ONLINE VIOLENCE IN SCHOOL: BEYOND CYBERBULLYING

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Suggested Citation:

BACKGROUND PAPER

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Abstract

Cyberbullying, and other forms of adverse school-related online experiences, have emerged as an area of major concern for policy makers and practitioners over the past decade. As children’s access to technology increases exponentially, and ICTs and social media become integral to children’s lives, regardless of socio-economic status or geography, so the risks for adverse experiences, and real harms to children, has increased. The need to address cyberbullying and other harms relating to online experiences have been recognised by many governments, researchers and practitioners. This paper explores the relationships between risks, resilience and harms resulting from and associated with the use of ICTs and social media amongst children in school, while recognising the opportunities that social media and the digital presents. Emerging good and promising practice in building children’s resilience (online), thus enhancing online safety, is explored. While focussing primarily on the school environment, the paper locates children’s online experiences within their broader offline lived experiences, recognising the fluidity and increasing blurring of children’s online and offline realities.

Keywords: cyberbullying, school violence, ICTs, online violence, online sexual exploitation, resilience, digital violence, digital citizenship, ICT4D, internet harassment
Introduction

In recent years, the issue of children and cyberbullying has received substantial attention by researchers and practitioners (Barbosa et al., 2013; Jones and Finkelhor, 2011; Broadband Commission for Digital Development, 2015; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Institute for Medicine and National Research Council, 2012). Similarly, violence in school, including issues such as corporal punishment and gender-based violence, has been extensively studied across a range of academic disciplines (Moore, Jones, and Broadbent, 2008; Plan International and International Center for Research on Women, 2015; UNESCO, 2015; Pinheiro, 2006; Office of the Special Representative to the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, 2012). Yet, how digital violence intersects with the ‘offline’ contexts of schools and teaching practices remains critically under-investigated. This research gap is troubling given that ICT-based interventions to prevent and combat violence are being rolled out in schools around the world without robust baseline data or evaluation strategies (Jones and Finkelhor, 2011; Livingstone and Bulger, 2013; 2014).

Online violence is boundless in nature, and while not necessarily restricted to the geographic setting of schools, has significant implications for learning institutions. More work is needed to unpack the spatial and temporal issues of online violence, and how they intersect with the offline regimes of education, supervision, and legality. As noted by Popadić and Kuzmanović (2013), “regardless of the fact that digital violence is not exclusively linked to the school, but may happen any time, any place, the school has an undeniable role in the prevention and solving of the problem of digital violence.” Given the limited pool of published research and evaluations on online violence in schools, the present literature review will look to learnings from other relevant literatures and fields, including ICT4D, bullying, school violence and education, gender-based violence, and public health.

Definitions

Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) say that internet harassment is “an overt, intentional act of aggression towards another person online. Actions can take the form of purposeful harassment or embarrassment of someone else.” In one of only a few studies directly researching incidences of digital violence among school students, Popadić and Kuzmanović (2013) define digital violence as an intentional act:

2 http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/youthviolence/electronicaggression
3 For another study on online violence and schools, see also Heng Choon (Oliver) Chan and Dennis S.W Wong. 2015.
**Using mobile phones, computers, video cameras and similar electronic devices in order to intentionally frighten, insult, humiliate or hurt a person in some other way. Friendly teasing and unintentional causing of damage and hurt were not considered as digital violence.**

From a public health perspective, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention removes intention, and defines “electronic aggression” as any type of harassment or bullying that occurs through email, a chatroom, instant messaging, a website (including blogs), or text messaging.

Livingstone and Smith (2014) discuss at length how cyberbullying is a contested term. In the authors’ systematic review of online violence literature, they found that Olweus’ definition of bullying is the more commonly used definition by online violence scholars:

> An aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group, or individuals, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and overtime against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself.

For Livingstone and Smith (2014), Olweus’ definition encompasses three sub-components that are important for research purposes. These are the concepts of ‘intent to cause harm’, ‘imbalance of power’, and ‘repetition of the act’, which become critical when operationalising the definition of cyberbullying in empirical research. For example, Livingstone and Smith (2014) found that prevalence studies that incorporated ‘imbalance of power’ and ‘repetition’ into their survey design reported markedly lower rates of cyberbullying than studies that relied on broader terms and definitions.

**Does The Online Dimension Worsen Childhood Experiences of Violence in School?**

An extensive amount of research has sought to understand the psychological, educational, and health impacts of conventional forms of school bullying and school violence on children (Plan International and ICRW, 2015; Pinheiro, 2006; Green, Collingwood and Ross, 2008). However, the field of research investigating psychosocial impacts of online violence is much more limited (see Ybarra and Mitchell, 2004; Samuels et al., 2013). Conventional school violence can lead to school drop-out, long-term psychological effects, and in some developing contexts, even hinder social and economic development (see SRSG on Violence against Children, 2012; Plan International and ICRW, 2015).

Popadić and Kuzmanović’s (2013) research on digital violence in Serbian schools identified the following platforms through which children are engaged in digital violence:

- Sending SMS with insulting and threatening content (insults, threats, inappropriate jokes, etc);
- phone harassment (giving false identity, silence, insults, etc);
- making videos using a mobile phone or camera, and forwarding and uploading such videos online;
- email harassment (insults, threats, inappropriate jokes, etc);
- harassment on social networks (e.g. Facebook and other...
networks); harassment on web pages; concealment of identity, taking over someone else’s identity, giving false identity, using someone else’s accounts, uploading photos and videos of other persons without their consent, posting incorrect and insulting content, sending viruses.

Children experiencing ‘offline’ forms of bullying are also vulnerable to online bullying, while children who tend towards bullying behaviour can extend similar behaviour in their online interactions (Livingstone and Smith, 2014; SRSG, 2014). Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) found that perpetrators of internet harassment frequently targeted people they already knew in an offline context, and that both perpetrators and victims of online bullying shared similar psychological traits as their offline counterparts. Livingstone and Bulger (2013) note that, “drawing the line between offline and online is becoming close to impossible; almost any experience has an online dimension, whether through a direct engagement by the child or through provision of services designed to improve children’s lives.” The blurring between online and offline forms of violence becomes an important factor in designing interventions. Popadić and Kuzmanović (2013) contend that given the proven linkages between digital violence and traditional forms of school violence “taking systematic preventive measures to reduce classic forms of peer violence would also contribute to a decrease in digital violence.”

Risks, Harms, and Opportunities

Risks and Harms

Risks and harms are underpinned by vulnerability and resilience factors, and influenced by socio-cultural contexts. As noted in the literature (Bose and Coccaro, 2013; Livingstone and Bulger, 2013; Kleine, Hollow, and Poveda, 2014; Gasser, Maclay, and Palfrey, 2010; Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2014) balancing the risks and opportunities of children’s access and use of ICTs is a key challenge. A frame for assessing risk and harms of online violence established by EU Kids Online (2009) may be useful to apply to school contexts. The typology classifies online risks as the content risks of mass-produced messages and images, the contact risks of adult-initiated activities, and the conduct risks of peer-to-peer interactions. Risks may be commercial, aggressive, sexual, and value-based in nature.

The literature cautions against strong reactions – such as the confiscation or banning of devices by schools – which may inadvertently work to limit positive outlets for exploration and connection. For example, gaming – often blamed for instigating violence 4 – may help model positive health behaviours in the offline world (IOM and NRC, 2012).

Opportunities

While the evidence has yet to unequivocally demonstrate that ICTs improve educational outcomes, modest benefits of online learning tools are beginning to emerge. “It also seems that we are witnessing some genuinely new learning opportunities, centring on possibilities of child-oriented digital creativity and on collaborative communication” (Livingstone, 2012). Protecting students while also ensuring that they can participate in the learning possibilities made available by the internet, will need continued research efforts and thought by educationalists and policy makers.

ICTs can help empower vulnerable youth to circumvent rigid social hierarchies, enhance their safety, seek out information, and amplify their ‘voice’ in public dialogues. The anonymity of the internet provides opportunities for girls and LGBT youth to navigate these constraints and find the information and connections to help negotiate disempowering conditions (Bachan and Raftree, 2011). For example, the online forum Young Africa Live gives girls and women an anonymous space to talk freely about sexual issues. Online sources of information about sexual health have also been shown to be particularly essential for LGBT youth (Livingstone and Mason, 2015).

Another potentially powerful promise of the internet is its role in strengthening accountability measures for institutions and systems mandated to protect and serve children’s rights. Child Helpline International collaborated with Plan International’s campaign Learn without Fear to use helplines to collect data on violence against children in schools in Egypt, Paraguay, Sweden, and Zimbabwe. Map Kibera’s efforts to make safety and health information publicly available is also working to increase accountability of policy makers, based on the data gathered by community members (Mattila, 2011).

Such interventions may be particularly useful in learning and school environments where safeguards against conventional forms of violence are weak or non-existent. Plan International CEO Nigel Chapman (quoted in Matilla, 2011) claims that his organisation’s efforts in increasing "[a]ccess to mobile technology coupled…with confidential helplines gives a voice to children to expose what can often be taboo subjects. The collection of data does not automatically equate to accountability or improved results for children. Institutions, policy, and implementation systems also need to be aligned to principles of good governance, and equipped with sufficient ‘offline’ capacities in order to fully benefit from ICT interventions (Kleine, Hollow, and Poveda, 2014).

**Vulnerability and Resilience**

Dominated by Global North studies, the literature identifies a number of psychological, family-based, gender, and socio-economic vulnerability factors for children and online violence, and in general suggests that children vulnerable to traditional violence are more likely to be vulnerable to online violence. Further, the literature suggests that children do enact strategies of resilience – such as talking to an adult or peer – and are not always distressed by aggressive behaviour directed at them online (EU Kids Online, 2009; Popadić and Kuzmanović, 2013).
Creating safe online and offline spaces for girls, and building their online skills and literacy, was seen as a one way forward for mitigating vulnerability and building resilience. Initiatives, like the Grace One project, have created girls only IT labs, or safe spaces in public libraries, to encourage girls’ online engagement (Kleine, Hollow, and Poveda, 2014). Girls-only coding projects, popular in the US, are also being implemented elsewhere, such as the The AkiraChix project in Kenya, which teaches high school girls to code.

Adult role models and structures of support (families and schools) may influence a child’s vulnerability and capacity for resilience. Research from Europe and Latin America show that youth whose parents do not use technology tend to be less digitally literate (Livingstone and Bulger, 2014; SRSG, 2014). Likewise, teachers who do not use the internet are more likely to have students with less-developed digital skills (Livingstone and Bulger, 2014). Yet, highly skilled teachers are more likely to be attracted to connected, urban settings, disadvantaging rural students and their access to digital learning (Kleine, Hollow and Poveda, 2014).

There is less available data and analysis on the specific vulnerabilities facing LGBT youth online. According to US survey data, LGBT youth reported the highest levels of sexual harassment online (Mitchell, Ybarra, and Korchmaros, 2014, cited in Livingstone and Mason, 2015), while other researchers have found that LGBT teens face high risks of online solicitations and sexual requests (Livingstone and Mason, 2015). UNESCO (2015) found that LGBT students in the Asia-Pacific region experience higher rates of victimisation than their non-LGBT peers, resulting in profound negative impacts on education, economic, and health outcomes (UNESCO, 2015). The fact that homosexuality is criminalised in many countries further heightens risks of school violence and stigma for LGBT students, who often lack institutional support from schools (UNESCO, 2015).

A global data gap also exists around children with disabilities and exclusionary practices in schools. Despite this, it is widely understood that the “lives of children with disabilities are fraught with stigma, discrimination, cultural practices, misperceptions and invisibility… These risks are also present in schools” (SRSG, 2012). Some experts posit that online communication can help transcend some of the isolation and communication barriers that children with disability might encounter in face-to-face interactions, although the barriers to access can be significant (SRSG, 2014; Lazarus, Wainer, and Lipper, 2005). Emerging research (Wells and Mitchell, 2014) indicates that young people in special education were more likely to report online victimisation.

Vulnerabilities faced by ethnic minority, refugee, and migrant children is another critically under-researched area. In the Global North literatures, there are indications that ethnic minority students approach and use ICTs differently than majority culture students. In a Dutch study, ethnic minority children spent less time using ICTs outside of school than majority culture students, and were more likely to use ICTs to hone and practice skills rather than to freely explore the internet (Volman et al.,
How findings such as these may apply to ethnic minority children’s experience of online violence requires further study.

Anxieties about schools becoming hotbeds of extremism have led to freshly announced anti-violence and “de-radicalisation” programmes in schools, which include hotlines for principals to report suspicious behaviours. In some cases, government policy allows for the exclusion of ethnic minority children from public schooling. In Europe, Roma children may be sent to “containment” schools, or refused permission by authorities to register in regular schools (Farkas, 2014; see also, Amnesty International). Stateless and refugee children in Thailand also experience exclusion from schools, and any limited access to education is through NGO-run learning centres.

Remaining Gaps and Challenges

Advancing the issue of online violence in schools will require bridging significant knowledge gaps, as well as methodological, research, and programme design challenges. Many of these have been noted throughout this review – a Global North research bias, a lack of consensus on key definitions and concepts, and a time-lag between the rollout of new technology practices and research. Limited evaluation of existing interventions, a poor evidence base for key vulnerable groups, and interventions that fail to target the most vulnerable children, have also been noted. This literature review has drawn from a wider pool of literature - including school violence, bullying, gender-based violence, and ICT4D – to demonstrate that there is an existing knowledge base that may prove helpful for school online violence scholars (see also Cioppa, O’Neil and Craig, 2015).

Understanding the behaviours that drive online violence in schools, and how they may lead to certain outcomes of technology use, as well as broader impacts on children, families, schools and communities, is another key gap. Here, there is opportunity to build on the work of cyber-bullying and violence prevention scholars in the Global North, who have demonstrated the role of behavioural aspects like communication, parenting skills, responsible usage, and digital literacy in preventing online and offline violence (Nakayama, 2011; Grolnick et al., 2002; EU Kids Online, 2009; Meurn, 2012; IOM and NRC, 2012). Extending such discussions to the issue of online violence and schools – particularly in under-researched contexts like the Global South and vulnerability groups – would go some way to meeting the knowledge gaps.

In designing future programmes, sustainability is likely to present another challenge. One practitioner quoted in a child-focused ICT4D study commented that his country was a “graveyard of successful pilots” (Kleine, Hollow, and Poveda 2014). Tendencies to introduce brand new technologies into communities, rather than work with existing tools that are already popular, was noted as an unsustainable practice. Further, donor-matrices for measuring success have little meaning unless an intervention is tailored to local contexts, and ownership by target beneficiaries (including children) is assured. Participatory design processes, that integrate children’s perspectives, are therefore key (Bachan and Raftree, 2011; Gasser, Maclay, and Palfrey, 2010).

An extensive amount of research has sought to understand the psychological, educational, and health impacts on children of conventional forms of school bullying and school violence (Plan International and ICRW, 2015; Pinheiro, 2006; Green, Collingwood, and Ross, 2008). However, the field of research investigating impacts of online violence in schools is much more limited (see Ybarra and Mitchell, 2004; Samuels et al., 2013). Conventional school violence can lead to school drop-out, long-term psychological effects, and in some developing contexts, even hinder social and economic development (see SRSG on Violence against Children, 2012; Plan International and ICRW, 2015). Some work (Samuels et al., 2013) has been conducted to identify any psychosocial and socio-economic consequences of online violence in schools. Lessons learned from the fields of child-focused sustainable development, public health, and education, may provide researchers with further guidance on how to gauge and measure the potential wider social and economic impacts of online violence. However, some of the unique characteristics of online violence, such as the permanency of the digital footprint, the capacity to remain an anonymous aggressor, the sheer scale of a viral offence, and the potential for online violence to permeate “all the spheres and spaces in which young people live their lives” (Samuels et al., 2013) may lead to distinct impacts and harms on children, schools, families, and community that require new research models to fully grasp.
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