Northern Ireland Assembly

Research and Information Service
Research Paper

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Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill: Views of Young People

NIAR 716-15

This Research Paper presents findings from a series of focus groups conducted to support the Committee for Education's scrutiny of the Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill.

Executive Summary

Introduction and methodology

The Education Minister introduced the Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill (the Bill) in the Assembly on the 30th November 2015. This Research Paper presents the findings of a series of focus groups the Research and Information Service (RaISe) conducted with post-primary pupils in order to gather their views on the Bill.

RaISe conducted 16 focus groups with post-primary pupils in November and December 2015, across all school management types. RaISe would like to thank all of the pupils and schools involved in the research for their valuable contributions.
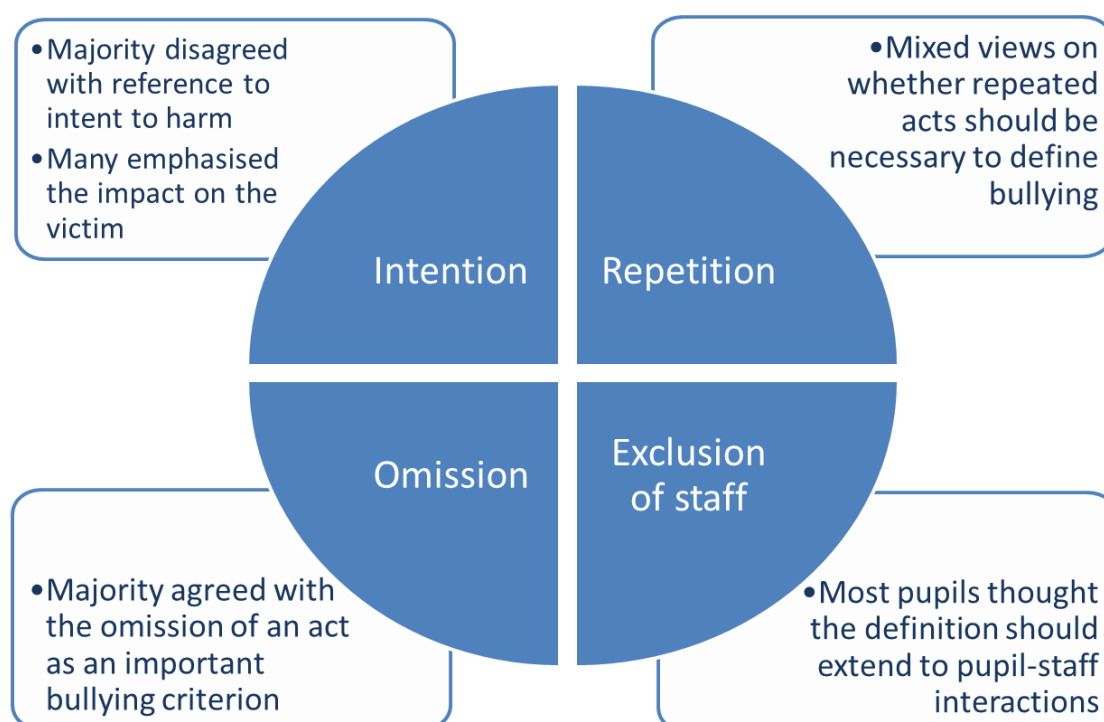
Views on bullying

Pupils participating in the focus groups discussed the harmful effects bullying can have on young people. Participants were particularly concerned about the extent of cyberbullying, which they thought could be more damaging than other forms, due to the potential for a large number of witnesses and due to its permanence.

Definition of bullying

The Bill provides a definition of bullying, describing it as a repeated verbal, written or electronic act or acts (or omission of an act), between pupils, with the intention of causing physical or emotional harm. The key findings of the focus groups in regard to the definition are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Participants' views on key elements of the Bill's definition of bullying

- Majority disagreed with reference to intent to harm
- Many emphasised the impact on the victim

Intention

Repetition

- Mixed views on whether repeated acts should be necessary to define bullying

Omission

Exclusion of staff

- Majority agreed with the omission of an act as an important bullying criterion

- Most pupils thought the definition should extend to pupil-staff interactions

Policies for preventing bullying

The Bill requires Boards of Governors to develop and implement policies to prevent bullying among pupils, applying to pupils:

- On school premises during the school day;

- While travelling to or from the school during the school term; and,

- While in the lawful control or charge of a member of school staff.

The majority of pupils participating in the focus groups thought that schools should be responsible for addressing bullying during school hours or when on school property, in line with findings from the DE survey.

While participants' views on extending schools' responsibility beyond this were more mixed, a majority supported the principle of schools being responsible outside school hours during term time (49% of survey respondents agreed). Many pupils thought that schools should be responsible while they are wearing school uniform. In particular, participants suggested that:

- Schools have a duty of care to their pupils;

- Bullying taking place outside school is likely to affect pupils at other times; and

- Bullying starting outside school is likely to continue within school (particularly cyberbullying).

Recording bullying incidents

The majority of pupils participating in the focus groups agreed with the Bill's requirements for Boards of Governors to ensure that a record of bullying incidents is kept within the school, in line with findings from the DE survey. However, participants highlighted a number of potential issues with this approach.

All participants stated that teachers are not always aware of bullying as pupils may choose not to report it. As such, statistics taken from school bullying records are unlikely to present a true reflection of the prevalence of bullying in schools. Participants highlighted a number of reasons why pupils may not report bullying, including:

- A fear that **reporting may worsen bullying**;

- A perception that **reporting is futile** due to the perceived widespread nature of bullying and an impression that it is often not addressed adequately;

- Pupils **may not wish to identify as being bullied,** due to feelings of embarrassment or shame;

- A view that **teachers often misidentify bullying or fail to take it seriously**; and,

- A perception that teachers are **less aware of electronic bullying** and that they often **struggle to address it**.

Some focus group participants also expressed concern around the implications of record keeping. In particular, they were concerned about implications for privacy; the attitudes of teachers towards those involved; future education and employment; and the maintenance of personal data.

In this regard, the majority of participants thought that the victim of bullying should have a say in whether an incident is recorded. They considered this to be particularly important where the motivation for bullying related to a personal matter or characteristic, or where a pupil was worried about retaliation.

Further issues related to whether schools would follow due process when recording incidents of bullying, and whether records would be held anonymously.

Motivation

Participants in the focus groups noted a wide range of potential motivations for bullying, with the most commonly perceived motives linked to factors outside those listed in the Bill. Pupils thought that internal motives tend to drive a large proportion of bullying, for example, jealousy, as an outlet for anger or as a way of dealing with problems at home.

Other factors related to social reasons, for example, to fit in with friends. Some pupils noted that appearance can act as a catalyst for bullying, while a smaller number highlighted other factors, such as race or religion.

In light of these findings, many participants suggested that it would be difficult for teachers to accurately determine the motivation for bullying incidents. In addition, some pupils indicated that it could be difficult to ascertain blame in cyberbullying incidents, which may be redistributed many times by others.

Conclusion

This Research Paper has presented the views of post-primary pupils from 16 schools on the Bill, and compared them to findings from the DE survey where possible. The findings suggest that pupils in principle support some aspects of the Bill, such as the inclusion of the word 'omission' within the definition of bullying, and the recording of bullying incidents.

However, focus group participants disagreed with other elements, such as the reference to intent to harm within the definition, and there were mixed views on other aspects, such as the repetition criterion. Participants also raised a number of concerns relating to some of the provisions. The box overleaf addresses these issues.

Further consideration could be given to the following areas:

Definition

- The emphasis pupils placed on the impact on the victim in defining bullying, rather than the intent to harm;
- Linked to this, the mixed views on the repetition criterion within the definition, and the emphasis placed on the impact on the victim in this regard; and,
- The exclusion of staff from the definition, in light of the view of most pupils that it should include pupil-staff interactions.

Policies for preventing bullying

- The evolving nature of bullying, particularly cyberbullying, and the implications of this for the scope of policies on preventing bullying and their implementation by schools
- The view of a majority of participants that schools' responsibility for addressing bullying should extent to outside school hours; and,
- The perception of some participants that schools' responsibility should include when pupils are wearing school uniform.

Reporting and recording bullying incidents

- How, if at all, the Department of Education (DE) will monitor the potential for underreporting of bullying (for example, whether it will conduct research with young people as a comparison);
- The barriers to pupils reporting bullying, including the perception that many teachers do not fully understand cyberbullying or fail to take bullying seriously;
- How long schools and the DE will maintain records of bullying;
- Who will have access to records of individual bullying incidents within a school under the proposed system;
- The view of the majority of participants that the victim of bullying should have a say in whether the incident is recorded;
- How, if at all, the DE will ensure that schools follow due process in recording bullying incidents; and,
- The motivations for bullying highlighted by pupils, for example, the rationale for excluding such motivations from the Bill.

Contents

Introduction

The Education Minister introduced the Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill (the Bill) in the Assembly on the 30th November 2015. The Bill provides a definition of bullying, places new duties on Boards of Governors to prevent bullying and requires schools to record bullying incidents. Further information can be found in Paper 136/15: Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill.

The Committee for Education commissioned the Research and Information Service (RaISe) to conduct a series of focus groups with young people to gather their views on the Bill. This Research Paper presents key findings from the focus groups which were conducted in November and December 2015.

It outlines the methodology used, and discusses participants' views on the key clauses. It also includes findings from the Department of Education (DE) consultation on the Bill held in January and February 2015, which included a survey with young people. This seeks to enable more robust consideration of the focus group findings, allowing for comparisons to be made between them and the DE survey results, in order to facilitate scrutiny of the Bill.

RaISe would like to thank all the pupils who took part in the focus groups for their valuable contributions. It would also like to thank their schools for supporting their participation.

1 Methodology

RaISe conducted a total of 16 focus groups with post-primary pupils. It held a series of focus groups, with schools visiting Parliament Buildings and making a number of outreach visits to schools, to ensure an appropriate balance of school management types (as far as possible). Table 1 outlines the schools involved.

Table 1: Profile of schools participating in the focus groups

Maintained	Controlled	Voluntary grammar	Controlled grammar	Integrated	Irish-medium	Special	EOTAS[1]	Total
3	3	3	1	1	1	2	2	**16**

Each group included between six and twelve participants (most of the groups contained eight), randomly selected from pupils volunteering to take part. Each lasted around 30 minutes, and participants discussed their thoughts and views on the key elements of the Bill. Figures and text boxes throughout the Paper present quotations from focus group participants.

[1] Education Other than at School providers

The focus groups took place after the DE consultation earlier in the year, which had consulted on the main policy proposals for addressing bullying in schools. The DE consultation received 4,939 responses to its survey, including 4,221 questionnaires completed by students (85% of responses), while the remainder came from teachers, parents and other stakeholders.[2]

In addition to the focus group findings, this Paper outlines some of the key results from the DE consultation to provide quantitative data. As noted earlier, the aim is to enable more robust consideration of the focus group findings, allowing for comparison with those from the survey.

2 Views on bullying

Pupils participating in the focus groups highlighted the potentially damaging effects of bullying, with some noting that it can have implications for mental health, even leading to suicide in certain cases. Pupils discussed a wide range of behaviours they thought constituted bullying, including those illustrated in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Bullying behaviours highlighted by participants
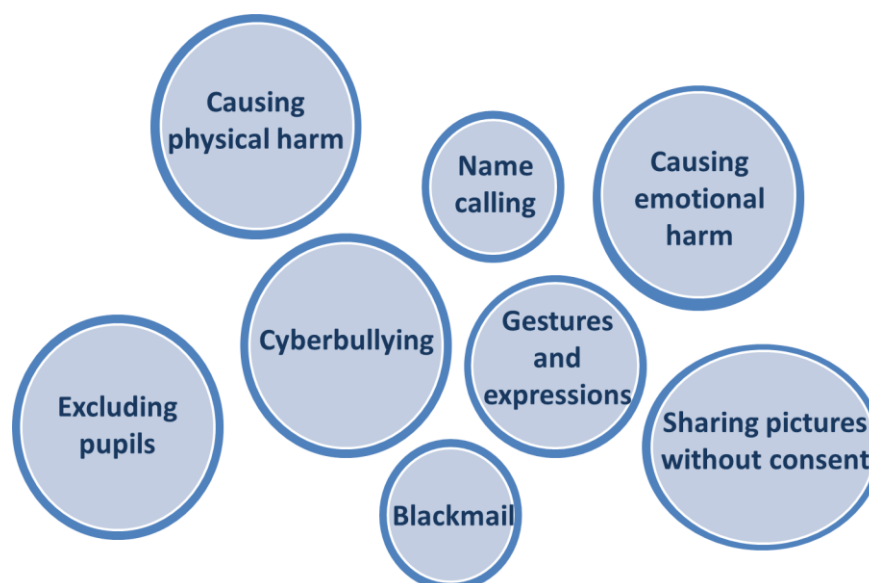
A common theme across all the focus groups related to pupils' concerns about the widespread nature of cyberbullying. Participants indicated that cyberbullying can be more harmful than other forms of bullying, due to the potential for a large number of people to witness incidents, and due to the permanent nature of electronic acts.

In addition, some pupils suggested that electronic forms of communication can facilitate bullying. In particular, pupils referred to the ease and accessibility of such forms of communication, as well as the anonymity it affords the perpetrator.

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[2] Department of Education (2015) *Addressing Bullying in Schools: Summary Report of Responses to the Consultation* Bangor: DE

> *"I think it [cyberbullying] causes more damage, because it's more permanent. If someone tells you something that upsets you, you can kind of brush it off. Whereas something on social media, everybody will see it, so you kind of feel attacked by everyone."*

Some focus group participants indicated that types of bullying can differ between girls and boys. In particular, they suggested that bullying is more likely to manifest physically among boys, while girls were more likely to carry out emotional or cyberbullying.

> *"Boys like to beat each other up but they'll just be doing it for a laugh half the time. For girls, if they actually want to hurt someone, they'll probably do it through their words, because girls don't really like to fight."*

3 Definition of bullying

The Bill provides a definition of bullying, describing it as a repeated verbal, written or electronic act or acts (or omission of an act), between pupils, with the intention of causing physical or emotional harm. There were mixed views among participants regarding the extent to which the definition is easy to understand. This section considers participants' views on the parties that should be included and on three key elements of the definition:

- Intention;
- Repetition; and
- Omission.

3.1 Intention

The majority of participants thought that the definition should not refer to the perpetrator's intent to cause harm. Instead, many described bullying in terms of the impact on the victim, regardless of the perpetrator's intention. This approach is used in a number of other jurisdictions, such as Scotland, which notes that bullying may not be intentional, and instead focuses on the victim's feelings.[3]

> *"Intentionally or not it doesn't matter; you still did it, the consequences are the same. That you didn't mean to do it isn't anything you can stand behind."*
>
> *"There are people who are bullies and who don't realise they're doing it. They're just trying to be funny and impress their friends."*

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[3] Perry, C. (2015) *Addressing Bullying in Schools Bill* Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service

3.2   Repetition

Just under two-thirds (65%) of pupil respondents to the DE survey agreed that hurtful or unhelpful behaviour becomes bullying only when it happens more than once.[4] This is broadly in line with findings from the focus groups, in which pupils expressed mixed views regarding whether repetition should be included within the definition.

Some pupils suggested that repeated actions characterise bullying and separate it from other behaviours.

> *"There's a one off… just a one off incident; but if it happens over and over again then that's bullying."*

However, others suggested that a single incident can have a significant impact on the pupil being bullied. Participants again emphasised the impact on the victim rather than the number of times the perpetrator carries out hurtful behaviour.

> *"It lives in your head, even if it's just one little thing that was said. It lives in your head and it never goes away. It just has to happen once."*

3.3   Omission

The majority of focus group participants agreed with the inclusion of the omission of an act within the Bill's definition. Many pupils indicated that excluding others is a common form of bullying; and one that can be just as harmful as verbal, physical or electronic forms.

> *"Having omission in there, I would say is important… It shows that it's not necessarily actually verbally, physically or electronically bullying someone. It is showing them that it's what you're not doing that also causes harm, like leaving people out, making them feel that they're excluded."*

However, some participants were concerned that then definition could label them as bullies, when they may not deliberately exclude other pupils. Some noted that they may leave another pupil out, but may do so due to differences in personality or in relation to previous disagreements.

> *"If you've had an argument with somebody and you just ignore them, I wouldn't see that as bullying – you're just trying to get away from the negativity."*

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[4] Department of Education (2015) *Addressing Bullying in Schools: Summary Report of Responses to the Consultation* Bangor: DE

3.4   Exclusion of staff

Just under a quarter (24%) of pupils responding to the DE consultation agreed that bullying only occurs between pupils, and does not include interactions between staff and pupils, while 56% disagreed.[5]

In the focus groups, almost all pupils believed that bullying could take place between pupils and staff, with both pupils capable of bullying staff members and staff able to bully pupils. As such, most pupils thought that the definition within the legislation should extend to interactions between pupils and staff.

> *"A teacher could be… cruel to that student by either making them feel bad in class, bringing a lot of attention to them and then degrading them."*
>
> *"Our old teacher; we didn't call her by her right name… she used to get so frustrated and we never did any work… they would turn their desks around to face the back. That was so bad."*

When discussing the potential for teachers to bully pupils, many focus group participants suggested that the imbalance of power could make it more difficult for pupils to report and address incidents of bullying.

> *"They [students} feel like if they tell someone, they'll get in trouble because the teacher has more power than they do."*

4 Policies for preventing bullying

The Bill places a number of duties on Boards of Governors, including duties to develop and implement policies to prevent bullying among pupils. The policies apply to pupils:

- On school premises during the school day;

- While travelling to or from the school during the school term; and,

- While in the lawful control or charge of a member of school staff.

A large proportion of respondents to the DE survey (over 90% in each case) thought that schools should be responsible for dealing with cyberbullying during school hours, while using school equipment and on school property. Almost half (49%) believed that they should be responsible at any time during term time. These findings are illustrated in Figure 3 overleaf.

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[5] Department of Education (2015) *Addressing Bullying in Schools: Summary Report of Responses to the Consultation* Bangor: DE

Figure 3: Consultation survey responses regarding when schools should be responsible for dealing with cyberbullying[6]
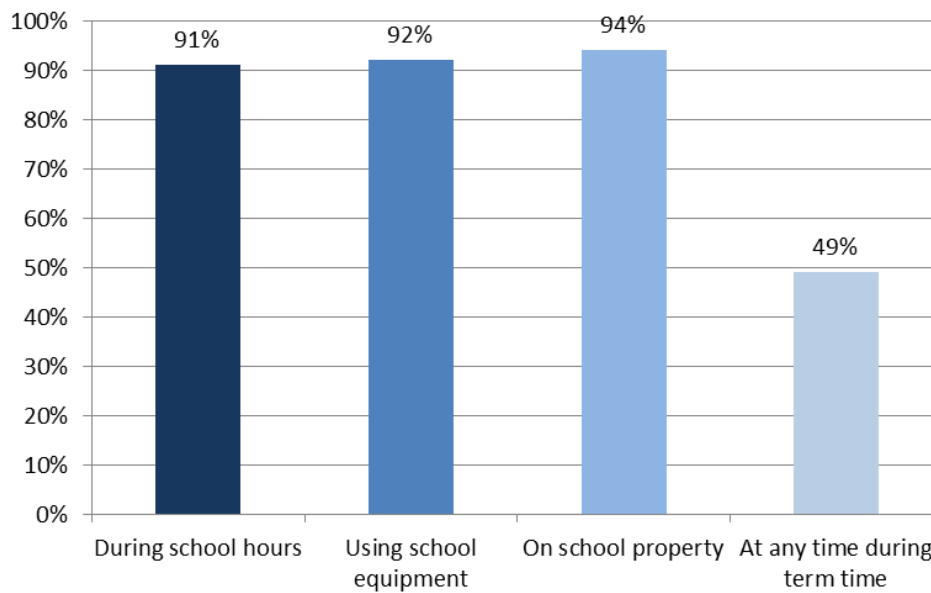
The focus groups findings were broadly in line with those from the survey. The majority of participants believed that schools should be responsible for addressing bullying during school hours, when using school equipment or when on school property. Views on extending responsibility to beyond such times were mixed, although a majority supported this.

Some participants believed that schools should be responsible for all bullying affecting their pupils, because bullying occurring outside school hours is likely to have implications for pupils during the school day.

Other participants referred to the school's duty of care for the pupils, and some suggested that bullying between two pupils outside of school is likely to continue during the school day. Figure 4 overleaf highlights these findings.

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[6] Department of Education (2015) *Addressing Bullying in Schools: Summary Report of Responses to the Consultation* Bangor: DE

Figure 4: Participants' rationale for stating that schools should be responsible for all bullying affecting their pupils

Schools have a duty of care to their pupils

"The school has a duty of care to the pupils that go there. It's not like when it's half three it's not their problem anymore. They have to make sure pupils are ok."

Bullying likely to affect pupils at other times

"[Schools should be responsible] all the time because it can affect you mentally; it can affect your school work. The school should definitely pick up on it."

Bullying starting outside is likely to continue within school

"If it happens outside school it's obviously going to happen inside school too; it's not just going to stay outside school."

Most participants thought that schools should be responsible for dealing with incidents of cyberbullying, particularly if they are mentioned in school or teachers become aware of them. Some noted that teachers refuse to address incidents of cyberbullying when they happened outside school.

Pupils also emphasised the evolving nature of cyberbullying incidents, which may begin at home but continue to develop during school. Many participants thought that teachers and other school staff should address cyberbullying, as typically it is not confined to home.

"If people post stuff about you on social media and you go to a teacher, they say that it didn't happen in school so they can't do anything. But then you are forced to spend seven hours in the same room as them [the perpetrator]. They should do something about that."

"Things happen in school and you go home and they're all over Facebook. The teachers still wouldn't… They just dismiss it. They say it's happened on the internet; it's happened outside school, go to the local police, even though it's to do with school. They completely dismiss it."

Many pupils discussed the idea that when they are wearing school uniform they are representing the school. Some suggested that the school's responsibility for addressing bullying should extend to when pupils are wearing uniform.

> *"When you're wearing your school uniform: I think that's important as well. There's a link to the school and the school has to be responsible."*
>
> *"The worst thing that you can do is show we are an aggressive school so the schools should step in when we are wearing the uniform."*

5 Recording bullying incidents

The Bill requires Boards of Governors to ensure that a record of all incidents or alleged incidents of bullying is kept within the school. The record must include the perceived motivation for the incident and state how the school addressed it.

While 85% of pupils responding to the DE survey agreed that schools should keep a record of bullying incidents (including their motivation), a lower proportion (72%) agreed that schools should use a common IT system to do so.[7] Three-quarters (75%) of pupils agreed that recording such incidents could help schools reduce bullying in the future.[8]

In line with these findings, the majority of focus group participants supported the principle of recording bullying incidents.

> *"I think it's good. They could go back and see if it hasn't happened before; and if so, they can deal with it further and have more insight into it."*
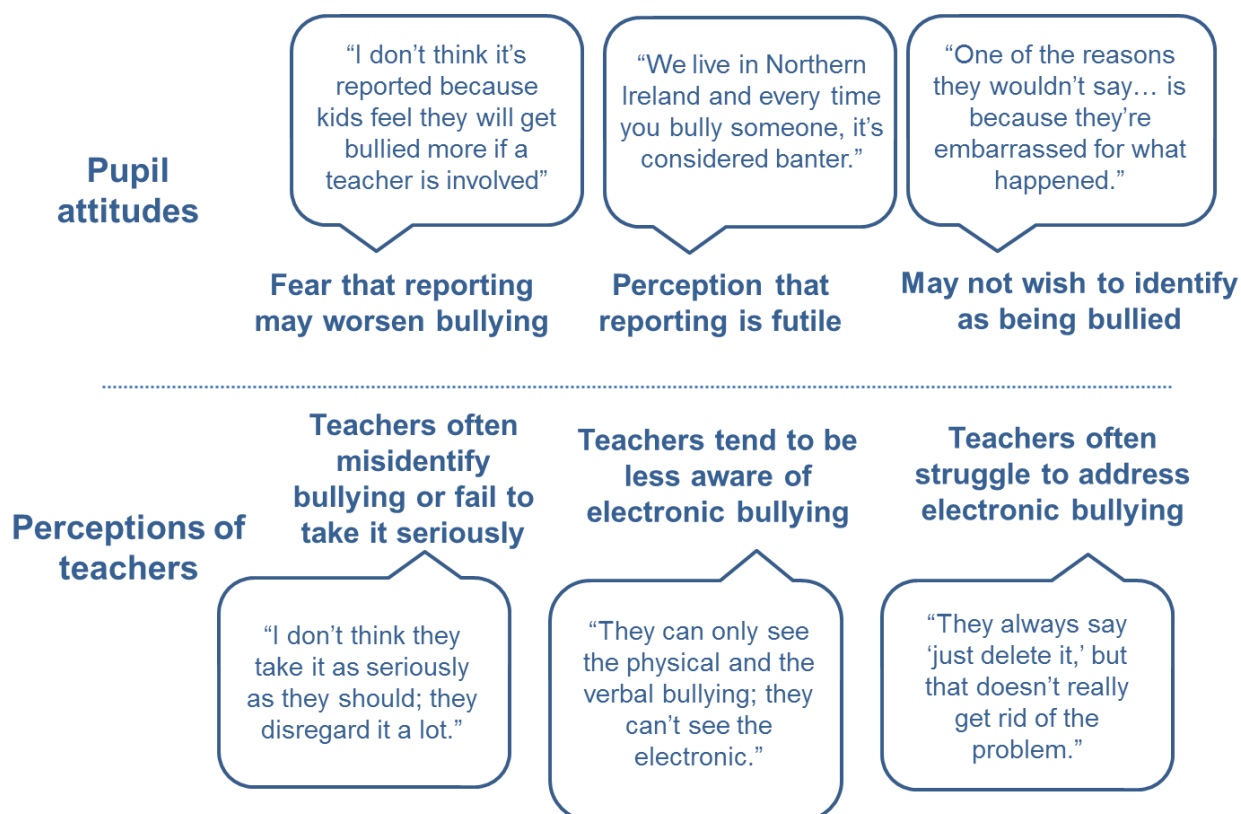
5.1 Underreporting

However, all pupils participating in the groups indicated that teachers are not always aware of bullying incidents within their school, suggesting that records of bullying are therefore unlikely to reflect a true picture of the prevalence of bullying within a school.

Participants discussed a range of reasons why pupils often do not report incidents of bullying to teachers or other adults in school. The reasons related both to pupil attitudes, for example, a fear that reporting may exacerbate bullying, and to perceptions of teachers, such as a view that teachers often fail to take bullying seriously. Figure 5 overleaf provides an overview of the key reasons for underreporting.

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[7] Note: the latter figure is drawn from a much smaller sample of pupils, so should be treated with some caution

[8] Department of Education (2015) *Addressing Bullying in Schools: Summary Report of Responses to the Consultation* Bangor: DE

Figure 5: Participants' views on the reasons why pupils often do not report bullying

Pupil attitudes

"I don't think it's reported because kids feel they will get bullied more if a teacher is involved"

"We live in Northern Ireland and every time you bully someone, it's considered banter."

"One of the reasons they wouldn't say… is because they're embarrassed for what happened."

Fear that reporting may worsen bullying

Perception that reporting is futile

May not wish to identify as being bullied

Perceptions of teachers

Teachers often misidentify bullying or fail to take it seriously

Teachers tend to be less aware of electronic bullying

Teachers often struggle to address electronic bullying

"I don't think they take it as seriously as they should; they disregard it a lot."

"They can only see the physical and the verbal bullying; they can't see the electronic."

"They always say 'just delete it,' but that doesn't really get rid of the problem."

Some focus group participants were concerned that keeping records of bullying may further deter pupils from reporting incidents, due to a fear of further aggravating the bullying, or because they did not want what they experienced to be recorded.

> *"Some pupils getting bullied might be afraid to go to a teacher, and even more so if it's written down. So they mightn't go in case the bully goes harder on them."*

5.2   Implications for those involved in recorded incidents

Some participants in the focus groups highlighted further concerns around the implications of such record keeping. In particular, pupils expressed concern about implications for:

- **Privacy:** *"You may not feel comfortable because people who aren't involved could see what had happened. Some people would want to keep it private";*

- **Perceptions of and attitudes towards those involved**: *"If the teachers have seen it; that might taint how they think of you;"*

- **Future education and employment:** *"If you have a good career, it could stop your career if you accidentally release some information;"* and,

- **The maintenance of personal data:** *"[If someone is experiencing bullying about] a photograph of themselves, would you want that on record? Would you want the Department of Education to see that, even if it's anonymous?"*

Some pupils also expressed concern that records could lead to the creation of league tables of bullying. In this regard, many students suggested that records could be maintained anonymously.

5.3 Consent

The majority of focus group participants thought that the victim of bullying should have a say in whether the incident is recorded. Some pupils thought that this would be particularly important where the motivation behind an incident related to a personal matter or characteristic, or where a pupil feared retribution as a result of the incident being recorded.

> *"If the pupil says not to [record] we have to respect their privacy. If it's something personal; about family or whatever."*

5.4 Due process

A number of pupils expressed concern about whether the school would follow due process in recording bullying incidents. Some suggested that the perpetrator and victim may provide conflicting accounts, while others highlighted the potential for pupils to falsely report that they had experienced bullying. Some pupils suggested that teachers could provide a biased account depending on their relationship with the perpetrator or victim.

> *"The bullies are going to say something completely different to what happened."*
>
> *"They mightn't even feel that they are being bullied; they're just doing it for the sake of getting the other person in trouble."*

5.5 Transfer of data

The majority of participants supported the provision of bullying data to the DE and the Education and Training Inspectorate. Many noted the potential for such data to support attempts to reduce bullying in schools. However, many emphasised the importance of ensuring that records are anonymous.

> *"It could improve the situation in schools."*
>
> *"Keep their name out of it. Just their statement, instead of their name."*
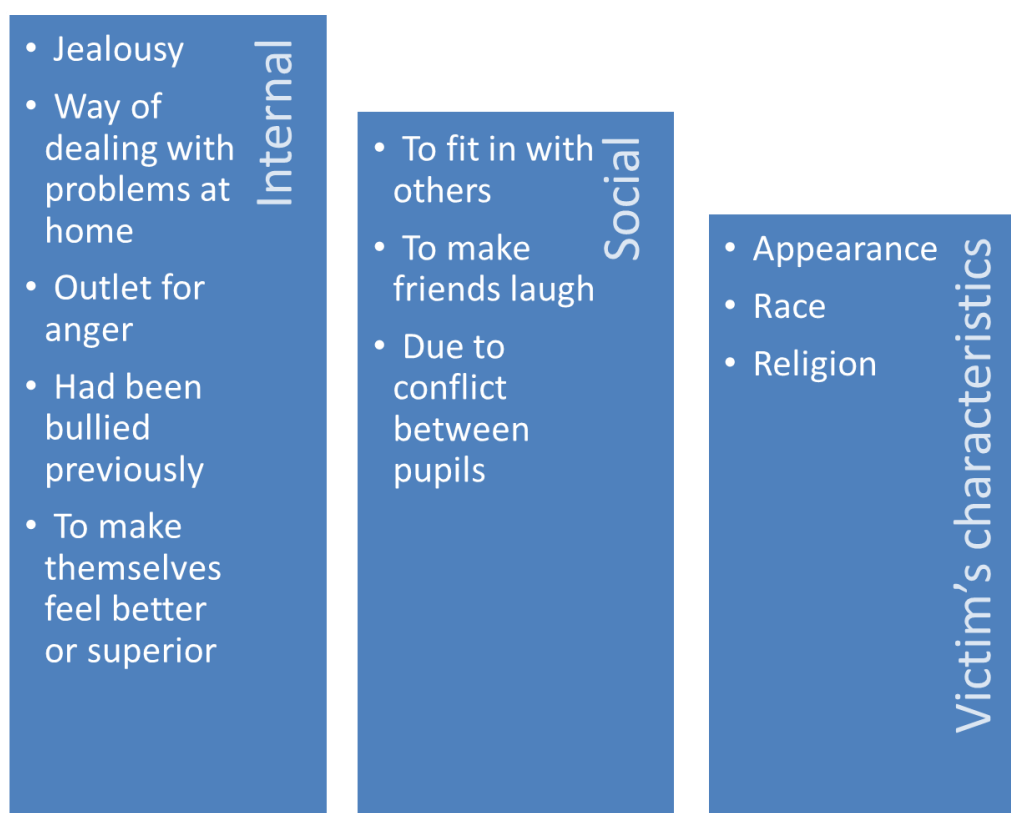
6 Motivation

Pupils highlighted a wide range of motivations behind bullying incidents. The most commonly perceived motivations were internal in nature, reflecting the perpetrator's own feelings or circumstances. For example, many suggested that pupils often bully others as a way of dealing with their own anger or as a result of jealousy.

Other participants indicated that some pupils bully for social reasons, for example, to fit in with their friends. Some pupils stated that appearance can act as a motivation for bullying, while a smaller number referred to other factors such as race or religion. Figure 6 below illustrates the perceived motivations.

Figure 6: Participants' views on the most common motivations for bullying

Internal
- Jealousy
- Way of dealing with problems at home
- Outlet for anger
- Had been bullied previously
- To make themselves feel better or superior

Social
- To fit in with others
- To make friends laugh
- Due to conflict between pupils

Victim's characteristics
- Appearance
- Race
- Religion

"If there are problems going on with you, you could take it out on someone else."

"They do know it's harmful, but they would just do it to get a laugh with friends… because they want to look more cool."

"When I was younger I got bullied for my hair colour and having bad teeth. When I got my braces out people still did it, because I was smiling too much."

Many participants in the focus groups highlighted a number of potential issues for teachers in ascertaining the motivation behind a bullying incident, noting that teachers would only know what they were told about the incident. Potential challenges in this regard could include that:

- The victim may not understand why they were bullied;

- The perpetrator may not be truthful in discussing their motivation; and,

- It may be difficult to review incidents of cyberbullying.

> *"The bully would say: 'I just did that for a laugh'. But deep down, it could be a physical outlet for anger, problems in the house."*
>
> *"If somebody is being bullied on the internet or through text messaging, they can't go in and look at somebody's private stuff."*

In one of the focus groups pupils suggested that it may be difficult to ascertain blame in cyberbullying incidents, as original material can be redistributed by many others.

> *"Who's the person to blame? The person who started it first and then it keeps on changing? So if I were to say 'I saw you with such and such', then they say it to someone else, they are going to add something. It's just natural."*

7 Conclusion

This Research Paper has presented the views of post-primary pupils from 16 schools on the Bill, as provided through the focus groups undertaken by RaISe, and compared them to results from the DE survey where possible. The findings suggest that pupils in principle support some aspects of the Bill, such as the inclusion of the word 'omission' within the definition of bullying, and the recording of bullying incidents.

However, pupils disagreed with other elements, such as the reference to intent to harm within the definition, and there were mixed views on other aspects, such as the repetition criterion. Participants also raised a number of concerns relating to some of the Bill's provisions. The box overleaf addresses these issues.

Further consideration could be given to the following areas:

Definition

- The emphasis pupils placed on the impact on the victim in defining bullying, rather than the intent to harm;
- Linked to this, the mixed views on the repetition criterion within the definition, and the emphasis placed on the impact on the victim in this regard; and
- The exclusion of staff from the definition, in light of the view of most pupils that it should include pupil-staff interactions.

Policies for preventing bullying

- The evolving nature of bullying, particularly cyberbullying, and the implications of this for the scope of policies on preventing bullying and their implementation by schools
- The view of a majority of participants that schools' responsibility for addressing bullying should extent to outside school hours; and,
- The perception of some participants that schools' responsibility should include when pupils are wearing school uniform.

Reporting and recording bullying incidents

- How, if at all, the DE will monitor the potential for underreporting of bullying (for example, whether it will conduct research with young people as a comparison);
- The barriers to pupils reporting bullying, including the perception that many teachers do not fully understand cyberbullying or fail to take bullying seriously;
- How long schools and the DE will maintain records of bullying;
- Who will have access to records of individual bullying incidents within a school under the proposed system;
- The view of the majority of participants that the victim of bullying should have a say in whether the incident is recorded;
- How, if at all, the DE will ensure that schools follow due process in recording bullying incidents; and,
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