An Investigation into Teachers' Perceptions Regarding Cyberbullying Policies and Practices in UAE Schools

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Abstract

With the continuous technological advancement, educational institutions and teachers are facing growing challenges of cyberbullying (CB) among their students. Victims of electronic bullying report a lot of undesirable harmful outcomes on their physical and psychological well-being. Research has identified many strategies to cope with this growing predicament. However, a noteworthy gap is neglecting the immense role educators' beliefs and concerns play in policy making and the implementation of these policies. The aim of this study is to understand teachers' perspectives on cyberbullying school policies in the UAE and how confident they (teachers) are to apply them in order to manage CB incidents. Some recommendation to inform policy and practice in schools especially in a fast-developing country like the UAE is provided.   A total of 60 teachers from different schools across UAE responded to a questionnaire adapted from (Li, 2008) about their perceptions of their school policies and practices on cyberbullying. Findings of this study indicate teachers' awareness and concern about online harassment. Inconsistent schools' attempts to increase this awareness and spreading it through training, classroom activities and parental discussions were noticed. Another significant conclusion is the recommendation by teachers for more education about this topic, especially through higher education.

Keywords: United Arab Emirates, cyberbullying (CB), policies, teachers' perspectives, information technology

1. Introduction

According to many studies, cyberbullying has become more frequent in adolescents' lives (Bamford, 2005; Li, 2006; Wolak, Mitchell & Finkelhor, 2007; Hou, 2023). Cyberbullying, also known as online harassment or electronic bullying has many definitions, one of which is bullying through chat rooms, e-mails, digital messages, web, or instant messaging (Kowalski, Limber & Agaston, 2008). Another definition is a repeated aggressive and intentional action through electronic platforms against a victim who is usually vulnerable and, therefore, unable to defend himself (Smith, Mahdavi, Carvahlo & Tippet, 2006). In the UAE, cybercrime laws have been upgraded to encompass social changes due to technological development (Federal Law number 2 in 2006 to number 5 in 2012) which imposes more severe penalties on cyber violations.

These CB incidents are challenging to the whole educational system which might include administrators who play a key role in policy making, teachers and students. How an institution promotes a safe climate should be taken into consideration when managing cyberbullying (Griezel et al., 2012; Olweus & Kallestad, 2010). Collaborative efforts of teachers play a key role in fostering positive behaviour among learners and establishing a balanced school community as they are the ones who contribute to various aspects of their character (Lickona, 1991).

This leads to the conclusion that teachers' perceptions about and contribution to controlling this phenomenon among learners is an inevitable foundation stone (Griezel et

al., 2012; Stauffer, 2012). This study investigates these perceptions regarding the policies used to manage cyberbullying in their schools.

This study's objectives are to have a better insight on:

1. Teachers' concern regarding cyberbullying incidents among learners

2. How confident they are in managing problems related to cyberbullying

3. Their opinion about school's commitment in dealing with cyberbullying

4. Teachers' perceptions about learning about this problem in higher educational institutions

Despite the fact that this research does not provide an insight into teachers' management of cyberbullying themselves, other empirical data supports the assumption that teachers' behaviours and decisions are directly influenced by their perceptions (Pepler, Craig, O'Connell, Atlas & Charach, 2004; Siu, 2004; Hurtubise, 2021). It is also worthy to note that educators' awareness and commitment can minimise cases of bullying by half (Boulton, 1999; Olweus, 1993, 1994, 2003).

In spite of the valuable contribution of teachers in controlling cyberbullying, a very limited research is done to explore their beliefs (Masseni, 2014; Sassu, 2006). Hence, this study is valuable for local and international levels. Another significant reason for this study is the current pandemic which forced the transition to distance or online learning, which in turn led to an increasing rates of online harassment cases (Tabrez 2020).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cyber-Safety Policies

Cyber safety refers to the measures followed when using online platforms and information. It also encompasses acceptable practices including responsible and proper use of these technologies (Shamsi 2019). These are usually guidelines devised by school leadership to maintain students' well-being and safety to minimize the chance of cybercrimes.

Due to the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, the frequency of cybercrimes, including cyberbullying among learners, has escalated (Jain et al. 2020; Medina et al. 2020). Consequently, the urge to have well-established policies to ensure students' protection and safety was a top priority (Kozma and Isaacs 2011; Redmond et al. 2020). Government and school leaders had to revise their e-safety measures, policies, and national curricula in hand.

Since the initiative to transfer educational systems and practices to solely distance learning in the UAE, new guidelines were devised (UAE Ministry of Education, 2020). The main aim of these policies was to ensure the success of distance learning experience while minimizing the occurrences of technical offences and violations, including cyberbullying, outside the physical premises of school campus and maintaining an adequate and positive learning environment. However, the challenge arises due to the lack of evidence of including these guidelines in national curricula. This is attributed to

the fact that Dubai private education is managed by KHDA (KHDA, 2020), and that in Abu Dhabi is managed by ADEK (ADEK 2020). On the other hand, the other emirates private education sector is managed by the Ministry of Education (MOE).

Stemming from the UAE's priority to ensure the safety of its citizens and responding to the necessity of the current heath situation and technological advancement, initiation of cyber-safety programs to raise awareness among students' use of internet was key (Al Shamsi, 2019). In March 2016, a joined effort between MOI and NHP launched the "Child Digital Safety" which is only one of many others targeting an improvement of digital literacy among UAE's children (UAE Ministry of Cabinet Affairs, 2019).

Another initiative by ADEK is the private school's policy guidance manual whose aim is to provide guidelines on sustainability, self-improvement, effective governance and good operational capabilities in private schools. One policy in this manual target the protection of students from inappropriate and aggressive online content and promotes online ethics and acceptable practices (Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge, 2015).

 In 2017, a new law was issued by Dubai government where all schools had to develop and implement e-safety policies and practices in their schools (Executive Council Resolution No. 2, 2017). In the same field, the UAE Telecommunications Regulatory Authority are making efforts to block sites which are unauthorized or have profane content.

Another initiative is the launching of "Aqdar e-Safe Schools" a security structure adapted from European e-safety standards in education. This security structure was established for both private and public education sectors (e-Safe School, 2020) to assist them in reviewing and even creating their safety policies.

2.2 Cyberbullying and Teachers

It is argued by Mason (2008) that although face-to-face bullying is recognized as a threat, few are aware of the frequency at which bullying occurs on digital platforms away from school grounds. Increasing awareness plays a crucial role in managing the problem of electronic harassment through working with all those involved in it: parents, students whether victims or bullies, and the whole school community.

Although it is stated by Epstein and Kazmierczak (2007) that teachers are effective stakeholders who can work efficiently in any anti-cyber-bullying program through consistent care and response, these teachers do not seem to have a clear road map to deal with cyberbullies because of policy vacuum in most schools globally (Shariff, 2005). Bhat (2008) also confirms that teachers lack the required knowledge of electronic tools and the guidelines to deal with bullies. Adding to this is the gap in literature about teachers' beliefs and concerns related to cyberbullying. Another limitation is the lack of investigation about their awareness and participation in related policy making and implementation.

2.3 Current Challenges

The KHDA, responsible for regulating quality assurance of education in Dubai private schools and ensuring that these schools are operating according to the highest standards, included a significant performance standard in the inspection framework entitled as "Care, welfare and safeguarding of students including child protection" under which implications of students' protection through rigorous procedures are investigated. According to this indicator, all school's stakeholders have to be fully aware of these safeguarding procedures and if not, the school is to be rated very weak (Knowledge and Human Development Authority 2015). Despite these efforts, the absence of clear legislations which can be utilized as a reference for child protection in private educational sector is a main limitation in this field.

  Adding to this is the empirical evidence observed by Europe and The United States in America which shows the lack of emphasis on cyberbullying in the Arabic Peninsula in general and UAE in particular. Kazarian and Ammar (2013) found out that in the UAE, 20.9% report being cyberbullied. These scholars emphasize the need to investigate the signs, locations and consequences of bullying in this specific region.

In another questionnaire conducted by ICDL Arabia (2015), 60% in gulf countries confessed that cyberbullying is present among peers and 54% of the teenagers in the UAE are not educated about the punishment of cyberbullying. Furthermore, 48% admitted the use of social media applications without adult supervision.   This can lead to exposing

these juveniles to unacceptable content like nudity and pornography as well as cyberbullies and crimes. It also might lead to deteriorating academic performance and sometimes dropping out of the school completely.

Addiction on virtual reality is also facilitated by the advance in cyber technology and high-speed connection which fuels the cyberbullying activities off campus, especially with the absence of legislative supervision.

Despite the initiatives to address cyberbullying, this area remains one of concern that requires more investigation both locally and globally. Although schools established anti-bullying guidelines, efforts need to be paid to a more effective implementation (Chalmers et al. 2016).

2.4 Related Literature

Previous body of literature had investigated the effectiveness of cyberbullying policies, policy development, policy analysis, and a review of existing empirical studies to recommend a policy framework. However very few looked into teachers' perceptions despite of their immense contribution in policy implementation.

Brown et al. (2006) revised the existing studies to look for a suitable framework of cyberbullying policy. According to these scholars, there is a necessity for policies to manage acceptable online use whether inside or outside school campus. The efficiency of these policies in controlling cyber-crimes should be evaluated as well.

  Aligned with this study is the one conducted by Valimaki et al. (2012) to study 54

guidelines from 27 European countries. This research examined the weaknesses and strengths of policy guidelines with respect to targeted groups: teachers, students, parents and schools. It came out with clear conclusions about the role of teachers in supporting students' development of online skills and that of parents to raise awareness among children in order to refuse and report online abuse. In spite of this, there was no noticeable emphasis on the cooperation between parents and schools or on the role of teachers in developing their anti-bullying skills or establishing and evaluating related policies. Moreover, the mentioned guidelines lacked the input of the authorities who are supposed to contribute to developing such policies (Brown et al. 2017; Chalmers et al. 2016).

In South Africa, it was argued by Kritzinger (2016) that education authorities do not seem to deal effectively with cyberbullying issue. Only half schools were reported to have a formal policy to deal with this problem and a minority had proper training on cyber-safety practices. Most of the policies emphasized restrictions of access on internet and social media. Conversely, there was not any clear integrated guidelines or practices in these schools' curricula.

 Research by Chalmers et al. (2016) which studied the development of anti-bullying policies found out that when National Social Security Fund (NSSF) guiding principles were implemented in Australia, rates of reporting bullying cases reduced in number. Another conclusion is that teachers require more support in applying the recommended

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guidelines. Specialists reported that online harassment need separate policy different from that of bullying as the former emerged later than the latter. In the light of the same study, a developed policy, to be effective, should be consistent and include all types of cyberbullying definitions, consequences, preventive measures, and ways of intervention, roles of students, procedures of reporting abuse incidents to authorities.

In another study involving the role of teachers in managing cyberbullying, (Beran & Li, 2005) argued that even when teachers recognise this issue, they are ignorant about specific incidents among their students. (Chou & Peng, 2011) conducted a study in Taiwan where many surveys were done to examine teachers' awareness and experiences related to e-safety issues. A significant number of teachers reported the absence of any formal training about cyber safety and how to deal with related issues. The Teacher Awareness of Internet Safety (TAIS) Project for elementary and middle school teacher was initiated as an acknowledgement of these problems by the Ministry of Education in Taiwan supported by empirical studies performed by the National Science Council. Overall, teachers consider cyberbullying a serious problem which should be dealt with. According to Shariff (2009), teachers suggest reporting related incidents to police while others tend to allocate the responsibility to school boards.

Despite these studies on a global level, there is not enough research about the topic of cyberbully in the UAE (AL Nuaimi, 2021). A renewed interest is noticed, however, through recent studies which investigated cyber safety in schools and evaluating policies

controlling cyberbullying incidents (Abaido, 2020), as well as the features of laws managing cyberstalking in the region (Hosani et al. 2019). Nevertheless, no studies were conducted to investigate the role of teachers' perceptions in shaping school policies and practices in this field and this study is meant to bridge this gap.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

In the current study, 60 teachers from different schools across the UAE responded to a questionnaire which investigated their views on cyberbullying, their concern, commitment of schools' leaderships in implementing policies to manage CB, and other related factors. Below are some graphs demonstrating their demographic details. Approximately, 60 % of the teachers work in Sharjah schools, around 28% work in Abu Dhabi schools and around 9% in Ajman schools. The majority of the teachers are females with a percentage of approximately 91% compared to 9% male teachers. Less than half of the participants teach high school students at 43%, while primary and middle school accounted for approximately 29% and 26% respectively.

Figure 1: Percentage of teachers in different Emirates.
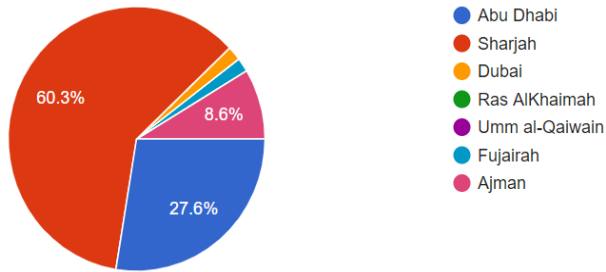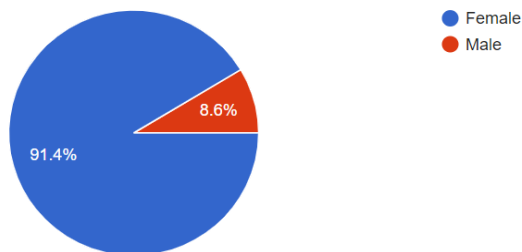

Figure 2: Percentage of teachers in terms of gender.

As for the years of experience, more than half of the teachers have more than ten years of experience (at around 52%) compared to 46% with an experience of less than 10 years of teaching. Teachers of different specializations participated in this study. For example, teachers of English language, Arabic language, science, social studies, mathematics, ICT, and Islamic studies. With the highest proportions for mathematics and   English teachers as 38% and 22 % respectively.

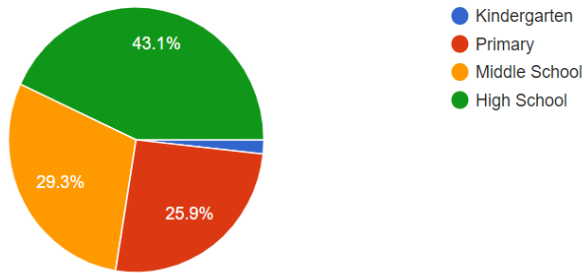**Figure 3: Percentage of Teachers in terms of grade level**

Figure 4: Percentage of Teachers in terms of years of experience.
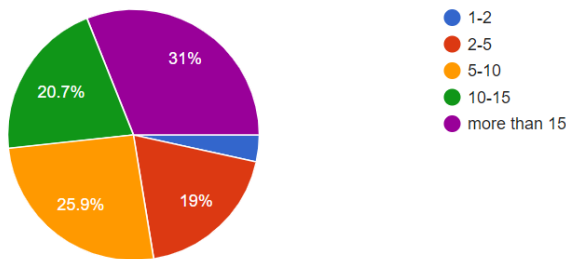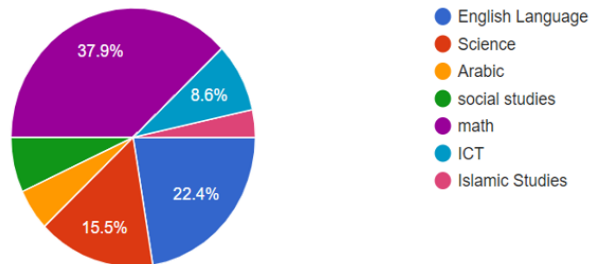

Figure 5: Percentage of Teachers in terms of taught subject.

3.2 Methodological Approach

A total of 60 teachers took part in this empirical study. All were teachers of primary, middle and high school. The teachers volunteered randomly to respond to the questionnaire, so the sample does not represent all the teachers in the UAE.   The conducted questionnaire was done via google forms and shared through social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. The participants were informed that this study is done for educational purposes and their identity would stay anonymous to ensure more reliability of responses.

As for the research instrument, the survey was adopted from a research study (Li, 2008) as no other tool was compatible with the research topic that deals with teachers' perceptions of cyberbullying and the effectiveness of related policies in schools. Some questions that were relevant to the research were added as well. The survey encompassed 24 items in 4 significant areas: demographic data of the participants (5 items), their concern about the phenomenon of cyberbullying (3 items), their confidence in identifying cases of cyberbullying (4 items) and their perspectives regarding school's commitment in managing cyberbullying (10 items) and their opinion regarding education about CB in tertiary level (2 items) . Responses to these questions or statements were based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1).

This research was carried out within a considered ethical framework. It followed the guidelines of MRS code of conduct (MRS, 2006) and British University in Dubai (BUiD) ethical considerations. Questionnaires included a clarification of the aim and the nature of the study and the consent of the participant through an information document. This questionnaire was designed to keep the identity of the teachers and the educational institutions anonymous.

4. Findings

The data from the questionnaire is analysed taking into consideration the major 4 indexes mentioned earlier: teachers' concern about the phenomenon of cyberbullying, their confidence in identifying cases of cyberbullying and their perspectives regarding school's commitment in managing cyberbullying, and the importance of learning about CB in higher education which means before teachers graduate and join career sector.

Table 1: Data related to research question 1

Question/Item	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree/Disagree
Belief that cyberbullying cases are detected in the school	38 %	33 %	29 %
Belief in negative effect of	90 %	9 %	1 %

cyberbullying			
Feeling concerned about cases in my school	69 %	17 %	14 %

The first index reveals that only 38% of the teachers believe that CB cases do exist in their schools. On the other hand, the other 62% were either neutral or disagreed on the presence of this phenomenon in their institution with (29% and 33% respectively). Conversely, 90% admitted that CB has negative effects on students while 9% remained neutral. As for the last question in this section, 69% of the teachers showed concern about CB cases in their school compared to 17% neutral and 14% who did not show concern.

Table 2: Data related to research question 2

Question/Item	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree/Disagree
Awareness about CB cases	84 %	14 %	3%
Teachers' responsibility to teach students about CB	47 %	30 %	23 %
Awareness of UAE policies to manage CB in schools	71 %	5 %	9 %

Confidence about managing CB cases	80 %	10 %	10 %

As for the second index which measures whether teachers are confident about their ability to identify CB cases, 84% agreed that they have enough awareness of what CB cases include, only 47% believe that it is their responsibility to teach students about CB, while 23% had an opposite opinion and 30% were neutral. Regarding their awareness of UAE's CB policies, 71% were positive while others were either unaware of them or preferred to stay neutral. 80% of the teachers were confident about their ability to manage CB incidents while the other 20% were either neutral or did not show that confidence.

Table 3: Data related to research question 3

Question/Item	Strongly Agree/ Agree	Neutral	Strongly Disagree/ Disagree
Clear policies in school	90 %	10 %	0 %
Engaged in establishing related policies	70 %	22 %	7 %
Teachers' training	62 %	19 %	19 %
Integration of CB awareness in curricula	79 %	16 %	5 %
Integration of CB awareness in class	62 %	21 %	17 %

activities			
Integration of CB awareness in school-wide activities	53 %	29 %	17 %
Orientation Sessions	50 %	29 %	21 %
Availability of counsellors	59 %	26 %	16 %
Protected computers	69 %	19 %	12 %
Discussion with parents	74 %	12 %	14 %

CB= cyberbullying

Index three was concerned about whether teachers believed in schools' commitment in controlling CB or not. The majority agreed that there are clear policies to manage CB in their school, while only 70% were engaged in establishing these policies and 62% only received proper training on dealing with CB. 53% to 79 % declared that CB is integrated in the curriculum, class-activities and school-wide activities. A similar range (50 % to 74%) claimed that schools organize orientation sessions for students, ensure the availability of counsellors to deal with CB victims, protected computers to avoid the use of programs via which cyberbullying would most likely take place, and that school policies support effective discussion with parents about cyberbullying incidents in school.

Table 4: Data related to research question 4

University education	**40 %**	**28 %**	**33 %**
Need of more education about CB in university	74 %	12 %	13 %

Regarding the fourth and last index, a big proportion of 74% of the teachers believed in the significance of educating teachers about CB during university years while only 40% declare that university played a role in educating them about cyberbullying policies in schools. Overall, the results depict a strong belief by educators that CB is a major issue and should be studied. It also has to take a significant part in professional development training sessions.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The most prevalent results of this study indicate that teachers have high concern about cyberbullying although only less than half of them know about cyberbullying incidents in their schools (table 1). This is similar to a study mentioned before by Beran & Li (2005) who argued that even when teachers are able to recognize CB, they do not know about specific incidents in their classes and among their students. That seems to be contradictory with their confidence about their ability to control CB incidents that occur in their classes. Another finding is that teachers tend to have awareness of UAE's policies and guidelines for CB management. Their responses indicate that their schools have clear

laws to deal with online harassment although only more than half of them received proper training about the topic and not all of them play their significant role in establishing these rules. This is parallel to the study by Chou & Peng (2011) who concluded that only few teachers reported any formal training about cyber safety and how to deal with related issues.

Although a major number of the participants argue that CB awareness is integrated in schools' curricula (table 2), schools' policies do not seem to encourage its application in class activities and school activities. It is also noteworthy that less than half of educators render themselves responsible to deal with this issue and others like counsellors and leaders in school should tackle such problem. This might be attributed to the fact that teachers are not confident about having proper education and skills in dealing with cyberbullying. According to Ertmer and Ottenbreit-Leftwich (2010), "the gap between what teachers know and what they do relates to their confidence, or self-efficacy, for performing the task successfully" (p.269). There seems to be a consensus among the majority of the investigated participants that there is an immense need to educate teachers and educators about the cases and dangers associated with CB (table 4). This is aligned with the study done by Li (2008) where teachers expressed similar views about school's responsibility to train them about how to cope with CB incidents efficiently. It also seems to support the argument done by Valimaki et al. (2012) mentioned earlier which stressed

on the indispensable role teachers play in controlling CB cases, raising awareness and communicating incidents to parents.

Despite these perceptions that reflect awareness on the side of the teachers, policies adopted by schools do not seem to encompass all the necessary elements or might not be implemented properly. A clear evidence is the fact that only half of the schools in hand provide orientation sessions to educate students about prevention and management of CB. Another evidence is that just sixty percent of schools have security systems in their computers to avoid students' access to social media, inappropriate material or online abuse. In addition to this, one quarter of the teachers stated that there is absence of discussion with parents regarding this issue. According to a study by Siyam & Hussain (2021) done about CB policies effectiveness in UAE schools which can be linked to the findings of the present study, only few policies entail a detailed explanation of how the school's community, including teachers and students, should be educated about CB. The same applies regarding incorporating this education in schools' curricula. Another significant finding of their study is that although the ministry of education provides awareness about CB in their curriculum, there is no evidence that it makes it mandatory in private schools as well. To add, these policies seem to highlight the necessity of training teachers through professional development programs; however, these same policies failed to provide specific instructions on whom to carry out the training, the frequency and content of these training sessions.

In conclusion, a number of dilemmas arise from the many attempts to address the CB issue whether on a national or international levels. This is attributed to the technological advance and its key role in education in our modern world on one hand and the risk accompanied by children's unlimited exposure to the internet on the other hand. This dilemma cannot be tackled by ignorance but by clear policies to prevent such cases and intervene when they occur. The current research has significant implications for practice and upcoming research.

CB is being recognized as a main issue by teachers. Although a great proportion did not perceive that it is their responsibility to tackle this problem, they still insist on consistent training on the topic (Li, 2008; Purdy & Mc Guckin, 2015; Styron et al., 2016; Yilmaz, 2010). Implications of this study suggest a recommended and efficient revision of policies and guidelines on the proper management of CB in educational institutions, mainly schools. Parallel to other studies as well, clear guidelines and policies should mandate the involvement of parents, provision of consistent counselling to students, integration of CB education and awareness in schools' curricula, activities and educational programs as they prove to be fundamental factors in dealing with this problem.

One more implication of this study is that when establishing these policies related to CB and other ethical considerations while using computers, a holistic approach is underscored and all concerned stake holders should be involved; such as parents,

educators, counsellors, psychologists, principals and inspectors which will result in shared accountability regarding CB management (Bhat, 2008, Diamanduros, Downs, & Jenkins, 2008). This has to come along and be supported through law enforcement and direct supervision by the ministry of education and other concerned authorities

Another implication is about school policy. Ministry of Education or schools need to create a safe environment for learners through developing policies related to the ethical use of computers, cyberbullying, and collaboration with the law enforcement, as well as programs related to student counseling and training for parents.

There are a number of limitations to the present study that should be shortlisted. First of all, this research depends exclusively on educators' self-report. It is recommended to examine other related parties such as health professionals, care providers, students, and principals as well. Another recommendation for future research is the inclusion of various aspects of students' disabilities and their relationship to CB. Also, a deeper investigation into principals' commitment and its credibility should be the focus of further research. Another shortcoming of the current study is that quantitative approach can be supported by qualitative one like interviews and discussion groups to show real incidents of CB in more details.

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