CONSULTATION ON TACKLING BULLYING IN SCHOOLS

RESPONDENT'S DETAILS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Dr Stephen James Minton</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Position (if applicable)</td>
<td>Lecturer in Psychology of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation (if applicable)</td>
<td>Trinity College Dublin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address</td>
<td>School of Education, Trinity College Dublin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>(01)8962216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email address</td>
<td><a href="mailto:mintonst@tcd.ie">mintonst@tcd.ie</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>25th June, 2012</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Introduction

I would like to start my submission by congratulating the Minister for Education and Skills and his colleagues at the Department of Education and Skills, and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs and her colleagues at the Department of for Children and Youth Affairs, for convening the Anti-Bullying Forum on the 17th May, 2012, and the National Anti-Bullying Coalition for their role in bringing this about. This current initiative provides a welcome opportunity to actualise some of the knowledge, experience and skills that have been accrued by researchers, campaigners, and educators since the drawing up and circulation of the Guidelines on Countering Bullying Behaviour in Primary and Post-Primary Schools, some nineteen years ago, so, and to make real inroads in addressing this issue of continued concern in schools and school communities.

I have been involved in the area of anti-bullying research and practise since 2000; I am a full-time lecturer in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin, a chartered psychologist and a parent). I have co-authored (with Professor Mona O’ Moore) two books on the subjects of bullying (‘Dealing with Bullying in Schools’ (2004, Sage) and ‘Cyber-Bullying: The Irish Experience’, (2011, Nova Science)), and have written or co-written over fifty chapters, scholarly articles and conference papers on the subject (see http://people.tcd.ie/mintonst). I have had experience of the design, implementation, provision of training for and evaluation of anti-bullying programmes at regional (Minton, 2011a; O’ Moore & Minton, 2005) national (O’ Moore & Minton, 2008) levels, and have had the pleasure of working with dozens of primary and post-primary schools – e.g., with school management on policy formation, training teaching staff on anti-bullying strategies, parents on awareness and information and direct work with students - all over Ireland.

In this submission, I have attempted to answer the priorities that need to be addressed in helping to prevent and address bullying in schools, including actions to be taken by the Department of Education and Skills, other government departments and agencies and school communities, with regard to current financial constraints. Hence, of the 7 questions mentioned in the guidelines on formatting submissions to the Working Group, I have addressed questions 1, 4, 5, 6 and 7 (and just within the 4000 word limit!) There are four aspects that I would argue should be noted from the very outset:

- It should be noted that in all reviews of anti-bullying efforts to date, existing whole-school anti-bullying programmes which have been implemented on a broad scale have, most often, resulted in at best moderate levels of success (Farrington & Ttofi, 2010; Smith, 2003; Smith, Pepler & Rigby, 2004).
- The behavioural management / awareness-raising approach that has dominated the design, strategies and resources used in whole-school anti-bullying programmes to date is not adequate in addressing the prejudices that underpin at least some bullying behaviour
As we shall see below, this is noticeable when specific, rather than general, forms of bullying behaviour have received the attention of researchers.

- Again, as we shall see below, although one broad-scale anti-bullying programme in Ireland has been designed with local concerns in mind (Minton, 2011a; Minton, O’ Mahony & Conway-Walsh, submitted), almost all existing broad-scale whole-school anti-bullying programmes elsewhere have ignored the social context of violence.
- Finally, and once again as we shall see below, despite a clear complimenting of anti-bullying actions made in each of the jurisdictions on this island, all-Ireland thinking has not yet been influential in the approach taken to addressing bullying.

Hence, the following sections are included in my submission, which I earnestly hope will be seen as constructive:

- (i) Supporting Anti-Bullying Efforts Specific to Homophobic Bullying
- (ii) Addressing Prejudice through Anti-Bullying Efforts
- (iii) Offering the Whole-School / Community Development Approach to School Communities
- (iv) An All-Ireland Approach to Anti-Bullying Action

This submission also includes conclusions (v) and references (vi).

(i) Supporting Anti-Bullying Efforts Specific to Homophobic Bullying

I would like to fully support the Department of Education and Skills Working Group’s task of developing concrete strategies to combat homophobic bullying, and congratulate the Minister on his designation of this task, which to me reflects his long-standing attention and genuine commitment to this specific issue. Research evidence, quite simply, does not support the position that in addressing bullying behaviour in general, that one is simultaneously addressing the issue of homophobic bullying. Canadian researchers Mishna, Newman, Daley & Solomon (2009) have correctly stated that ‘the preponderance of bullying research does not address sexual orientation as a possible factor’ (p. 1598). Their compatriot, Gerald Walton, asserts that, ‘Even though homophobia is a prominent feature of schoolyard bullying, it is also one of the most unchallenged forms of bullying’ (2006, p. 13); furthermore, he argues that apparently non-targeted anti-bullying interventions in schools may be hampered by deficits of homophobia, heterosexism and heteronormativity (Walton, 2006).

The issue of homophobic bullying is, of course, one of considerable urgency. Studies of the experiences of young LGBT people in Northern Ireland by Carolan & Redmond (2003) and in the Republic of Ireland by Minton, Dahl, O’ Moore & Tuck (2008), showed that 44.0 per cent and 50.0 per cent of their samples respectively reported having been bullied at school in the last three months because of their sexual orientation. A study of 1,100 LGBT people in Ireland showed that 58 per cent reported the existence of homophobic bullying in their schools, and five per cent had actually left school early because of homophobic bullying (Mayock, Bryan, Carr & Kitching, 2009). With the proportion of high school students who reported having been bullied in the last three months in O’ Moore, Kirkham & Smith’s nationwide survey of bullying behavior being one in six, it has been concluded that the LGBT population is one ‘at risk’ in the Irish school population of being bullied (Minton et al., 2008).

Hence, the self-reported experiences of homophobic bullying (current and retrospective) of LGBT people was known from previous surveys in Ireland (Mayock et al., 2009, Minton et al., 2008); what remained unknown up until recently was the relationship between sexual orientation and bullying in the general school-going population. However, in May 2010, 824 fifth-year (age ca. 16 – 17 years)
secondary school students (341 male (41.4%), 483 female (58.6%)), at nine schools covering the entire geographical area of the Republic of Ireland, completed an English language translation of a questionnaire previously used in a large-scale empirical study in Norway (Roland & Auestad, 2009). It was found that whereas 32.9 per cent of heterosexual males and 20.1 per cent of heterosexual females reported having been bullied in the last couple of months, and 9.9 per cent and 1.5 per cent respectively reported having been ‘frequently’ (that is to say, once a week or more often) so, 62.5 per cent of non-heterosexual males and 66.7 per cent of heterosexual females reported having been bullied in the last couple of months, and 37.5 per cent and 20.8 per cent respectively reported having been frequently so. Hence, non-heterosexual females were statistically significantly more likely to report having been bullied than were heterosexual females or females in general, but the proportion of non-heterosexual males in the sample was too small to accurately calculate statistical significance (Minton, 2011b).

Given this prevalence, Ireland is fortunate in that a campaign specific to homophobic bullying is already in existence. In 2010, BeLonG To launched its first annual ‘Stand Up! LGBT Awareness Week’, which is aimed at creating positive understanding of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people and their issues, with a focus on homophobia, transphobia and exclusion in schools, youth clubs and local areas, and tackling homophobic and transphobic bullying. The first Stand Up! Week was held on the 9th – 18th April 2010, and took place mainly in youth services around Ireland; everyone was encouraged to ‘show your support for your lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender friends’ and, ‘don’t stand for homophobic bullying’ (BeLonG To, 2010). In the 2012 Stand Up! Week (launched by the Minister for Education and Skills), a pack (combing a DVD and printed materials) was sent to every post-primary school in Ireland. It will not have escaped attention that the Anti-Bullying Forum coincided with the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHO) (17th May); nor that the theme of IDAHO this year was ‘combating homophobia and transphobia in schools’. Indeed, Stand Up! has deservedly been internationally recognised by UNESCO, and that organisation’s recent ‘Global Good Practice and Policy Manual on Education Sector Responses to Homophobic Bullying’ (launched 16th May, 2012) has been much informed and driven by researchers and activists in Ireland.

Based on the prevalence of homophobic bullying, and the resources and expertise that exist, I would advocate two courses of action.

- (i) Future ‘general’ anti-bullying programmes that are developed for use in schools should meaningfully address homophobic bullying as a specific issue. This should be reflected in the design, implementation (including resources and work with policies, management and teaching staff, parents and community members and especially young people) and evaluation of such programmes.

- (ii) The efforts of the ‘Stand Up!’ campaign should be applauded and centrally supported, including the development of an evaluated, evidence-based whole-school or whole-school / community programme specific to anti-homophobic bullying, to be implemented on a pilot and eventually nationwide basis.

(ii) Addressing Prejudice through Anti-Bullying Efforts

Sadly, as well as homophobia and transphobia, society is blighted by other forms of prejudice. One which has been investigated recently is alterophobia, which refers to prejudice directed towards members of ‘alternative’ sub-cultures, including those who are, or are perceived as being, goths, punks, emos, skaters and fans of heavy metal, and those who listen to any type of alternative music (Minton, 2012b). Alterophobia has been manifest in criminal cases such as the murder of Sophie
Lancaster in England in 2007; a recent survey established that it is also evident in patterns of bullying behaviour. 820 fifth-year students (16 – 17 years old; 339 male (41.3 per cent), 481 female (58.7 per cent)), at nine secondary schools in Ireland, were asked to respond to a short, specifically constructed questionnaire (concerning membership of groups and sub-cultures, and bullying behaviour). Self-identified members of sub-cultures reported both having been bullied more frequently than did members of the general sample, and participants expressed that members of ‘alternative’ sub-cultures (‘moshers / rockers’, ‘goths’, and ‘emos’) were more likely to be bullied, and that members of ‘non-alternative’ sub-cultures (‘chavs’ and ‘D4s’) were more likely to bully others. It was concluded that ‘alterophobic bullying’ was a reality, and that members of ‘alternative’ sub-cultures may be considered to be ‘at risk’ of being bullied (Minton, 2012c).

In terms of addressing prejudice through anti-bullying efforts, schools were officially instructed to specifically reference homophobic bullying in their anti-bullying policies in 2010 (O’Higgins-Norman et al., 2010). I would argue that as members of ‘alternative’ sub-cultures can also be considered to be ‘at risk’ of bullying, that as well as perhaps using those grounds established in the equality legislature (i.e., the Employment Equality Act (1998) and the Equal Status Act (2000)), that making specific reference to alterophobia in school anti-bullying policies is warranted.

(iii) Offering the Whole-School / Community Development Approach to School Communities
As was noted above, although some have been designed with local concerns in mind, almost all existing broad-scale whole-school anti-bullying programmes have ignored the social context of violence. An exception in Ireland has been the recently and successfully implemented ‘Erris Anti-Bullying Initiative’ (2009 to date), which is the world’s first to be designed and implemented according to both whole-school and community development principles.

In August 2009, the staff of the Iorras Le Chéile Community Development Project (headed by Rose Conway-Walsh) and began working on putting together a comprehensive strategic plan to help to tackle and create a zero tolerance towards bullying in the entire Erris community. A local Steering Committee met for the first time in September, 2009, and after considerable consultation and collaboration, the final version of the practical anti-bullying plan was finalised in March, 2010, based on (i) the general desire to work in a way that is inclusive of the whole community; (ii) community consultation; and, (iii) best practice findings regarding anti-bullying intervention programmes, locally nationally and internationally, in the past. The Erris Anti-Bullying Initiative was designed to run in the participating schools and community groups (e.g. youth and community development groups, the Gardai, the GAA and soccer clubs, the clergy, psychotherapists, and advocates for disability groups and the elderly). By a simultaneous involvement of schools, community groups and community members, young people should receive a consistent message regarding the unacceptability of bullying behaviour.

A comparison of pre- (May 2010) and post- (May 2011) programme modified Olweus Bully / Victim Questionnaires completed by students in participating schools showed that amongst primary school students, following the implementation of the programme, there were reductions in frequencies of reports of having been involved in all categories of bully / victim problems; increases in frequencies of reports in all categories of their estimations of their teachers, peers and own positive responses in situations of bullying at school; and, increases in frequencies of students’ reports in most categories of feelings about bullying consistent with an anti-bullying ethos. Amongst post-primary students, there were reductions in frequencies of reports in most categories of bully / victim problems; increases in frequencies of reports in most categories of their estimations of their teachers, peers and own positive responses in situations of bullying at school; and, increases in frequencies of students’ reports in one category of feelings about bullying consistent with an anti-bullying ethos.
(Minton, 2011a; Minton, O’ Mahoney & Conway-Walsh, submitted). At the time of writing, plans to implement a programme based on the Erris model in eight primary schools in Skopje, Macedonia, are at an advanced stage.

In Norway, a country which has had notable success and is indeed a world leader in implementing anti-bullying research and intervention programmes, all schools must implement an anti-bullying programme, but may choose from one of a number of evidence-based and government-approved models. (These are the ‘Olweus’ programme, the ‘Respekt’ programme, or they may be assisted in developing their own models; additionally, some models are implemented on a broader scale within the municipalities, such as the ‘Connect Oslo programme’, which is implemented in a number of schools in the greater Oslo area).

If the Department of Education and Skills is to give its approval to programmes, and these programmes be offered to schools in a nationwide implementation, I believe that it should do so on an evidence basis of the effectiveness of programmes. At present, the long-standing ‘Cool Schools’ model has such an evidence basis. A case could be made for the proposed and as yet developing ‘Safe Schools’ model that was presented at the recent Anti-Bullying Forum, as I assume it draws from the experiences of O’ Moore’s implementation of a similar model in Donegal primary schools in the academic years 1998 – 2000 (O’ Moore & Minton, 2005). I would also request that the more recently and successfully implemented ‘Erris Anti-Bullying Initiative’ should receive DES approval and be offered to school communities who wish to address bullying via the ‘whole-school / community development approach’. In this way, schools and school communities can be offered a choice of anti-bullying programmes according to their perception of their own needs, as is the case in Norway.

(iv) An All-Ireland Approach to Anti-Bullying Action

Whilst it is noted that Ms. Dorothy Angus of The Department of Education in Northern Ireland was invited to address the Anti-Bullying Forum of 17th May 2012, I would contend that all-Ireland thinking has not been sufficiently influential in anti-bullying research or intervention. Indeed, a comparison of Professor O’ Moore’s and Ms. Angus’s presentation demonstrated that anti-bullying actions have developed along quite separate lines in the two jurisdictions on this island. However, when one looks at these actions, there is a clear complimenting of efforts. In both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, (i) incidence rates of bullying behaviour have been established (Collins, McAreavy & Adamson, 2004; O’ Moore, Kirkham & Smith, 1997; O’ Moore & Minton, 2008); (ii) resources have been developed (e.g., by the Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre, and Anti-Bullying Campaign, in the Republic, and Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum); active advocacy organisations exist (e.g., the Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum, and the National Anti-Bullying Coalition in the Republic); (iii) schools in both jurisdictions have been encouraged to develop anti-bullying policies, and had guidelines provided; and, (iv) legislation has been passed to ensure that duties of care to students are to be spelt out in, and maintained under, codes of discipline (in Northern Ireland in 1989; and in the Republic in 2000).

In the Republic of Ireland, there have been long-standing detailed guidelines on forming school anti-bullying policies (since 1993), and researchers have had the experience of successfully implementing whole-school (Donegal primary schools, 1998 – 2000; ‘Cool Schools’ programme, ongoing) and whole-school / community (Erris Anti-Bullying Initiative, 2009 onwards) anti-bullying programmes. In Northern Ireland, legislation requiring schools to have anti-bullying policies has been enacted (The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order (2003)), and considerable experience has surely been built up in both community development and conflict resolution initiatives in the peace process. Therefore, it is valid at every level to pool efforts North and South. Furthermore, in addressing bullying behaviour and the prejudices that underpin it, through communicating messages
of non-aggression and mutual respect to young people, we can take the opportunity to make a contribution to the peace process that has been taking place on this island.

(v) Conclusions

- Existing whole-school anti-bullying programmes which have been implemented on a broad scale have, most often, resulted in at best moderate levels of success.
- Almost all existing broad-scale whole-school anti-bullying programmes have been limited in their ignoring of (i) the prejudice that underpins bullying behaviour; and (ii) the social context of violence.
- Based on the prevalence of homophobic bullying, and the resources and expertise concerning this prejudice-related form of bullying, future ‘general’ anti-bullying programmes that are developed for use in schools should meaningfully address homophobic bullying as a specific issue, and BeLonG To’s ‘Stand Up!’ campaign should be supported, including the development of an evaluated, evidence-based programme specific to anti-homophobic bullying, with an eventual nationwide implementation.
- In terms of addressing prejudice through anti-bullying efforts, as well as perhaps using those grounds established in the equality legislature, recent research supports that making specific reference to alterophobia (prejudice directed towards members of ‘alternative’ sub-cultures) in school anti-bullying policies is warranted.
- A small range of evidence-based anti-bullying programmes should be supported by the Department of Education and Skills, in order that schools and school communities can be offered a choice, as is the case in Norway. At present, a case can be made for the long-standing whole-school ‘Cool Schools’ model, the developing whole-school based ‘Safe Schools’ proposal, and the whole-school / community development based ‘Erris Anti-Bullying Initiative’ model.
- Anti-bullying actions have developed along separate lines in the two jurisdictions on this island, but when one looks at these actions, there is a clear complimenting of efforts. It is argued that it is valid at every level to pool efforts North and South. In addressing bullying behaviour and the prejudices that underpin it, and through communicating messages of non-aggression and mutual respect to young people, we can take the opportunity to make a contribution to the peace process that has been taking place on this island.

Finally, I would like to note that I more than happy to discuss any of the content of this submission in person.

(vi) References