School Bullying and The Impact on Mental Health

ASTI Submission to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science, February 2021

Introduction

Globally, there is growing awareness and concern about violence and bullying schools. UNESCO has declared the first Thursday in November as the International Day against Violence and Bullying at School Including Cyberbullying, recognizing that school-related violence in all its forms is an infringement of children and adolescents' rights to education and to health and well-being. Ireland has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child, article 19 of which requires states to protect the child from abuse and neglect. In its first report to the Irish government in 2006, the UN Committee recommended that the State takes measures to combat bullying and that its impact be dealt with in a responsive and child-sensitive way. In 2013, Department of Education and Skills to published the National Action Plan on Bullying and directed all schools to implement the related Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools. More recently, the child protection procedures for primary and post-primary schools (2017) refers to the duty of school in terms of responding to bullying cases.

Bullying and its impact on children's mental health

Bullying is increasingly understood as a form of abuse and violence. The highly-acclaimed Anti-Bullying Centre in DCU [1] identifies three main features of bullying: 1) Intentionality: Bullying is a goal-oriented and systematic abusive behaviour; 2) Repetition: Bullying happens repeatedly and 3) Imbalance of power: The systematic abuse of power is perpetrated by someone (perpetrator) who is either physically or psychologically stronger than the target. The impact of bullying on children has been extensively document in the national and international literature and is uniformly deeply damaging in terms of the victim's psychological and physical wellbeing. In many instances, it has a life-long negative impact. All of the reports on children's wellbeing in Ireland refer to bullying as a major issue in children and young people's lives. For example, the report of Comhairle na n'Óg to the 2016 UN Committee on the Convention on the Rights of the Child stated:

> *Mental health and physical safety are the two main areas that we, as young people, are concerned about in Ireland. Bullying is the number one issue that worries us, followed closely by stress, and the pressures of school and home life.* [2]

Bullying happens in various contexts, especially when adult supervision is low. Cyber-bullying thrives in the latter environment. Cyberbullying consists of negative behaviour occurring through electronic means of communication that is either repetitive and long-lasting or occurs one-time. It is intrusive, invasive of privacy and security and 'always-on'. A widely acknowledged definition describes it as wilful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices.

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[1] https://antibullyingcentre.ie/

[2] https://www.childrensrights.ie/sites/default/files/submissions_reports/files/PictureYourRights0515.pdf

[3] Overall, cyberbullying has similar elements to offline bullying, but it can involve a larger audience, distance between the perpetrator and the victim and anonymity frequently for the former. Certain unrepeated acts, such as posting an embarrassing picture online can harm the target by the repetitive exposure to others; hence, repetition is not one of the main criteria in cyberbullying.

Schools' response to bullying

The 2013 Action Plan sets out a range of recommendations and immediate actions to address bullying in schools, such as developing a positive school culture and climate, as well as evidence-based intervention strategies. The Anti-Bullying Procedures include a template for schools to record incidents of identity-based bullying such as racist, homophobic and cyber-bullying. Identity-based bullying is a particular issue for children of Traveller, Roma and migrant backgrounds, children with an illness or disability and LGBT+ young people.

The reports from the Office of the Chief Inspector of the Department of Education & Skills provides aggregated data on quality and standards in primary and post-primary schools. The most recent report published in 2018 stated "schools are doing good work to tackle bullying and there is a marked improvement since the last report in the percentage of parents and students that are confident that schools will deal with bullying promptly and effectively". [4] Significantly, 85% of students stated that they could get help from a teacher if they were being bullied.

Research by the DCU Anti-Bullying Centre confirms that while the 2013 Procedures provide a clear framework for responding to allegations or incidents of bullying, concerns exist around the capacity of schools to engage in the prevention and intervention approaches recommended in the Procedures. [5] The latter are central to the concept of the inclusive school and the creation of a positive school environment which foregrounds respect, dignity and safety for all students. The ASTI can absolutely confirm this research finding. Austerity measures in the last decade has resulted in second-level schools losing middle-management posts. The latter are key to ensuring that whole-school policies such as that specified in the 2013 Procedures are delivered, monitored and regularly reviewed.

Research also confirms that teachers need more concrete tools for bullying prevention work with adolescents, helping them to build resilience and self-confidence, as much as they need clear guidelines to intervene when bullying is detected. In its submission to the Departmental consultation on the 2013 Anti-Bullying Action Plan, the ASTI underlined the need to support the Procedures with a national programme of Inservice for teachers. This did not happen. The need for such a programme has not gone away. If anything, the changed societal landscape - in particular the growing emphasis on mental health and wellbeing, living safely and ethically in the online space, the need to have specific measures to protect the dignity of minorities and of LBGT+ students - is infinitely more complex and challenging than that which prevailed as recently as 2013. Huge advances have also taken place in

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https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_education_further_and_higher_education_research_innovation_and_science/submissions/2020/2020-11-05_opening-statement-and-submission-dr-angela-mazzone-postdoctoral-researcher-national-anti-bullying-research-and-resource-centre-dublin-city-university_en.pdf

[4] https://assets.gov.ie/25244/4f5eb802e7664dc4a9c6abdd9a93922b.pdf

relation to research on anti-bullying intervention measures, while at system level, schools must implement a Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice. The latter identifies bullying, aggress and violence as key risk factors for students' wellbeing.[6] The Framework is a complex and multi-faceted approach to student wellbeing. It is predicated on complex organisational practices such as 'collaborative problem-solving approaches', 'school-based screening and intervention tools to assess social, emotional and behavioural difficulties', 'policies and plans setting out how inclusive practice will be implemented in a way that fosters school connectedness, acceptance and celebration of diversity'. This Framework was not accompanied by a national training programme either. No additional resources in the form of additional middle-management posts or Guidance Counselling posts were provided to ensure the effective implementation of this Framework in each school.

ASTI recommendations for supports for schools

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically made society aware of the centrality of schools to the wellbeing of young people. Policy-makers must reflect on how government can better support the vital work of schools in educating, supporting and socialising our young people in the post-pandemic period. Schools are seriously under-invested in given the multiplicity of roles that they clearly discharge. Schools cannot effectively address complex societal problems such as bullying if there are not enough teachers, not enough dedicated leadership posts, not enough specialist teachers such as Guidance Counsellors, no training programmes for <u>teachers</u>. Many of the recommendations which the ASTI makes in this section of our submission are relevant to other areas of school life.

Recommendation 1: Review the current Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools to represent current bullying prevention and intervention research and the societal landscape in which children and adolescents are now developing in, in particular the digital landscape.

Recommendation 2: Increase the number of middle-management leadership posts in schools to ensure a coordinated and evidence-based approach to responding to, and preventing, bullying including cyber bullying.

Recommendation 3: Introduce a national CPD programme for teachers with particular emphasis on preventative approaches and restorative practices.

Recommendation 4: Prior to implementing a revised SPHE/RSE programme in schools, a dedicated CPD programme must be provided for teachers of this programme. [7] A specific post-primary qualification for teaching SPHE and Wellbeing is also required to ensure high quality delivery of this course content. Currently, such a qualification is not provided by any higher education institution.

Recommendation 5: Avoid curriculum overload. Anti-bullying prevention and intervention should be embedded into existing school policy and school curricula to avoid overload. Teachers must be provided with professional time to discharge their non-classroom teaching duties, work as members of teams and engage in CPD. Relying exclusively on policies without enabling teachers to actually implement the policy is a deeply flawed approach to innovation in our schools.

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[6] https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/wellbeing-policy-statement-and-framework-for-practice-2018%E2%80%932023.pdf#page=35

[7] https://ncca.ie/media/4462/report-on-the-review-of-relationships-and-sexuality-education-rse-in-primary-and-post-primary-school.pdf

Recommendation 6: Ensure continuous evaluation of effectiveness of the online safety and anti-bullying and cyberbullying prevention and intervention programmes delivered in schools and elsewhere. Online safety messages need to be designed in such a way that they resonate with, and are understood, by young people.

Recommendation 7: Department of Education and Skills needs to have stronger engagement with social media and other online platforms/corporate bodies in order to optimise the reporting process and provide schools with effective ways to report cyberbullying and work on take-down measures. There is a widespread perception among teachers and principals that the corporate sector could and should play a more proactive role in promoting internet safety, protecting privacy, and listening to the online experiences of young people.

Recommendation 8: Youth mental health services must be radically expanded. Camhs – the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service - has come in for much criticism in recent years due to funding and staffing shortfalls. There are regular reports of children spending months or even years on waiting lists for an initial appointment. Regional disparities in terms of access to the service are stark. Last year it was revealed that nearly half the staff positions in Camhs were unfilled. [8] Teachers consistently report that when school responses are exhausted or insufficient to meet young people's needs, the latter simply do not have access to CAMHS or any other mental health service.

Recommendation 9: Schools provide valuable life-enhancing activities such as sport, clubs and the arts to young people. These extra-curricular activities can have a huge impact in developing young people's life skills, self-esteem, confidence and resilience as well as providing opportunities to make new friends. It is a matter of regret to the ASTI that we are being told by teachers that they simply cannot engage in these activities due to their heavy workload. Research commissioned by ASTI in 2018 found that the working week for teachers was typically 40+hours.[9] Aside from the fact that heavy workload is a major stressor in teaching, with its attendant debilitating consequences for teacher morale and wellbeing, it is now impacting on what schools can offer young people outside their timetables.

Recommendation 10: Prioritise the wellbeing of teachers. Why is teacher well-being important? Being healthy physically and emotionally, being socially active and being able to take care of themselves and of others helps teachers to become and remain happy and confident, positive and engaged in their own learning and teaching. It must now be recognised that teachers' overall well-being must be fostered, developed and supported alongside their professional and intellectual development. The Department of Education and Skills should support the health promotion initiative co-developed by the teacher unions and school management bodies.

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[8] https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/youth-mental-health-services-in-spotlight-after-kri%C3%A9gel-d%C3%BAn-laoghaire-cases-1.4074845

[9] https://www.asti.ie/document-library/teachers-work-work-demands-and-work-intensity-march-2018/