



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



An tIonad Náisiúnta Taighde agus
Acmhainne don Fhrithbhulaíocht
National Anti-Bullying Research
and Resource Centre

UNESCO Chair on Tackling Bullying in Schools
and Cyberspace through a Global Partnership
for Equality and Wellbeing with Dublin City University

Submission to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Topic: School Bullying and The Impact on Mental Health

18th February 2021

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Introduction

The National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre (ABC) is a University designated research centre located in DCU's Institute of Education. The Centre is known globally for its research excellence in bullying and online safety. It is home to scholars with a global reputation as leaders in the field. The work of the Centre builds on 25 years of research. Researchers at ABC were the first in Ireland to undertake research on school, workplace, homophobic and cyber bullying. The Centre hosts the UNESCO Chair on Tackling Bullying in Schools and Cyberspace and the International Journal on Bullying Prevention.

The aim of ABC is to contribute to solving the real-world problems of bullying and online safety through collaboration with an extensive community of academic and industry partnerships. The extent of our resources and the collaboration between disciplines drive quality education, understanding and innovation in this field. The objectives of the Centre are aligned to support the UN's overarching goal to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030 (SDG4) and supports the implementation of the Government of Ireland's Action Plan on Bullying (2013), Action Plan for Online Safety (2018-2019), the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018-2023), and the Health and Safety Authority's Code of Practice for Employers and Employees on the Prevention of Workplace Bullying (2007).

Summary

School bullying is a broad term that encompasses many different types of negative behaviours. It can include physically hurting someone, verbally abusing them and/or ignoring or creating rumours about the target. Given the amount of time school students spend online, it also relates to victimisation in online spaces which can be just as varied in form. For example, it relates to cyber hate, trolling and the non-consensual sharing of sexual imagery. These are only examples and it is important that we understand that there are many forms that bullying can take both online and offline. Regardless of the form, school bullying is when one person intentionally and repeatedly targets another person with an intent to cause harm. The bully typically shows some power over the target (e.g., physical strength, popularity or technological skills).

While trying to understand the phenomena of school bullying, research has provided much needed insights into child and adolescent development, such as the association of childhood trauma and psychopathology in later life. Children do not develop in isolation, they both actively shape and are shaped by the social worlds in which they live. A child's personality, interests and activities are firmly located in the interactions between a child and the network or system to which each child belongs (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In this way, exposure to harassment or negative actions in childhood can directly influence their social and emotional development. School bullying provides the best example of this.

Experiences of bullying in childhood and adolescence are related to poorer mental health of our students that often continues into adulthood. Buffering the negative social, emotional and psychological implications of bullying is therefore a cost-effective and appropriate manner to influence and reduce individuals using mental health services, the criminal system and/or dropping out of the education system.

What is School Bullying?

The most prevalent definition of bullying is one put forward by Olweus (1997) who defined it as when “*a student is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more students*”. To constitute bullying behaviour there must also be an imbalance in power between the bully and his/her target(s). Cyberbullying refers to when this negative behaviour occurs online or using technology or mobile phones (Smith et al., 2008). The core elements of intentionality, repetitiveness and power imbalance hold true for the definition of cyberbullying. However, the methods and means of causing harm vary greatly. Cyberbullying can consist of threats, verbal abuse, the non-consensual spreading of images and videos, defamation and identity threat. In addition, posting a video or an image of someone online once, but in a manner that can be shared several times, constitutes cyberbullying. The invasive nature of a cyberbullying incident in that it can happen in one’s own home and the potential for a larger audience, can contribute to increased levels of shame, embarrassment, humiliation and a feeling of a lack of control for the victim. It can also make it more difficult to prove a cyberbullying incident, as the identity of the bully can be kept anonymous and there are often no witnesses to the initial posting or sharing of the photo, video or information.

It is important to note, that while we often distinguish between online and offline bullying, this does not always serve to understand the nuances of young people’s lives. We know that most school students do not distinguish bullying in this manner and in many cases, students can be targeted both online and offline at the same time. As such, the term school bullying is used here to refer bullying in the broader sense that includes online and offline bullying.

How prevalent is bullying?

One extensive review of all Irish studies found that 22.4% of primary students and 11.8% of post-primary students have experienced some form of school bullying (Foody, Samara & O’Higgins Norman, 2017). This figure changes when we look at specific types of bullying and when we consider different students. For example, our research shows that girls are more likely than boys to experience sexual victimisation online and this is more often at the hands of someone their own age (Foody et al., 2020)). Some students such as gifted students (Laffan et al., 2019), students with special educational needs (Feijóo et al., 2020) and LJBQT+ students (Earnshaw et al., 2017) are at an increased risk for being targets of school bullying (Laffan et al., 2019). Importantly, a recent study at ABC argues that contextual factors such as school culture and ethos are essential when considering bullying rates (Kuldass et al., in preparation).

Mental Health Implications of School Bullying

There is no doubt that involvement in school bullying has negative consequences for the mental health of students. One review of the Irish literature found ten studies linking bullying to mental health consequences (Foody et al., 2017). Specifically, school bullying was associated with **lower self-esteem** (O’Moore & Kirkham, 2001), **lower life satisfaction** (Callaghan et al., 2015), **poorer wellbeing** (Devine & Lloyd, 2012; McGuckin, 2010) and

higher anxiety, depression and thoughts of self-harm (James et al., 2003; McMahon et al., 2010). Our own research at ABC of over 2000 12-16 year olds in Irish schools found **negative mental health** implications for both victims and bullies (Foody et al., 2019). In addition, we found it is associated with **stress and loneliness** (Laffan et al., in preparation).

These are only a sample of the many studies available documenting the negative mental health consequences of school bullying on **both victims and bullies**. If we look to the international literature, we see that the effects of school bullying extend into other areas we might not yet have considered such as **drug misuse** (Ttofi et al., 2016). In addition, bullying often leads to more **violence**, increases the risk of **carrying a weapon to school** and places a higher burden on the emergency services (Ybarra et al., 2007; Waseem et al., 2013).

Overall, these outcomes demonstrate the need for school bullying to be considered high risk experiences for the immediate and the later development of mental health problems in children and young people. Indeed, appropriate early intervention could reduce the number of individuals presenting to mental health services in the future. The literature suggests that all young children and adolescents who are exposed to bullying should be considered high risk for the development of psychological problems at some stage in their life.

Reporting and interventions

Principals in Ireland have been given a mandate to address bullying through the Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (2013). One study conducted at ABC investigated the extent to which Irish principals considered the impact of bullying on their students and the steps they took to respond. The results indicated that principals are well aware of the negative impact of bullying, yet only half of our sample of over 900 principals had appointed a designated person to tackle bullying in their school. In the same study, less than half of the principals had researched and identified a specific anti-bullying programme to use when dealing with bullying in their schools (Foody et al., 2018).

There are many interventions that schools can take to tackle school bullying. Programmes such as the FUSE programme at ABC are showing promising results particularly when it comes to students feeling safe in online spaces and having confidence to seek support from parents and educators. Yet, they are preventative measures and are not designed as a psychological tool to support victims of bullying. More psychological supports need to be made available to our young people to be able to support them in times of crisis.

One reason for negative mental health implications could be that many young people choose to suffer in silence and do not report the bullying. Unpublished research at the ABC found that 17.7% of victims of school bullying said they had not told anyone about the experience. For the other students who did report telling someone about it, only 8% said they told an adult at school and 2.9% said their school tutor (Foody & O'Higgins Norman, in preparation). This leaves our young people in a lonely and isolated space which can be very damaging for their mental health. Our study of principals shows that this could be a systemic problem as only 40% of principals agreed that pupils in their school could access qualified counsellors when they experienced bullying. In parallel, we know the importance of friendships in acting as a buffer to the negative effects of cyberbullying (Foody et al., 2019). There needs to be increased access to mental health supports for victims of bullying in conjunction with

awareness raising on the importance and usefulness for talking and sharing problems with friends and peers.

Recommendations

UNESCO recently published new guidelines on how to tackle school violence and bullying including cyberbullying. International research suggests that successful initiatives aimed at tackling school bullying and cyberbullying are delivered as part of a whole-school approach. However, these whole-school based initiatives have been limited in their success because they have failed to recognise that the local school exists within a wider education system and community that is supported and maintained by society. Consequently, UNESCO now proposes that an effective response to bullying and cyberbullying should be described as a “whole-education approach”. A whole-education approach ensures that local school initiatives recognise the importance of the interconnectedness of the school with the wider community including education, technological and societal systems, values and pressures, all of which can impact on the prevalence and type of bullying and cyberbullying that occurs in a school and how we respond to it.

With this in mind the following specific recommendations are presented for your consideration:

- We suggest that further funding should be provided to the National Anti-Bullying Research Centre to adequately investigate the impact of school bullying. There are a small number of studies investigating mental health implications of school bullying but the role of bullying in wider social issues is under-researched in Ireland. For example, there is no evidence as to how many young people who are using the Child and Mental Health Services have experienced bullying in Ireland. In addition, the rate to which school bullying contributes to wider violence in our society, inter-partner and domestic violence, homelessness, racism and/or hate crimes is not established in Ireland. This is also the case for early school leaving, truancy and drug misuse, despite international research suggesting these are key issues.
- School bullying includes online victimisation and school students are often able to use the most current and contemporary methods to hurt and bully each other. As such, having a student task force or panel of young people who can document the most recent concerns of young people will mean our interventions and approaches are relevant and up to date. ABC is working to create a children’s task force to inform all of our research and supports. Such an approach could also be adopted by stakeholders such as the Department of Education.
- There needs to be increased access to mental health supports and services for young people. This relates to supports in schools such as student counsellors and services in the wider community (e.g., Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services). A community based multi-disciplinary approach to the delivery of these services is key (Downes, 2010). They should be easily and quickly accessed by young people.
- In addition to anti-bullying programmes, schools should consider other psychological strategies such as mindfulness which have positive implications for the mental health

of students (Foody & Samara, 2018). This fits with the agenda of the current Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018-2023 and recognises that school bullying needs to be addressed in a holistic manner outside of the standard punishment and reinforcement model sometimes adopted by schools.

- The Action Plan on Bullying (2013) is eight years old at this stage and needs to be updated. School bullying has changed rapidly in recent years due to the amount of time young people spend online. New methods for bullying (e.g., image sharing) and appropriate responses are not considered enough in the current action plan.
- The Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Principals need to include all the forms bullying can take. The recently published UNESCO guidelines for tackling school bullying argue that the current definition of bullying falls short in documenting the range of victimisation experiences that can happen today. For example, ethnicity-based bullying is not clearly articulated nor is the impact this can have on ethnic minorities like members of the Travelling community. As suggested in the previous point, an audit or review of current practices is needed to ensure that the guidance to principals is in line with best practice.
- Teachers should be trained in determining the signs of bullying, preventative measures and appropriate interventions. This could be embedded in teacher initial teacher education programmes or there should be funding for continuous professional development.
- Encouraging and appreciating the full diversity of friendships and positive peer relationships should be considered a valued objective for schools and the wider community. Friendships are a powerful and simple tool to lower the risk of bullying and to buffer the negative effects of victimisation if it happens.

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