



Ollscoil Chathair
Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University



Ionad
Frithbhulaíochta
Anti-Bullying
Centre

DCU Anti-bullying Centre

**Opening Statement
for Joint Oireachtas
Committee on
Education, Further
and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation
and Science**

Dr Siobhan O'Reilly

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Opening address

Good morning Chair, thank you for inviting DCU Anti-Bullying Centre to attend this meeting of the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. I welcome the opportunity to represent my colleagues at the Centre. We are very happy to continue to support the Committee's work in relation to school bullying and mental health.

DCU's Anti-Bullying Centre is located in DCU's Institute of Education and staff at the Centre have been doing research and education on bullying for 26 years.

The Centre works closely with the Department of Education with whom we have a service level agreement, as well as the Department of Justice and Department of Further and Higher Education, with whom we have research agreements.


The Centre also hosts the UNESCO Chair on Bullying and Cyberbullying and the Irish Research Observatory on Cyberbullying, Cyberhate, and Online Harassment.

In addition to our research activity, the Centre delivers a number of educational resources, including "FUSE" Ireland's nationwide anti-bullying and online safety programme for primary and post-primary schools. With financial support from Meta K, Rethink Ireland and the Department of Education, FUSE is offered free to all schools in Ireland, and is proving highly successful in improving the self-efficacy of children and adolescents in relation to tackling bullying and online safety issues.

Our opening statement represents the full cohort of over 50 scholars and educators working with the Centre and builds on our two previous submissions in November 2020 and March 2021 and our presentation to this Committee in June 2021.

Importance of Schools as Safe Spaces i.e. free from bullying, intimidation and harassment

The Anti-Bullying Centre, both from research and a practice perspective, believes that young people must feel safe in order to learn at their optimum level. A safe school is free from bullying, intimidation and harassment.




Students/Learners who feel safe at school tend to have better emotional health and are less likely to engage in risky behaviours. That sense of safety contributes to an overall feeling of connection. School connectedness is measured as feeling happy, safe, close to people, a part of school, and believing teachers treat students fairly.

A safe school is committed to a range of preventative measures and also prepared to intervene and/or respond when the space is experienced as unsafe. A multi-tiered system of support facilitates a systematic approach in a learner-centred manner. A safe learning environment, social emotional learning and being trauma informed are core preventative strategies that support self-regulation, empathy, self-esteem and caring relationships and can support **‘the all’** in the school setting. Specific or specialised strategies may be required to support **‘the some’** or **‘the few’** to ensure children and young people with more complex needs can be effectively supported and feel safe at school. Optimally, this would include a family and/or community-based element.

Safe and connected schools are adequately supported to create and sustain a caring climate **‘for all’**, which may require differentiated responses for **‘the some’** and **‘the few’** based on the needs presenting. Various professional roles, including those involving adults from the wider community context of the school, can work collaboratively to ensure that the school climate is one where children and young people feel safe and connected. School climate is one of the key protective factors with regard to bullying prevention. We know that the Minister is launching the new Action Plan on Bullying in December and it would be great to see the inclusion of a school climate survey as one of the actions to be implemented as part of that plan.

Impact on mental health if schools are not safe

Health is defined by the Department of Health as: everyone achieving his or her potential to enjoy complete physical, mental and social wellbeing (Healthy Ireland, 2013). Positive mental health for children and young people is part of their overall health and is inextricably linked with well-being. It is usually conceptualised as encompassing aspects of **emotional** (affect/feeling), **psychological** (positive functioning), **social** (relations with others in society), **physical** (physical health) and **spiritual** (sense of meaning and purpose in life) well-being (Barry and Friedli, 2008).




As outlined in our 2020 and 2021 submissions, previous research has consistently shown that being involved in bullying as a target, as a child/young person displaying bullying behaviour or as a bystander at school can be associated with a number of mental health problems, including, psychosomatic complaints, anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation (Gibb, et al., 2011; Gini & Pozzoli, 2009). Issues of identity seem to continue to remain at the heart of much bullying behaviour. UNESCO 2019 research showed that physical appearance and race were the most common reasons for a child being a target of bullying behaviour. It is well established in research that adverse childhood experiences (ACES) have a negative effect on the development of a child, particularly when the bullying is related to identity. The Anti-Bullying Centre would like to build on the research and work that it has done, which led to the development of the FUSE programme, by researching and developing specific education responses/programmes for students with particular or additional educational needs and/or an autistic diagnosis. Recent decades have seen a significant increase in the number of autistic students enrolled within mainstream school settings in Ireland (Kenny, McCoy & Mihut, 2020). The number of autistic students allocated SNA support increased by 83% in five years between 2011 and 2016 and the number of specialist autism classes increasing by 400% in the ten years between 2011 and 2021. There are now 2,184 specialist classes in Ireland, with over 85% designated for autistic pupils (who number over 13,000). Post-primary school has been identified as a time when young people with an autism diagnosis are at an increased risk of developing mental health problems (Barnhill and Myles 2001).

There currently are no specific guidelines for schools or for parents to support autistic students who experience bullying. There is also no existing research exploring the prevalence or common forms of bullying experienced by autistic students attending Irish schools.

Impact of school policy and initiatives to support implement school policy in a WEA

The Department has developed, produced and provided a range of policy and guidance documents, which provide a clear and supportive framework on how schools can work towards creating safe school spaces and support students' mental health and well-being. In developing and implementing their own specific related school policies and procedures, ABC encourage schools to again work within a Whole Education Approach which includes



all staff, not just teaching staff, and other significant adults whether that be in a family and/or community context. This can be done in a way that draws on the potential wide-ranging areas of expertise, experience and backgrounds of the staff and/or adults.

School policies and procedures play a significant role in sign-posting schools in their support of children and young people. ABC believes that empowering and supporting schools to respond in a dynamic way to the needs presenting in their context, will achieve the optimum outcomes in terms of creating safe school climates. These responses will be underpinned by the policies, procedures and evidence informed practice frameworks available. They should also be created relating to the specific needs of their school, with the resources they have available to them within the school and the wider community context and ideally in consultation with the children and young people themselves.

Our recommendations are as follows

- The implementation of a School Climate Survey as part of the Action Plan on Bullying to be released in December.
- That research be carried out on the prevalence or common forms of bullying experienced by autistic students attending Irish schools. That subsequent to that research, specific guidelines for schools and parents to support autistic students experiencing bullying are developed and implemented.
- That the development and introduction of Multi-Disciplinary Teams in and around schools is considered.
- That schools are supported to take a Whole Education Approach (WEA) in policy, procedures and practice

References

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Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018–2023 Revised October 2019

Contact details:

Dr Siobhan O'Reilly

siobhan.s.oreilly@dcu.ie

