



Ollscoil Chathair  
Bhaile Átha Cliath  
Dublin City University

# Opening Statement for Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

National Anti-Bullying  
Research and Resource Centre

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June 15th 2021 3.30pm-5.30pm

Good afternoon Chair, thank you for inviting us to attend this meeting of the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. We are very happy to be able to support the Committee's work in relation to school bullying and mental health.

DCU's Anti-Bullying Centre is located in DCU's Institute of Education and staff at the Centre have been doing research and education on bullying for 25 years.

The Centre works closely with the Department of Education with whom we have a service level agreement, as well as the Department of Justice and Department of Further and Higher Education, with whom we have research agreements.

The Centre also hosts the UNESCO Chair on bullying and cyberbullying and the Irish Research Observatory on Cyberbullying, Cyberhate, and Online Harassment.

In addition to our research activity, the Centre delivers a number of educational resources, including "FUSE" Ireland's nationwide anti-bullying and online safety programme for primary and post-primary schools. With financial support from FACEBOOK, Rethink Ireland and the Department of Education, FUSE is offered free to all schools in Ireland, and is proving highly successful in improving the self-efficacy of children and adolescents in relation to tackling bullying and online safety issues.

I am joined today by my colleagues,

Dr. Mairéad Foody, Marie Curie Research Fellow, DCU Anti-Bullying Centre.

Dr. Alan Gorman, Assistant Professor in Policy and Practice and Research Fellow, DCU Anti-Bullying Centre

Darran Heaney MSc, Project Manager with specific responsibility for the FUSE programme, DCU Anti-Bullying Centre.

Dr. Seline Keating, Assistant Professor in SPHE and Research Fellow in DCU Anti-Bullying Centre

Dr. Angela Mazzone, Chair of the Irish Research Observatory on Cyberbullying, Cyberhate, and Online Harassment at DCU.

Our submission and opening statement represents the full cohort of over 30 scholars and educators working with the Centre.

## **School Bullying Impact on Mental Health**

As outlined in our two submissions in November 2020 and March 2021, previous research has consistently shown that being involved in bullying as a target, bully, or bystander at school can be associated

with a number of **mental health problems**, including, psychosomatic complaints, anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation (Gibb, et al., 2011; Gini & Pozzoli, 2009).

Issues of identity seem to remain at the heart of much bullying behaviour. One report from UNESCO involving 144 countries found that 33% of children globally are bullied at school, with physical appearance as the top reason for being bullied, and race, nationality or skin colour as the second most common reason (Behind the Numbers, UNESCO, 2019). In terms of identity, a recent study at our Centre found that teachers of Religious Education have specific concerns about students who are practising Catholics being targeted for bullying more than those who do not practice a religion (Meehan and Laffan, 2021).

So, it is well established in research that negative childhood experiences have a negative effect on the development of a child, particularly when the bullying is related to identity. Our research shows that school principals understand and recognise this (Foody, Challenor, Murphy, O'Higgins Norman, 2018).

The next step should not be to go over old ground any longer but instead to think critically about how we can prevent bullying. Our research also shows that it is this piece that principals are less sure about.

### **School Bullying Legislation and Policy**

During the past 10 years, there have been some very significant developments at a policy level in relation to school bullying. Most significantly, the introduction of the Action Plan on Bullying (2013) and related Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (2013) as well as Circular 0045/2013 all of which were a landmark in educational policy related to bullying prevention and intervention.

We suggest the Action Plan on Bullying (2013) be audited to ensure that

- it continues to be informed by up-to-date research and evidence,
- it is connected to subsequent policies on child protection, wellbeing, and Relationships and Sexuality Education
- and benchmarked against the recommendations that were recently published by UNESCO's Scientific Committee on tackling bullying and cyberbullying in schools (Behind the Numbers, UNESCO, 2019).

UNESCO's Scientific Committee consulted with over 50 researchers around the globe, and highlights that we need to recognise bullying not just as an individualised issue but also as a systemic issue in society and as such a whole education rather than a whole school approach is required to prevent bullying in schools.

A brief review and audit of our Action Plan and Procedures to ensure that they comply with UNESCO's recommendations will not be overly burdensome nor will it allow us to be distracted from the continuing challenge of implementing the Action Plan and Procedures in schools now.

Our research shows that despite being required to do so in the Action Plan and Procedures,

- Only 51% of schools have appointed a specific member of staff to investigate and tackle bullying in their school,
- less than half (45%) of schools had researched and identified a specific anti-bullying programme to use in their school.

- Only 40% of Principals agreed that pupils in their school could access qualified counsellors when they experienced bullying.

(Foody, Challenor, Murphy, O’Higgins Norman, 2018)

Clearly there is both a need to provide further support to assist schools in implementing the requirements of the Action Plan and Procedures while also ensuring that, possibly through the Department’s Inspectorate, schools continue to prioritise bullying prevention and intervention as part of a whole education approach. In fact, we believe there needs to be greater transparency about how cases of bullying are reported and are dealt with in each school.

Finally, in relation to bullying policy we warn against the dangers of conceptual pluralism where issues like bullying prevention and intervention are conflated with concepts such as wellbeing and positive school culture, as this may result in a dilution of the focus and efforts required to fully tackle bullying and cyberbullying among children and adolescents in our schools.

### **Role of Cyberbullying**

Parents and schools are also very concerned about issues related to cyberbullying and online safety. Our most recent research showed that during the first Lockdown in 2020, 28% of 10 – 17 year olds reported being the targets of cyberbullying while 50% reported witnessing cyberbullying (Milosevic, Laffan, and O’Higgins Norman, 2020).

Moderation of cyberbullying content and behaviours on social media and online gaming platforms is improving and increasingly relies on proactive artificial intelligence (AI), with the aim of identifying bullying, before it is reported by a user.

Published information on bullying content that is detected proactively by AI would be more meaningful if we had more information, such as the overall incidence of bullying involving minors on a given platform and what supports were provided (Milosevic & Vladisaljevic, 2020; Culloty, Suiter, Milosevic, & O’Higgins Norman 2021; Milosevic et al., under review).

To that end, it will be increasingly important to ensure inter-Departmental collaboration between the Department of Education, which is responsible for the Action Plan and Procedures; the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and the Media, which is responsible for the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill (OSMR), as well as the Department of Justice, which is responsible for the implementation of Coco’s Law.

Furthermore, in addition to their role in preventing bullying behaviour within schools, school staff need to understand that they also have a role under the Action Plan and Procedures in relation to bullying that occurs elsewhere, including online (Circular 0045/2013).

Consequently, mechanisms to support closer collaboration between school communities, social media/gaming platforms, and statutory agencies will be required. This has already started informally, for example, between DCU, Facebook and the Department of Education in relation to the roll-out of our FUSE Anti-Bullying and Online Safety Programme. The results of our current fieldwork suggest this could also include greater collaboration between schools and online platforms in reporting abusive content.

## **FUSE Anti-Bullying and Online Safety Programme**

Over the past 3 years we have translated our research on school bullying and online safety into a programme of resources for schools. This programme is called FUSE and is made possible with financial support from Facebook, Rethink Ireland and the Department of Education.

The programme is designed to support the wider SPHE/RSE/Wellbeing curricula in schools and involves teacher training, parental support, student agency, and a suite of resources aimed at tackling bullying and online safety issues among children and adolescents.

At the heart of the FUSE programme is the aim of building capacity in schools themselves to tackle bullying and online safety and to empower children and adolescents to understand their own behaviour, be able to recognise bullying and online safety risks and to be confident in how to report and seek support when they need it.

Thus far over 12,000 students have been registered on the programme across 127 schools in every county in Ireland and evaluations show that the majority of those who complete the programme have increased their self-efficacy in noticing, responding and reporting bullying and online safety issues.

### **What to do Next**

Based on national and international research on bullying prevention and online safety, we recommend:

- An audit of the Action Plan on Bullying and the Procedures to ensure that they continue to be informed by the latest research and comply with UNESCO's Whole-Education Approach.
- Further field work to understand why some schools are encountering challenges in implementing the Action Plan, Procedures, and Circular 45/2013.
- Increase transparency from schools, social media, gaming and other online platforms on how they are handling reports of bullying and cyberbullying.
- Awareness raising of the vulnerability of students based on identity, for example practising Catholics, LGBTQ+, Ethnicity, etc.
- Greater involvement from the Department of Education's Inspectorate and PDST in supporting schools to implement and review bullying prevention and intervention.
- That schools have appropriate access to counselling for those negatively affected by bullying.
- Schools to be required to provide specific hours each year to implement an approved programme of resources such as the FUSE programme to teach about bullying prevention within a Whole-Education Approach and alongside SPHE/RSE/Wellbeing.

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