



SCHOOL OF EDUCATION STUDIES

Tackling Bullying and Discrimination: A Whole School Approach

SUBMISSION TO THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION & SCIENCE

Consultation on Tackling Bullying in Schools

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Introduction

The School of Education Studies at DCU is one of the most radical and innovative of Ireland's university education departments both in terms of our taught programmes and our research activities. Since the foundation of the School in 1995 the related themes of wellbeing, discipline, bullying, pastoral care and diversity have been central to all our activities particularly in our teaching and learning and in our research.

In our teaching and learning at undergraduate level, in our BSc programmes prepare teachers of Science, Biology, Mathematics and Physical Education. At postgraduate level, we have developed Ireland's first part-time Professional Diploma in Education for post-primary schools. On all of these teacher education programmes we have developed modules in values, culture, wellbeing, pastoral care, human rights, equality and society aimed at helping to prepare student teachers to encounter the diversity of students and worldviews that apply in education and training.

In terms of research, the School of Education Studies values and encourages good quality research, particularly research that engages with issues of wellbeing, resilience, discipline and bullying. Of particular importance are publications that have arisen out of our research which have fed into policy development in the Department of Education and Skills and among school management bodies. Recent publications include:

1. O'Hara, J. & Byrne, S. (2000). Implementing a Positive Learning Programme. *Irish Educational Studies*, 19, 1. pp 68 - 81.
2. O'Hara, J., Byrne, S. and McNamara, G. (2000). *Positive Discipline: An Irish Educational Appraisal and Practical Guide*, Department of Education and Science.
3. Norman, J. (2004). *A Survey of Homophobic Bullying in Irish Second Level Schools*. Dublin: Department of Education & Science.
4. O'Higgins Norman, J. (2008). *Homophobic Bullying in Irish Secondary Education*. Palo Alto, Ca. Academica Press.
5. McSharry, M. (2009). *Schooled Bodies? Negotiating Adolescent Validation through Press, Peers and Parents*. Trentham Books.
6. O'Higgins Norman, J. Goldrick, M. & Harrison, K. (2010). *Addressing Homophobic Bullying in Irish Second Level Schools: Case Studies*. Dublin. Equality Authority.
7. O'Higgins Norman, J. & Connolly, J. (2009). Mimetic Theory and Scapegoating in the Age of Cyberbullying: The Case of Phoebe Prince. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 29, 4, pp287-300.

Arising out of our ongoing commitment to the promotion of wellbeing in education we welcome the development by the Department of Education and Skills of a national working group on bullying in schools and we wish to contribute the following to support this initiative.

Changes to improve how Bullying is addressed in Schools

In essence earlier researchers understood bullying mostly in terms of *repeated aggressive behaviour* arising from a deliberate intent to cause physical or psychological distress to others. This has sometimes led to a tendency on the part of researchers, policy makers, teachers and parents to overly pathologise those who bully and those who are bullied (Kumpulainen, 2008; Pollastri et al., 2009). Such a focus on bullying *behaviour* alone ignores the reality that a huge amount of bullying occurs because of a lack of tolerance for diversity and as such constitutes a form of discrimination.

Our own research at DCU on initiatives to address bullying in schools (2010) revealed that several schools are now rolling out innovative anti-discrimination initiatives aimed at eliminating bullying. The most successful initiatives focused on diversity education and were supported by school leadership. While leadership obviously includes school management it also involves external agencies including Government and inspectorates and internally other school leaders such as chaplains, guidance counsellors and year heads in co-operation with parents and students alike.

In summary, it is important that we understand bullying both as a psychological *and* sociological problem. Such a shift in how we understand bullying involves a recognition that while certain individuals are more likely to bully, the context in which they exist can also contribute towards an environment where bullying is more acceptable. Young people are rarely bullied because they are perceived to be the same as everyone else. Rather they are often bullied because they stand out for being different from their peers. This reality points to the need for schools to promote diversity as a “normal” part of life. The research shows that where young people are provided with an opportunity to reflect on difference as a positive aspect of life levels

of bullying and other forms of discrimination decrease (Devine and Vasquez, 1998; Chirot and Seligman, 2001; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; O'Higgins Norman, 2008).

Where to Start?

It is clear from our research that in order for an initiative aimed at addressing bullying to be successful, it must be developed as part of a mainstream or whole-school approach to the problem. However, several elements have to be considered in any action taken if the school is to truly develop a whole-school approach to the problem of bullying.

It is important that school leaders familiarise themselves with up to date research on bullying and ensure that other key members of staff also have a copy or have access to these reports. This will allow school leaders to raise awareness of the issue at staff meetings, on notice boards, with pastoral care teams, staff bulletin, senior management team meetings, or any other way of getting the message across effectively.

The principal can begin to make use of an existing committee in the school such as the pastoral care team, the healthy schools task group, school planning working party or school council, to help increase awareness and manage change in relation to bullying. If necessary the school may be able to form a specific anti-bullying working group, but it is probably preferable and more time-efficient to approach this issue from within an existing structure. This is also more likely to ensure any changes or additions to existing procedures will be properly embedded within the wider life of the school. However, it is probably advisable to ask one member of staff to take specific responsibility for the brief to ensure that it is kept on the agenda. This anti-bullying co-ordinator could be the school chaplain or guidance counsellor or some other person with an interest in the area as well as the appropriate knowledge and skills required to develop awareness in a sensitive manner.

The working group must then develop a whole-school approach checklist. This will provide the criteria for effective practice. It is important that the school use the checklist to self-evaluate and decide what action is required to initiative, enhance, or

change practices that promote acceptance of diversity and reduce bullying within the school.

These are a 7 essential elements that can be used as a check list by school leaders and working groups who are trying to develop a whole-school approach to addressing bullying.

Leadership and Managing Change

While the roles of the board of management and principal are of great importance in animating a whole-school approach, leadership should also be understood to encompass the contribution of the Department of Education and Skills, as well as deputy-principals, class tutors, year heads, chaplains, guidance counsellors, subject leaders, parents councils, and even prefects and other senior students. Fundamentally, it is the responsibility of all those who are identified as leaders within the school community to ensure that practical steps are taken to challenge and respond to bullying. This can be done by principals and other leaders in the school striving to engender an ethos in the school in which bullying is unacceptable. It is also vital that school leaders involve both staff and students in developing and implementing a vision of the school where diversity is accepted and celebrated. The desire to address and change the situation regarding bullying will need to be included within the School Development Plan.

The principal has a key role in modelling the type of behaviour that s/he wants staff and students to demonstrate. This includes understanding, respect and inclusiveness. Nothing will undermine a school approach to bullying more than if the students and staff perceive those in authority to be failing in their responsibilities to develop an environment in which people feel safe, cared for and respected. At the very least this means that senior management must value the entire school community and be sensitive to the needs of individuals, including their need for professional development. This will involve the provision of specific training for members of schools' boards of management, parents and staff and the results of this training will have to be monitored for its effectiveness in bringing about change within the school.

Finally, it might be an idea for school leadership, through the working group, to begin this process with an audit of bullying behaviour. This should include students and staff keeping a log of bullying (verbal and physical) as it occurs over a specific period of time. Such an audit will give the working group a clear idea of the extent of the problem within the school and the task of bringing about change within a whole-school framework.

Policy Development

All second-level schools are now required to have a number of policies in place including one on bullying behaviour. In August 2006 in order to reduce the administrative burden on schools the Department of Education & Science issued a template anti-bullying policy. This template from the DES built on the previously issued *Guidelines in Countering Bullying in Schools* (1993) and included reference to homophobic bullying. This was a major step forward in breaking the silence and invisibility that often surrounds homophobic bullying in Irish second-level schools, even at a policy level (Norman et al. 2006).

It is vital to have up-to-date and coherent policies including those on bullying, guidance, Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), and child protection and to have associated procedures for dealing with bullying. One study found that while almost all schools had anti-bullying policies, only 10% included any reference to homophobic bullying (Norman et al. 2006). This policy should be developed and reviewed in consultation with all members of the school community, and should emphasise that all types of bullying will not be accepted in the school. The policy should also state the school's commitment to taking preventative action to reduce the likelihood that bullying incidents will occur.

In developing this policy the school will need to state that any perpetrators of bullying will be dealt with severely and that those who are bullied will receive appropriate support. The school's policy on bullying should also refer to the schools commitment to celebrating the diversity of backgrounds and identities of all in the school community. This commitment will be evident in the school's RSE policy and programme. Finally, the anti-bullying policy will need to include an element of

monitoring and evaluating incidents of bullying and the mechanisms for these will need to be stated and operated clearly and efficiently. Teachers must never allow bullying in the form of discriminatory comments or actions to go unchallenged.

Curriculum Planning for Teaching and Learning

There are many opportunities across the curriculum to challenge students to think about their attitudes, to correct misinformation, and to raise awareness about the implications of prejudice and discrimination. However, this does not mean that the use of one off workshops or visiting speakers is enough to tackle bullying in a school. It is more appropriate to discuss issues such as bullying within a broader context, rather than in specific lessons focusing solely on bullying. Such discussions will help students to understand that difference is part of life, something to be valued and celebrated and that bullying is a fundamental rejection of human diversity.

While some classes such as Civic, Social and Personal Education (CSPE), Religious Education, and Social Personal and Health Education (including RSE) will provide an obvious platform for teaching and learning about bullying issues, there is a place within most subjects on the curriculum to promote and value diversity and to teach about bullying as something that is wrong. From time to time, and when appropriate, teachers must ensure that they include reference to bullying in their lessons and senior management should ensure that schemes of work reflect this. Furthermore, research has shown that young people can rely on knowledge and understanding about Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgendered (LGBT) people that is deeply stereotyped (Norman, 2006). Consequently, it is important that teachers in all subjects across the curriculum provide positive and non-stereotypical role models of people who identify as LGBT and of people who do not identify as LGBT but who value and respect diversity.

Finally, it is important to remember that teaching about SPHE/RSE involves teaching about different kinds of relationships, about friendship, about love and about caring for ourselves and others. It is not the same as teaching about sex. Furthermore, in order for staff to demonstrate that they personally feel secure to challenge homophobic bullying and to answer students' questions about sexuality, they will

need to be provided with professional development opportunities to facilitate them in developing this competence.

School Ethos, Bullying and Homophobia

At the centre of a whole-school approach to addressing bullying is the creation of a positive school ethos. However, the ethos of a school is in itself an elusive entity, the result of many influencing factors at work in the school community. Fundamentally though, school ethos can be described as the atmosphere that emerges from the interaction of a number of aspects of school life, including teaching and learning, management and leadership, the use of images and symbols, rituals and practices, as well as goals and expectations. School ethos is the dominant pervading atmosphere or character of the school resulting from the habits of behaviour of those who are part of it (Norman, 2003:2; Williams, 2000:74). A positive school ethos is characterised by a respect for the individual regardless of his/her background or identity (DES, 1993:9). Consequently, school ethos can be said to influence every aspect of school life and is a determinant factor in the success of work to address bullying.

Research has shown that some teachers can be nervous about addressing homophobic bullying in the context of denominational education (Norman et al. 2006). Contrasting views on homosexuality between the main religious faiths can often be seen as an obstacle to addressing homophobic bullying in schools. However, regardless of a school's denominational status, most religions and faiths are based on justice and fairness. Therefore, the key issue to address is not so much the range of religious beliefs about sexuality, but rather the need to challenge discrimination and promote the respect and equality of all people, regardless of their sexuality.

It is important then, that all documentation including the staff handbook and student journals make it clear that the school does not tolerate discrimination or harassment of any kind including homophobia. This can also be made explicit in staff recruitment information and in student admissions policies as well as through the use of relevant posters.

If the school ethos is rooted in the presumption that everyone is heterosexual then school leaders will have to ensure that this ethos begins to change by making explicit reference to LGBT issues and providing resources and other materials for use in classrooms and around the school reminding everyone, including staff, that although often invisible, people who identify as LGBT are valued members of the school community. What is most important is that no member of staff, parent or student is left with any ambiguity in terms of where the school, including trustees, stands on the issue of bullying including homophobic bullying.

Student Voice

The most effective way to obtain the support and co-operation of students in addressing bullying is to involve them in developing ways of challenging discriminatory behaviour by their peers. Due to numbers, it is unlikely that it will be possible to engage all of the students with every aspect of a school's response to bullying at the same time. However, it will be possible to engage groups of students with different levels of the school's response in different ways and thus over time all students should feel that they have contributed to and therefore own their school's procedures to address bullying.

Where they exist, student councils can provide a platform for discussion about how to involve students in tackling bullying and discriminatory behaviour.

The Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) programme provides the main context for dealing with issues around bullying generally (DES, 1993:9). As part of the SPHE programme students could design a survey to assess the extent of bullying in the school and then design and implement appropriate responses to address the problem. One example of how students might become involved in addressing bullying is through the development of a charter against bullying. Students can also use suggestion boxes to express their opinions on bullying and how to address it within the school.

Provision of Student Support Services

While many of the elements of a whole-school approach are focused on addressing bullying across the school, there is also a need to provide support directly to individual students (and sometimes staff) who experience bullying.

Research in Ireland and the UK confirms the importance of relationships of trust and mediation for young people who find they experience difficulties in second-level schools (Coldron, 2002; Murphy, 2004). Generally, year heads, class tutors and other members of staff play an important role in helping young people to overcome the effects of bullying. This can be achieved by respecting requests for confidentiality from students and ensuring that a supportive atmosphere is maintained in tutor groups and subject classes.

The role of peer mentors has also been shown to be quite successful and within the limits of their competency they can sometimes act as a first port of call for those students who need to seek advice or support. This is definitely an area that could be developed further in schools. Senior management teams will need to identify funding to allow for the training of teachers and students who will provide this type of activity at a school level.

Furthermore, key support personnel such as the school chaplain, guidance counsellor, and the home-school-community liaison have particular roles in terms of animating the pastoral ethos of a school by offering specialised support to students who are experiencing difficulties. These key staff will also need to be aware of the emotional health issues that surround bullying. In order to provide this support they will need adequate space and time to ensure that they are available when the students need them. A simple thing like placing a LGBT rainbow sticker or an anti-bullying poster in a prominent place such as on an office door can send out the message that support is available. It is important that other members of staff are aware of the contribution that these key staff can make and that clear referral procedures are in place.

Furthermore, all members of staff take responsibility for the well-being of their students and should not abdicate responsibility to key staff such as the chaplain or guidance counsellor or home-school-community liaison.

Partnership with Parents and Local Communities

Parents, guardians and local communities play an important role in a whole-school approach to tackling bullying. Schools need to seek ways of consulting and involving parents/guardians and members of the local community when responding to bullying, while being clear about the school's approach to the issue.

Such a partnership will need to be planned and carried out in a very sensitive manner. Societal changes have been dramatic in contemporary Ireland and increasingly the school is expected to mediate between the contrasting cultures of home, community, media, churches, and other stakeholders (Martin, 2006:3.1). Schools should not presume that all students are from a "traditional" family background and encourage all parents and guardians to attend meetings and visit the school regularly.

The school will need to frequently remind parents/guardians that any information they have about their personal lives, sexuality, child-minding arrangements and so on will be treated confidentially. It is important that the school has in place a clear and confidential procedure for parents/guardians to raise their concerns about bullying including those about homophobic bullying. These procedures should be well publicised and referred to in student handbooks, school policies, school brochures and websites.

In recent years a number of well run LGBT youth groups have been established around the country and these are a particularly appropriate community support for young people who identify as LGBT and/or who experience homophobic bullying. Staff, parents and young people may be unaware of this type of support so a school's working group may have to identify these local groups and provide information about them to the school community. This can be done in newsletters, on notice boards, websites and in handbooks.

Conclusion

Implementing a whole-school approach to addressing the problem of bullying will not be achieved over night. It will involve all of the elements outlined above and will evolve over time. However, our research has shown it is possible to make a start and to build on success no matter how small or insignificant it may be. It is vital that school leaders provide opportunities to validate and celebrate successes while keeping the school focused on what future challenges need to be met. Cultural change is slow and staff, parents and students will need constant support and training to assist them in achieving their goals of eliminating bullying from the school. Students will need to be continually rewarded for contributing to a school community where diversity is appreciated and respected and where bullying is not accepted.

Finally, a whole-school approach to bullying is more than about protecting young people from being bullied. It is as much about developing a school ethos where staff, parents and students alike feel they are accepted and can be free from discrimination on any ground.

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