**Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools: Critical Evaluation of the Policy**

Key Concepts and Current Debates in Global Education Policy

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**The issues that prompted the adoption of the policy**

In Ireland, policy on bullying was anchored under the 1993 Guidelines on Countering Bullying Behaviour in Primary and Post-Primary Schools. However, as reported by O’Moore et al. (1997), incidences of bullying continued to persist, with study showing that in both primary and secondary schools, 31% and 16% of students respectively were bullied. Overall, the study indicated that close to 23% (200,000) school going children were still under the risk of bullying (O’Moore et al., 1997). According to Lewis (2013), bullying for school going children was associated with stress among children, together with psychological trauma (Lewis, 2013). Earlier studies had further indicated that 60% of students who were bullies were more likely to end up as criminals by the age of 24 (Shetgiri, 2013). These factors promoted for the adoption of a comprehensive anti-bullying policy. Notably, while the 1993 requirement for anti-bullying laid a foundation for such policy, new forms of bullying, such as homophobic bullying and cyber bullying had emerged by 2013 with technological advancement, prompting for a more comprehensive policy detailing all forms of bullying in schools.

**What was happening within the government**

The government, through legislation, had been addressing the problem of bullying in schools for a long period. An ongoing debate prior to the adoption of the policy was the debate on education (Welfare)(Amendment)(No.2) Bill 2012, which sought to amend the previous Education (Welfare) Act 2000 (O'Brien, 2013). Notably, while the former version required adoption of the anti-bullying policy in schools, the latter amendment was intended to make it mandatory for adoption of the anti-bullying policy by the board of management in schools. The debate came at a time when the government, through the ministry of education had been developing a program to encourage learning institutions to develop a policy on anti-bullying and set particular strategies to fight homophobic bullying, which in previous provision, was not specified as a form of bullying (Foody et al., 2018). Consequently, the Action Plan on Bullying – Report in January 2013 made recommendations paving the way for the policy.

**Summary of the key ideas outlined in the policy**

The policy provided a comprehensive definition of bullying, types of bullying, developed principles of anti-bullying, and a framework for addressing and tackling bullying in schools. Under the policy, bullying is taken to be any negative behaviour that is unwanted, whether verbal, physical, or psychological conduct by one individual repeatedly against another person. From this definition, the policy thus identifies bullying types to include cyberbullying, identity-based bullying, special education needs such as disability, relational bullying such as malicious gossip, discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, or nationality, cyber-bullying, and homophobic bullying (Department of Education and Skills, 2013). To prevent these forms of bullying, the policy spells out the principles of creation of effective leadership, positive school culture, school-based approach against bullying, support for staff, implementation of educational and prevention strategies, shared understanding of the impact of bullying, effective monitoring and supervision of pupils, regular evaluation of the policy effectiveness, and recording and investigation of bullying behaviour (Foody et al., 2018). This framework identifies stakeholders involved and the approach against bullying in schools.

**What did the policy intend to achieve?**

The basis of the policy was on the implementation of the recommendations made earlier by the Action Plan on Bullying Report (2013). Notably, the action plan had developed twelve key areas that needed attention, which the policy sought to achieve. First was the establishment of nationwide anti-bullying procedures and standards for schools with respect to diversity through their school’s code of conduct. Secondly, the policy sought to enhance teacher education support service provision by defining how Continuous Professional Development (CPD) would be coordinated. Further, the Action Plan on Bullying suggested coordinated training for boards of management and parents, and the provision of resources to create awareness on bullying (Department of Education and Skills, 2013). On school’s self-evaluation, the policy sought to provide procedures necessary to evaluate whether a positive school culture was present. Given the need to provide support to children with special educational needs, the policy sought to spell out a positive school culture where bullying for such children was prevented (Foody et al., 2018). Further, with the advancement of technology, the policy also sought to address cyberbullying, by prevention of bullying associated with avenues such as social media and their impact on student’s mental health. Overall, the policy sought to achieve the provisions of Equal Status Acts (2000-2008), which prohibits harassment and discrimination in the dissemination of services, such as education-related services (O’Higgins-Norman et al., 2010). In so doing, equality would be guaranteed by the policy in the learning institutions.

**How did it intend to achieve it?**

The policy spells out the procedures and strategies for tackling bullying in schools. Chiefly, achieving anti-bullying behaviour in schools is recognized as a collective responsibility for stakeholders identified by the policy, which include the schools, teachers, school heads, parents, and the boards of management (Department of Education and Skills, 2013). Each of the stakeholders under the policy is required to undertake a specific role. For schools, a positive environment and culture is a requirement under the policy, and this will be achieved by setting up a school’s anti-bullying policy. Principally, the anti-bullying policy at the school level ought to spell out procedures of tackling bullying, and most importantly, spell out the procedures for investigating and dealing with bullying (Foody et al., 2018). These procedures are to be accompanied by a school’s code of conduct, made available for teachers, students, and parents.

The school’s anti-bullying policy is to be reinforced by an active role of all other stakeholders. For teachers, the role of investigating and determining whether or not a bullying behaviour has occurred lies on their shoulders, and upon realisation, contact to parents is made informing them of the incidence in reference to the policy. Further, the conflict is to be resolved by the teacher, together with the concerned parties, with the aim of restoring a good relationship between them. For evaluation, teachers are also needed to keep written records, which allows the school to have self-evaluation in relation to the policy (Department of Education and Skills, 2013). On the other hand, the school principal is required to make reports in regards to the policy at the end of each school term to the board of management to facilitate oversight. Lastly, the board of management, upon receiving the termly reports, makes annual reviews of the policy, to identify areas that need improvement (Foody et al., 2018). Through these means, the anti-bullying policy is able to meet its objectives.

**What influences impacted on its development?**

The development of anti-bullying policy was a product of an ongoing push for children rights, especially in educational institutions. Under the Equal Status Acts (2000-2008), any form of harassment and discrimination in service provision in Ireland was prohibited, including in education (O’Higgins-Norman et al., 2010). These acts identified grounds for diversity to be marital status, gender, sexual orientation, family status, disability, age, religion, and disability, most of which affected children in schools. In promoting equality in schools, the Equality Authority had constantly collaborated with education partners to ensure that quality on these lines was achieved, thus becoming a significant influence it the policy development. With the provision of a legal requirement for equality being provided under the Education (Welfare) Act 2000, subsequent provisions, including the National Education Welfare Board in 2008 made provisions for comprehensive code of conduct for schools. However, according to O’Higgins-Norman et al. (2010), not all forms of diversity were recognized in schools. For instance, while all pupils were subject to harassment and bullying, it was noted that LGBT youth were in particular risk of such treatment in school.

At the same time, international and Irish research confirmed that homophobic bullying was less likely to be sufficiently addressed in educational institutions and that teachers were well equipped to tackle this form of bullying (O’Higgins-Norman et al., 2010). Such developments promoted the government’s program to encouraging learning institutions to develop a policy on anti-bullying and set particular strategies to fight homophobic bullying. Consequently, the Action Plan on Bullying Report was developed through the ministry of education in conjunction with the Ministry of Children and Youth Affairs, resulting in the development and adoption of the policy. Additionally, as mentioned by Levin (1998), the overall climate in the education sphere promotes standardisation, accountability, and testing. This also arguably informed the creation of a national policy on bullying that among other things proposes forms of evaluating schools’ achievement of national goals against bullying.

**Evaluation of the policy**

Generally, studies on the effectiveness of school bullying prevention policies rely on responses from pupils and teachers. In 2002, the Department of Education undertook a study which showed that 40% of students in primary school and 30% of students in post-primary school have been bullied in the past, while 25% of primary school students and 28% of post-primary school students have bullied another pupil in the past (Education and Skills Committee, 2007). 77% of primary schools and 90% of post-primary school report having in place anti-bullying measures and mechanisms, but 75% of primary school staff and 77% of post-primary school staff feel their need further trainings as they feel more confident in dealing with cases of bullying rather than preventing it from happening (Education and Skills Committee, 2007). Following the more recent policy developments, all school were required to have anti-bullying policies and procedures in place Action Plan on Bullying Report and do so under guidance of Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (Department of Education and Skills, 2013). In 2017, a metanalytic study of on school bullying in Ireland suggested that 22.4% of primary school students and 11.8% of post-primary school students have been bullied at some point in their lives (Foody et al. 2017). Therefore, 4 years after the implementation of the policy, Ireland witnessed an 17,6% decrease in primary school bullying as well as 18% post-primary bullying incidents as compared to 2002 which can be linked to the success of the nation policy implementation in Irish schools.

*Outcomes of the policy*

The policy’s main aim is to provide recommendations for schools on how to build their own school-specific policies to tackle bullying. Following its adoption, all schools are required to have anti-bullying measures in place. Different studies have found that the majority if not all of the schools in Ireland have anti-bullying measures in place (Dealing with bullying, n.d.; Foody et al., 2018). Following the recommendations on how to build such policies, some schools have chosen to adopt the anti-bullying measures as part of their behaviour policy, while others developed and implement separate documents entirely dedicated to policies on school bullying (National Disability Authority, 2014). Either way, schools strive to adopt the best practices given in policy and follow its aims.

However, not every school is equally effective at following the guidelines. This policy in an example of a low-politics policy as it tackles a sectoral issue at national level – it is a national response giving guidelines to schools as to how to tackle school bullying issues (Youde, 2016). Yet, not every school has means to produce an equal response as suggested in the national policy guidelines in the same way – this is why gaps are identified when implementing the policy in each specific school. For instance, School principals report that children do not have access to qualified counsellors in case they experience bullying (Murphy et al., 2017; Edwards and Downes, 2013; European Commission, 2013, 2015). The lack of qualified counsellors may lead to further problems and to worsening of bullying behaviour without counsellors to ensure early identification and support to both victims and perpetrators of school violence and bullying (Murphy et al., 2017).

Not having access to counsellors also means that teacher are the ones responsible for dealing with the mental health and psychological issues resulting from school bullying. This is considered ineffective as teachers and school staff do not have the necessary qualifications to deal with psychological traumas (Bauman, 2008). It is expected that school staff and qualified counsellors will respond differently to reports and incidents of school bullying due to their different trainings, education, and background (Murphy et al., 2017; Foody, et. al., 2017). Thus, although the policy provides goals such as identifying bullying, they can be unrealistic to the point that schools do not have the manpower or skills to initiate the necessary changes and cannot provide the necessary support to the bullied in the short perspective.

In addition, school principals in the 2017 Anti-bullying Centre survey on the implementation of the policy agree that it is essential to have multidisciplinary teams to work on bullying incidents and prevention consisting of a teacher and another professional such as a counsellor, however, the lack of qualified counsellors in schools is a widely reported problem (Murphy et al., 2017). Multidisciplinary teams working on bullying incidents is a well-recognized good practice in many European countries as well as a recommendation by the European Commission (Murphy et al., 2017; Edwards and Downes, 2013; European Commission, 2013, 2015). In this respect, the policy also sets an aim for talent development to tackle this issue which arguably includes this shortage of qualified staff into schools’ agenda but it does not account for the financial burden it can incur.

Another outcome of the policy under review is that many schools involve the children themselves in developing and implementing anti-bullying measures while stressing the importance of communication so that children can raise alert in cases of bullying (National Disability Authority, 2014). For example, Woodland National School (n.d.) encourages students’ artwork as a tool to promote anti-bullying behaviour. The ScoilIognáid School (n.d.) integrates anti-bullying components into their curriculum such as sports activities to control aggression, drama classes, personal development programmes. This is indicative of the achievement of one of the main policy goals, namely positive communication and environment being encouraged by the school staff in order to prevent school bullying. What is more, the fact that schools look for further training on how to apply the policy effectively shows their dedication and willingness to take the most of the policy and implement it successfully.

Under the policy, schools are required to perform evaluations of their school-specific anti-bullying policies on a yearly basis. Schools and staff have included such a measure in their policy and rely on tools such as surveys among students and staff, checklists, reports, etc. In most cases, there are specific procedures and templates to be followed when performing the yearly evaluation of the anti-bullying programmes (Taobh na Coille, n.d.). The Castlepollard Community College uses a checklist for Annual Review of the Anti-bullying Policy and its Implementation included into the Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (Castlepollard Community College, n.d.). Pupils are surveyed on the extent of bullying and together with data from reporting templates the survey are used by regular monitoring and supervision activities of the school (Anti-bullying Policy - Castlepollard Community College, n.d.). This is to signify that these schools have applied the measures the policy suggests for the review.

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*Unintended consequences*

One, perhaps unintended consequence is the emergence of private companies who develop anti-bullying programmes and sell them to schools as ready solutions so that schools can be more effective at achieving national goals. For example, the Sticks & Stones whole-school anti-bullying programme is aimed at engaging students, schools staff, and family in workshops and training to counter and prevent bullying. Clients testify that it is very effective in providing them with the necessary instrument to prevent and tackle bullying (Sticksandstones.ie, n.d.). The “Cool School programme”, the “OK programme”; the “Blue Shield Campaign”, the “„Stand Up!‟ campaign”, the “Childline Ireland”, etc. All of these programmes are aimed at encouraging schools to welcome diversity, foster free-of-violence culture and environment, involve professional psychiatrists, psychologists, counsellors, parents and the wider community in school bullying prevention, give opportunity to children to report and talk about bullying incidents and learn from them (European Antibullying Network, 2014). Their goals correspond to the best practices and measures identified and recommended in the policy and schools are free to choose which particular programme to implement (European Antibullying Network, 2014).

This consequence perhaps emerged from the market-based nature of the reform intended by the policy under evaluation. The state of Ireland placed itself as a market regulator setting the parameters and guidelines on how school policies should look like (Bell and Stevenson, 2006). Yet, some schools found themselves under constrained resources such as skills and time which led to the education market adaptation and creation of private agencies who offer a service for bringing schools up to the national standards.

A lack of access to counsellors and

psychological support risks a situation where problems associated with mental

or emotional health become worse without early intervention. In addition, when

a school does not have access to such resources, responsibility for dealing with

mental health issues often falls to teachers. This is not an eective anti-bullying

strategy as school sta are rarely appropriately skilled to deal with serious psycho-

logical issues and there is often no follow-up for those involved in terms of their

mental health and/or their coping strategies. In addition, there is evidence that

teachers and counsellors respond dierently to bullying reports which could be

as a result of dierences in training backgrounds

Such neo-liberal context also introduced a reality where principals difficulties in choosing which particular programme to adopt that would be suitable for their schools and meet the policy requirements (Nolan, 2016). As the policy under review involves a rather bottom up approach, it leaves to each particular school the decision as to the way its management would implement the policy (Sabatier, 1986). They are free to choose which of the existing anti-bullying programmes to adopt or they can develop their own as long as it corresponds to the requirements of the policy (Murphy et al., 2017).

**Conclusion**

The adoption of the common anti-bullying procedures by the Irish government can be viewed a step forward in the prevention of bullying as it requires all school to have specific measures in place. The policy has been achieving its main goal to foster a positive school environment as well as communication between all stakeholders through the anti-bullying measures in order to have successful school bullying prevention and response. As a proof, Ireland witnessed an overall 17% decrease in primary and post-primary bullying incidents. The policy has led to the design of numerous anti-bullying programmes to be used by the schools as whole-school approaches to bullying by adopting the best practices outlined in the policy. It is also successful in setting the guidelines for review of the measures thus ensuring that school-specific policy will be updated in accordance to the needs of the schools and the requirements of the policy.

The anti-bullying measures such as means to report and respond to bullying incidents, encouragement of positive and welcoming behaviour by students, teachers, staff, and parents, etc. adopted by schools correspond to the recommendations of the policy and use the good practices identified in it. This results in improved response to school bullying incidents (Murphy et al., 2017). Furthermore, the Ireland school system witnessed an increase in communication among the key stakeholders such as principals, teachers, pupils and parents which resulted in new collaborative measures such as ones practiced in Woodland National School and ScoilIognáid School. This can also can be seen as an achievement of policy goals leading to decrease in bullying.

However, reports from school principals and staff reveal some gaps in the implementation of the policy. The lack of trained counsellors and multidisciplinary teams, as well as the excess number of programmes available for schools to choose from leads to problems in the successful policy implementation. While it is true that the policy sets the framework for the anti-bullying, it does not give specific directions as to how to ensure trainings for counsellors, multidisciplinary work or how to choose a particular programme to implement. This neoliberal outcome seems to illustrate the critique of the market-based policies which, according to Olssen (1996), result in the very inequality that they aim to tackle. Inability to navigate in this sea of measures and policies could manifest in some schools having fewer success in addressing bullying than others, which results in uneven development of human capital in Ireland.

Nonetheless, in terms of pure efficiency and tackling bullying, statistics support the development and implementation of such policies. Despite the uneven development and implementation problems, policy does improve the situation with bullying in primary and post-primary setting. Thus, the best course of actions should be the continuation of this policy by the policy makers in the directions that it provides further and more detailed guidelines for the successful and efficient implementation of the problematic areas discussed above. As the policy provides a solid foundation, further updates can only contribute to the better functioning of the anti-bullying measures. Addressing the issue will allow schools and their staff to prevent and respond to bullying cases more efficiently, thus guaranteeing the wellbeing of the school community. Also, there is a need for the Department of Education & Skills and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to come up with a common strategy to introduce multidisciplinary teams focused on early identification and prevention of bullying as well as on support to bullied and bullying children and the emotional needs of the children.

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