Teacher cyberbullying and possible interventions at school: a view of teachers experiencing student cyberbullying

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Summary

Research indicates that teacher-student interaction on social media may have a positive effect on teacher-student relationships, as well as on students' study results and their motivation to learn (Keasberry, 2018). However, digitally mediated communication can also have its downsides, as misuse of technology and information may result in teachers falling victim to cyberbullying by students (Kyriacou & Zuin, 2016; Phippen, 2011). According to Smith et al. (2008), cyberbullying is an aggressive and intentional act directed repeatedly against one or more persons, and for a long time through electronic means (e-mail, text messaging, social media platforms or chat rooms, etc.).

Previous research (Kopecký & Szotkowski, 2017a; NASUWT, 2013; Phippen, 2011) indicates that a significant number of teachers have been exposed to cyberbullying. For example, in an empirical study conducted in the UK (N = 377), almost 36% of the educational professionals (i.e. teachers, management, support staff) surveyed were either cyberbullied themselves or aware of some of their colleagues' incidents (Phippen, 2011, p. 9). Scholars (Willard, 2007; Kopecký & Szotkowski, 2017b) propose that teachers can fall victim to many different forms of cyberbullying (e.g. flaming, sharing of degrading visuals, cyberstalking, harassment, denigration, etc.). Although efforts have been made to draw attention to the seriousness of the problem (Kyriacou & Zuin, 2016, p. 259; Eden, Heiman, & Olenik-Shemesh, 2013, p. 1040) and potential severe consequences to the teacher's career and private life (Kopecký & Szotkowski, 2017b; Davenport, 2014; NASUWT, 2013), there is still relatively little empirical research that has focused primarily on teacher cyberbullying by students. Although several quantitative studies have been carried out (cf. Kopecký & Szotkowski, 2017b; NASUWT, 2013; Ontario College of Teachers, 2007; Phippen, 2011), the number of qualitative studies is still scarce (see

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Kyriacou & Zuin, 2016). Despite the fact that there have been references to the existence of the problem in several student theses (Paal, 2014; Sule, 2019; Tikk, 2017; Välimaa, 2016), cyberbullying of teachers by their students has not yet triggered academic attention in Estonia.

The aim of the present study is to analyse the opinions and experiences of teachers of Estonian general education schools (N = 14) who have experienced cyberbullying by students and to investigate what kind of school intervention opportunities teachers recommend to solve cases of cyberbullying. The following two key research questions were formulated:

1) What forms of cyberbullying by their students have the teachers encountered?
2) How could the school intervene in cyberbullying cases of teachers?

Considering that teachers' cyberbullying is a sensitive and hidden topic and recruiting to the study therefore more difficult, snowball sampling which is considered suitable for recruiting hard-to-reach groups (Salmons, 2010), was used. To find the informants, active cooperation with the Estonian Teachers' Union and the Bullying Free School Foundation was established. To reach more people, a video was published on Facebook on January 3, 2019, inviting teachers with student initiated cyberbullying experiences to participate in the study. The video was shared 267 times and viewed 31,000 times (Jürisaar, 2019).

In spring 2019 semi-structured individual interviews with Estonian teachers (N=14) who had been cyberbullied by their students were carried out. The sample included individuals who had worked as a teacher up to five years (N=6) as well as those, whose career was longer than fourteen years (N=8). Each of the interviewees was able to choose the best time, format and place for the interviews. All in all, we conducted 10 individual face-to-face interviews, two telephone interviews and two video calls via the internet (Skype, Facebook).

The transcriptions (419 pages) were analysed using a qualitative content analysis, as this method provides an overview of the text being studied as a whole and focuses on the main and important meanings of the text, while also supporting hidden-line analysis (Kalmus, Masso, & Linno, 2015).

Relying on the cyberbullying classifications developed by Willard (2007), and Kopecký and Szotkowski (2017b), our findings indicated that participating teachers had experienced the following six forms of cyberbullying: 1) sharing degrading visual material depicting teachers (e.g. processed photographs); 2) flaming; 3) denigration; 4) harassment; 5) impersonation (e.g. identity theft) and 6) cyberstalking. In addition to sharing their immediate experience, almost all the teachers who participated in the study were able to talk about the cyberbullying incident of a colleague or teacher from another school.

Similar to the findings of other studies (Kopecký & Szotkowski, 2017b; NASUWT, 2013; Phippen, 2011), our interviews revealed that the greatest number of teachers in our sample had been cyberbullied by sharing degrading visuals (e.g. processed photos). On these occasions a photograph of the teacher was downloaded either from the internet, or a photo was taken of the teacher in the classroom or in some public place. Vulgar additions are added to the photo and then distributed publicly, either on the student's social media account, the Instagram account of school memes, or via social media groups.

Teachers in our sample had also often experienced flaming, i.e. students had sent hostile, vulgar and insulting messages (e.g. in Facebook Messenger) or e-mails either under their own name or anonymously and denigration i.e. students had posted cruel rumours, gossip and derogatory comments about the teachers on different web platforms. One of the interviewees was a victim of a long-term online harassment by students; while another had fallen victim to impersonation i.e. students made a fake Facebook account of the teacher and posted problematic content under her name. One teacher in our sample had also experienced cyberstalking by a student.

Our interviews indicate that schools play a significant role in preventing and combating cyberbullying of teachers. Similarly to the Kopecký and Szotkowski's (2017b) study, our interviewees emphasised that schools need to support and protect the teacher when dealing with the incident (e.g. representing the teacher in dealing with parents, talking to the bully) and should have zero tolerance for any negative behaviour directed at teachers. Teachers considered it important that school regulations should provide the necessary measures to protect and support teachers in dealing with cyberbullying (rules of procedure, guidelines, etc.). Similar to the teachers in our study, Kopecký & Szotkowski (2017b) also recommend developing both preventive programmes as well as a crisis plan to prevent and solve cyberbullying of teachers.

According to the teachers in our sample, there is also a need to increase general awareness and knowledge of the school professionals about teachers' cyberbullying. For example, it was considered important that training, teaching materials, and programmes were provided, to be better able to detect, address and prevent cyberbullying in the future. Furthermore, similar to the teachers who have experienced bullying (see Daniels, Bradley, & Hays, 2007; Özkilic & Kartal, 2012), teachers in our sample also believed it to be important to provide cyberbullied teachers with both psychological and technical support (e.g. by educational technologist) when dealing with the incident (e.g. help the teachers to remove student-posted material from the web).

The study provides a novel input in assessing what forms of student initiated cyberbullying Estonian teachers have experienced, as well as practical

recommendations for possible methods for interventions in schools. Still, as the findings are based on a relatively small sample (N=14), the results cannot be generalised or extended to the entire Estonian teaching community. Furthermore, even though researchers (Smith et al., 2008) consider repetition as an important criterion in defining cyberbullying, there was no defined condition for the sample of this study that the cyberbullying experience must be a recurring case. Hence, future studies should consider setting more specific criteria for the sample and distinguishing one-time cyberbullying from consistent cyberbullying.

In order to get a better idea of the magnitude of the problem, future studies should explore the topic quantitatively. There is also currently no overview of how many educational institutions have implemented any regulations and guidelines on the topic of cyberbullying. Thus, future research could also chart the measures taken so far to prevent and deal with cyberbullying of teachers in schools.