

# Bullying Experiences at Irish Primary Schools and Implications for Practice

Monica Monahan, Doctoral student at the University of Marburg

and Director of Studies, abi Anti-Bullying Institute [www.abi.ie](http://www.abi.ie)

Michael Power, abi Anti-Bullying Institute, [www.abi.ie](http://www.abi.ie)

Micha Strack, University of Goettingen, Germany



## Introduction

Irish schools are obliged to have anti-bullying policy in place that is appropriate to their particular circumstances. For many, it is a challenge to translate the various policy templates available into effective anti-bullying practice which not only includes intervention methodologies when a bullying cycle emerges, but is also coupled with a continuous, structured pedagogical approach to the themes that encompass and prevent bullying behaviour.

As part of a process of design of a whole school anti-bullying programme by the first two authors, data was collected in 34 Irish primary schools (235 classrooms, 5,705 participants; Oct. 2014 – Jan. 2018). The data was gathered in order to assess levels of bullying behaviour in participating schools, to put any policy recommendations made to the schools on an empirical basis, and to inform the content and design of specific modules to comprise an anti-bullying programme that was then delivered to each participating school.

## Method

In total, 34 schools participated (Oct. 2014 – Jan. 2018), comprising a total of 235 individual classrooms. One school was a small all-girls school in which classes were not recorded, and two 1st classes in one school were not recorded separately; these were amalgamated in a single class id. In six schools several class levels were taught together (two-classroom and three-classroom schools). Most schools had one class for each year from 1<sup>st</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> class, some schools had up to four classrooms of each class year. The 5,705 participating students were 6 to 13 years old (m: 9.0, SD 1.7). Gender: 49.5% girls, 49.7% boys, 0.7% not known.

Participating schools contacted the first author subsequent to reading about the abi Programme on [www.abi.ie](http://www.abi.ie). Each school principal consulted with the first author to ascertain their school's suitability. In the main, schools that opted for implementation of the programme had already been engaging in prosocial education strategies with students and wished to embed a prosocial school ethos with the help of a structured programme, or schools had been experiencing bullying issues and wanted best practice methodologies put in place to address issues going forward.

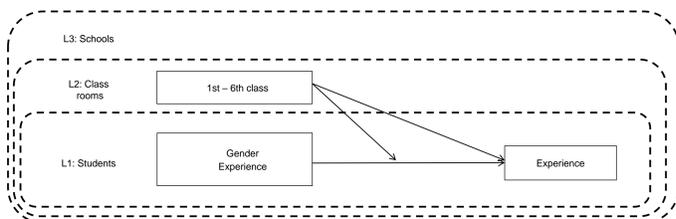
### Data Collection

#### Questionnaire development and assessment procedure

In order to survey preliminary students from age of six years and upwards, the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire (by Dan Olweus privately printed in 1996, distributed by Hazelden Publishing) is too long and complicated.

#### Multi-Level Model Data Analysis

Individuals are nested in class\_id, and class\_id are nested in schools



Three-level data structure: Individuals nested in classrooms nested in schools.

### Specific analysis questions

**RQ1:** Does the **feeling of being bullied** differ between schools and specific classes in a school, and does it vary systematically depending on class, gender and/or the interaction of class and gender.

**RQ2:** Which behaviour causes the experience of being bullied, i.e. which **type of behavioural experience** (of the six assessed) most likely predicts the feeling of being bullied? Or is a combination of a number of the behaviours most predictive? The answers would serve as a guide to teachers as to which reports of specific behaviours to take most seriously.

**RQ3:** Does the number of **witnesses** differ between schools and/or specific classes in a school, and does it depend on class and gender? Is there a relationship between being a witness and having felt bullied?

**RQ4:** Does **reporting** bullying behaviour differ between schools and/or specific classes in a school; also, does it depend on class and gender, and is reporting related to being a witness and/or of having felt bullied oneself?

**RQ5:** Does admitting to **having bullied others** differ between schools and/or specific classes in a school? Does it depend on class and gender, and is it related to (also) being a witness and/or a target of bullying behaviours?

## Results

Approximately 20% of students felt bullied in an ongoing school year, 29% felt they had witnessed bullying, 29% reported bullying and 4.5% reported bullying others. Except reporting, the patterns vary little between schools (ICC < 10%).

Variations between classes within schools are partly due to more frequent bullying experiences in younger classes; partly, a class climate variable of classmates feeling bullied predicted the probability of a student witnessing bullying. Reporting behaviour which differs between schools (ICC 21%) is predicted for targets (from 50% in 1st to 30% in 6th class) and for witnesses (in rural schools only similar in respect of targets), but in Dublin schools higher and increasing over class levels.

| Parameter             | School | Class  | Gender | Class x Gender | School x Class | School x Gender | School x Class x Gender | Intercept | Var School | Var Class | Var Gender | Var School x Class | Var School x Gender | Var School x Class x Gender |
|-----------------------|--------|--------|--------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|--------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|
| N                     | 5668   | 5635   | 5695   | 5658           | 5696           | 5693            | 5692                    | 5695      | 5684       | 5503      |            |                    |                     |                             |
| AIC <sub>c</sub>      | 26467  | 25210  | 26350  | 32584          | 27663          | 26937           | 26930                   | 27094     | 28022      | 27533     |            |                    |                     |                             |
| Intercept             | -1.405 | -0.921 | -0.898 | -3.051         | -1.747         | -1.537          | -1.515                  | -1.574    | -1.893     | -2.079    |            |                    |                     |                             |
| Var School            | 0.050  | 0.042  | 0.216  | 0.065          | 0.069          | 0.162           | 0.114                   | 0.067     | 0.079      | 0.364     |            |                    |                     |                             |
| Var class_ID   School | 0.264  | 0.419  | 0.367  | 0.398          | 0.422          | 0.202           | 0.087                   | 0.380     | 0.424      | 0.239     |            |                    |                     |                             |
| Prevalence            | 19.7%  | 28.5%  | 28.9%  | 4.5%           | 14.8%          | 17.7%           | 18.0%                   | 17.2%     | 13.1%      | 11.1%     |            |                    |                     |                             |
| ICC School            | .05    | .04    | .18    | .06            | .06            | .14             | .10                     | .06       | .07        | .28       |            |                    |                     |                             |
| class ID   school     | .21    | .30    | .27    | .28            | .30            | .17             | .08                     | .28       | .30        | .19       |            |                    |                     |                             |
| Indv.   class         | .74    | .66    | .65    | .65            | .64            | .69             | .82                     | .66       | .63        | .53       |            |                    |                     |                             |

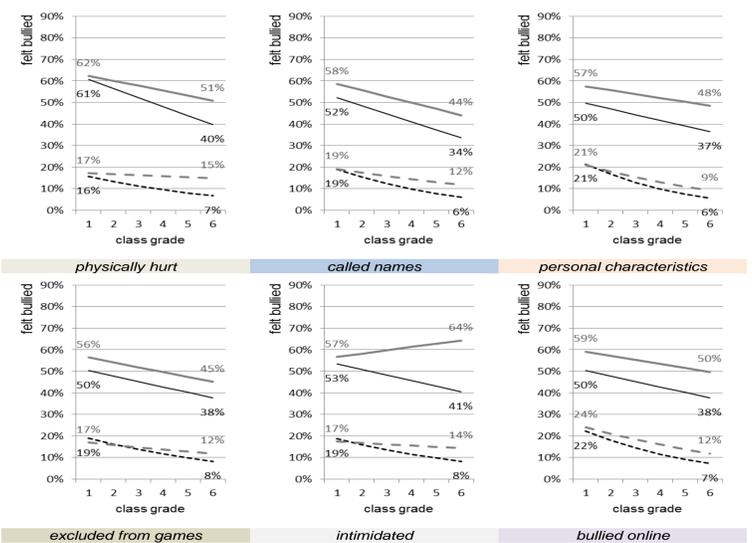
Prevalence and variation between schools and classrooms

### Answers to the Research Questions

**RQ1:** The analysis of the data, contrary to e.g. the PISA report on older (15-year-old) children (OECD, 2017), has shown no differences in terms of levels of bullying behaviours between schools.

Alongside the generalized result of a near 20% prevalence across the 34 primary schools participating in the study, the data is sufficiently differentiated and well suited to inform the content and design of specific modules within a school's individualized anti-bullying programme. Corresponding to findings in the literature (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), the feeling of **being bullied** varied between classes within schools. In short, prevalence is higher in younger classes and among girls.

**RQ2:** All six of the **behaviours asked about contributed to** the experience of being bullied, in particular physical bullying and intimidation, the latter more predictive among girls. Development over classes showed the expected shift from physical or body-related to more social or identity-related bullying behaviours which has also been found by Serdiouk et al (2013). Although the frequency of physical and social experiences was related to class and gender as in Fox et al (2014), the connections between experiencing individual or combined types of bullying and the overall experience of having been bullied were identified. Only online-bullying itself was prone to a time-trend. but it's power to evoke a feeling of being bullied did not differ from the other experiences assessed.



**RQ3:** Being a **witness** clearly differed between classes within schools: here a **class climate** variable (proportion of classmates feeling bullied) predicted the likelihood of becoming a witness regardless of gender or class level. The experience of being a target oneself additionally enhanced the probability of being a witness to others being bullied, this ties in with findings by Stapinski et al (2014).

**RQ4:** **Reporting** bullying behaviour to adults (prevalence 28.9% of participants), on the individual level was motivated by being either the target or having witnessed bullying, both in equal measures. Additionally, there are remarkable differences in levels of reporting behaviour between schools. The inclusion of urban as a variable at school level reveals an overall better climate for reporting in urban than in rural primary schools, particularly for witnesses.

**RQ5:** There was a low prevalence of admitting to **having bullied others** (4.5%). girls admitted to bullying less than boys, and prevalence slightly declines over class levels matching the associated data trend from the target's or witness' perspective.

## Conclusion

The low differences in bullying exposure between primary schools provide the most interesting result and will facilitate the use of policy templates.

High reporting results point to a rational for a structured intervention methodology within an anti-bullying programme which is used universally across the school system by all adults upon disclosures of bullying and in which children are inducted at the beginning of the school year. As a structured element of this programme, a practical action for primary school teachers would be that all reports of any type of bullying behaviour could be taken equally seriously and that an immediate down-tools intervention to deal specifically with the use of the word 'bullying' in association with any kind of negative peer interaction and whether it fits the interaction could be the first step to unveiling any deep bullying dynamic that may exist or not.

There is strong evidence of fluctuating roles in bullying cycles, particularly in younger classes. Learning opportunities around the dynamic of bullying behaviour in primary schools should centre on roles that are played to support the cycle so that children can recognise themselves and then learn how to begin to talk to other children in the same role group as part of an Anti-Bullying Programme.

Specific heightened bullying cycle role identification learning opportunities for children in rural primary schools is recommended.

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