

PREVENTING FATAL SCHOOL INCIDENTS

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Deploying Risk Communications on Bullying to Prevent Fatal School Incidents

By: Jamila Kanji

Abstract

Bullying is a growing form of violence among students. Research has shown that students who are bullied are at a greater risk for self-harm and suicidal behaviours (John et al., 2018, p. 10). Peer bullying is increasingly prevalent, but can be reduced if not prevented with risk communications in schools that are relayed to students, parents and teachers. There have been a number of suicides in Canada that have sparked public outrage, with a demand for policy changes at a school and government level. This paper reviews research conducted by Albayrak, Yidiz and Erol (2016) and McWilliam, King, Drennan and Cunningham (2016) to understand how school boards can be proactive in addressing bullying before a fatal incident occurs.

The analysis focuses on two Canadian case studies related to bullying: the deaths Devan Bracci-Selvey and Rehtaeh Parsons. In October 2019, Devan Bracci-Selvey, a 14-year-old student from Ontario was fatally stabbed by two students who tormented him for months. Rehtaeh Parsons, a 17-year-old student from Nova Scotia, faced a similar situation to Devan's; she committed suicide in April 2013 after relentless bullying in person and online. Her story has been widely published, namely on how school boards and administrators can better address and prevent bullying. Peer-to-peer-based communication was found to be much more effective in reducing bullying compared to institutional-based communication. Similarly, student stories on bullying shared among students is an empathetic approach that can create a student-led community to reduce harm and risks.

Research Question

What communication tactics can Canadian public-school boards deploy to prevent fatal bullying incidents?

Key Terms: Bullying, bullying prevention, fatal school incidents, suicide, peer communication

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Peer-to-peer bullying entails “repeated, intentional humiliation and oppression of a person who has less power than his or her aggressor(s)” (Vaillancourt et al., 2010, p. 41). In Canada, thirty-seven per cent of Canadian students between the ages of eight and 18 have been victims of bullying, and more than thirty-one per cent of students reported that they have bullied another student. Alarming, sixty per cent of children who bullied others had “at least one criminal conviction by age 24” (p. 41). Cyberbullying is harder for a victim to escape as harmful content—messages, images and videos—can reach hundreds of people in a short time.

UNICEF (2017) reported that “victims of cyberbullying are more likely to use alcohol and drugs, to not attend school, to experience in-person bullying, to receive poor grades and to experience lower self-esteem” (p. 75). Victims of cyberbullying are at a greater risk for self-harm and are twice as likely to attempt suicide; therefore, school boards need to be equipped to handle such situations in a timely and respectful manner (John et al., 2018, p. 10; Centre for Suicide Prevention, n.d.). I argue that peer-based risk communications on bullying is essential in schools nationwide to prevent fatal school incidents and reduce bullying overall.

Literature Review

The literature review focuses on research conducted by Albayrak, Yidiz and Erol (2016) and McWilliam, King, Drennan and Cunningham (2016). Albayrak et al. (2016) outlines the theoretical frameworks that guide the development of anti-bullying programs to decrease bullying behaviours. This research is supported by McWilliam et al.’s (2016) work in determining the success of peer-to-peer-based campaigns in preventative bullying programs.

Albayrak, Yidiz and Erol (2016) studied the efficacy of bullying prevention programs (BPP) in reducing bullying behaviours by creating a BPP using the Behavioral-Ecological Model (BEM) and the Neuman Systems Model (NSM). The study was based on these frameworks

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because “BEM recommends strategies on individual, local, social and socio-cultural levels, [and] NSM offers suggestions as to strategies that can be applied to individuals on primary, secondary and tertiary prevention levels” (p. 2). The study consisted of 583 students between the ages of 12 and 15, who were divided into two groups: the study and the control group. Over the course of five weeks, the study group was given preventative bullying education for one hour a week; the control group received no education. Bullying rates were lower in the study group compared to the control group.

McWilliam, King, Drennan and Cunningham (2016) found that “20 to 40 per cent of young people have reported being a victim of cyberbullying” (p. 214). Preventative bullying campaigns have largely utilized social media to reach the audiences most affected—those ages 12 to 17—to influence behaviour. The authors studied the impact of two Australian anti-bullying campaigns with the participation of 849 people between the ages of 16 and 24. Participants were either exposed to a peer-to-peer-based campaign, which was the Inspire Foundation’s “Bullying—Don’t Stand By, Stand Up” campaign, or to a traditional website, which was the Australian government’s “Bullying. No Way!” site. Both campaigns were rated highly in influencing behaviour, source credibility and realism; however, the peer-to-peer-based campaign rated higher for message honesty (p. 224).

The findings from Albayrak et al. (2016) and McWilliam et al. (2016) outline the guiding theoretical frameworks to create anti-bullying campaigns and provide insight into how risk communications should be disseminated for maximum effectiveness among students and adolescents.

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“Everyone failed my son.” The Tragic Loss of Devan Bracci-Selvey

On October 7, 2019, two teens fatally stabbed Devan Bracci-Selvey, a 14-year-old student in Hamilton, Ont., outside of Sir Winston Churchill Secondary School. Devan was bullied since his second day of school in the current year, and his mother, Shari-Ann Selvey, said she “raised the issue multiple times with the school” (O’Reilly, 2019). Shari-Ann was told that Devan “should not be in the hallways by himself, that he doesn’t go to the bathroom by himself [and] that he leaves 10 minutes earlier before the other kids get out” (Grillo, 2019).

During a school board meeting on October 28, the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) reported that it is conducting a formal review of its anti-bullying policies and creating a three-member panel to assess HWDSB’s approach to bullying in response to Devan’s passing. Shari-Ann and other parents were told they would have an opportunity to speak at the meeting; however, no one was given a chance to speak stirring further frustration with the board.

Timeline of Events

In September, Shari-Ann informed staff at Sir Winston Churchill Secondary School that Devan is being bullied by other students. The staff provided suggestions on how Devan could avoid his tormentors, such as by never being alone. On October 7, Devan called his mother and asked to be picked up from school. At 1:23 p.m., as Shari-Ann pulled into the school parking lot, she sees Devan running to the car, who is soon stabbed to death before he can make it to her. A video of the stabbing was taken, and Hamilton Police Services and HWDSB were notified. That same day, a letter from the school principal, Marco Barzetti, is sent to all families, outlining the tragedy and encouraging students to speak to school staff if they are distraught with the incident (HWDSB, 2019a, para. 6). Links to HWDSB’s approach to keep schools safe were included, along with ways to support children during a tragedy. Manny Figueiredo, director of education at

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HWDSB, released a statement of the tragedy as well. On October 8, a second letter was sent to the school families that acknowledged the support the school has received and reminded parents and students that help is available to those who are seeking it (HWDSB, 2019b).

The letters were the foundation of Barzetti's three tweets he posted on October 8 about the incident; however, all of his tweets failed to include an action, a web link to resources or mention bullying. On October 9, a mother of another victim with the same bullies went public with her story and said, "My son told us numerous times that he feels that this was going to happen to him. I even told the school, 'I think they're going to kill my son.' I even told the police and they never got back to me" (Dixon, 2019). Neither the school nor HWDSB responded to this story. That same day, the Hamilton Police also reported that two teens had been charged with first-degree murder, and later in the evening, a vigil for Devan was held at his school (O'Reilly & Mahoney, 2019, para. 9). Hundreds of people who attended the vigil wore shirts that said, "Stand Up, Speak Up, STOP Bullying for Good," pushing for bullying intervention (Mahoney, 2019).

On October 10, Sir Winston Churchill Secondary School held a football game in honour of Devan, and HWDSB released its official statement online regarding the stabbing. The board said it is co-operating with the police and "will conduct a formal review of [its] Safe Schools practices" (HWDSB, 2019c, para. 7). The school's own Twitter account did not post any original content regarding the tragedy; it retweeted posts from Barzetti, and on October 10, the school's account resumed posting about school sports and events.

On October 28, the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board held a board meeting where it was announced that it is creating an independent three-member review panel to assess the board's bullying prevention and intervention policies and guidelines. The report is expected

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to be completed in May 2020 and will be made public. The three-hour meeting was streamed live and the video of the meeting is still accessible on YouTube. Although the meeting appeared to facilitate two-way communication, the public—including Devan’s mother—were not given a chance to speak. On that same day, the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board tweeted details about the meeting, so individuals could tune in and shared its Bullying Prevention Handbook. The Board also shared a link to an anonymous bullying tip line, called HWDSB Helps, that students can detail a bullying incident they were involved in. On October 29, Ontario NDP Leader Andrea Horwath supported HWDSB’s move to examine its policies, noting that they “obviously didn’t work for Devan,” and stressed the importance of engaging the community in overhauling HWDSB’s processes (Grillo, 2019).

“What happened to my daughter was preventable.” The Story of Rehtaeh Parsons

On November 12, 2011, 15-year-old Rehtaeh Parsons attended a party among her high school peers in Cole Harbour, N.S. She was intoxicated and was sexually assaulted by four boys. On November 17, 2011, she found out that an explicit photo of herself was taken that night and was circulated among high schools in the area, including hers. She was a target of immense bullying, humiliation and cyber abuse. Rehtaeh and her parents reported the incident to the police and used several coping resources; however, her father recalled that “the programs offered did not focus on the most urgent problems of trauma and sexual assault, depression, and the fear of self-harm” (Pepler & Milton, 2013, p. 6).

Rehtaeh’s high school, Cole Harbour High School, did not take action because Rehtaeh was set to transfer to another high school in Nova Scotia. Her new school was unaware of the incident; therefore, there was no intervention or response from either school or the Halifax Regional School Board (HRSB). In November 2012, the RCMP did not press any charges to the

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teen boys and closed Rehtaeh's case. On April 4, 2013, Rehtaeh attempted suicide and passed away on April 7, 2013. After much media scrutiny, the RCMP reopened Rehtaeh's case; this move was met with criticism from Nova Scotia's justice minister, who said this was "purely an act of public relations damage control" (CBC News, 2013). After a year-long investigation, two of the boys were charged and pleaded guilty to child pornography charges (McMillian, 2015).

Four days after Rehtaeh's passing, Prime Minister Stephen Harper publicly commented on the incident, saying he was "sickened seeing a story like this" (CBC News, 2013). In 2013, Pepler and Milton were appointed by the Government of Nova Scotia to conduct an independent review of HRSB's policies and protocols related to bullying instigated by Rehtaeh's death (p. 1). After speaking to 111 people, Pepler and Milton (2013) provided four recommendations, but their first recommendation—to "emphasize prevention"—was targeted to the Government of Nova Scotia, regional school boards, community and social agencies (p. 26). Increasing risk communications in schools will "make safety and respect the norm" and will "prevent bullying, cyberbullying, and sexual aggression" (p. 26). A second independent review by Murray Segal (2015) recommended greater collaboration between schools and the police, noting that Rehtaeh's story "highlighted the absence of a cohesive, comprehensive response by police, the school system, victim assistance services and mental health services to her and her family's crisis" (p. 105). See Appendix A for a full timeline of events.

Comparative Analysis

Both HWDSB and HRSB have pages on their websites for bullying intervention and prevention. HWDSB's information is much easier to find than HRSB, which may be because of Devan's recent passing. Both school boards requested to have independent reviews conducted of its policies and processes to prevent a future incident; however, in both cases, the school boards

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were notified of the bullying beforehand, but did not take action or amplify its risk communications messages around bullying, cyberbullying and sexual violence. To prevent a future risk, the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, the Halifax Regional School Board and other Canadian school boards should increase risk communications “to promote a consensus and understanding of peer bullying;” (Albayrak et al., 2016, p. 8) in particular, the messages should be displayed in school lunchrooms, washrooms and hallways as those are the areas secondary students feel the most unsafe (Vaillancourt et al., 2010, p. 45). These communications should also be in the form of brochures and booklets, and be shared with students' families (Albayrak et al. 2016, p. 8).

With the increasing prevalence of bullying, Canadian school boards should develop peer-to-peer bullying prevention programs as it was found that peer-to-peer-based campaigns and communications rated higher for message honesty and “appeared more raw and personal” compared to institutional-based communications (McWilliam et al., 2016, pp. 224-225). The Behavioral-Ecological Model and the Neuman Systems Model should be integrated in school-based bullying prevention programs as these frameworks focus on a holistic view of the environment, student and health (Albyrak et al., 2016, p. 2). School administrators should also ensure “parents get school safety information numerous times a year...and use student school newspapers to promote safety stories and to talk about challenges to school safety” (Trump, 2011, p. 258). This will leverage the benefits of peer-based interventions.

Post crisis, the principals at Devan’s and Rehtaeh’s high schools failed to carry out their due diligence as school administrators. According to the *Ontario Education Act*, a school principal “is responsible for conducting an investigation independent of the police and taking appropriate disciplinary action” and “is required to suspend a student if he or she believes that a

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student has engaged in a number of specific activities at school, including bullying, where engaging in the activity will have an impact on the school climate” (Gergin, 2013). Devan’s principal, Marco Barzetti, did not respond to the media or suspend the two boys involved in the murder; no disciplinary action was taken. The same is true for Rehtaeh’s principal. None of the four boys were suspended, the bullying was not dealt with, Rehtaeh had to transfer schools without the principal intervening and the principal did not respond to the media. Failing to communicate with parents and the media in a timely and empathetic manner will cause irreputable damage to a school community (Trump, 2011, p. 253).

For Devan and Rehtaeh, vigils were held at their schools within two days, and flocks of media were present. School administrators must be prepared to manage this by having accurate, respectful and consistent key messages; a plan to manage media requests; and tactics to be a supportive network for parents and students. Both school boards should have released an official statement within 24 hours in response to the incident to rectify any rumors and allow the school board to be first in explaining what happened. The response should have acknowledged the incident, identified steps taken by the school to prevent the incident and communicated how the school will prevent the incident from happening again (Trump, 2011, p. 256).

In both cases, the parents of the victim became spokespeople for bullying. Devan’s mother has been involved in the community to prevent bullying. She is speaking out on how the problem is still happening at Devan’s school, even as a formal review is being conducted. Rehtaeh’s father, Glen Canning, has also been a loud voice when it comes to bullying. In 2018, Canning spoke at a March For Our Education rally in Ontario, fighting Premier Doug Ford’s sexual education curriculum repeal (Preklet, 2018). This demonstrates that parents of victims can become key players in setting the agenda around issues.

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Conclusion

School administrators have a responsibility to ensure students' risks are minimized. This can be achieved with relevant, proactive risk communications. While Devan and Rehtaeh were victims of bullying, they were also products of what can happen when a school does not have robust risk communications in place. Findings from Albayrak et al. (2016), McWilliam et al. (2016), Segal (2015), Pepler and Milton (2013) and Trump (2011) demonstrate the need for stronger risk communications in schools to decrease bullying behaviours.

It is recommended school boards mobilize peer-to-peer anti-bullying campaigns using communications tactics and messaging that resonates highly among students. Doing so could catalyze an exchange of bullying-related stories and experiences among peers, which is an effective method in reducing bullying. Canadian school boards should also integrate preventative bullying education in its curriculum for one hour a week to increase awareness of peer bullying, including where students can find help, with the goal of reducing the number of bullying incidents in Canada. Increasing safety communications among students and their families while also developing peer-based interventions will be highly effective measures for schools to deploy to minimize fatal bullying incidents.

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Appendix A**Table 1: Timeline of events of Rehtaeh Parsons' case (Segal, 2015).**

Date	Event
Nov. 12, 2011	Rehtaeh Parsons attends a small party in Cole Harbour, N.S., where she was sexually assaulted by four teen boys.
Nov. 17, 2011	Rehtaeh discovers explicit photograph of her taken and prepares to transfer high schools
Nov. 19, 2011	Rehtaeh and her mom, Leah, file a complaint with the RCMP related to the incident on Nov. 12. Rehtaeh is interviewed, but the interview is not recorded. Only handwritten notes are taken.
Nov. 29, 2011	A second statement is retrieved from Rehtaeh since the first one was not recorded.
Jan. 6, 2012	Leah receives a Facebook message from one of the teen boys involved in the case.
June 27, 2012	Leah shares concern with police department on the length of the investigation.
Oct. 31, 2012	Police inform Leah that there is insufficient information to charge the teen boys with sexual assault, but are investigating child pornography charges.
Nov. 2, 2012	The Crown refuses to proceed in charging the teens on any accounts.
April 7, 2013	Rehtaeh passes away.
April 11, 2013	Prime Minister Stephen Harper comments on Rehtaeh's case, saying he is sickened by the incident.
April 12, 2013	RCMP reopens Rehtaeh's case.
April 13, 2013	Vigil is held for Rehtaeh.
June 14, 2013	Independent review by Pepler and Milton (2013) completed and published.
August 2013	Government of Nova Scotia passes a cyberbullying law in response to Rehtaeh. It was said to be rushed and was quashed by the Nova Scotia Supreme Court.
Aug. 8, 2013	Teen boys are charged with child pornography.

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Nov. 29, 2014	Rehtaeh's parents founded the Rehtaeh Parsons Society to combat cyberbullying and sexual violence.
Oct. 8, 2015	Review by Murray Segal (2015) completed and published.
April 6, 2018	Five-year anniversary articles published for Rehtaeh in traditional news outlets.
July 5, 2018	Nova Scotia's new law, <i>Intimate Images and Cyber-protection Act</i> , comes into effect. This law was an iteration of the first one introduction in 2013.