



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

School Bullying with specific reference to cyberbullying and internet security during Covid-19

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Introduction

The National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre (ABC) is a university designated research centre in Dublin City University (DCU). ABC is hosted by the Institute of Education (IoE) in DCU, which is a centre of excellence in teacher education. Sixty percent (60%) of teachers in Ireland are trained at the IoE in DCU.

ABC is the UNESCO Chair on Tackling Bullying in Schools and Cyberspace and leads the field of research and resource development in bullying in Ireland. ABC is an internationally recognised centre of excellence in bullying research and education. The Centre leads several national and international research projects funded by the European Commission, the Irish Research Council, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, the Department of Education and Skills, Facebook, Rethink Ireland, the Health Service Executive (HSE), and UNESCO.

Presently, ABC is running several projects aimed at tackling bullying and promoting online safety (FUSE), preventing discrimination and bullying towards immigrant children (TRIBES - funded by the European Commission) and Roma children (BReAThE project – funded by the European Commission), and at changing values, attitudes and behaviour across the school system in order to tackle gender stereotyping, gender-based bullying and gender-based violence (Gender Equality Matters - GEM; funded by the European Commission).

1. Bullying and Cyberbullying: An Overview

Cyberbullying definitions tend to be derived from definitions of face-to-face and school bullying. School bullying is defined as a form of aggressive behaviour which aims to harm a chosen target (Smith, 2016). Although various definitions of bullying can be found in the literature, scholars tend to agree on 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. Bullying has a negative impact on the target, in terms of their psychological and physical wellbeing (Smith, 2016).

Bullying happens in various contexts, especially when adult supervision is low (e.g., schoolyard; school bus) (Walters, Kremser, & Runell, 2020). Bullying can also happen in the online context, termed as cyberbullying, digital bullying or online bullying. Cyberbullying consists of negative behaviour occurring through electronic means of communication that is either repetitive and long-lasting or occurs one-time, but it is intrusive and leaves the target unable to stand-up for themselves (Slonje & Smith, 2008). A widely acknowledged definition describes it as “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices” (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009, p. 5). Overall, cyberbullying has similar elements to offline bullying, but it can involve a larger audience, distance between the perpetrator and the target and anonymity (Slonje & Smith, 2008). 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 (Slonje & Smith, 2008).

Offline and online bullying are highly correlated; i.e., cyberbullying is an extension of traditional bullying as targets often face the same perpetrators offline and online (Görzig & Machackova, 2015) (Wegge, Vandebosch, & Eggermont, 2014). Thus, rather than focusing only on the time that adolescents spend online, we need to investigate the quality of the relationships with their peers both online and offline (Ellis et al., 2020).

A meta-analysis of 39 published cyberbullying studies in Ireland found a cybervictimisation rate of 13.7% for primary and 9.6% for post-primary students (Foody, Samara, & O’Higgins Norman, 2017). More recent research conducted with a sample of Irish adolescents (aged 12-16) showed that 12.4% of post-primary students were bullied online; 2.9% of students were both targets and perpetrators of cyberbullying and only 1.5% of adolescents admitted that they bullied others online (Foody, McGuire, Kuldass & O’Higgins, 2019).

The negative effects of cyberbullying and other forms of online harassment can be devastating for children and young people. Some scholars have suggested that cyberbullying can be more harmful than traditional forms of bullying because the reach of humiliation is expanded to a large audience online, and because words and images can remain online indefinitely (Nixon, 2014).

2. Cyberbullying during the COVID-19 Crisis

Concerns about children being bullied online have increased considerably in the past months, due to the measures adopted in response to the pandemic. Schools needed to provide online education and children have been required to increase their use of applications and digital platforms. Meanwhile, as they were unable to meet friends in-person, children have connected via text messages and social media more often than before the pandemic (Ellis, Jones, & Mallett, 2014). Research has shown that maintaining online social connections has been important for mental health outcomes during the COVID-19 restrictions (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2020), (Pancani, Marinucci, Aureli, & Riva, 2020). However, when children are using educational platforms and social media that demand interactions through posts and comments and they are more connected with peers online, the opportunity for cyberbullying and other forms of online abuse might increase.

Not every risk will result in harm and also some risks will lead to development of resilience and digital skills (Livingstone, Mascheroni, & Staksrud, 2018; Staksrud, Olafsson & Livingstone, 2013).

In May 2020, The National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre (ABC) conducted a study in partnership with the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission (JRC)¹, on the experiences of Irish children and families during the Covid-19 lockdown (Milosevic, Laffan & O'Higgins Norman, 2020). The goal of this research was to understand how children and parents engaged with digital technology while staying at home and how these experiences may have impacted children's online safety and overall family wellbeing.

Findings show that 28% of children in the sample reported to have been the target of cyberbullying during the lockdown, while 50% reported to have seen others being cyberbullied (bystander role). The younger in age they were, the more likely they were to have been the target of cyberbullying. Overall, 49% of males experienced significantly more frequent cyberbullying since lockdown. Sixty-six percent (66%) of all children between the ages of 14-16 years experienced significantly more cyberbullying (as compared to pre-lockdown) in instant/private messaging services such as WhatsApp, Viber or Telegram.

It is of importance to underline that online interactions are likely to mimic in person dynamics (Wegge et al., 2020); hence some adolescents might have already had problematic peer interactions before the pandemic, which led to an increase of cyberbullying episodes during the pandemic.

It is also important to emphasise that the lockdown and the shift in classroom activities online could provide an opportunity for the development of digital skills. For example, the ABC report findings show that 73% of children knew the information they should share or not share online. Sixty-three percent (63%) of children participating in the study knew how to change their privacy settings (on a social networking site or device). However, there is still a portion of children who are not able to discern the information they should share or not share online and many children are not aware of how to protect their online privacy either. Taken together, these findings highlight the need for educational programmes aimed to increase children's digital skills.

¹ <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/science-update/kidicoti-kids-digital-lives-covid-19-times>

3. School response

Although cyberbullying incidents often happen outside of school grounds, pupils/students can also engage in cyberbullying at school and the fall out and consequences in terms of changes to peer relationships, bullying and mental health implications can filter into the school environment (Dobson & Ringrose, 2016).

Overall, research suggests that tackling bullying and cyberbullying should be a combined effort of students, parents and educators; i.e., whole-school approach. The intervention should be targeted at the whole school, including also those students who are not directly involved in bullying, as well as school staff.

4. Recommendations

Research suggests that adults working in schools need more concrete tools for bullying prevention work with children and adolescents, as much as they need clear guidelines to intervene when bullying is detected. We suggest that a national anti-bullying program based on a whole school approach, including an online safety component should become a specific part of the national curriculum for primary and post-primary schools.

Based on these considerations, we suggest that the following points will be taken into consideration in the agenda of the Committee

- Research shows that it is challenging for principals to implement the most practical aspects of the anti-bullying procedures. These challenges could be overcome by offering more support and training to both principals and school staff. It would be beneficial to schools to have a specific anti-bullying audit tool in place to assist them with the oversight management of their anti-bullying policy on an annual basis.
- Research centres, children's welfare organisations and governments need to collaborate and work together to minimise the impact of cyberbullying among children. We suggest that a National Campaign aimed to raise awareness among students, teachers and parents about bullying, cyberbullying and online safety should be put into place regularly.
- We suggest that additional funding should be provided for the establishment of a permanent observatory based at the National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre to continually measure bullying and cyberbullying in Irish schools. The main goal of the observatory will be to constantly monitor the rates of bullying, cyberbullying and online risks.
- We propose revising the current DES (2013) 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. Also, it is essential to ensure continuous evaluation of effectiveness of the online safety and anti-bullying and cyberbullying prevention and intervention programmes delivered in schools. Online safety messages need to be designed in such a way that they resonate with children and young people; integrating online safety

programmes into already established evidence-based programmes targeting offline harms is strongly recommended (Jones, Mitchell, & Walsh, 2014; Finkelhor et al., 2020). Furthermore, considering cyberbullying specifically not merely as an online safety issue but as a relational issue could help inform more effective interventions.

- We suggest enhancing engagement with social media and other online platforms and other stakeholders such as online safety charities (NGOs) in order to optimise the reporting process and provide schools with effective ways to report cyberbullying and work on take-down measures. As online platforms are increasingly leveraging artificial intelligence based solutions to tackle cyberbullying, it will become increasingly important to ensure transparency in this process; and to leverage children's feedback into the design of technological solutions, as well as to ensure child, parental and teacher education about these solutions (Milosevic, 2018; Milosevic & Vladislavjevic, 2020).
- Existing social-structural inequalities are being exacerbated due to the COVID-19 pandemic (DeMulder, Kraus-Perrotta, & Zaidi 2020). Children belonging to minority groups (sexual minority youths; migrant children; children with additional needs) might not have access to social support services such as supportive peer groups and school health centres. These children might be in great need of counselling and psychological support.
- Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for teachers, Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) and ancillary staff should include a strong focus on tackling bullying and cyberbullying in line with The Teaching Council guidelines (e.g. Cosán Framework). At Initial Teacher Education (ITE), increased time on the BEd programme to SPHE would be beneficiary whilst a specific post-primary qualification for teaching SPHE and Wellbeing is required to ensure high quality delivery of this course content. The latter has been echoed in the recent NCCA Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) research paper (Keating, Collins & Morgan, 2018) and the NCCA Report on the Review of RSE in Primary and Post-primary Schools (NCCA, 2020).
- Any policy recommendations should be designed with existing legislation in mind such as the recently proposed Online Safety Media Regulation Bill (OSMR)² in order to ensure synchronous and effective collaboration among different government bodies and institutions.
- Ensure that any future anti-bullying changes reflect current developments, internationally and nationally, at both policy and curriculum content level e.g. revised Child Protection Procedures for Schools (2017); Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2019); NCCA Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (2020); NCCA Senior Cycle Review; NCCA RSE Review. It is key that connections are made to enable the holistic development of a child/adolescent. Furthermore, these connections enable a spiral approach and continuity between primary and post-primary education. Anti-bullying prevention and intervention should be embedded into existing school policy and school curricula to avoid overload.

² <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d8e4c-online-safety-and-media-regulation-bill/>

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

School Bullying with specific reference to cyberbullying and internet security during Covid-19

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Introduction

Dublin City University is Ireland's most innovative and fastest growing university - its student population grew by more than 50% in the past five years. At present, DCU comprises over 18,000 students including over 2600 postgraduate students, of whom ca. 800 are research students. Excellence in DCU education and research activities has led to its ranking in the top of 1.5% of universities in the world.

The National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre (ABC) is a university designated research centre in Dublin City University (DCU). ABC is hosted by the Institute of Education (IoE) in DCU, which is a centre of excellence in teacher education. Sixty percent (60%) of teachers in Ireland are trained at the IoE in DCU.

ABC leads the field of research and resource development in bullying in Ireland and is an internationally recognised centre of excellence in bullying research and education. ABC leads several national and international research projects funded by the European Commission, the Irish Research Council, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, the Department of Education and Skills, Facebook, Rethink Ireland, the Health Service Executive (HSE), and UNESCO.

Presently, ABC is running several projects aimed at tackling bullying and promoting online safety (FUSE), preventing discrimination and bullying towards immigrant children (TRIBES - funded by the European Commission) and Roma children (BReAThE project – funded by the European Commission), and at changing values, attitudes and behaviour across the school system in order to tackle gender stereotyping, gender-based bullying and gender-based violence (Gender Equality Matters - GEM). More information on ABC's current projects can be found here:

<https://antibullyingcentre.ie/research/current-projects/>

1. Bullying and Cyberbullying: An Overview

In recent years, there has been an increasing concern among adults about bullying and cyberbullying among children and adolescents and a greater awareness of the negative effects of these phenomena on children, schools and families. This led the Department of Education and Skills to publish the National Action Plan on Bullying and the related Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools, which were published in 2013 (Department of Education and Skills, 2013a).

These documents were followed-up with the Circular 0045/2013, informing schools that they were required to implement the anti-bullying procedures (Department of Education and Skills, 2013). These documents required that all schools in Ireland comply with the new procedures by the end of the second term of the 2013/14 school year. More recently, the Department of Education and Skills set out further guidelines (i.e., Child protection procedures for primary and post-primary schools, 2017), in terms of handling the bullying cases (Department of Education and Skills, 2017).

Cyberbullying definitions tend to be derived from definitions of face-to-face and school bullying. School bullying is defined as a form of aggressive behaviour which aims to harm a chosen target (Smith, 2016). Although various definitions of bullying can be found in the literature, scholars tend to agree on 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. Bullying has a negative impact on the target, in terms of their psychological and physical wellbeing (Smith, 2016). Offline bullying can take physical, verbal and relational forms (e.g., social exclusion, gossiping).

Bullying happens in various contexts, especially when adult supervision is low (e.g., schoolyard; school bus) (Walters, Kremser, & Runell, 2020). Bullying can also happen in the online context, termed as cyberbullying, digital bullying or online bullying. Cyberbullying consists of negative behaviour occurring through electronic means of communication that is either repetitive and long-lasting or occurs one-time, but it is intrusive and leaves the target unable to stand-up for themselves (Slonje & Smith, 2008). A widely acknowledged definition describes it as “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices” (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009, p. 5). Overall, cyberbullying has similar elements to offline bullying, but it can involve a larger audience, distance between the perpetrator and the target and anonymity (Slonje & Smith, 2008). 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 (Slonje & Smith, 2008). As children grow into late adolescence, they are less likely to be bullied offline; in contrast, older students (late adolescents) appear to be more at risk of cyberbullying than younger students (early adolescents) (UNESCO, 2019).

Offline and online bullying are highly correlated; i.e., cyberbullying is an extension of traditional bullying as targets often face the same perpetrators offline and online (Görzig & Macháčková, 2015) (Wegge, Vandebosch, & Eggermont, 2014). Thus, rather than focusing

only on the time that adolescents spend online, we need to investigate the quality of the relationships with their peers both online and offline (Ellis et al., 2020).

Cyberbullying prevalence rates vary significantly from study to study (this reflects the differences in how cyberbullying is assessed, and disagreements around the definitions of cyberbullying). Prevalence rates can vary (in different countries and for different age groups) from 6.5% to 72% (Görzig, Milosevic & Staksrud, 2017 cf. Kowalski et al., 2014, Tokunaga, 2010).

A meta-analysis of 39 published cyberbullying studies in Ireland found a cybervictimisation rate of 13.7% for primary and 9.6% for post-primary students (Foody, Samara, & O’Higgins Norman, 2017). More recent research conducted with a sample of Irish adolescents (aged 12-16) showed that 12.4% of post-primary students were bullied online; 2.9% of students were both targets and perpetrators of cyberbullying and only 1.5% of adolescents admitted that they bullied others online (Foody, McGuire, Kuldass & O’Higgins, 2019).

1. Cyberbullying, School Achievement and Mental Health

1.1 Target

The negative effects of cyberbullying and other forms of online harassment can be devastating for children and young people. International research shows that some children and young people report feelings of depression, anger, and frustration. These often result in lower self-esteem and anxiety (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007, 2008, 2009; Hackett, 2013).

Some scholars have suggested that cyberbullying can be more harmful than traditional forms of bullying because the reach of humiliation is expanded to a large audience online, and because words and images can remain online indefinitely (Nixon, 2014). Cybervictimisation is a stressful event which could negatively affect students’ academic achievement (Kowalski & Limber, 2013). Adolescent girls (aged 12-16) who report a poor friendship quality and are the target of cyberbullying show high levels of emotional problems and depression (Foody, et al., 2019). Various studies have suggested that cybervictimisation exacerbates other emotional problems such as hopelessness, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression and stress, thereby increasing suicidal thinking or behaviour (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

Young people belonging to minority groups (e.g., Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning; ethnic minority students) are more likely to be the target of cybervictimisation as opposed to their majority peers, and as a result, they are at risk of experiencing mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation (Sciacca, Mazzone & O’Higgins Norman, submitted).

1.2 Perpetrators

Cyberbullying perpetration has been found associated with several negative outcomes, including theft, binge drinking and school suspension (Hemphill, Kotevski, & Heerde, 2015). Hyperactivity and discipline problems have also been found related to cyberbullying

perpetration (Fletcher et al., 2014). Cyberbullying perpetration has also proved to have a negative impact on the perpetrator's academic performance (Kowalski & Limber, 2013). It is important not to rush to criminalise children who engage in bullying and cyberbullying behaviour. On the contrary, the negative outcomes of cyberbullying indicate that perpetrators of cyberbullying are in great need of educational programs aimed to decrease aggressive behaviour and of psychological support.

1.3 Passive Bystanders

Cyberbullying is reinforced by the behaviours of students who join the perpetrator or remain passive. Recently, more attention has been paid to the so-called cyber-bystanders, whose intervention (offering emotional support and/or stepping in to defend the target) can have a positive effect, but who often remain passive or even join the perpetrator (Macháčková, Dedkova, Sevcikova & Cerna, 2013). Intervention programs target bystanders in an effort to increase their sense of self-efficacy and empathy toward their victimised peers and in doing so, increase the chances that they will stop the bullying episodes that they witness online (DeSmet et al., 2018).

In terms of the mental health outcomes of witnessing cyberbullying, longitudinal evidence shows that witnessing cyberbullying behaviour predicts an increased risk for symptoms of depression and anxiety over time (Wright, Wachs, & Harper, 2018). These findings have been recently confirmed by further research showing that students who witness cyberbullying (passive cyber-bystanders) show higher levels of depression, anxiety and psychosomatic symptoms when compared to non-bystanders (Doumas & Midgett, 2020).

Taken together, these findings indicate a need for parents and school staff to be aware of the possible impact that taking part in cyberbullying with different behaviours has upon student mental health and academic achievement.

2. Cyberbullying during the COVID-19 Crisis

Concerns about children being bullied online have increased considerably in the past months, due to the measures adopted in response to the pandemic. Schools needed to provide online education and children have been required to increase their use of applications and digital platforms. Meanwhile, as they were unable to meet friends in-person, children have connected via text messages and social media more often than before the pandemic (Ellis, Jones, & Mallett, 2014). Research has shown that maintaining online social connections has been important for mental health outcomes during the COVID-19 restrictions (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2020), (Pancani, Marinucci, Aureli, & Riva, 2020). However, when children are using educational platforms and social media that demand interactions through posts and comments and they are more connected with peers online, the opportunity for cyberbullying and other forms of online abuse might increase.

International study findings show that since the start of the pandemic there has been an increase in abusive and hateful comments on social media when compared to the previous year (Babvey et al., 2020). Importantly, during the COVID-19 crisis, it might be more difficult to identify children at risk, as many adults who would typically identify signs of abuse and maltreatment

(e.g. teachers, childcare workers, coaches, extended family, community members, child and family welfare workers) are no longer in regular contact with children (Babvey et al., 2020).

Warnings about the possibility of an increase of cyberbullying incidence during lockdown in relation to more time spent online, came from other parts of the world as well. The Australian Office of the E-safety Commissioner reported in April a 21% increase in youth-based cyberbullying, warning that more time online could translate into greater incidence of victimisation.¹ A national study from the United States conducted in July 2020 found that 21% of 9-12 year-olds had experienced cyberbullying either by witnessing (15%), as a victim (15%) or as a perpetrator (3%).² We need to emphasise that while spending more time online and on social media might be related to a greater incidence of risky experiences, including cyberbullying, more time online does not inherently have to be negative. Not every risk will result in harm and also some risks will lead to development of resilience and digital skills (Livingstone, Mascheroni, & Staksrud, 2018; Staksrud, Olafsson & Livingstone, 2013)

In May 2020, The National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre (ABC) conducted a study in partnership with the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission (JRC)³, on the experiences of Irish children and families during the Covid-19 lockdown (Milosevic, Laffan & O'Higgins Norman, 2020). The goal of this research was to understand how children and parents engaged with digital technology while staying at home and how these experiences may have impacted children's online safety and overall family wellbeing. Data were collected with an Irish sample of 504 parents and 504 children aged 10 to 18.

Findings show that 28% of children in the sample reported to have been the target of cyberbullying during the lockdown, while 50% reported to have seen others being cyberbullied (bystander role). The younger in age they were, the more likely they were to have been the target of cyberbullying. Overall, 49% of males experienced significantly more frequent cyberbullying since lockdown. Sixty-six percent (66%) of all children between the ages of 14-16 years experienced significantly more cyberbullying (as compared to pre-lockdown) in instant/private messaging services such as WhatsApp, Viber or Telegram.

It is of importance to underline that online interactions are likely to mimic in person dynamics (Wegge et al., 2020); hence some adolescents might have already had problematic peer interactions before the pandemic, which led to an increase of cyberbullying episodes during the pandemic.

Less than a half (41%) of children who were cyberbullied talked to a parent or caregiver. Under a fifth of the victims (19%) said they told a friend; and less than a tenth told a school counsellor (9%) or a teacher or principal (5%). Eight percent (8%) of children said they did nothing about it or ignored the problem. In fact, these findings are coherent with research studies carried out before the COVID-19 crisis, showing that up to half of cyberbullied students do not report their experiences of cyber-victimisation to anyone (Ging & O'Higgins Norman, 2016), and only a small minority talk with friends and parents. Reasons for students not telling adults about the bullying experiences they endure offline and online might be related to the fear of making

¹ <https://7news.com.au/lifestyle/health-wellbeing/coronavirus-the-surprising-rise-in-cyberbullying-during-social-isolation-c-999773> and <https://www.esafety.gov.au/about-us/blog/covid-19-online-risks-reporting-and-response>

² <https://www.newswise.com/articles/cartoon-network-and-cyberbullying-research-center-release-first-ever-national-research-findings-on-cyberbullying-among-tweens>

³ <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/science-update/kidicoti-kids-digital-lives-covid-19-times>

things worse, and anticipation of ineffective reactions or overreactions from adults (Blomqvist et al., 2020). However, the COVID-19 restrictions might have even exacerbated children's reluctance to report cyberbullying episodes, to professionals, such as teachers, who typically would have been in regular contact with children (Babvey et al., 2020).

It is also important to emphasise that the lockdown and the shift in classroom activities online could provide an opportunity for the development of digital skills. For example, the ABC report findings show that 73% of children knew the information they should share or not share online. Sixty-three percent (63%) of children participating in the study knew how to change their privacy settings (on a social networking site or device). Thus, most children know what type of information is appropriate to share online, and they also know how to protect their privacy. However, there is still a portion of children who are not able to discern the information they should share or not share online and many children are not aware of how to protect their online privacy either. Taken together, these findings highlight the need for educational programmes aimed to increase children's digital skills. It is also important to bear in mind that these figures are based on children's self-reports, and we have not assessed their skills directly e.g. by testing them. This is why these numbers could constitute an overestimation.

Irish children reported significantly higher levels of worry about keeping up with school while their classes moved online during the lockdown, as compared to their peers in the other European countries where the survey was conducted (Vuorikari, Velicu, Chaudron, Cachia & Di Gioia, 2020). A significant portion of Irish parents reported an increased level of worry too over their children's Internet and digital media use during lockdown. Forty-two percent (42%) of parents were a lot more worried about cyberbullying since the lockdown than before. Fifty-four percent (54%) of parents were increasingly worried about the online safety of their child during the lockdown. Forty-one percent (41%) of the parents agreed or strongly agreed that digital technology use increased stress and anxiety levels in their family.

Despite these worries, many parents acknowledged the positive aspects of technology use: Eighty-six percent (86%) agreed or strongly agreed that digital technology use helped maintain contacts with family, friends and people they care about. Sixty percent (60%) of parents thought that their children gained more competence and autonomy for online school activities (Vuorikari, et al., 2020). Parents also believed that their children became more competent with helping others with digital technology in relation to school activities. Forty-one percent (41%) of parents agreed that their children became more engaged with the school activities and 47% thought that their children become better at organising the school activities.

3. The Role of Individual and Contextual Factors

The explanations of the causes of cyberbullying have predominantly emphasised either individual dysfunctions related to callous unemotional traits, cold cognition and a lack of empathy (Zych, Baldry, Farrington, & Llorent, 2019) or have pointed to poor parenting skills (Katz, Lemish, Cohen, & Arden, 2019). Without rejecting the importance of individual factors in contributing to cyberbullying perpetration, overall, in order to understand cyberbullying, it is paramount *not* to neglect the role of contextual factors (Hinduja & Patchin, 2012).

The extant literature has highlighted the role of socio-contextual variables, such as the school culture (i.e., norms, values, trust and shared rules within the school), as a factor that might

contribute to cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2012). Students who experience cyberbullying (both those who are targeted as well as perpetrators) perceive a poorer climate (e.g., quality of the relationships between students and between students and teachers) at their school as compared to those who are not involved in cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2012).

Social media might be used to convey derogatory comments pointing to weight stigmatisation, misogynist, homophobic, transphobic comments and racial discrimination (Chou, Prestin, & Kunath, 2014). These negative comments might contribute to setting the accepted standards of normativity; young people who do not conform to the accepted standards of normativity might, in turn, be the target of online abusive comments. In other words, some personal or physical attributes might be socially constructed as “deviant” or “marginal” within a specific online/offline context, as opposed to the norms prescribed by the dominant social discourse. This might explain why minority youth are more at risk of being the target of bullying both offline and online (Sciacca, et al., submitted).

One example is the representation of beauty on social media, which has been suggested to have a role in the phenomena of online and offline bullying. A report published by the National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre showed that children perceive body shape and size to be related to bullying victimisation (i.e., overweight children are likely to be the target of bullying), (Ging, Savage & O’Higgins Norman, 2017).

Worryingly, cyberbullying might not be considered harmful and might even be normalised, meaning that students could consider it as part of the normal online interactions (Wright & Li, 2013). This, in turn, highlights the need to increase student awareness around cyberbullying and its negative outcomes.

4. School response

Although cyberbullying incidents often happen outside of school grounds, students can also engage in cyberbullying at school and the fall out and consequences in terms of changes to peer relationships, bullying and mental health implications can filter into the school environment (Dobson & Ringrose, 2016). Yet teachers do not always feel responsible for helping students deal with cyberbullying. For instance, there is much evidence showing that some school staff are divided on the issue of where their responsibility lies when dealing with student relationship problems that do not occur at school (Green et al., 2017). In some cases, teachers feel they have a pastoral role in this regard (Mura, Bernardi & Diamantini, 2014), while in other cases they feel that punishing the students involved would mean “overstepping the school authority” (Young, Tully & Ramirez, 2017). Furthermore, when measures are taken to intervene, they run the risk of being ineffective and harmful.

Nevertheless, under the National Action Plan on Bullying (Department of Education and Skills, 2013), teachers are obliged to respond to cases of bullying which happen outside of school, either in person or online. To this end, it is necessary to provide appropriate opportunities for students to raise their concerns in an environment that is comfortable for the students themselves (Department of Education and Skills, 2013).

The general procedure for dealing with bullying within a school system is for the teacher to be the first point of contact when making a complaint (Foody, Murphy, Downes, & O’Higgins

Norman, 2018). Unfortunately, teachers often respond ineffectively to such incidents and express a need for additional training (Mazzone, Kollerová & O'Higgins Norman, in press). Indeed, due to their own everyday obligations, teachers might find it challenging to detect and respond to bullying and cyberbullying episodes (Mazzone et al., in press). Also, cyberbullying episodes might be difficult for teachers to detect. Importantly, a factor that greatly promotes teachers' capacity to help children who are the target of bullying and cyberbullying is access to a system of support at school and the wider community (e.g., counsellors and school psychologists).

In terms of the principals' response to bullying and cyberbullying, research shows that principals tend to underestimate the prevalence of bullying and cyberbullying in their schools (Fröjd, Saaristo, & Ståhl, 2014). A research study carried out by ABC at the end of 2016 showed that less than half of school principals had a designated person to deal with the bullying cases (including cyberbullying) in their schools (Foody et al., 2018) and only half of the principals appointed a specific member of the staff to investigate and tackle bullying in their schools. Although the situation might have improved since the aforementioned study was conducted, these findings are of concern, as the Action Plan on Bullying (Department of Education and Skills, 2013) specifically states that the school's anti-bullying policy must indicate the staff members who are responsible for dealing with bullying in the schools.

However, despite the importance of anti-bullying policies, these may not be sufficient to influence the degree of teachers' involvement in bullying prevention and intervention (Langos, et al., 2018). Indeed, previous research findings have shown that having an anti-bullying policy or an anti-bullying program implemented at school did not make any difference in teachers' tendencies to either ignore or respond to bullying (Langos et al., 2018). In other words, relying exclusively on policies and legal responses does not seem to contribute to produce the desired change (Langos et al., 2018). Indeed, teachers may not be sufficiently equipped to implement interventions and may not be sufficiently integrated in school-level changes. Furthermore, some anti-bullying programs may not include a teacher component or may not require teachers' participation.

In contrast, whole school approaches have shown to be effective in increasing teachers' ability to deal with bullying situations (Ahtola, Haataja, Kärnä, Poskiparta, & Salmivalli, 2012). Importantly, anti-bullying programs should also increase teachers' empathy for the victimised students as well as their sense of self-efficacy and responsibility to intervene in bullying situations (Mazzone et al., in press).

5. Prevention and Intervention Programs Aimed to Tackle Cyberbullying: What works?

5.1 The Whole School Approach

Previous intervention programs were effective in tackling cyberbullying by educating children about the online risks and by changing the peer group norms that sustain risky online behaviours (e.g., sharing personal information online), (Del Rey, Casas, & Ortega, 2016). Based on the successful outcomes of these programs, it is paramount to educate children about how to use the Internet in a positive and safe manner. By shifting the focus from the online

risks to the benefits and positives of the online communication, children might be involved in less problematic online behaviours.

Overall, research suggests that tackling bullying and cyberbullying should be a combined effort of students, parents and educators; i.e., whole-school approach. The whole-school approach to bullying prevention is predicated on the assumption that bullying is a systemic problem and that intervention should be targeted at the whole school, including also those students who are not directly involved in bullying, as well as teachers, Special Need Assistants (SNAs), and other school staff.

Previous international programs designed to tackle cyberbullying have successfully adopted the whole-school model, which improves school climate and encourage mutual support within the school context (Del Rey, et al., 2016). These programs involve a strong focus on awareness-raising and training on how to contribute to the creation of a safe online environment.

Anti-cyberbullying programs adopting a whole-school approach, involved both parents and teachers and have placed a strong focus on social emotional learning (e.g., empathy skills training). Interestingly, even whole-school programs which are not specifically designed to tackle cyberbullying, can be effective in reducing this negative behaviour, by increasing students' social competence (Gradinger, Yanagida, Strohmeier, & Spiel, 2016).

A whole school approach to bullying, including cyberbullying should incorporate the following essential elements (O'Higgins Norman & Sullivan, 2018):

- 1) **Leadership and Managing Change:** The principal and all those people identified as leaders in the school (e.g., deputy principals; chaplains; guidance counsellors; subject leaders; parent councils) should take practical steps to prevent and tackle the problem of bullying. Principals and school leaders also serve as role models in terms of the behaviour that they want students to show. These should include respect, inclusiveness and celebration of diversity.
- 2) **Policy Development:** A specific mandate to tackle bullying was provided by the Department of Education in 2013, when the Department of Education and Skills (DES) published the Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-primary schools. As outlined above, these were followed by some more recent guidelines on how to handle the bullying cases in 2017 (Department of Education and Skills, 2017). It is essential for schools to have up-to-date anti-bullying policies. In line with the DES guidelines (2013), and in an effort to integrate school teachers in the school-level changes, the anti-bullying policies need to be developed and reviewed in consultation with teachers.
- 3) **Curriculum Planning for Teaching and Learning:** The school curriculum should include a module aimed at raising awareness about bullying, cyberbullying and online safety. Inclusion and diversity should also be contemplated in the module. In order for teachers to deliver such contents, it is essential for them to be trained on the aforementioned topics.
- 4) **School Ethos:** One of the key elements of the whole school approach is the creation of a positive school ethos (or school climate); i.e., the atmosphere that emerges from the interaction of several aspects within the school, such as teaching and learning; management and leadership; the use of symbols, rituals and practices as well as goals and expectations. A positive school climate should convey the message that bullying is

not tolerated, whereas respect and inclusiveness are encouraged and promoted within the school.

- 5) **Student Voice and Bystanders:** Students should be encouraged to consider bullying as wrong and unacceptable behaviour and to partner in developing initiatives to tackle bullying. Also, they should feel responsible for helping their peers who are being victimised either online or offline. A system of support at the school level is needed (e.g., school counsellors) for children to report bullying safely. This, in turn, would reduce passive bystander behaviour in incidents of online and offline bullying.
- 6) **Student Support Services:** Students who are victimised either online or offline might need psychological support and counselling. Such support systems should be made available at school for students to receive adequate emotional support.
- 7) **Partnership with Parents and Local Communities:** Collaboration between parents/guardians and schools is needed for anti-bullying efforts to be successful. Unfortunately, only a small portion of parents (18%) monitor their children's activity on social media (O'Higgins Norman & McGuire, 2016). In terms of the parents' role, research has shown that children of parents who adopt an inconsistent cyber-mediation style (i.e., setting rules but not enforcing them or not following through their application) greatly increase the likelihood of involvement in cyberbullying perpetration and cybervictimisation (Katz et al., 2019). These findings highlight the importance of educating parents about the risks associated with inconsistent parenting styles in terms of children being involved in negative online behaviours. Involving parents in intervention programs could be effective in terms of improving their self-efficacy and motivating them to talk about cyberbullying and other negative online behaviours with their children (Cross, Lester, Pearce, Barnes, & Beatty, 2018).

5.2 The FUSE Programme

In 2019, ABC launched a research-based schools programme to tackle bullying and online safety, called FUSE. This programme is grounded in Irish and International best practice research. FUSE takes a whole-school approach, which allows it to involve parents, teachers and school staff of learners in primary schools across Ireland. The FUSE programme is a response to a 2017 study by ABC (Murphy, Downes & O'Higgins Norman, 2017) among school principals which found that while the majority had been successful in implementing some aspects of national procedures for tackling bullying and cyberbullying/online safety, a significant number of schools were still struggling with aspects of the Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools 3-4 years after they were first published by Government. In particular, school principals reported a need for support in training teachers to tackle bullying and online safety and a lack of time and resources to undertake research and develop local programmes.

In its first year, FUSE trained 385 teachers from 43 post-primary schools around the country and 1,600 students took part in workshops, which were delivered by their teachers in school. The aim of FUSE is to enhance the capacity of students, parents, and school staff to work towards tackling bullying and increasing online safety among adolescents.

A survey carried out by ABC in the first year of FUSE found that over half (54%) of post-primary school teachers surveyed had not received training on tackling bullying and online safety for students but were eager to learn. It also highlights that the majority (60%) of school

staff members surveyed didn't know the number of reported bullying incidents during a school term and that, in an era where online safety is proving so important, most teachers and parents surveyed weren't aware of what online threats children have faced.

ABC research shows that FUSE has been successful in educating students in how to tackle bullying (offline and online) and how to safely report it. Having completed the programme, 86% of students surveyed reported feeling more confident in their ability to see the need to tell someone and speak out against bullying, with 89% now knowing who to ask for help. 86% also reported feeling more confident that they would notice if someone was trying to harass or bully them online. Funding from the Department of Education, Facebook and Rethink Ireland has allowed FUSE to be extended to primary schools in September 2020.

6. Recommendations

Research suggests that adults working in schools need more concrete tools for bullying prevention work with children and adolescents, as much as they need clear guidelines to intervene when bullying is detected. There is now a rich body of evidence on the mechanisms of bullying and cyberbullying, and this knowledge must be incorporated in anti-bullying measures for them to be effective (see Salmivalli & Poskiparta, 2012, p. 41). Cyberbullying needs to be looked at as a student health matter with a strong emphasis on research-based preventions and interventions that are data-driven (i.e. regular survey and evaluation) and context-sensitive to the local school and particular peer groups, individuals and situations (Thornberg, 2019). These anti-bullying/cyberbullying measures should not be implemented only during the COVID-19 crisis, but they should become part of an ongoing anti-bullying effort.

Following the example of Scandinavian countries, we suggest that a national anti-bullying program⁴ based on a whole school approach, including an online safety component should become a specific part of the national curriculum for primary and post-primary schools. Importantly, when research-based knowledge and evidence-based programmes are adopted by schools to their own local practice, it is important that this transfer is done in terms of sensitivity to contexts and situations, rather than being applied in an uncritical and mechanical way (Thornberg, 2019).

Based on these considerations, we suggest that the following points will be taken into consideration in the agenda of the Committee

- Although the National Action Plan has created some discussion around bullying and some positive changes, principals might not be able to meet all requirements of the anti-bullying procedures (Foody et al., 2017). Research shows that it is challenging for principals to implement the most practical aspects of the anti-bullying procedures. These challenges could be overcome by offering more support and training to both principals and school staff. It would be beneficial to schools to have a specific anti-bullying audit tool in place (approved by the Department of Education and Skills) for

⁴ In Ireland, the Stay Safe programme (Child Abuse Prevention Program - C.A.P.P.) is part of the national curriculum at the primary school level. The program aims to prevent child abuse, including bullying and cyberbullying. Unfortunately, similar programmes have not been implemented in post-primary schools.

both primary and secondary schools to assist them with the oversight management of their anti-bullying policy on an annual basis. This will positively enhance anti-bullying policies in becoming “active” policies for effective bullying prevention and intervention. Also, schools should put into place a compulsory recording template for bullying incidents in place, which should be actively used by all staff.

- Research centres, children's welfare organisations and governments need to work together to minimise the impact of cyberbullying among children. We suggest that a National Campaign aimed to raise awareness among students, teachers and parents about bullying, cyberbullying and online safety should be put into place regularly. Importantly, children and parents should be made aware of the anti-bullying policies implemented at their schools through awareness raising initiatives. These initiatives would make the whole-school approach more realistic and feasible.
- We suggest that additional funding should be provided for the establishment of a permanent observatory based at the National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre to continually measure bullying and cyberbullying in Irish schools. The main goal of the observatory will be to constantly monitor the rates of bullying, cyberbullying and online risks. All primary and post-primary schools across Ireland will be required to participate in a national survey every year. Based on the collected data, expert advice on how to tackle bullying and cyberbullying will be given to schools with the higher reported rates of these phenomena.
- Ensure continuous evaluation of effectiveness of the online safety and anti-bullying and cyberbullying prevention and intervention programmes delivered in schools. Online safety messages need to be designed in such a way that they resonate with children and young people; integrating online safety programmes into already established evidence-based programmes targeting offline harms is strongly recommended (Jones, Mitchell, & Walsh, 2014; Finkelhor et al., 2020). Furthermore, considering cyberbullying specifically not merely as an online safety issue but as a relational issue could help inform more effective interventions. Research shows that conceptualisations of cyberbullying between parents and other adults on the one hand, and children and young people on the other, differs in this respect (Mishna, Birze, Greenblatt, & Khoury-Kassabri, 2020). Considering the problem primarily as an online safety problem, which tends to be the adult view of the matter, can restrict the range of potential solutions offered.
- Beyond promoting digital literacy and online safety, it is urgently needed to enhance socio-emotional learning (e.g., improve social competence, empathy and prosocial behaviour). In other words, we need to shift our attention from risk factors towards protective factors. Non-punitive, educational interventions aimed to change the peer norms (sustaining prosocial behaviour rather than online abusive behaviours) could contribute to tackle bullying and cyberbullying. Research suggests that early prevention programmes can help with tackling the problem of bullying (Saracho, 2017). Early intervention programmes focused on socio-emotional learning among young children (starting from the Junior and Senior Infant curriculum) are warranted. This, in turn, will help to prevent the issues of bullying and cyberbullying.

- Given the increased online presence of children during the COVID-19 crisis, online service providers should explore innovative ways through which social media and virtual platforms might be used to assist potential victims of online abuse (Babvey et al., 2020). The reporting and referral mechanisms as well as support services should guarantee confidentiality and privacy of the targeted children and should not expose them to further harm.
- We suggest to enhance engagement with social media and other online platforms and other stakeholders such as online safety charities (NGOs) in order to optimise the reporting process and provide schools with effective ways to report cyberbullying and work on take-down measures. As online platforms are increasingly leveraging artificial intelligence based solutions to tackle cyberbullying, it will become increasingly important to ensure transparency in this process; and to leverage children's feedback into the design of technological solutions; as well as to ensure child, parental and teacher education about these solutions (Milosevic, 2018; Milosevic & Vladisavljevic, 2020).
- Existing social-structural inequalities are being exacerbated due to the COVID-19 pandemic (DeMulder, Kraus-Perrotta, & Zaidi 2020). Children belonging to minority groups (sexual minority youths; migrant children; disabled children) might not have access to social support services such as supportive peer groups and school health centres. These children might be even more vulnerable to cyberbullying, which in turn might affect their mental health (Sciacca et al., submitted). These children as well as students whose mental health has been negatively impacted by cybervictimisation are in great need of counselling and psychological support. Counselling and therapy services should be accessible at school and online (Foody, Samara, & Carlbring, 2015)
- Professional development for teachers, special needs assistants (SNAs) and other school staff should include a strong focus on tackling bullying and cyberbullying. We suggest that anti-bullying training should be made mandatory for both pre-service and in-service teachers.
- Any policy recommendations should be designed with existing legislation in mind such as the recently proposed Online Safety Media Regulation Bill (OSMR)⁵ in order to ensure synchronous and effective collaboration among different government bodies and institutions.
- Overall, the abovementioned recommendations are in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (2015) according to which it is paramount to invest in children's wellbeing and to protect them from every form of abuse. An increased investment in developmental prevention policies would make an important contribution to reducing cyberbullying (and offline bullying) (Farrington, Gaffney, Lösel & Ttofi, 2017). This investment would also pay off in financial terms, as typically, the benefits of developmental prevention greatly outweigh the costs.

⁵ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d8e4c-online-safety-and-media-regulation-bill/>

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