Cyberbullying and Giftedness: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract: Even though cyberbullying and gifted students are two hot topics that researchers are interested in, there isn't much empirical evidence about what happens when these two topics are studied together. Relevant research on cyberbullying and gifted students so far has revealed that gifted students are subjected to both bullying and cyberbullying, just like their non-gifted peers. Additionally, prior research has demonstrated that bullying and cyberbullying are associated with negative mental health outcomes, and these students are at great risk of being unable to cope with these negative outcomes. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate cyberbullying and its unique effects on gifted students and to provide suggestions, strategies, and considerations for those working with this specific population.

Keywords: *Cyberbullying, Gifted, Talented.*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Bullying

The term "bullying," which is widely recognized as a prevalent form of violence, particularly among school-age children, refers to the physical, psychological, and social attacks perpetrated by the more powerful individual against the more vulnerable one for the stronger individual's own benefit and satisfaction (Card & Hodges, 2008; Olweus, 1993). Bullying, which often consists of systematic and organized behaviors and is intended to intentionally harm the victim, is one of the most prevalent issues at all educational levels, beginning with kindergarten (Vlachou et al., 2011). According to international research with considerable regional and cultural variance, children are exposed to bullying at a rate ranging from 5% to 70% (Due et al., 2005, 2008). For instance, between 20% and 30% of American students have been involved in bullying at school (Bauman, 2011). The most current statistics from the National Center for Education Statistics in the United States, which has tracked bullying experiences of kids between the ages of 12 and 18 since 1989, indicate that 22% of students reported being bullied at school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Studies conducted in Turkey reveal similar results as well. For instance, a study that was carried out with high school students found that 22.5% of the students were bullied at school (Izğir, 2019). A recent meta-analysis conducted in Turkey also revealed that an adolescent is victimized at least twice during the school year (Talu & Gümüş, 2022). Therefore, despite the fact that bullying rates have

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decreased over the past decade, it is still a significant concern, since one out of every five students is bullied at school.

The prominent authority in bullying studies, the Scandinavian scholar Dan Olweus, defines bullying as repeated, aggressive, and intentional harm to others that implies an imbalance of power and separates bullying into direct and indirect forms (Olweus, 1993). The existing literature also discusses several different forms of bullying, such as physical bullying, verbal bullying, and relational bullying (Bauman, 2011; Olweus, 1993, 1997; Olweus et al., 2019). While physical bullying (kicking, hitting, pushing, etc.) and verbal bullying (threatening, teasing, name calling, etc.) involve open attacks on the victim, relational bullying (exclusion, spreading rumors, ignoring, etc.) is more subtle but considered more popular (Coloroso, 2009; Olweus, 1997). According to several studies examining gender differences in bullying, males have repeatedly been found to be more prone to bullying and victimization than females (Atik et al., 2012; Liang et al., 2007). On the other hand, while females are more likely to be engaged in indirect forms of bullying such as gossiping or ignoring, males are more likely to be engaged in direct forms of bullying such as hitting or pushing (Felix et al., 2011; Pigozi & Machado, 2015).

Bullying may have detrimental effects on all populations. Bullies and their victims are more likely to suffer from psychosocial and negative health issues, including internalizing and externalizing problems (Card & Hodges, 2008; Eastman et al., 2018; van der Wal et al., 2003). While internalizing symptoms consist of problems within the person, including depression, anxiety, fear, and social disengagement, externalizing symptoms are outwardly oriented behaviors such as anger, aggression, and conduct problems (Sigurdson et al., 2015). Existing research suggests that the victims of bullying are more likely to display internalizing symptoms, and bullies are more likely to display externalizing symptoms (Kumpulainen & Räsänen, 2000; Olweus & Limber, 2010). Studies have even shown that the victims of bullies are more likely to be involved with mental health problems such as depression, loneliness, low self-esteem, and suicidal ideation not only when they are young but also later in life as well (Nansel et al., 2001; Sigurdson et al., 2015; Ttofi et al., 2011; van der Wal et al., 2003).

1.2. Cyberbullying

Different forms of bullying have been previously discussed along with the fact that bullying rates have started to decline in schools. As mentioned before, almost 22% of adolescents ages 12–18 reported being bullied at school in 2019, which was lower than the rate recorded in 2009 (28 percent) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Although bullying rates have decreased in recent years, cyberbullying, a new form of bullying, has surged and become more prevalent than traditional forms of bullying. With the rapid innovations in the field of technology and the widespread use of the internet have made cyberbullying a growing concern all over the world.

Although the literature on cyberbullying has grown substantially since the beginning of this century, there is still no consensus on the definition of cyberbullying. Researchers who are interested in the topic of cyberbullying either try to develop their own definitions for the phenomenon based on their own studies or opt to accept the definitions that were developed by

the pioneers of this subject area. The majority of researchers however agree the fact that cyberbullying includes the following key elements: technology, harm, repetition, willfulness (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015). The following definitions can be given as examples of cyberbullying, as they include all the necessary elements. Tokunaga (2010), for example, defines cyberbullying as any behavior conducted through technology by individuals or groups that repeatedly convey hostile or aggressive messages with the intent to cause harm or distress others. Smith et al. (2008) also define cyberbullying as an intentional, aggressive act committed by a group or an individual, using electronic means of contact, against a victim who cannot easily protect him/herself. Finally, the definition of cyberbullying by Hinduja and Patchin (2015) is also simple yet comprehensive: Cyberbullying is "willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices" (p.11).

Willard (2007) identified eight types of cyberbullying, including flaming, harassment, denigration, impersonation, outing, trickery, exclusion, and cyberstalking. Willard (2007) defines each type of cyberbullying as follows: *Flaming* is a short disagreement or conversation that takes place between individuals or groups in public communication venues such as online forums, chat rooms, discussion boards, and other similar places. Flaming also involves the use of language that is insulting, unpleasant, and vulgar. *Harassment* is a unilateral behavior characterized by the repetitive and persistent transmission of offensive messages through private communication channels (emails, instant messaging) or public communication environments (social media) to a single target. *Denigration* is the dissemination of hurtful, inaccurate, or cruel information about a person via technology with the intent of harming that person's reputation or interfering with friendships. *Impersonation* is the act of pretending to be someone else and sending or posting something that is intended to harm a person's reputation or relationships. *Outing* is the dissemination of private, sensitive, or embarrassing information or content about a person using technological means. *Trickery* is also a component of outing, which entails deceiving a person into providing personal information or materials, which are then distributed without their knowledge. *Exclusion* is the purposeful and deliberate act of excluding someone from an online group. *Cyberstalking* occurs when an individual frequently sends threatening or abusive messages containing threats of violence or extortion.

Cyberbullying is a form of bullying that involves the use of digital technologies, including mobile phones, computers, and tablets. This specific form of bullying can be found on messaging, gaming, and forum platforms, as well as on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and others (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). If the proper security precautions are not implemented, the widespread use of social media makes the content shared by individual accessible to the individual's inner circle as well as to foreigners. Therefore, if an individual is targeted, their posts whether, positive or negative might be used against them to intimidate, anger, or embarrass them. For instance, making embarrassing changes to a photo that a youngster shares on social media and then re-posting it may humiliate the child in front of his/her peers. Moreover, sharing inaccurate information about a student or sending him or her hurtful or threatening messages may lead the student to experience fear, sadness, or helplessness.

1.3. Bullying vs. Cyberbullying

Although traditional bullying and cyberbullying have many similarities, cyberbullying is distinguished from traditional bullying by several characteristics. First of all, traditional bullying happens predominantly on school grounds, and victims feel mostly safe when they are at home (Kowalski et al., 2008; Olweus, 1993). On the other hand, due to the development of new technical devices, cyberbullying can occur anywhere at any time, including but not limited to homes, schools, and playgrounds (Dilmaç, 2009; Smith et al., 2008). This means that it becomes extremely challenging for those who are cyberbullied to find a location where they feel safe.

Another distinction between traditional and cyberbullying is the anonymity of the person in cyberbullying (Willard, 2007). In contrast to traditional forms of bullying, in which the victim and the bully must come into direct physical contact with one another, the victim of cyberbullying may never learn the identity of the person who bullies him/her online. By utilizing anonymous email accounts, using pseudonyms, or creating fake social media accounts, the cyberbully can easily hide him/herself from the victim while still maintaining the ability to communicate with the victim (Paullet & Pinchot, 2014).

One last difference between traditional bullying and cyberbullying is the power differential. In contrast to traditional bullying, in which the bully is typically bigger and stronger than the victim, cyberbullying does not require physical characteristics. According to Willard (2007), cyberbullying is typically perpetrated by those who are perceived as weaker. As a result of his or her technological proficiency, the victim of a traditional bully may become a cyberbully.

1.4. Cyberbullying and Mental Health

The ease of accessing and misusing technological tools such as computers, tablets, and cell phones has made cyberbullying an increasing concern outside of the school walls. Studies have shown that cyberbullying rates are on the rise worldwide (Ang & Goh, 2010; Bauman, 2011; Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Smith, 2015). Although the rates of cyberbullying vary in studies conducted in the United States (3% to 72% victimization), it has been found that, on average, one out of every five school-age students experienced cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Selkie et al., 2016). High prevalence rates of cyberbullying have been found in other parts of the world as well, such as Singapore, China, and Turkey (Ang & Goh, 2010; Aricak et al., 2008; Cagirkan & Bilek, 2021; Chan & Wong, 2015). In fact, one of the recent studies in Turkey found that 60% of high school students have been cyberbullied (Cagirkan & Bilek, 2021). These high prevalence rates unfortunately come with negative consequences.

Cyberbullying, like traditional bullying, is a major threat to the health and well-being of today's youth, as it has also been linked with serious problems such as depression, anxiety, and suicide (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Iranzo et al., 2019; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012). Several scholars have even noted that the impacts of cyberbullying can be more severe than those of traditional bullying, particularly for victimized kids (Baier et al., 2019; Bonanno & Hymel, 2013; Campbell et al., 2012). According to Gilroy (2013), the wider target audience and higher power of the internet may be contributing factors to the severity of the consequences of cyberbullying.

Numerous studies have found a significant relationship between cyberbullying and depression, anxiety, helplessness, substance use, low self-esteem, avoidance, poor concentration, and somatic symptoms (Akcil, 2018; Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Kowalski et al., 2008; Kowalski & Limber, 2007, 2013; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012; Sourander et al., 2010; Tokunaga, 2010; Ybarra, 2004; Ybarra et al., 2006). The connection between cyberbullying and suicide is perhaps the most worrying part of the phenomenon. Hinduja and Patchin (2010)'s study demonstrated that middle school students who were the victims of cyberbullying were more likely to attempt suicide and had a higher prevalence of suicidal ideation than those who had not been the target of cyberbullying. Another study done with adolescents has shown that cyberbullying has direct and indirect effects on suicidal ideation (Iranzo et al., 2019). Studies with college students also showed some serious findings. According to Schenk et al. (2013) and Mitchell et al. (2018), cyberbullying has a significant relationship with suicide among college students.

1.5. Gifted Students and Cyberbullying

It is a common misconception that gifted students are developmentally superior in all areas to their peers and always perform at a high level. Gifted students may outperform their peers in some developmental areas, such as cognitive development, but they may also fall behind in emotional and social development (Silverman, 1997). According to Peterson (2009), gifted students go through similar challenges as their peers, but they may be more at risk of social exclusion and bullying than other students due to their developmental differences. Jealousy of their peers, hatred of their abilities, and negative stereotypes might be some of the other reasons why these students are being bullied (Manaster et al., 1994). Studies have revealed that gifted students are mostly teased by their peers and called names like "nerd", "know it all", or "dweeb" (Alvino, 1991).

Although there has been an increase in the number of studies on cyberbullying and gifted students in recent years, these studies are not sufficient to explain how this specific population experiences cyberbullying. What is currently known, however, is that gifted children and adolescents experience high rates of bullying and cyberbullying (González-Cabrera et al., 2019, 2022; M. S. Mitchell, 2012; Ogurlu & Sarıçam, 2018; Peterson & Ray, 2006). Peterson and Ray (2006) reported that 67 percent of the 432 gifted eighth graders in the United States had experienced at least one kind of bullying. Their study also showed that in the sixth grade, 14% of the boys experienced repeated bullying, with 25% of them being bullied more than 10 times. In Turkey, Ogurlu and Sarıcam (2018) found that the mean bullying victimization scores of gifted kids were considerably higher than those of non-gifted children (106.02 vs. 95.75). Moreover, Gonzalez-Cabrera et al. (2022) did a study with 449 gifted and 950 non-gifted adolescents and found that gifted students were more likely to be the victims of bullying.

Mitchell (2012) also found that gifted students from 5th to 8th grades accounted for 17% cyberbully-victims, 5% of cybervictims, and 4% of cyberbullies. Another study done with gifted students in Spain showed that 25.1% of the students were cybervictims, 3.9% were cyberbullies, and 6.6% were cyberbully-victims (González-Cabrera et al., 2019). Finally, a recent study conducted in Ireland revealed that 55.4% of the gifted adolescents reported having

been bullied, and 31.3% of the gifted adolescents had been cyberbullied at some point in their entire lives (Laffan et al., 2022). Even though the research is slowly but steadily adding up, a growing body of research shows that gifted students experience cyberbullying. Therefore, special attention must be given to this special population as cyberbullying is associated with different mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Iranzo et al., 2019; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012). In fact, a recent study with gifted students showed that cybervictims, and particularly cyberbully-victims, had high scores in depression, anxiety, and stress and low scores in quality of life, life satisfaction, and social support (González-Cabrera et al., 2019). Such findings suggest that cyberbullying's dynamics and impact on the gifted student population demand greater attention than they have received to date.

1.6. Tips for Families and Schools

Although some studies show that gifted students are perceived as less likely to be the victims of bullying at school, numerous studies have now shown that these students experience not only bullying but also cyberbullying with high prevalence rates (Estell et al., 2009; González-Cabrera et al., 2022; Laffan et al., 2022; Ogurlu & Sarıçam, 2018; Peterson & Ray, 2006). Therefore, all parties, including parents, educators, and school officials should move forward and take a proactive role to protect gifted students from this growing danger. Research has shown that students remain silent and do not report cyberbullying incidents (Connolly, 2018; Li, 2007; Willard, 2007; Ybarra et al., 2006). Some of their resistance to reporting includes a sense of helplessness, concerns over inappropriate adult action, being pessimistic about adult intervention and being afraid of parental overreaction (Connolly, 2018; deLara, 2012; Holfeld & Grabe, 2012). Thus, creating a positive family and school climate that is founded on a trusting relationship with the gifted child is one of the most essential things to do. If we want these students to speak up and share their experiences of cyberbullying, we need to make sure that there are honest and open ways of communication with them established within the framework of trust.

There are also a few things that parents can do to protect their gifted children from being bullied online, even if they are unable to monitor all their actions in the digital world. First of all, parents can help reduce cyberbullying by modeling appropriate technology use and fostering an environment in which the child feels safe reporting negative online experiences (Siegle, 2010). Also, if parents suspect that their children are being cyberbullied or wish to prevent cyberbullying, they should closely monitor their children's social media accounts, applications, and internet search histories. Additionally, it is important for families to stay up to date on the latest technological developments, popular applications and websites used by children. The digital language used by their children is one of the other most significant factors for parents to be aware of (Aoyama & Talbert, 2010). Therefore, it is important for parents to learn this language and effectively use it in their communication with their children.

As mentioned before, because of the anonymous nature of cyberbullying, it can cause more serious problems than traditional bullying (Campbell, 2005). Therefore, professionals such as school or mental health counselors should educate families and educators about cyberbullying

through seminars or workshops. By providing the necessary information, parents and teachers of gifted children may become more aware of this problem and learn effective strategies to protect their children. School counselors should also assess cyberbullying in schools on a regular basis to find out if students are at risk for cyberbullying. If gifted students at school found to be cyberbullied, school counselors can work with them either individually or in group settings. This will help gifted students not only better understand their problems and learn effective ways to deal with them, but also recognize that other students have similar experiences as well. In addition, teachers and school counselors who work with gifted children should consider taking more direct actions, like making sure the kids are properly integrated and discussed different types of bullying, specific examples of bullies, and what teens can do to lessen perceived threats and how to respond to bullying behaviors in class (MacFarlane & Mina, 2018). Last but not least, schools must have anti-bullying/cyberbullying programs and should consider giftedness in them.

2. DISCUSSION

Even though the relationship between cyberbullying and gifted students has attracted researchers' attention for the past couple of years, there is still a lack of research when these two topics come together. According to limited research done in recent years, it has been proved that gifted students experience cyberbullying (González-Cabrera et al., 2019; Laffan et al., 2022; M. S. Mitchell, 2012). However, more research is needed to better understand the relationship between cyberbullying and gifted students. Larger student samples with different variables would give us a more accurate picture of cyberbullying with gifted students. Longitudinal studies would also help us to better understand long term effects of cyberbullying among gifted students. As a result, the research community is encouraged to pay closer attention to this specific topic with this unique population.

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