



STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE  
A College of Queen's University Belfast

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*Ref: Written Evidence for Committee Stage of the Addressing  
Bullying in Schools Bill*

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Stranmillis University College would lend its full support to the comprehensive response submitted by the Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum (NIABF), whose chair is Dr Noel Purdy, Director of Research and Scholarship and Head of Education Studies at Stranmillis.

In addition, Stranmillis University College would draw the Committee's attention to some very recent research carried out by Dr Purdy and Prof Peter K Smith (Goldsmiths, University of London) which is currently under review by an academic journal and which it is hoped will be published in full in 2016.

Entitled "A content analysis of school anti-bullying policies in Northern Ireland" the paper is based on a content analysis of 100 anti-bullying policies, obtained in November 2014 from schools right across Northern Ireland, 50 mainstream primary schools and 50 mainstream post-primary schools. A content analysis was used and adapted from Smith et al. (2012). As well as determining which region of Northern Ireland the schools were located in, two new categories were added to record whether the policies mentioned consultation with registered pupils and/or their parents, resulting in a total of 36 categories. The categories were divided into four sections as before: (A) 13 categories concerning the definition of bullying; (B) 11 categories concerning reporting and responding to bullying; (C) 6 categories concerning recording, evaluating and consulting on the policy; and (D) 6 categories on strategies for preventing bullying. For each category the school scored either one for meeting the criterion or zero for not meeting it. The total overall anti-bullying content score was generated ranging from zero to 36. The number of pages of the policy was also counted and recorded, which included cover pages but not extraneous or duplicate material such as letters to parents. Finally, an additional unscored category was added to record whose definition of bullying (if any) had been used in each school policy.

In Section A, on the definition of bullying behaviour, responses were high for having a definition (98%), making it clear that bullying is different from other forms of aggression (74%), and for mentioning physical (94%), verbal (90%), relational (91%), material (76%), and cyberbullying (71%). Responses were moderate for mentioning racist bullying (47%), and low for homophobic (28%), sexual (22%), adult/teacher-pupil (7%), and bullying due to disability (16%) or religion (28%).

When the definitions were analysed, it was found that just 20% of the schools chose to use the Department of Education definition of bullying (DENI, 1999), while 11% used the

definition of the Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum (NIABF, 2005). A further 3% of schools used definitions taken from other referenced sources such as Olweus (1999). A majority of schools (57%) used an unreferenced definition, and when analysed further it was found that this was even more common among primary schools (68%) than post-primary schools (46%). Many of these definitions were written in child-friendly language but some failed to include the widely accepted essential criteria of repetition and imbalance of power (Smith, 2014). The following examples illustrate the weakness of some of the definitions used, since they do not mention either of the defining criteria of repetition and power imbalance (and the final one does not even specify actual behaviour):

“Bullying is behaviour intended to hurt another person resulting in pain and distress to the victim.”

“Bullying is any behaviour which is deliberately intended to hurt, intimidate, frighten, harm or exclude.”

“Bullying is the wilful, conscious desire to hurt another and put him/her under stress.”

In Section B, on reporting and responding to incidents of bullying, there were high responses for five of the eleven categories: 90 per cent of the policies stated what victims of bullying should do, 96 per cent said how teaching staff should respond to a report of bullying, 85 per cent clearly mentioned the responsibility of parents if they know of bullying, 78 per cent clearly mentioned the responsibilities of other pupils if they know of bullying, and 79 per cent discussed if, when or how parents would be informed. There were moderate levels of response for stating whether sanctions applied for bullying can vary (63%); for mentioning follow-up to see whether the sanctions were effective (52%); for discussing what action will be taken if the bullying persists (43%); and for suggesting how to support the victim (50%) and how to help the pupil(s) doing the bullying to change their behaviour (45%). The response was however very low (13%) in relation to clearly mentioning the responsibilities of non-teaching staff if they know of bullying.

In Section C, which focused on recording, evaluating and consulting on the policy, responses were very mixed. A high percentage (81%) of policies said that reports of bullying would be recorded, though it was noted that very few of these gave any further details as to how or where they would be recorded. Responses were moderate in terms of mentioning the periodic review and updating of the policy (61%), and in mentioning the (statutory) consultation with registered pupils (40%) and their parents (38%). Responses were low for saying who was responsible for coordinating the recording system (26%) and lower still for showing how records or survey data would be used to know whether the policy is working or not (8%).

Section D considered strategies for preventing bullying in schools. A high percentage of policies (73%) mentioned strategies to encourage co-operative behaviour, reward good behaviour, improve school climate or create a safe environment, while there was a moderate response (48%) in terms of providing additional advice for parents about bullying (beyond simply encouraging them to report it); and also for mentioning the preventative role of playground activities or lunchtime supervisors (34%). The other three items all received low responses: discussion of general issues of peer support (33%); discussion of issues of

inclusiveness (25%); and mention of the issue of bullying on the way to school or happening outside school (25%).

The implications of this research are clear.

First, there is an urgent need for clarity around what is meant by bullying, as currently there is a wide variation in understanding in schools, as evidenced by the range of definitions, some of which are inadequate. Stranmillis University College supports the recommendation of NIABF that we need a robust definition of bullying in schools, and feels that this should include the core elements of an intention to harm, repetition, and an imbalance of power. The current definition as outlined in Clause 1 of the Bill is weak in that it fails to include the imbalance of power.

Second, there is an urgent need for more guidance and/or exemplars of good practice for schools as they write their anti-bullying policies. This study highlights some encouraging progress but also many areas of concern e.g. where too few schools refer to specific forms of identity-based bullying within their policies; where there is limited or no information at all in relation to the nature of the support offered to children involved in bullying; and where there are too few references to how the information collated about bullying incidents will be analysed and used by schools to improve practice.

Third, the statutory guidance which will follow the Bill will be extremely important for adding the detail regarding the recommended approaches to preventing bullying and also responding to bullying incidents in schools. We would ask that this guidance be carefully considered, and written by a representative group which should include NIABF, but also teachers from all sectors, including special education. No expense should be spared in ensuring that this guidance is fit for purpose and appropriately disseminated to all schools.

In conclusion, this most recent research in Northern Ireland confirms the importance of the new Bill and ensuing statutory guidance, but also therefore the importance of getting things right from the start.

**4 January 2016**