include cyberbullying within all pertinent policies, examine and investigate cyberbullying, support victims, educate staff, parents, and students, and safeguard staff (Darden, 2009; Feinberg & Robey, 2009).

These suggestions do not incorporate two key features of a proven, research-based anti-bullying program: identification and supervision. Teachers can utilize social networking technology to more effectively identify cyberbullying and, to an extent, insert adult supervision. In doing so, teachers and districts might more ably regain a sense of classroom humanity and resist an emergent dilemma that most students face (Li, 2006, 2007; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Vandebosch & Cleemput, 2008; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004) but few report (Feinberg & Robey, 2009; Fredrick, 2009; Price & Dalgleish, 2010).

While acknowledging the gravity of cyberbullying and teacher misconduct, teachers can employ social networking technologies to identify and, to an extent, monitor cyberbullying. Researchers have noted that teacher-student social relationships fostered on these networking sites has positive impacts on students' learning and socio-emotional development (Carter, Foulger, & Ewbank, 2008; Kist, 2008a; Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007, 2009). Other professionals disagree with these data-based conclusions.

The Ohio Education Association, the Association of Texas Professional Educators, and other organizations strongly encourage educators to avoid social networking sites (eSchoolNews, 2007a). The Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and Frederick County (Maryland) Public Schools (FCPS) policies are illustrative examples of school districts' responses. CPS banned all teachers from social networking on the district's computers and limited faculty members' e-communication with students and parents to only district e-mail accounts (CPS, 2009). FCPS warned educators about potentially negative outcomes of social networking with students, provided past examples of teacher misconduct for illustrative purposes, and stated there would be no support for teachers enmeshed in conflict (Cannon, 2009). These represent two ends of a continuum centered on school districts' reactions to teacher-student social networking.

District policies such as those noted above and others cited within American School Board Journal and Principal Leadership (Darden, 2009; Feinberg & Robey, 2009), however, do

not provide opportunities for effective identification of cyberbullying nor do they recognize the potentially positive aspects of teacher-student interactions on social networking sites. These policies are litigation-prevention and liability-avoidance responses; they are comparable to moral panics surrounding Internet imagery (Grassley, 1995), comic books (Hajdu, 2008), and film and television (Kist, 2008b). With the intent of protecting districts from litigation, such policies are long on restrictions and broad in scope. However, empirical evidence indicates both that cyberbullying is ubiquitous (Li, 2006, 2007; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Vandebosch & Cleemput, 2008; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004) and that victims are reluctant to report it (Feinberg & Robey, 2009; Fredrick, 2009; Price & Dalgleish, 2010). Such policies do not construct regulatory measures to identify or monitor cyberbullying, which are two key components to all anti-bullying strategies (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009, 2010; Olweus, 1991, 1993, 2004).

This article utilizes suggestions from consequential organizations and research-based programs to demonstrate how teachers can creatively utilize social networking to identify (and, to an extent, supervise) cyberbullying and to connect with students socially. The article details and applies its arguments, which many may see as potentially effective at best or seemingly nonsensical at worst, to the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) (formally the National Middle School Association, NMSA, 2003, 2010) suggestions for successful middle schools in *This We Believe*. It then contextualizes students' interests in, and cyberbullying on, social networking sites along with school districts' responses. Next, the article applies the premise to the guiding principle of Olweus, a proven and research-based anti-bullying program. It then examines a range of school districts' policies on social networking sites, which most specifically address students' abuses and teachers' misuses. The article ends with reflections about the implications of the aforementioned suggestions. (Due to a dearth of research on this topic and various administrators' reservations with a pilot study, the authors make this case in this format in hopes of rousing interest for further research.)

Teacher-Student Social Networking and the AMLE

In refutation to Einstein's quote and those in education who subscribe to it, teachers can construct a sense of humanity in the schools through social networking technology in ways that they cannot do otherwise. The authors base their premise on teachers' ethical and purposeful use of social networking sites. (Ethical means the moral and principled dispositions that administrators and the public expect of teachers; purposeful denotes the deliberate employment of social networking technologies to positively impact students and the school environment.) This premise is two-fold.

First, social networking websites are technological tools that can enable teachers to identify seemingly hidden conflicts that may manifest in cyberspace but begin in school. As mentioned, cyberbullying peaks around middle school, most students are targets at some point, and few report it. By adding students as Facebook "friends", teachers can inconspicuously observe the content students add to their online profiles as well as comments made by others. By this means, teachers can *better* identify potential cases of cyberbullying than if they simply observed students' school behaviors and classroom comments or waited for students to report it. This approach is akin to a fisherman casting a wide net. As the fisherman's net cannot catch every fish, neither can this approach identify every case of cyberbullying. However, as

fishermen need to put nets in the water to garner some success, educators must similarly act to identify some instances of cyberbullying. Without identification, proactive intervention is impossible. While this technology does not enable comprehensive supervision, such regulation is near impossible in school hallways, bathrooms, lunch rooms, locker rooms, and other "hidden" spaces within a school (Finders, 1997). While certainly less-than-ideal, this is a positive step towards identification and supervision.

The AMLE (2003, 2010), in the School Environment clause of This We Believe, suggested that students in middle schools should feel safe and supported. In a sense, teachers can become metaphorical flies on the wall as students share issues that are usually reserved for the aforementioned hidden spaces within a school. Teachers can then employ this discreetly gained knowledge to identify and, to an extent, supervise (and proactively intervene in) the interpersonal conflicts that manifest in all schools. As previously stated, the authors do not pretend that this approach will identify every case, nor do they imply this supervision to be infallible. Without such an attempt, though, educators are akin to the motivated fisherman without a net in the water.

Second, teachers can employ Facebook, and other means of social networking, to construct meaningful teacher-to-student relationships. Teachers can share more about themselves to students who view the teacher's pages, observe the teachers' comments, and look over the teachers' pictures on the respective social networking website. This enables shy students to learn more about the adult in front of the classroom without getting up the courage needed to ask that (sometimes scary) first question. Furthermore, research indicates that students see teachers who willingly and freely disclose personal information through social networking sites as more competent, trustworthy, and caring than teachers who do not (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2009). Research also demonstrates that students demonstrated higher levels of motivation for learning, displayed greater affective learning, and perceived the classroom climate to be more positive for teachers with whom they socially networked than for teachers with whom they did not (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). This all supports the positive results of online relationships developed through teacher-student social networking.

In the Adult Advocate section of *This We Believe*, the AMLE (2003, 2010) suggested that all children should have an adult advocate that guides the students' intellectual *and* personal growth. Concerning intellectual growth, social networking sites can be tools for teachers to offer students reminders on upcoming events and assignments. They can provide students an opportunity to ask homework questions outside of school. In addition, as previously mentioned, students rated teachers with whom they socially networked as more competent, exhibited more motivation, and viewed the classroom context to be more constructive than teachers with whom they did not socially network (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007, 2009). Concerning personal growth, social networking sites enable students to communicate with teachers through public wall comments and/or email in privacy and without worry of potentially judgmental stares. The technologically-constructed privacy that regulates potentially judgmental stares is not always possible during school time. Unlike in a discussion, there is a better chance for a written and stored record for communication (save instant messaging), which can protect teachers from erroneous claims. Finally, unlike in school when educators' time can be scarce, teachers can respond to academic questions and personal queries at their own speed, possibly after having

consulted with a guidance counselor or other teachers about a consequential topic. Such technology, for those teachers who employed it, facilitated students' perceptions of them as more trustworthy and caring than teachers who did not employ the technology (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2009). This research suggests the positive impact social networking can have for students' intellectual and personal development.

The authors recognize that to suggest utilizing social networking sites in this way will likely elicit either curiosity or anxiety from educators, administrators, and the public. However, when considering the contemporary context of emerging Internet technologies, students' interests in and misuses of it, the ubiquity of cyberbullying, and students' reluctance to report it, to do otherwise might seem to be a controversy-avoidance (or a litigation-prevention) stance in the hopes that such misconduct will disappear. In other words, cyberbullying will manifest whether teachers identify it or not. The authors argue that a controversy-avoidance (or a litigation-prevention) stance is akin to the proverbial ostrich putting his head in the sand. To justify this argument, the article will document students' uses and misuses of internet technology, apply the premise to a successful and research-based programmatic approach to bullying, and contextualize it using representative examples of school districts' current policies.

Students' (Mis)Uses of Technology and Adults' Responses

Miller, Thompson, and Franz (2009) offered a plethora of substantive examples to describe American teenage culture as "wired". Through technologies such as computers, cell phones, tweeting, blogs, social networking sites, YouTube, Google Buzz, and internet gaming, teens actively construct media and connect with friends more frequently than previous generations in ever-expanding ways (Miller, Thompson, & Franz, 2009; Lenhart & Maddeen, 2007; Lenhart, Maddeen, & Hitlin, 2005). Researchers suggest many positive aspects of this "connectedness" such as, but not limited to, novel literacies, cross-cultural and interracial interactions, access to alternative media, unique ways to explore new identities, and novel experiences that would not occur otherwise (Alvermann, 2008; Hartnell-Young & Vetere, 2008). Similarly, many researchers have noted the progressively increasing ways adolescents integrate the abovementioned technologies into their offline worlds (Miller, Thompson, & Franz, 2009; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Tynes, 2007). As technologies expand, troubles and dangers emerge. While sexting elicits sensationally pungent headlines (Boucek, 2009; Lenhart, 2009; Manzo, 2009; O'Donovan, 2010; Zirkel, 2009), cyberbullying has a stronger (and more lasting) negative impact on children and classrooms (Darden, 2009; Feinberg & Robey, 2009; Fredrick, 2009; Gross, 2009; Mustacchi, 2009; Vandenbosch & Van Cleemput, 2008).

Cyberbullying thus has the attention of lawmakers, reporters, first amendment scholars, the courts, school administrators, and various parent groups. Koloff (2008) and eSchool News (2007b) reported numerous states' attempts to construct laws to confront cyberbullying. In response, many reporters and first amendment scholars question the first amendment or "free speech" rights of students depicted as the aggressor or cyberbully (Hudson, 2009; New York Times Editorial, 2009). In court cases, such as Beidler v. North Thurston School District (2000), these dynamics have been confronted with differing conclusions, which places school administrators in a quandary. There is simply no proven or universally supported path.

Even though some have questioned school administrators' authority to involve themselves in issues that manifest outside the schools' doors (Anderson, 2007), schools must respond (Darden, 2009; Feinberg & Robey, 2009; Mustacchi, 2009). It is due to this context's fluidity and the volatility of cyberbullying, which peaks in middle school (Williams & Guerra, 2007), that this article suggests teachers' active involvement with students on social networking websites. With the hopes of discovering effective strategies, educators must carefully and purposefully test new possibilities. This method addresses the first steps towards proactive intervention: identification and, to the best extent possible, supervision.

Clearly an attempt to think outside the proverbial box, this article's premise coheres with AMLE's stated philosophies. As mentioned, AMLE (2003, 2010) urged middle schools to facilitate students' feelings of safety and support. Through such social networking behaviors, teachers can effectively gain access to hidden conflicts to quickly and positively respond. As AMLE encouraged an adult advocate for every student, teachers can utilize social networking technologies to better construct meaningful relationships to aid students' intellectual and personal growth (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2009). Furthermore, this use of social networking follows the proactive suggestions of research-based anti-bullying strategies.

To Proactively Confront Cyberbullying

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program grounds this article's proposal. Multitudes of researchers have studied various school districts' applications of the Olweus program. Black and Jackson (2007) noted dramatic decreases in bullying incidents over a four-year period in six urban schools. Research in rural school districts has yielded similar results (Melton, et al 1998). Focusing on ten middle schools, Bauer, Lozano, and Rivara (2007) reported comparable success.

Olweus' (1991, 1993, 2004) proactive philosophy, in short, suggests districts identify contexts where problems emerge, insert supervising adults whenever possible, educate adults to recognize students' (mis)behaviors, and empower the adults to proactively respond to new conflicts. The American Psychological Association (APA, 2004) supports such actions.

For any approach to be proactive and responsive, it must first identify problematic contexts and then, to the best extent possible, insert adult supervision. Utilizing premises from the AMLE (2003, 2010) and suggestions from Olweus (1991, 1993, 2004), this approach provides an (untested but promising) identification strategy and, to the best extent possible, incorporates adult supervision. As mentioned, identification and supervision are especially necessary in this emergent context of cyberbullying. As this next section details, however, current education policy complicates matters.

Current Policy in Education

Social networking websites such as Facebook are immensely popular among adolescents and adults (Cassell & Cramer, 2008; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Since cyberbullying and teacher misconduct emerge on social networking websites, schools have legal and moral responsibilities to respond. Senate bill S.1492: Broadband Data Improvement Act (2008) requires that all federally funded schools with internet access teach students about proper and improper

online behaviors, including cyberbullying and online threats. Thus, schools' must construct policies to protect students from such threats.

School districts' policies appear influenced by two guiding principles: to keep students safe and to avoid controversy and litigation. When considering the litigious implications for school districts, creating a policy that encompasses both principles is seemingly impossible. While not theoretically incongruous, these two guiding principles *in practice* negatively influence each other. Although both principles deserve consideration, this is not the case because school districts' fears of controversy and litigation limit how far they allow teachers to go to keep students safe. In doing so, such policies purposefully avoid employing unproven (if promising) techniques – like social networking technology – to ameliorate cyberbullying. This article contextualizes and evaluates their actions, as judged by their policies, on a continuum.

Chicago Public Schools (CPS, 2009) policy denotes the negligently reactionary end of the spectrum. CPS recently banned all faculty members' social networking activities on the district's network and limited faculty members' e-communication with students and parents to only district e-mail accounts. This policy, and others like it, fails to accept the previously mentioned positive attributes of teacher-student interactions on social networking sites, and in its current context, appears unenforceable.

Frederick County (Maryland) Public Schools (FCPS) policy represents the opposite end of the spectrum and is characterized as a weak warning. FCPS cautioned faculty about potentially negative consequences of teacher-student social networking, provided past cases of teacher misconduct, and asserted there would be no support for teachers entangled in controversy (Cannon, 2009). Thus, FCPS allowed teachers to network socially with students but offered no formal support, even if the teachers' social networking with students were attempts to confront cyberbullying. This lack of support likely has the resultant effect of timidity among teachers who employ technology to bring a sense of humanity back into the classroom.

Both school districts seemingly constructed policies out of fear of litigation and appear devoid of realistic tools to confront cyberbullying. Most importantly, both fail to distinguish between problematic behavior and problematic technologies. For instance, cyberbullying and teacher misconduct are certainly crises that manifest on social networking sites. While social networking sites enable their emergence, the misdeeds likely happen in other contexts, probably frequently, but go unnoticed or unreported. Thus, it is the students' and teachers' misbehaviors that are the problem, not the technology. To prohibit the technology (and this identification method) will not prevent the previously cited misbehaviors, it will however allow them to remain unidentified.

Since neither policy addresses cyberbullying through proactive identification or the insertion of adult supervision, neither coheres with the Olweus (1991, 1993, 2004) anti-bullying program. These policies thus do not advantageously employ the latest technologies to address cyberbullying and, it stands to reason, do *not* ensure a safe school environment or an adult advocate for all students, as AMLE (2003, 2010) suggested.

Summations and Discussions

For purposes of clarity, it is necessary to revisit the previous suggestions about teachers and students interacting on social networking sites. First, as a technological tool, teachers can effectively identify consequential information from students about both cyberbullying *as they emerge*. Teachers can only garner evidence about cyberbullying, a ubiquitous and rarely reported problem, if they actively socially network with students. This enables teachers to proactively identify ostensibly concealed conflicts that emerge outside the school's walls but directly (and negatively) influence the classroom environment and students' learning. Through such identification, and in coherence with AMLE's suggestions about middle schools' environments and Olweus' suggestions for anti-bullying strategies, educators can better respond to cyberbullying.

Second, and in reference to students' personal growth, teachers can better construct meaningful relationships with students using social networking sites. By enabling picture-sharing and informal conversations, teachers can more easily connect with all students, especially the quieter ones. Furthermore, students who socially network with teachers see those teachers as more trustworthy, caring, and competent than teachers with whom they do not network. In regards to students' intellectual growth, teachers can use such sites to remind students about upcoming events and assignments and answer students' questions about homework after school hours. Additionally, students who socially network with teachers are more motivated, more able for affective learning, and view those teachers' classrooms as more constructive than teachers with whom they do not. Therefore, in coherence with AMLE's suggestions about adult advocates for all student network, educators can better form consequential relationships with students that positively influence students' personal and intellectual growth.

This approach enables teachers to connect with students, providing a novel avenue for student-teacher dialogue. Connectedness is a multi-facet proposition for contemporary middle school students. Since it is not only through face-to-face interactions that facilitate personal relationships, it makes sense that teachers' developed online presence can also facilitate young adolescents' socialization. In order to better bond with students, teachers need to become adept at and actively involved in how students socially interact.

Unlike in a discussion, there is a written and stored record for all communication, which can protect teachers from invalid assertions. In addition, unlike in school when teachers' time is scarce, teachers can respond to academic questions and personal queries at their own speed, possibly after having consulted with a guidance counselor or other teachers. Teachers may also feel the need to present themselves to students and parents differently than they do to friends and family. Towards these ends, a teacher can create two profiles, one for professional and one for personal use. Such privacy controls are both manageable and readily available (Kang, 2010).

Many teachers, administrators, and parents likely have experience with documented instances of cyberbullying on social networking sites after it emerged and continued for long periods of time. When this occurred, the victim likely felt disempowered at both the cyberbullying and at his or her "telling on" the aggressor (Gross, 2009; Vandenbosch & Van

Cleemput, 2008). If a teacher had been Facebook "friends" with either the victim or the aggressor and thus had access to their pages, the teacher could have quickly identified the situation and provided a more timely response. Sadly, in most instances, this does not occur because students rarely report cyberbullying.

The suggested steps closely mirror Olweus' (1991, 1993, 2004) suggestions to recognize problem areas, insert adult supervision, identify students' misbehaviors, and proactively respond. These procedures closely mirror recommendations from AMLE (2003, 2010) and the APA (2004). Further, these procedures certainly seem to be more proactive with greater potential for success than previously mentioned school districts' policies. Most importantly, students deserve educators' conscientious and purposeful examinations of this new possibility.

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