ABSTRACT

EXAMINATION OF OHIO MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS’ AWARENESS AND CONFIDENCE OF IMPLEMENTATION OF CYBERBULLYING POLICIES

by Keely Hohmann

This research project, which included a random sample of Ohio school districts, investigated how the quality of the school districts’ cyberbullying policies impacted administrators’ levels of awareness and confidence in implementing the policies. A survey was created to assess cyberbullying policy awareness and perceived confidence of implementation, and the results were then compared to a dichotomous quality rating of the policies reviewed. A correlation was found between the awareness and the confidence scales, indicating that as policy awareness increases, confidence in policy implementation also increases. Further analyses resulted in non-statistically significant findings regarding the level to which the quality of the policy impacted the level of awareness or confidence of implementation. Qualitative findings from open-ended survey questions provided valuable information about the areas of strengths and weaknesses of current cyberbullying policies, as reported by the middle school principals. Limitations and implications for future research were discussed.
EXAMINATION OF OHIO MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS’ AWARENESS AND CONFIDENCE OF IMPLEMENTATION OF CYBERBULLYING POLICIES

A Thesis

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### Table of Contents

Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 1  
  Rationale ............................................................................................................................. 2  
Literature Review .................................................................................................................. 3  
  Issues with creating policies ............................................................................................... 3  
  Effective Policies ............................................................................................................... 4  
Method ..................................................................................................................................... 5  
Analysis ................................................................................................................................. 7  
  Quantitative Results ............................................................................................................ 7  
  Item Descriptives ............................................................................................................... 8  
  Qualitative Analyses ........................................................................................................... 9  
Discussion .............................................................................................................................. 11  
Limitations ............................................................................................................................ 12  
Practical Implications ......................................................................................................... 13  
References ............................................................................................................................ 16  
Appendix A ............................................................................................................................ 18  
Appendix B ............................................................................................................................ 23
List of Tables

Table 1 .............................................................. Responses from the Awareness Scale
Table 2 .............................................................. Responses from the Confidence Scale
Table 3 .............................................................. Qualitative Responses for Question 17
Table 4 .............................................................. Qualitative Responses for Question 18
Table 5 .............................................................. Qualitative Responses for Question 19
Table B1 ......................................................... Geographical Distribution of Survey Respondents
List of Figures

Figure 1 .......................................................................................................................... Map of Ohio Regions
Introduction

The issue of cyberbullying is one that has increased rapidly over the past couple of decades, due in part to advances in technology and easier access to digital outlets such as social networking sites and online chat forums (Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2012). In 2009, the National Center for Education Statistics reported results from the School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey, suggesting that about 6% of students aged 12-18 in the United States reported being a victim of some form of cyberbullying (Devoe, Murphy, & National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Students are now being taunted worldwide via electronic mediums such as text messaging, e-mail, and a variety of different Websites, such as those that allow people to post and share information (Epstein & Kazmierczak, 2006/2007). With increased and easier access to these “cyber” outlets, students who may have previously fallen victim to more traditional bullying throughout the school day are now subject to cyberbullying that follows them home at the end of the day and provides no respite. Likewise, research has indicated that cyberbullying may also be more volatile and create more lasting damage compared to traditional bullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Snakenborg, Van Acker, & Gable, 2011). For instance, once something has been posted or shared via these different types of technology, it can continue to be viewed by everyone else who has access to it, creating damaging effects every time the victim goes online (Goodno, 2011). Cyberbullying has undoubtedly become one of the biggest concerns facing public schools in the last decade or so.

As the issue of cyberbullying continues to become more prevalent and to receive increased research (and media) attention, federal and state lawmakers have been attempting to figure out appropriate ways to deal with the issue of cyberbullying without violating the constitution, specifically people’s freedom of speech. Currently, no federal laws exist that directly address bullying; however, bullying can often overlap with laws against discriminatory harassment (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d. a). Although there exists no federal mandate for schools to address bullying in particular, federally-funded schools are required to take action and respond appropriately in cases of discriminatory harassment of protected classes of people (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d. a). This includes discriminatory harassment based on race, national origin, color, sex, age, disability, or religion, which can often overlap with schools’ definitions of bullying or harassment (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services- n.d. a). While the federal government does not have specific legislation on bullying or cyberbullying, many states have their own laws pertaining to bullying and harassment, as well as cyberbullying. While 49 states currently have anti-bullying or harassment laws, 47 states have laws that include bullying/harassment done by electronic means, and only 19 states specifically include the term “cyberbullying” within these laws (Hinduja & Patchin, 2014). Considering the variability among states pertaining to the laws and terminology used regarding cyberbullying, it is easy to understand why schools may have issues creating quality policies that are understood and utilized confidently and consistently in practice.

Since the present study was conducted in school districts throughout Ohio, the laws pertaining to cyberbullying in this state were of particular interest. According to Hinduja and Patchin (2013), Ohio is a state that includes legislation on bullying/harassment via electronic means in its policy mandates, but cyberbullying is not specifically mentioned or prohibited statewide. As mentioned, the Ohio Revised Code (O.R.C.) does include state laws dealing with the issues of bullying and harassment, with O.R.C. 3313.666 specifically covering the topic of cyberbullying (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d. b). In particular, House Bill
116, also known as the Jessica Logan Act, explains what is required of federally-funded schools in the state of Ohio in regards to cyber bullying law:

House Bill 116 requires school districts [in Ohio] to establish cyber-bullying policies and to annually teach teachers and inform parents about their overall bullying policies. It also requires them to teach students about the policies if state or federal funding is provided for that purpose… HB 116 requires school districts to include bullying committed using a cell phone, computer or other electronic communication device in their anti-bullying policies (House Bill 116 of the Ohio Revised Code 3313.666).

Although House Bill 116, which went into effect during the 2012-2013 school year, attempts to address cyberbullying within Ohio school districts, its requirements are vague and leave those responsible for enforcing these laws with much “gray area” to interpret and implement. For instance, it requires that these schools educate parents and teachers annually about bullying policies, but does not specify what this might entail or how to keep records of its occurrence. It is also not clear which specific components, if any, need to be included in the policy. Despite the fact that federally-funded schools in Ohio are required to establish policies protecting against bullying by electronic means, many schools continue to struggle with how to appropriately handle instances of cyberbullying because of ambiguous laws and lack of effective policies (Goodno, 2011).

Rationale

While an increasing amount of research has been done in the past decade or so regarding the impact of cyberbullying on its victims, as well as the bullies themselves, the research does not extensively go beyond those topics to address the vast issues of cyberbullying that are at play among students and schools. Moreover, the policies mandated by state laws to deter and handle cyberbullying incidences have not been widely researched to consider how those responsible for enforcing the policies actually perceive and feel about implementing them.

Of concern is that policies are being created to combat cyberbullying, yet administrators (who are typically directly involved in reporting or handling instances of cyberbullying within the schools) may not be very knowledgeable about these policies, or they may not feel confident or comfortable with carrying out the procedures outlined in these policies.

Likewise, just because a school district has created its mandatory cyberbullying policy, that does not mean it is being utilized or carried out competently. Some school districts may simply adopt the model policy provided by the state, but they may not fully educate themselves or their staff on what these policies entail or how to implement them effectively. Therefore, it is of interest to look at the quality of cyberbullying policies throughout a sample of districts to determine whether the key components, as discussed in the literature review, impact how confident administrators feel in implementing the policies. This study was conducted to gain a better understanding of administrators’ basic awareness about their cyber bullying policies and how confident they feel in implementing the policies that have been put into place. Finally, the study examined cyberbullying policies to identify whether key elements exist, and how the inclusion or exclusion of these essential elements impact the level of confidence that administrators feel in implementing the policies. The current study’s aim was to measure administrators’ awareness of cyberbullying policies and confidence in implementation of these policies throughout the state of Ohio.
Literature Review

According to research, several distinct characteristics of cyberbullying may create a situation that is more volatile or damaging than traditional bullying. Factors such as the ability for the bully to remain anonymous, the fact that the bullying act can reach a large number of people very quickly, and the fact that there is no significant threat of punishment may all contribute to cyberbullying being considered as more pervasive and damaging than traditional bullying (Beckstrom, 2008; Brown, Jackson, & Cassidy, 2006; Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Snakenborg, Van Acker, & Gable, 2011; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). In addition to these factors, today’s students are often very familiar and comfortable using various types of technology and the Internet, making it a preferred mode of communication (Lisante, 2005), and students also realize that parental and teacher monitoring is usually low for technology and Internet use (Epstein & Kazmierczak, 2006/2007).

In order to combat and effectively deal with this emerging type of bullying, states have begun to create and mandate school policies aimed at responding to and preventing the occurrence of cyberbullying instances. Best practice suggests developing a school-wide policy to address the goals of the school and educating staff members on strategies aimed at reducing instances of bullying (Olweus, 1994 and Smith et. al., 2003, as cited in Felix & Furlong, 2008).

Issues with creating policies

Research has indicated a plethora of issues related to creating cyberbullying policies, mainly concerning the appropriate language to include in the policy that does not take away students’ constitutional rights. Of particular concern are how to appropriately define cyberbullying while protecting freedom of speech, how to enforce policies for behaviors that occur off school grounds, and how to create policies that address the personal, parental, and school’s authority over the students (Brown, Jackson, & Cassidy, 2006; Goodno, 2011; Beckstrom, 2008).

In considering how to define cyberbullying for policy purposes, traditional bullying has typically been defined as repeated aggressive behavior intended to cause harm that involves an imbalance of power (Olweus, 1992, as cited in Snakenborg, Van Acker, & Gable, 2011; Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Bauman & Hurley, 2005). One issue, then, becomes how to define cyberbullying in order to be able to create an appropriate policy against it. Hinduja and Patchin (2009) define cyber bullying as “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices.” While most definitions of traditional bullying include components that indicate it is an intentional and repetitive occurrence of aggression involving an imbalance of power, cyberbullying may not necessarily reflect these same components. Even when cyberbullying instances are not repeated, they can still have severe, if not more severe, consequences than traditional bullying (Anti-Defamation League, 2009). The issue of repetition is not as clear for cyberbullying, as one initial act of cyberbullying can often “snow ball” and spread to others through the use of a variety of different technologies, beyond the initial act carried out by the cyberbully (Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2009). Thus, the victim may be forced to experience the initial bullying act numerous other times as it spreads or is shared through technologies by other people. Likewise, an imbalance of power in cyberbullying can be very different than that seen in traditional bullying. While the victim of traditional bullying is usually seen as “weaker” either physically, socially, or psychologically, an imbalance of power can take on other forms for cyber bullying (Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2009; Listante, 2005). However, when considering cyberbullying, the issues of anonymity, power in numbers, and knowledge about how to use
various technologies can also create an imbalance of power (Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2012). With this in mind, it becomes clear that creating an operational definition of cyberbullying can create issues that do not yet have definite answers.

Besides the lack of clarity in defining cyberbullying for policy creation purposes, the language used in the policies must also be considered in order to ensure that students’ constitutional rights are upheld. One of the main concerns is how to appropriately address an issue of cyberbullying while ensuring that freedom of speech is not violated (Beckstrom, 2008; Brown, Jackson, & Cassidy, 2006, Hinduja & Patchin, 2009). While students’ freedom of speech must be considered in instances of cyberbullying, students do not always receive the full protection provided by the First Amendment (Beckstrom, 2008). Based on results from a number of court cases surrounding this issue, students’ freedom of speech rights will not necessarily be upheld in all circumstances. In the United States, results from court cases typically favor upholding the student’s constitutional rights, except in instances where the cyberbullying incident: 1. causes substantial or material disruption within the school environment 2. violates the constitutional or civil rights of others 3. disrupts learning in the schools or school discipline or 4. uses technology owned by the school to carry out the harassment (Beckstrom, 2008; Hinduja & Patchin, 2009).

Another issue when considering the language being used in cyberbullying policies is whether or not the school can uphold disciplinary action for instances of cyberbullying that occur off school grounds. A plethora of court cases in recent years have brought some clarity to when instances of cyberbullying may or may not be considered for disciplinary action by the school. For instance, in the case of J.S. v. Bethlehem Area School District (2000), it was determined that discipline is permitted and necessary for instances occurring off school grounds when the conduct “materially and substantially interferes with the educational process” (as cited in Hinduja & Patchin, 2009). Along the same lines, the Cyberbullying Research Center stated that “School districts are well within their legal rights to intervene in cyberbullying incidents, even those initiated off campus, when it can be demonstrated that the incident resulted in a substantial disruption of the educational environment” (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009). What specifically constitutes as substantial is not made clear, and will most likely vary depending on the instance.

Effective Policies

The need for school policies addressing cyberbullying is extremely evident, and most states across the nation have begun to look more deeply at this issue and develop policies aimed at handling cyberbullying instances. Lisante (2005) suggested that school districts should create policies that lay out clear rules for acceptable technology/computer use both on and off school grounds, as well as indicating what behaviors constitute cyber bullying and how infractions of the rules will be handled. Hinduja & Patchin, who are leading researchers in the area of cyberbullying and authors of the Cyberbullying Fact Sheet (2009), have identified six key components that should be included in an effective policy, based on proposed laws and discussions with policymakers.
Based on these factors, the following elements were identified as essential to effective policies aimed at addressing cyberbullying:

- Specific definitions for harassment, intimidation, and bullying (including cyberbullying)
- Graduated consequences and remedial actions
- Procedures for reporting
- Procedures for investigating
- Specific language that if a student’s off-school speech or behavior results in “substantial disruption of the learning environment,” the student can be disciplined
- Procedures for preventing cyberbullying, such as workshops, staff training, curriculum enhancements (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009).

Likewise, the Department for Education and Skills in the United Kingdom established a pack that was distributed to schools that was aimed at addressing bullying. This pack, known as “Don’t Suffer in Silence” also provided practical components that should be included in a school’s bullying/harassment policy, including the following:

- a definition of bullying, including racist, sexist and homophobic bullying
- aims and objectives
- procedures to follow - who to tell, how to record bullying, sanctions
- intervention techniques, curriculum support, training policy, and play policy- depending on resources (Department for Education and Skills, 2002)

Smith, Smith, Osborn, and Samara (2008) also identified similar essential components for a cyberbullying policy. They include: a definition of the behavior, a procedure for reporting and responding to cyberbullying, a system for recording incidences, a plan for communicating and evaluating the effectiveness of the policy, and cyberbullying prevention strategies outlined within the policy. Furthermore, it has been suggested that effective policies need to be written as a collaborative effort among all stakeholders, including students, parents, school administrators, and legislative officials (Brown, Jackson, & Cassidy, 2006).

With these key ideas and components in mind, it is essential that our nation move toward creating highly effective policies to address cyberbullying that can be easily read and understood by everyone. It is not enough to have a vague policy that mentions the prohibition of cyberbullying. School officials must have a working knowledge of these policies and feel confident in utilizing the policies, or else the policies ultimately serve very little purpose. In the next section, the method used to identify the awareness and confidence of implementing cyberbullying policies as designed for the present study, is presented and discussed in detail.

**Method**

In this study, the following research questions were examined: How aware are administrators of their district’s current cyberbullying policies? How confident do administrators feel in implementing these cyberbullying policies? To what extent does the quality of the existing cyberbullying policy impact an administrators’ level of awareness and confidence in implementing the policy?

This study used a mixed methods survey research approach to assess administrators’ basic awareness of their districts’ cyberbullying policies to get a better understanding of how much they know about the policies, as well as measured the level of confidence that
administrators have regarding the implementation of these policies. Data were also collected to correlate the “quality” of cyberbullying policies, based on the amount of key components they include, with the level of administrator confidence in implementing the policies.

A listing of the six essential cyberbullying policy components, as outlined by Hinduja and Patchin (2009), was created to analyze the cyberbullying policies from a sample of 125 districts throughout Ohio. The six policy components are:

- Specific definitions for harassment, intimidation, and bullying (including cyberbullying)
- Graduated consequences and remedial actions
- Procedures for reporting
- Procedures for investigating
- Specific language that if a student’s off-school speech or behavior results in “substantial disruption of the learning environment,” the student can be disciplined
- Procedures for preventing cyberbullying, such as workshops, staff training, curriculum enhancements (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009).

This list of key components was used to examine each district’s cyberbullying policy in order to determine the number, if any, of components each policy contains. Each policy was read thoroughly and given a check mark for each component that the policy includes. Once the policies were “scored,” they were divided into a qualitative dichotomy based on how many essential components they were found to have, and the policies were labeled as either “strong” or “weak.” Strong policies included those that were found to have 5-6 of the key components, while weak policies contained 4 or less of the key components.

A random group sample of 125 school districts within the state of Ohio was utilized to analyze policy components. For the purposes of this study, the state was separated into 5 regions, and a random sampling of 25 school districts within each of these regions was obtained. See figure 1 in Appendix B for a map of the state and how it was divided for the purpose of the random sample. Only school districts that had a student population of 700 or more students, as reported from the 2012 ODE District Profile Report, were included in this sample.

Participants included middle school administrators from the school districts whose policies were analyzed. Middle school was chosen specifically, as research indicates that bullying incidences peak during the middle school years and begin to decline in high school. Consent was first obtained by a district representative, such as the superintendent. Then, an administrator from one middle school in each of the districts who gave consent to participate was asked to participate in the study. Each principal also signed a separate consent form, which was mailed back simultaneously with the cyberbullying survey, if they chose to participate.

Of the 57 surveys sent to administrators whose school district’s consented to participate in the study, 24 surveys were ultimately returned (N=24). All participants were sent a paper copy of the survey designed to identify two constructs: 1) the person’s basic awareness of their school’s cyberbullying policy, and 2) their perceived level of confidence in carrying out the policies’ requirements, should a cyberbullying incident be brought to their attention. Since no survey currently exists that collects all of the information required for this study, a survey was created with appropriate questions specifically tailored to the research questions posed. Refer to Appendix A to see the survey that was created and sent to administrators. Some questions (the demographic questions, as well as items 15 and 16) were loosely adapted from the Cyberbullying Survey (Poole, 2010), while most were written by the researcher (items 1-14).
Cyberbullying Survey reported a reliability of ≥.85 (Poole, 2010). Due to time and resource limitations, reliability and validity data were not collected for the other survey items created by the researcher, which is a noted limitation of this study and is discussed further in the discussion section of this paper.

Analysis

Analysis of the data gleaned from the survey results was aimed at identifying the level of awareness and confidence that administrators have in implementing cyberbullying policies, as determined using scores obtained from the survey that was administered. In addition, data was collected to assess if the presence or absence of key policy components correlated with the awareness and confidence levels of administrators.

Quantitative Results

The data were sorted into two parts and analyzed to look for a pattern of responses: part one included questions based on basic awareness of cyberbullying policies and part two included questions based on confidence in implementing the policies. Both sets of questions had a Likert-scale response system, which was scored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). There was also a “not applicable” choice in the event that a respondent felt the question did not apply to their district’s policy. The first 8 questions of the survey were analyzed to determine the level of awareness administrators have regarding their cyberbullying policies. The last 8 questions were analyzed to determine the confidence level of administrators in implementing their cyberbullying policies. Of the overall sample size of 23, 8 respondents were from the northwest region, 3 respondents were from the northeast region, 5 respondents were from the southwest region, 4 respondents were from the southeast region, and 3 respondents were from the central region (refer to table B1 in Appendix B for a table of these results).

A correlation was conducted to compare the awareness of the policy with the confidence level of implementing the policy. A Spearman correlation of .571 (r= .571, p= .004) was found between the awareness and confidence scales, suggesting a moderately significant positive correlation that as policy awareness increases, confidence in policy implementation also increases. Variability in responses both within and between the awareness and confidence scales was very low, and most respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the questions in both scales. It should be noted that response bias contamination was considered and could have impacted the results of the study, particularly due to the nature of the positively-worded Likert style item sets. This possibility is discussed further in the discussion and limitations section of this paper.

Of the 23 districts who participated in the study, 6 districts were found to have “strong” policies, meaning they included at least 5-6 of the key policy components identified. The other 17 policies were considered to be “weak” policies, as they included 4 or less key components that were identified. The awareness and confidence scales were analyzed to consider how the average scores for the “strong” policies compared to the average scores for the “weak” policies. An independent samples t-test showed a non-significant difference t(18.62)= -1.54, p<.05 for the awareness scale (M= 3.89, SD= .12) of the strong policies and a non-statistically significant difference t(21)= -.431, p<.05 for the confidence scale (M= 3.74, SD= .33) of the strong policies. A t-test also showed a non-statistically significant difference t(21)= -1.12, p<.05 for the awareness scale (M= 3.77, SD= .26) of the weak policies and a non-significant difference t(8.52)= -.423, p<.05 for the confidence scale (M= 3.67, SD=.32) of the weak policies.

In addition, a Mann Whitney U-test was conducted in order to compare strong and weak policies with the awareness and confidence scales. Item number 16 from the confidence scale was omitted from this particular analysis due to its low reliability. Results from the Mann
A Whitney U-test indicated no significant difference between ratings of either awareness (U= 40, p>.05) or confidence U= 44, p>.05 between respondents with either strong or weak policies. Overall, responses were very similar for respondents whose policies were considered strong or weak both within and between the two scales. In addition, when examining the correlation between the strength of the policy and the level of reported confidence and awareness of policies (with number 16 omitted) using Spearman Rho, no significant correlation was found. The awareness scale was found to have a correlation of .373 (r_s=.373, p=.08) and the confidence scale was found to have a correlation of .239 (r_s=.239, p=.273). Thus, the “policy score” that denoted each policy as strong or weak did not correlate with the overall awareness or confidence scale results. Reliability yielded an overall Cronbach alpha of .669 for the awareness scale. With question number 8 omitted, the Cronbach alpha increased to .79. This question may have been viewed differently by respondents because it asked about knowledge of educational opportunities related to cyberbullying, which may typically be implemented at the district level (embedded in curriculum for students, offered to parents outside of school hours, etc.). The other questions in the awareness scale lent themselves more to awareness of policy components an administrator would have more direct authority over, such as implementing disciplinary consequences. However, this question was believed to be important to the overall survey, as it corresponded directly to one of the key policy components (procedures for preventing cyberbullying, such as workshops, staff training, and curriculum enhancements). Reliability yielded an overall Cronbach alpha of .468 for the confidence scale. With question number 16 omitted, the Cronbach alpha increased to .635 overall for the confidence scale. This may be due to the overall structure and content of the question and could be considered for deletion or revision in future studies. Rather than aligning with the key policy components, this question asked respondents to agree or disagree that an updated and improved policy would allow for more effective implementation. It was then reverse-scored to fit with the confidence scale. For example, a respondent who agreed that an updated and improved policy would lead to more effective implementation would theoretically have lower confidence in implementing their district’s current policy than someone who disagreed with this question. Although this question has potential for inferential analysis, it substantially decreased the overall reliability for the confidence scale.

**Item Descriptives**

The following tables include an item by item analysis of how each survey response was distributed. This analysis includes 24 surveys that were completed. For previous analyses comparing policies to survey responses, only 23 surveys were included. This is because one of the school districts completed and returned a valid survey; however, the district’s cyberbullying policy was not made available for analysis. Questions in Table 1 make up the awareness scale.
Table 1

*Responses from the Awareness Scale*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>.204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>.338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>.282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
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<td>.565</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>.338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.42</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Questions in Table 2 make up the confidence scale.

Table 2

*Responses from the Confidence Scale*

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>.338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>.338</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**Qualitative Analyses**

The results of the open-ended questions, including questions 17, 18, and 19, were inferentially analyzed to look for a pattern of responses. Patterns of responses were also compared to whether respondents agreed or disagreed with question 16 regarding the perceived need for an updated and improved policy. Not all survey respondents provided a written response to the open-ended questions, therefore, the number of responses for each question had a smaller overall “n” than the total survey responses, where N=23. The following tables represent how the responses for each open-ended question were categorized. Table 3 categorizes question 17, Table 4 categorizes question 18, and Table 5 categorizes question 19. Not all respondents answered each open-ended question; therefore, the number of responses for each question varies.
Table 3

*Qualitative Responses for Question 17*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Total Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More student lessons needed</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address off-school grounds</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More policy review with staff</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More policy review with parents</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyberbullying needs a separate section</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Update to reflect current laws</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More interventions for students and parents</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More student lessons needed</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It should be noted that responses indicating that no improvements were necessary were not included in this qualitative analysis. For example, some respondents answered the open-ended questions by writing “none” or “the policy is adequate/fine as is.” However, some responses stated that the policy was fine but then included suggestions for improvements or changes in addressing or handling cyberbullying, although not directly through the cyberbullying policy. Those responses were included. For example, one response was written as “I feel the policy is adequate. However, interventions to help students and parents need improvement.” Many of the respondents felt that their district’s current policy was adequate; however, they wrote that it needed to be reviewed more frequently with staff and parents in order to be most effective. Others indicated that although they may have viewed the cyberbullying policy as adequate, they felt that improvements were still needed outside of the actual policy in order to adequately address cyberbullying, such as more professional development for staff and lessons for students and parents regarding what cyberbullying is and is not.

Table 4

*Qualitative Responses for Question 18*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Total Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Receive legal updates more frequently</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearer definition and laws</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement about involving police</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More severe consequences</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More teacher (administrator) training</td>
<td>4 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More student lessons</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More frequent review</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of responses for question 18 indicated a need for more professional development, specifically for teachers. One respondent included professional development for administrators and discussing cyberbullying more frequently at administrator meetings as well. The next highest category of responses included those that wrote about needing/wanting to be more updated on the current laws regarding cyberbullying and ensuring the policies are up to date in accordance with the law. Finally, a couple respondents felt that clearer definitions and clearer
laws would help to increase their confidence in implementing the cyberbullying policy. Similarly, one respondent felt that including verbiage in the policy about what circumstances would or would not warrant involvement with local law enforcement agencies would help to increase confidence in implementing the cyberbullying policy. Like question 17, some respondents wrote that they were confident in implementing the policy, and those responses were not categorized.

Table 5

**Qualitative Responses for Question 19**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“It will change due to recent events”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Policy is fine as written, it’s just that each incident can be uniquely different requiring varied approached when discipline is needed or warranted.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It's not the efficacy of the policy, it is the efficacy of the implementation- solid foundations with parents and students make all the difference.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I am pleased with how to deal with those situations.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Parents need to do a better job of &quot;keeping an eye on&quot; their children and monitoring them and their actions.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I feel the staff understands our policy well. However, students and parents really struggle to understand what bullying truly is and how to appropriately deal with conflict.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The responses to question 19 were not categorized due to the varying nature of the responses provided. However, several respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the policy and not concerned with its efficacy. In addition, several other respondents noted that more parent involvement and knowledge about the topic was pertinent.

**Discussion**

Overall, none of the quantitative analyses led to statistically significant findings. The strength or weakness of the cyberbullying policy was not significantly correlated to a higher or lower awareness level or confidence level. Due to the very similar nature of responses, it was found that middle school principals have a high awareness of their district’s cyberbullying policies. They also reported having high confidence in implementing their district’s cyberbullying policies. As mentioned previously, response bias contamination could have impacted the way that respondents answered the survey responses. For example, Rennie (1982) suggested that response bias has been evidenced particularly in response sets with Likert-type scales, possibly due to respondents’ likelihood of choosing an extreme response or a neutral response more often. Since the present survey was formatted as a Likert response scale, response bias could have impacted the results, with middle school principals choosing “Strongly Agree” the most frequently. In addition, Rennie (1982) reported that most affective scales are typically designed so that half of the questions are worded in the positive direction and half are worded in the negative direction in order to help reduce response bias. The questions in the survey for the present study were all worded in the positive direction, which is a noted limitation with the design of the survey instrument. However, despite possible response bias that may have impacted the results of the quantitative data, the qualitative data provided through open-ended responses suggested multiple areas of concern regarding policy development, implementation, and a need for increased awareness of policies for faculty, students, and parents. A pattern of
responses suggested that some respondents felt policy issues needed to be addressed by someone else, such as lawmakers, police officers, or through the further education of parents, staff members, and students in order to make cyberbullying policies more effective.

Going back to the literature, the results of this study indicated that none of the policies included in this study had all of the essential components that leading researchers highlighted as pertinent for highly effective policies. Most policies were identical, following one of two generic formats and did not expand beyond the provided template to include all essential components. Currently, there is very little research on cyberbullying policy implementation, and this study further shows that increased awareness and research is needed in this area. Although the quantitative findings of this study suggested that principals felt they were aware of their policies and were confident in implementing them, the qualitative data suggested that cyberbullying remains a large concern in the schools and needs to be further addressed with a variety of people, including parents, teachers, and students.

**Limitations**

Several limitations may have impacted the results of this research project. First, it is important to note the inferential nature of the scoring of the policy components. Each policy component was scored as either 0, indicating the component was not present in the policy, or 1, indicating the component was present in the policy. This could be problematic because a score of 0 or 1 could look very different for each policy. For instance, definitions of cyberbullying varied amongst policies, but most districts received a 1 in this category because they included some type of definition. The components were also scored based on how the key elements were interpreted by the researcher based on the research done by others. For example, the key component identified that includes off-campus language to address cyberbullying behavior could have been interpreted differently amongst researchers. Many districts included language in their policies to address cyberbullying behavior that occurred off school campus or after the school day ended, such as on the school bus, in the school parking lot, or at a school-sponsored event. However, no districts included in this research included specific language about cyberbullying behavior that occurs off school property or after school ends that adversely impacts the learning environment, such as cyberbullying that occurs at the student’s home. This key component could be broken down into these 2 separate parts and analyzed further. It would be beneficial for future research to include more specific criteria about the wording for each of the key components in order to ensure consistency with the criteria done by other researchers, such as Hinduja and Patchin.

Another noted limitation was the small number of participants included in this study. Although 125 school districts were initially selected for the random sample, only 57 districts consented to participate. Furthermore, of the 57 surveys sent out to the middle school principals whose districts consented to participate, only 24 middle school principals returned the survey. In addition, one of those surveys could not be included because the district’s cyberbullying policy could not be found online and the district representative could not be reached to acquire a copy of the policy. An overall sample of 23 respondents limited the number of policies and survey results that could be analyzed. This low response rate may have impacted the external validity of the survey results, and may not be a true representation of Ohio middle school principals throughout the entire state. In an attempt to increase the response rate, 2 separate follow-up emails were sent to the middle school principals in order to ensure that they received the survey and were aware of the basic components of the research project. However, this correspondence did not increase the amount of responses that were ultimately returned.
Since the respondents from each of the 5 geographical areas that were included in the research (refer to figure 1 in Appendix B for a map of Ohio showing how the state was broken into five regions) were also skewed, this may impact the generalizability of the results to the rest of the intended population. Again, 8 respondents were from the northwest region, 3 respondents were from the northeast region, 5 respondents were from the southwest region, 4 respondents were from the southeast region, and 3 respondents were from the central region (refer to table B1 in Appendix B for a table of these results). This could have impacted the results based on how similar or dissimilar the policies are within each geographical area, as well as how middle school principals responded to the survey. Another limitation included the limited reliability and validity data for the survey utilized in this research. Although the survey did not undergo rigorous analysis testing for reliability and validity prior to its dissemination to participants, the survey was specifically constructed from the current cyberbullying research and based on key policy components. Each respondent participated under the same procedures and was given the same opportunities to respond. In addition, the survey was field-tested on a small sample (N=10) of people. Once the survey results were analyzed, it was identified that at least two of the questions were found to negatively impact the reliability of the overall awareness and confidence scales. The results did account for this and those items were deleted from particular parts of the analysis. However, the results could be more reliable and valid if the survey were to undergo more extensive reliability and validity development.

Practical Implications

From this study, it can be implied that middle school principals do continue to have concerns regarding the awareness and implementation of cyberbullying policies. Schools should work more closely with lawmakers to ensure policies are updated appropriately to reflect current laws and that those who implement the policies have a better understanding of what the laws mean. Schools should also put continued efforts into educating staff, parents, and students about issues pertaining to cyberbullying, such as what is or is not considered cyberbullying, how to report suspected instances of cyberbullying, and what to expect once an instance has been reported. A more “hands on” approach is needed to acquire and disseminate information pertaining to cyberbullying policies.

In addition, it is important for principals and other staff members to stay up-to-date with the continual increase of technological advances and ease of access to different technological platforms. As more devices become mobile and cyber outlets become more accessible almost anywhere a student might go, policy makers need to join forces with policy implementers to decide and communicate how policies will be enforced for cyberbullying that does not occur on school grounds. Aside from requiring students to sign an acceptable use policy at the beginning of each school year, schools should strive to go above and beyond in order to educate students on what is considered acceptable or unacceptable in regards to using technology and sharing information. This could help to not only raise awareness about cyberbullying and prevent students from engaging in unacceptable cyber behavior, but it could also help to increase overall student safety when utilizing technology and sharing information via technology.

Since cyberbullying has been found to have such a profound impact on the mental health of students, it is pertinent that strong cyberbullying policies be put into place to combat and even prevent instances from occurring. As mentioned in the six essential policy components outlined by leading research, one way that prevention can be addressed is through the detailed procedures for providing training, workshops for staff and parents, and curriculum for students. Districts
whose policies do not currently include such procedures and detailed plans for providing
prevention training should consider revising their current policies to include such components.
As the mental health of students continues to receive more attention and federal/state funding, so
too will it be essential that schools have policies in place to protect the mental well-being of
students. Strong cyberbullying policies with established prevention procedures is but one way
that schools can help to address the mental health needs of students within the schools.

School staff members are often the first persons to respond to a reported instance of
cyberbullying, so it is very important that all staff, including teachers, be aware of cyberbullying
policies and the reporting procedures. Although the respondents from this research study
reported a high level of awareness and confidence of implementation of cyberbullying policies,
those results do not necessarily apply to other staff members. From the qualitative results, it is
evident that a lack of training and misconstrued definitions of cyberbullying amongst staff,
parents, and teachers is of concern for middle school principals. From this study, it can be
implied that, in general, many administrators feel a need for an increased awareness about
cyberbullying and cyberbullying policies for other stakeholders within the school communities.

Implications for school psychologists can also be made from this research study. The
versatile role of the school psychologist lends itself to acquiring a plethora of diverse duties,
often including acting in administrative roles and addressing the mental health needs within the
school. School psychologists not only need to be aware of the impact cyberbullying can have on
its victims and perpetrators, but it is important for school psychologists to understand and feel
comfortable discussing the short- and long-term effects cyberbullying can have on students.
From a mental health perspective, school psychologists play a pivotal role in addressing and
helping to prevent instances of cyberbullying. From an administrative role, it is important for
school psychologists to also have a working knowledge of the district’s cyberbullying policies,
as teachers, students, or parents may report instances of cyberbullying directly to the school
psychologist. Being able to play a part in discerning what is or is not a true instance of
cyberbullying, as well as following the district’s outlined procedures for reporting the instance, is
a crucial task for someone who may be the first respondent to a reported instance of
cyberbullying. In addition, school psychologists may be called upon as the “behavior experts” to
provide professional development or in-service trainings to staff and parents because of the wide
array of expertise school psychologists have with mental health and behavioral needs. Knowing
what is expected, at minimum, in the cyberbullying policy can help a school psychologist to plan
and implement trainings and follow-up as appropriate. These are but a few of the ways that this
study can be applied to the role of the school psychologist.

Finally, this study brought to light the lack of specificity and importance currently placed
on cyberbullying. Of all the policies that were reviewed, only two main types of policies were
found. All policies fell under one of these two pre-formatted policies, with the only changes
being made to the name of the school to which the policy applies. Vague definitions and
procedures may lead to poor responses to instances of cyberbullying, which is undoubtedly
harmful to the students. Increased caution and time should be placed on writing cyberbullying
policies, rather than just adopting a model provided by an outside source. Policies should be
more specifically tailored to the uniqueness of each school district and provide educational
opportunities that are feasible for the members of each school community. Overall, this study
provided insight into how aware and confident principals feel in implementing cyberbullying
policies, and that is was not significantly related to the overall strength or weakness of the
districts’ policies. However, this sheds light on the fact that many principals may not know or
understand what an effective policy should include in order to best implement the policies and raise awareness about the dangers of cyberbullying.
References


Appendix A
Cyberbullying Policy Survey

INSTRUCTIONS: Please answer the following questions about your current school setting:

What is the name of the school at which you currently work?
___________________________________

What Ohio school district is your school located in?
___________________________________

What is your current position within the school you work?
___________________________________

Please circle the answer that best describes your current level of knowledge:

1. I am knowledgeable about my school district’s policy that addresses cyberbullying or bullying via electronic means:
   
   A. Agree  
   B. Somewhat Agree  
   C. Somewhat Disagree  
   D. Disagree  
   E. Not Applicable

2. I am knowledgeable about how to access my school district’s policy that addresses cyberbullying or bullying via electronic means:
   
   A. Agree  
   B. Somewhat Agree  
   C. Somewhat Disagree  
   D. Disagree  
   E. Not Applicable

3. I am knowledgeable about my school district’s specific definition of cyberbullying or bullying via electronic means:
   
   A. Agree  
   B. Somewhat Agree  
   C. Somewhat Disagree  
   D. Disagree  
   E. Not Applicable
4. I am knowledgeable about the district-approved consequences and actions for incidences of cyberbullying or bullying via electronic means that occur on school grounds:

A. Agree
B. Somewhat Agree
C. Somewhat Disagree
D. Disagree
E. Not Applicable

5. I am knowledgeable about the district-approved disciplinary actions for incidences of cyberbullying or bullying via electronic means that occur off school grounds:

A. Agree
B. Somewhat Agree
C. Somewhat Disagree
D. Disagree
E. Not Applicable

6. I am knowledgeable about the exact steps to follow when reporting cyberbullying or bullying via electronic means, as outlined in my school district’s policy:

A. Agree
B. Somewhat Agree
C. Somewhat Disagree
D. Disagree
E. Not Applicable

7. I am knowledgeable about the procedures for investigating reported cyberbullying or bullying via electronic means, as written in my school district’s policy:

A. Agree
B. Somewhat Agree
C. Somewhat Disagree
D. Disagree
E. Not Applicable

8. I am knowledgeable about my school district’s specific procedures for educating others about cyberbullying or bullying via electronic means, such as workshops for staff and parents:

A. Agree
B. Somewhat Agree
C. Somewhat Disagree
D. Disagree
E. Not Applicable
For the following, please circle the response that most accurately describes your current perceptions about each statement:

9. I feel confident in properly identifying an incident of reported cyberbullying or bullying via electronic means, occurring both on or off school grounds:

   A. Agree
   B. Somewhat Agree
   C. Somewhat Disagree
   D. Disagree
   E. Not Applicable

10. I feel confident in providing district-approved consequences and remedial actions for incidences of cyberbullying or bullying via electronic means, as stated in the district’s policy:

   A. Agree
   B. Somewhat Agree
   C. Somewhat Disagree
   D. Disagree
   E. Not Applicable

11. I feel confident in properly reporting an incident of cyberbullying or bullying via electronic means, as outlined by the district policy:

   A. Agree
   B. Somewhat Agree
   C. Somewhat Disagree
   D. Disagree
   E. Not Applicable

12. I feel confident that I could properly carry out an investigation of a reported incident of cyberbullying or bullying via electronic means

   A. Agree
   B. Somewhat Agree
   C. Somewhat Disagree
   D. Disagree
   E. Not Applicable
13. I feel confident in implementing disciplinary action for cyberbullying or bullying via electronic means that occurs off school grounds:

A. Agree
B. Somewhat Agree
C. Somewhat Disagree
D. Disagree
E. Not Applicable

14. I feel confident in implementing prevention strategies such as teacher, student, or parent training programs aimed at reducing incidents of cyberbullying or bullying via electronic means:

A. Agree
B. Somewhat Agree
C. Somewhat Disagree
D. Disagree
E. Not Applicable

15. I feel that the school district’s current policy related to cyberbullying allows me to effectively address incidents of cyberbullying or bullying via electronic means:

A. Agree
B. Somewhat Agree
C. Somewhat Disagree
D. Disagree
E. Not Applicable

16. I feel that an updated and improved district policy would allow me to more effectively address incidents of cyberbullying or bullying via electronic means:

A. Agree
B. Somewhat Agree
C. Somewhat Disagree
D. Disagree
E. Not Applicable
Please consider the following questions and write your answers below:

17. Based on your experiences, what improvements are needed in your school district’s current policy regarding cyberbullying?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

18. What do you feel could be done to increase your confidence in addressing incidences of cyberbullying at your school in a district-approved manner?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

19. Do you have any additional comments regarding your school district’s current cyberbullying policy?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
Appendix B

**Figure 1.** This is the map of Ohio regions that was used for survey distribution.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographical Region</th>
<th>Total Number of Survey Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northwest</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>