



DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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RESEARCH BRIEFING

ISSN 1366-803X

RB 8/2002

October 2002

BULLYING IN SCHOOLS: A NORTHERN IRELAND STUDY

KEY POINTS

Primary

- ◆ 40% of primary pupils stated they had recently been bullied;
- ◆ 25% of primary pupils stated that they had bullied another pupil;
- ◆ Name calling was the most common form of bullying in both primary and post-primary schools; and
- ◆ 74% of primary school staff reported having an anti-bullying policy although 75% of staff requested further training.

Post-primary

- ◆ 30% of post-primary pupils stated they had recently been bullied;
- ◆ 28% of post-primary pupils stated that they had bullied another pupil; and
- ◆ 90% of post-primary school staff reported having an anti-bullying policy although 77% of staff requested further training.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Bullying is an aspect of school life that impacts on pupils' social, emotional, psychological and educational development. Recent years have seen the development of evidence-based strategies aimed at increasing awareness and understanding about issues relating to bullying and promoting an anti-bullying ethos within each school environment. The occurrence of bullying in schools has contributed to structured efforts by Government bodies, local educational authorities and schools to ensure that pupils' educational experiences are free from intimidation, fear and unhappiness.

THE STUDY

2.1 The overall aim of the research was to establish an evidence base about bullying in schools in Northern Ireland which can be used to inform policy about effective approaches to countering the problem.

2.2 The research set out to identify the nature and extent of bullying in primary and secondary schools from the pupils' perspective and to explore the attitudes and perceptions of schools' staff around a number of issues about bullying.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 120 schools were selected for the study using a stratified sampling approach, which took account of Free School Meal (FSM) band, rural/urban location and school management type. One class of pupils from Year 6 in 60 primary schools and one class of pupils from Year 9 in 60 post-primary schools participated. The research was carried out during May and June 2000.

3.2 A standardised instrument - the Olweus Bullying Questionnaire - was used to gather information from pupils. The questionnaire included questions about school, about being bullied, perceptions of support, attitudes to bullying and bullying others. Questionnaires were administered directly by researchers which resulted in a 100% return rate for pupils.

3.3 A questionnaire was devised and distributed to school staff (teaching and non-teaching) in all participating schools. The questions were designed to provide information on staff awareness about bullying, anti-bullying policies and procedures,

training needs and general attitudes to bullying in school. Distribution of the questionnaire was undertaken by a named contact in each school. While the return rate varied from school to school, the overall rate was 73% in primary schools and 92% in post-primary schools.

KEY FINDINGS

4.1 The key findings of the report are set out below.

4.2 Victims

Primary Pupils (Year 6)

- ◆ 40% reported being bullied in the last couple of months;
- ◆ Name calling was the most common form of bullying;
- ◆ Bullying happened most often in the playground;
- ◆ Girls were usually bullied by a female classmate;
- ◆ Boys were usually bullied by an older boy;
- ◆ Support for victims would be sought from parents or friends first; and
- ◆ Pupils with a larger circle of friends (four or more) were less likely to be bullied.

Post-primary Pupils (Year 9)

- ◆ 30% reported being bullied in the last couple of months;
- ◆ Name calling was the most common form of bullying;
- ◆ Bullying happened most often in the playground;
- ◆ Girls were usually bullied by a female classmate;

- ◆ Boys were usually bullied by boys;
- ◆ Boys were more likely to have been bullied than girls; and
- ◆ Girls held a more pro-victim and pro-teacher attitude than boys.

4.3 Pupils As Bullies

Primary Pupils (Year 6)

- ◆ 25% reported that they had bullied another pupil;
- ◆ Name calling was the most usual way;
- ◆ Boys were more likely to be involved than girls; and
- ◆ A teacher was more likely to have discussed a pupil's bullying behaviour with them than someone at home.

Post-primary Pupils (Year 9)

- ◆ 28% reported that they had bullied another pupil;
- ◆ Name calling was the most usual way;
- ◆ Boys were more likely to be involved than girls;
- ◆ Female bullies were more likely than their male counterparts to use methods of exclusion; and
- ◆ About half of the bullies had not discussed their bullying behaviour with a teacher; and most of the bullies had not discussed their bullying behaviour with anyone at home.

4.4 Staff attitudes and perceptions

Primary Pupils (Year 6)

- ◆ Being threatened was the form of behaviour most frequently perceived to constitute bullying;
- ◆ Physical bullying, name calling, spreading rumours and being excluded were perceived as being more hurtful to girls than boys;
- ◆ 74% of staff reported that their school had an anti-bullying policy (often embedded within other policies);
- ◆ Staff reported feeling more confident about dealing with bullying than preventing it; and
- ◆ 75% of staff requested further training, mostly for counselling skills.

Post-primary Pupils (Year 9)

- ◆ Being threatened was the form of behaviour most frequently perceived to constitute bullying;
- ◆ Blackmail, being threatened and being forced to hand over money were perceived as the forms of bullying most hurtful to boys;
- ◆ 90% of staff reported that their school had an anti-bullying policy (often embedded with other policies);
- ◆ Staff reported feeling more confident about dealing with bullying than preventing it; and
- ◆ 77% of staff requested further training, mostly for counselling and behaviour management skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Bullying Policy

5.1 Every school should have an explicit policy in relation to bullying. The policy should be available and comprehensible to parents and pupils.

5.2 Within school policies, social exclusion, rejection, or persistent, directed spreading of damaging rumours should be defined as bullying.

5.3 Consideration should be given to the establishment of peer support systems within schools, where appropriate.

Role of Senior Management

5.4 Managers should monitor representations from parents regarding bullying and there should be procedures for taking action in relation to this information; increased school/parent co-operation may be a positive and effective way of addressing bullying.

5.5 Managers and teachers should monitor the incidences of ethnic and religion-based bullying and this area should be explicitly included within school policies.

5.6 Managers and teachers should monitor the incidences of bullying by means of name calling with a sexual connotation or homophobic intent and this area should be included within school policies.

5.7 The playground was the most likely place in which bullying occurred in both primary and post-primary schools and should be monitored for signs of bullying activities.

5.8 School locations such as the school canteen, gyms, toilets and changing rooms should be considered as likely locations for bullying and should be monitored where possible.

5.9 There should be early identification of pupils in primary schools who are being persistently bullied so that such children will not be bullied for the duration of their time at primary school.

In Service Management

5.10 Playground supervisors, bus staff and other non-teaching staff should be made aware of indicators of bullying and should have clear reporting procedures.

5.11 Teachers should be alerted to the possibilities of indirect bullying in the classroom.

5.12 The problems of being bullied in the absence of teachers in the classroom or corridors in primary schools should be recognised.

5.13 Staff development activities should foster an anti-bullying ethos.

5.14 Teachers should be afforded staff development in counselling and classroom management strategies designed to counter bullying.

5.15 Staff development should be offered to non-teaching staff to ensure that they are aware of anti-bullying procedures and have the necessary behaviour management skills.

Organisation of Teaching and Learning

5.16 Pupils should be educated regarding their observation of incidents of bullying and their responsibilities in this respect.

5.17 The curriculum development process should incorporate pedagogies that will assist teachers to counter bullying through promoting personal growth for pupils.

5.18 Opportunities should be sought in the curriculum to use role play and group work to increase the awareness of pupils of bullying and to present strategies for supporting victims.

5.19 The nature of playground play and pupil interaction should be reviewed in order to ensure that opportunities for pupils to gain social and interpersonal skills are maximised and contexts that enable bullying to take place are minimised.

Initial Teacher Training

5.20 There should be consideration of the need to address the curriculum for initial teacher education and early professional development in respect of educating trainee teachers to recognise bullying and manage bullying situations effectively.

THE PROJECT

6.1 The Project was undertaken for the Department of Education by the Further and Higher Education Research Unit, School of Education, University of Ulster. The cost of the project was £62,588.

FULL REPORT

7.1 The full report entitles “Bullying in Schools: A Northern Ireland Study” is available from the Department of Education, price £5¹.

This paper is a summary of the research report and as such any views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Education.

¹ Each educational establishment and library is entitled to one free copy.

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Department of Education**