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Preventing bullying and discrimination  
of Roma children



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# Initial Trend Report

An initial report on prominent trends, best practice, and issues across literature on ethnicity-based bullying.

The BReAThE project report

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## **Trends of Research and Practice in Ethnicity-Based Bullying:**

### **The case of Roma Population in Europe**

Trends of research in regards to the bullying of Roma individuals usually incorporate challenges or issues in regards to (i) measurements (ii) approaches, and (iii) practices.

- (i) An empirical issue: How can we measure the relationship between ethnicity and bullying/victimisation?
- (ii) A theoretical issue: How ethnicity-based bullying happens?
- (iii) A practical issue: What is the prominent practice that schools use to tackle ethnicity-based bullying?

There is also a fourth issue centring on research design: In this case that is how participants (e.g. Roma) as the research assistants can contribute to thorough and comprehensive data collection and analysis of what is found. Suggestions for dealing with these issues can determine trends in regards to how we approach reducing or preventing ethnicity-based bullying of Roma children and adolescents. The BReAThE project has followed the trends outlined below:

- 1) Whether ethnicity is the bully's or victim's (perceived) reason for bullying/being victimized;
- 2) Whether only one perspective (i.e., victim or bully) is taken into account when estimating the prevalence of bullying/victimization;
- 3) Whether a new theoretical approach is needed to explain how ethnicity-based bullying/victimization occurs;
- 4) Whether a participatory action research approach (i.e., Roma participants as the research assistants) is effective in conducting the research; and
- 5) Whether there is a prominent practice that schools take to tackle ethnicity-based bullying/victimization;

## **(1) Is ethnicity a perceived reason for bullying/victimization among Roma participants?**

Most studies on ethnicity-based bullying include no ethnicity as a perceived reason for bullying/victimization, especially among Roma children and adolescents. To address this, the BReAThE project has taken into account both victims' perception of their own ethnicity and bullies' perceptions of the victims' ethnicity as a reason for bullying/victimization.

Ethnicity as a perceived reason for bullying someone or being bullied is difficult to determine in research practices due to the lack of instruments (e.g., surveys or questionnaires). Widely used research instruments fall short in measuring both (a) the extent to which victims are aware of the bullies' motivations, and (b) whether bullies recognize or perceive reasons of ethnic-cultural difference for their own aggressive behaviour. How much ethnicity-based bullying is reported can vary according to how victims' ethnicity is perceived by bullies, rather than how victims themselves identify with an ethnicity.

## **(2) Bully and Victim's View of ethnicity-based bullying/victimization**

In general, studies only focus on measuring how much ethnicity-based victimization goes on by asking school students how often they bullied someone or were victimized because of ethnicity. Studies tend to concentrate on ethnic background of the bully (who bullies) and victim (who is bullied) separately, but not considering a combination of the two (i.e., who bullies whom, such as members of a Roma community bullying those of another Roma community).

Indeed, the majority of present research on ethnicity-based bullying/victimisation only takes into account the victim's perspective, despite the fact that when bullies declare that ethnicity is the reason they are bullying someone is far more significant than when victims do, especially in classrooms where an ethnic group is dominant. This suggests that

researchers need to take both sides into account (i.e., who bullies whom) to determine a more accurate prevalence rate of ethnicity-based bullying/victimization. To this aim, The BReAThE project has taken into account both bully and victim's perspective/report of ethnicity as a reason for bullying or victimization.

### **(3) A Transactional Approach to Ethnicity-Based Bullying/Victimisation**

Very recent studies on ethnicity-based bullying highlight the need for theoretical explanations (i.e., why and how ethnicity-based bullying happens?) rather than conducting further empirical research (e.g., using questionnaires). The push towards theoretically driven studies is increasing, to provide theoretical explanations of how ethnicity-based bullying/victimization occurs. To meet this concern, the BReAThE project has proposed (and been based) on a transactional approach. That is, to take into account specific characteristics of a school classroom, namely ethnical misfit (e.g., dissimilar to the majority in colour and language) and power imbalance (e.g., the number of an ethnic minority versus majority in a classroom). This approach suggests that ethnicity-based bullying happens not because of personal (i.e., ethnic identity) nor the classroom characteristics, but because of inter-dependent effects between individual and characteristics. That is, how the number of students of a specific ethnicity influence the perception of ethnic identity and dominance in a classroom.

Ethnicity-based bullying/victimisation can be explained by the inter-dependent effects between (a) ethnicity, (b) ethnical power imbalance and misfit (the number of an ethnic minority students in a classroom), and (c) individual characteristics (e.g., perceived ethnic-identity, -threat, -misfit, -confidence, -competition, and dominance). The inter-dependent effect means that the classroom and individual characteristics are not the cause of ethnicity-based bullying but probably “perceived” as motivational or reasons. Neither ethnicity,

classroom/school context, victim, nor bully is the direct cause of ethnicity-based bullying/victimisation. Due to the interdependent effects, (a) at the individual level, students can change roles between victims and bullies; and (b) at the collective level, there can be swapping of the victim and bully roles between ethnic minority and ethnic majority students.

From this perspective of the inter-dependent effects on the formation of intra-personal (e.g., personal perception of oneself/ethnic identity) and interpersonal values (e.g., diversity acceptance) in school and social contexts, it can be understood that bullies and victims are influenced by social group (e.g., peer group) as much as they can influence the group personally. Therefore, the framework proposes not only mutual effects between bullies and victims but also within individual characteristics. That is, bullies and victims are defined in terms of (a) how they “perceive and affect” their own ethnic identity and (b) how they are “perceived and affected by” each other, within a particular time period, social-cultural context, and physical environment. Ethnicity-related bullies, victims or bully-victims do not simply act up to social-cultural norms, but also subjectively perceive and form their interpersonal and intrapersonal values or norms. As such, they may perceive, evaluate, and act on their subjective and social norms, which in turn improve or inhibit their fit between social and personal needs. They may choose to change their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours to fall in – or out- of line with social-cultural norms. Their subjective (conscious or unconscious) choice and intention may in turn increase or decrease the prevalence of ethnicity-based bullying.

#### **(4) A participatory action research approach: Roma participants as the research assistants**

Recent research on ethnicity-based bullying and discrimination emphasises the importance of the role of research participants as assistants in a research on their ethnic

community. This is a trend in adopting a ‘participatory research action approach’. To this aim, two Roma assistants collaborate with the BREATHe project to collect and analyse data.

##### **(5) The Need for Best Practice: Ethnic-Diversity of Teachers**

One of the underlying reasons for ethnicity-based bullying is power-imbalance. For example, there is power imbalance when the number of Roma students is smaller than those who make up another ethnic majority in classrooms. To balance the power, a trend in school practice is to promote teacher-ethnic diversity.

It would be remiss to discuss power imbalance in the classroom setting without acknowledging the proportion of ethnic diversity among teachers as well as the policy, culture, and ethos of the school setting. Power imbalance can also be represented in the proportion of ethnic diversity among teachers, and be associated with school policies, ethos or norms which may prioritize an ethnic/racial dominance. In many cases, power imbalance does not result merely out of disproportionate pupil numbers of one group or another but more in terms of the value that a school places on diversity and inclusion.

Structural issues at the school, community or even society level such as best practice policies and procedures can also influence the power hierarchy of particular student groups and/or increase the risk of a particular group being associated with ethnic misfit. Some examples of such practices might be a shortened day for students from particular backgrounds (e.g., Irish travellers) or rewards such as time off for students engaging in particular religious’ ceremonies (e.g., Holy communion in Irish Catholic schools). Furthermore, school policies on bullying and victimisation, although nearly present in every school may fall short of recognising inter-ethnic bullying/victimisation as an important behaviour to reduce and limit.