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The Enactment of the Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools (2013): Perspectives from 10 Principals in Irish Primary Schools

Research Report

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Introduction

It has been widely acknowledged in the international literature and by policymakers, practitioners, and wider society that bullying remains a pervasive and persistent threat to the education and well-being of children. While various conceptualisations and definitions of bullying exist, there is a shared consensus that the role of the school is crucial in tackling the prevalence of bullying and the harmful consequences of bullying behaviour. Within the past decade in Ireland, there has been an increased focus on the role of schools and educational settings in addressing bullying. The publication of two key policy texts in 2013, the *Action Plan on Bullying* (DES, 2013a) and *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* (DES, 2013b) and the more recent *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying* (DoE, 2022), have set out the approach of the Department of Education (DoE) to tackle bullying and within schools. This has been seen as a significant development, given that the previous guidelines (DES, 1993) were issued twenty years beforehand. The publication of the *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* (DES, 2013b), hereafter referred to as the 'anti-bullying procedures', provides direction and guidance to school authorities and personnel and sets specific mandates for schools in dealing with school-based bullying behaviour. All recognised primary and post-primary schools and centres for education are mandated to comply with the procedures and to develop and formally adopt an anti-bullying policy (local level) in line with the anti-bullying procedures (macro-level).

Rationale for research

Despite the development of anti-bullying procedures and the requirement for schools to develop specific school policies concerning bullying prevention, several research studies highlight the persistence of bullying within schools (Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Foody et al., 2018; Murphy et al., 2017). It is also widely recognised in policy and literature that the principal plays a crucial role in implementing anti-bullying policies and in leading the school's commitment to tackling anti-bullying. However, the competing policy demands that school principals encounter, stemming from the 'new public management' agenda (Tierney, 2006), can potentially compromise their capacity to deal with bullying (Brown et al., 2020; Farrelly et al., 2017). Furthermore, there is a dearth of research on how principals translate national policies at the local school level, including the interpretation and implementation of national anti-bullying policy (Brown et al, 2020; Foody et al, 2019). A range of quantitative research studies have been previously conducted by the Anti-Bullying Centre (ABC) at Dublin City University (Foody et al., 2010; Murphy et al., 2017) to investigate how principals are implementing anti-bullying procedures. Principals in primary and post-primary schools were surveyed, and there was a positive response (n=918 principals) in completing the survey. Despite the publication of the anti-bullying procedures in 2013, the studies report that principals in primary and post-primary schools continue to face challenges in dealing with bullying. The studies also highlight the need for more in-depth research into the implementation of anti-bullying policies at the school level.

Research aims and objectives

Arising from the backdrop, and the rationale for research, this research sets out to undertake the following:

- Explore principals' interpretation of the anti-bullying procedures and
- Unpack their experience of enacting these procedures.
- Within the conclusion section of this report, proffer recommendations for future development of anti-bullying procedures that are based on the experiences of principals

It is important to flag that these objectives should not be mutually exclusive. Instead, they will be treated as cumulative, given the interplay between the interpretation and enactment of policy (Ball et al., 2011).

Literature Review

While it could be argued that many school principals have gained exposure or experience in their formal roles as teachers, thus gaining an 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie, 1975, 2009), transitioning into this role can bring a radical shift in terms of the expectations and tasks affiliated with the role of the school leader, alongside a change in relationships with various stakeholders in and outside of the school (Spillane & Anderson, 2014; Spillane & Lee, 2014; Stevenson, 2006). The literature review for this research report explores the complex role of principals and the role of principals in bullying prevention. In addition to providing insights into the role of the principal, the literature review begins by examining the complex nature of policy enactment, given that it is a central focus of this study.

Policy Enactment

The critical policy research community challenges the taken-for-granted assumption that producing a policy text is seen as the ultimate solution to a specific problem within the field (Ball et al., 2011). This superficial perspective fails to account for key moments in developing and enacting policy. It also fails to recognise the actors' experience interacting and negotiating with policy in their day-to-day practice. (Ball et al., 2011). Instead, policy is viewed as a process that is subject and open to different interpretations as it is enacted. Thus, policy is "done by and done to teachers; they are actors and subjects, subject to and objects of policy…they have to be translated from text to action - put into practice" (Ball et al., 2011, p. 3). Ball's conceptualisation of policy, as both *text* and *discourse* (1993), also highlights the complex nature of the policy process. Policies as *texts* are value-laden, express certain positions, and generally adopt an approach that "do not normally tell you what to do; they create circumstances in which the range of options available in deciding what to do are narrowed or changed" (Ball, 1993, p. 12). Policy as *discourse* reflects the communicative approaches employed by the producer that are used to convey specific meaning, authority, or truth to the reader of the policy, and this controls how they interpret and interact with the policy.

To further highlight the nuanced nature of policy enactment, considerable attention has been given to a typology of enactment that typically occurs within education settings, such as schools (Ball et al., 2011). This typology illustrates certain actors' roles when interacting with, interpreting, and translating policy (see Table 1). These roles are not static, linear, or mutually exclusive. Instead, actors can assume a range of multiple roles and move between roles as they enact policy. The role of narration plays an integral part in how policy is interpreted at the school level, mediated generally by the school leader who filters aspects of the policy that must be done, can be done, and cannot be done. Entrepreneurs advocate or champion specific policies in the school and are personally invested in the policy and its enactment. As the term suggests, outsiders are those actors who are based outside the school but play a vital role in the successful enactment of the policy within the school. Transaction deals with overseeing policy, typically driven by monitoring, enforcement, and accountability procedures. Enthusiasts welcome specific policies as they may support them in their teaching, professional learning, or professional growth and development. Translation is seen as the process of enacting policies through the production of institutional texts, facilitating professional learning, structures may be adapted, and resources may be allocated for enactment. Policy critics contribute to the policy, particularly when a perceived threat is identified within the policy, e.g. workload implications. Finally, receivers are those who are simply recipients of the policy where "managing in the classroom is the prime reality" and thus they "exhibit 'policy dependency' and high levels of compliance most of the time" (Ball et al., 2011, p. 622). This typology highlights that schools are complex systems, and thus, policy is subject to (re)configuration as it navigates enactment (Ball et al., 2011).

Table 1. Policy actors and 'policy work' (Ball et al., 2011, p. 626)

Policy Actors	Policy Work
Narrators	Interpretation, selection, and enforcement of meanings, mainly done by headteachers and the SLT (senior leadership team)
Entrepreneurs	Advocacy, creativity, and integration
Outsiders	Entrepreneurship, partnership, and monitoring
Transactors	Accounting, reporting, monitoring
Enthusiasts	Investment, creativity, satisfaction, and career
Translators	Production of texts, artefacts, and events
Critics	Union representatives: monitoring of management, maintaining counter-discourses
Receivers	Mainly junior teachers and teaching assistants: coping, defending and dependency

Principalship: The competing and conflicting demands of the role

Transitioning from the role of teacher, where the duties predominately centre around teaching children, to the role of the school leader, which contains a broad range of duties and responsibilities, often brings a shock factor (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Diverse and often competing roles, such as financial, human resource, and building management, alongside instructional and transformational leadership, result in certain aspects of the role taking priority over others (Spillane & Anderson, 2014). More so, the excessive work pace that is expected in carrying out such tasks, particularly those that require immediate attention or those that are heavily bureaucratic, are not fully realised until after the post has been taken up (Spillane & Lee, 2014; Stynes & McNamara, 2019). There is limited to no support within the school to assist the school leader in handling such role demands (Bush & Oduro, 2006). Often, school leaders are much more enthusiastic about instruction, teaching, and learning but are mostly consumed with the burden of paperwork (Salter et al., 2018). Educational improvement approaches, such as establishing learning communities, fostering staff and pupil relations, and observation of teaching and learning, are side-lined by building management, finances, and other administrative tasks (Cowie & Crawford, 2008). Such competing demands can lead to stress (Daresh & Male, 2000). Furthermore, this administrative work must often be done in isolation, leading to loneliness and burnout (Stephenson & Bauer, 2010).

In tandem with the multifaceted roles discussed above, principals are often challenged in enacting school policies (Ball et al., 2012). This requires specific knowledge of (a) the policy, (b) specific approaches or methodologies that are endorsed in the policy, and approaches for professional learning of staff concerning the policy expectations (Brennan & Gorman, 2023; King et al., 2023; Murphy, 2023; Spillane & Anderson, 2014). The nature of working with staff with different experiences, alongside issues that staff may raise or encounter concerning the policy, can also present challenges. School leaders are often faced with the challenges of dealing with demoralised staff or staff who may be reluctant to support the school leader for many reasons (Crow, 2006; Kelly & Saunders, 2010). Finally, where a policy requires engagement from the wider school community, e.g., the school's parent body, the school leader is tasked with building relationships to gain collective and shared agreement towards the policy. To be accepted, there is a need to be familiar with the school's community and attuned to the community and parental preferences. Crow and Weindling (2010) note that the interpersonal and political dimensions of the school leader's role are crucially important.

The principal as a critical actor in tackling bullying

While there is acknowledgement that the principal is often tasked with managing the multifaceted roles in the preceding sections, both national and international research recognises the principal as a crucial actor in effectively tacking bullying (Brown et al., 2020; Farrelly et al., 2016; Foody et al., 2018; Sebring et al., 2006). Key leadership attributes and skills in responding to and preventing bullying. As part of this, Foody et al. (2018) argue that the principal plays a crucial role in developing a school culture that is inclusive and diverse, a proactive measure that can effectively prevent bullying. Effective practices of supporting inclusivity and celebrating difference may also support teachers in addressing bullying within class: "Creating and maintaining a positive class/school climate, promoted by principals, may communicate that all students have a role in reducing bullying (Yoon & Bauman, 2014, p. 310). Research by Skinner et al. (2014) found that the support of principals played a crucial role in improving the expectations and self-efficacy of teachers, alongside being an important factor in "developing school-based programs to reduce bullying" (p. 80). On the other hand, where an absence of support is evident, this, in turn, can negatively impact how teachers respond to how teachers address bullying incidents within classrooms.

The values, perspectives, and emotions principals bring to the role can also impact school culture and bullying prevention. Concerning the latter, research by Farrelly et al. (2016) on principals' perspectives of homophobic bullying in primary schools found that principals and their leadership styles were critical in successfully responding to bullying:

> If a school principal does not recognise homophobic bullying as an issue worth addressing, then his/her values can impact on the extent to which a school is ready to prevent and address this type of bullying. The extent to which a principal's values are linked to equality and non-discrimination in education will affect his/her ability to animate a school environment where LGBT pupils, staff or parents feel safe and free from homophobic bullying. (p. 156).

Prior studies by O'Higgins Norman (2008, 2009) flagged that the perspectives and attitudes of senior management, including principals, created a layer of anxiety for teachers who wanted to address issues of homophobic bullying. The values and emotions that principals bring to the role can also have a wider impact on the school culture: "The emotional climate of schools influences and shapes the emotional experience of principals, impacting on their actions and decisions, which in turn affect the quality of staff relationships, the emotional climate of schools and the emotional experience of principals" (Brennan & Mac Ruairc, 2011p. 145). Where a principal responds negatively to bullying and does not prioritise it as an area of concern, in turn, impacts the school's collective approach to addressing the issue (Foody et al., 2018). Professional learning for leadership needs to allow principals to reflect on the emotional climate within their schools and cultivate a "caring, connected and supportive climate that is committed to authentic relationships" (Brennan & Mac Ruairc, 2011, p. 148). Thus, the demands of the principal in tackling bullying within schools move beyond merely implementing a policy but demand complex enactment that provides an array of leadership approaches that include leading prevention strategies within the curriculum, leading professional learning for staff, building and maintaining a positive school culture. The literature has flagged that this requires a particular emotional response by the principal, open and supportive, in a climate of increased pressure, burnout and responsibility for principals (Tobin, 2023).

Research Design

As flagged in the introduction to this report, this research sets out to undertake the following: (i) explore principals' interpretation of the anti-bullying procedures and (ii) unpack their experience of enacting these procedures. A qualitative-oriented narrative research approach was adopted to gain in-depth accounts of how they interpreted the anti-bullying procedures and unpack their experience of enactment (Creswell, 2017, 2022). A purposive sample was employed in the data collection process involving ten school principals working in the Republic of Ireland. To allow for variation within the dataset, the purposive sampling procedure explicitly targeted diverse schools by demographic (single-, co-educational, urban, rural) and patronage (denominational, non- and multi-denominational, *Gaelscoileanna*), as illustrated in Table 2. All school leaders who engaged in the research were in the role of principal for two years or more. Semi-structured open-ended interviews formed the basis of the data for analysis. Within these semi-structured interviews, questions included their perspectives of the anti-bullying procedures, their experiences of enacting the anti-bullying procedures, their perspectives on professional learning and support (for principals, for teachers, including newly-qualified teachers, and other stakeholders, including parents/guardians), and recommendations for future anti-bullying procedures. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Transcripts were member-checked by each of the participants. None opted to make changes to the transcripts.

Table 2: Participant profile

Name	Principal Experience	School	School Type	Patronage	Location
Fergus	15 years	Cherry Hill	Vertical – male	Catholic	East (Urban)
Robert	8 years	Oak Heights	Vertical – co-ed	Catholic	East (Urban)
Seán	3 years	Willow View	3rd to 6th class	Catholic	East (Urban)
Ciarán	3 years	Ivy Road	Vertical – co-ed	CoI	East (Urban)
Martin	18 years	Sycamore Park	Vertical – co-ed	Catholic	West (Urban)
Brendan	9 years	Rose Field	Vertical – co ed	Catholic	Southeast
Miriam	3 years	Birch Terrace	Vertical – girls	Catholic	Southeast (Urban)
Caoimhe	4 years	Holly Lane	Vertical – co-ed	ETNS	Northwest
Siobhán	11 years	Pairc na Coille	Vertical – co-ed	Gaelscoil	Northwest
Lorraine	7 years	Beech Meadow	Vertical – co-ed	CNS	South

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data, as it provided a systematic approach to identify, organise, and offer insights into patterns or themes across the semi-structured interview dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Inductive coding was adopted as the predominant approach where data were coded to capture the meaning within the data. Deductive analysis was also employed to ensure that the coding process was relevant to the overarching research objectives and the theoretical constructs examined in the literature review. Coding combined semantic and latent approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2021) where the semantic approach produced descriptive analysis of the data and the latent approach moved beyond description, identifying underlying or hidden meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis followed six recursive phases. Phase one involved familiarisation with the data. Phase two began with initial coding, which involved systematically working through the data set and recording succinct labels relevant to the research question. Phase three examined how the different codes that shared similar features were combined to form potential themes. Phase four involved reviewing potential themes. Phase five presented the three key emergent themes. Careful examination was required to ensure that each theme was consistent with the data, the preceding analysis phases, and the research objectives. Phase six involved the write-up of the themes, which will be presented in the forthcoming section.

This research was conducted within Dublin City University's ethical guidelines. All participants gave written consent for participation, and the right to withdraw at any stage during the data collection phase was clearly explained. To protect the participants' identities, pseudonyms were used in the thematic analysis.

Findings

Principals' interpretations of the anti-bullying procedures

The ten principals felt that the existing anti-bullying procedures had proved helpful in formulating a policy. Brendan described the procedures as a "very good start-off base". Robert suggested that "they give a structure for the schools to operate within, but they also give you a basis to create your own policy". Siobhán discussed that they "are uniformed", and "while many policies are subject to the individual boards of management, they are uninformed and transferable between schools". When asked why she felt that this was important, she suggested that the uniformity was helpful:

> All schools are working from the same approach, and I think that is helpful for principals who might run into an issue and need help from their cluster [informal Irish Primary Principals' Network group]. Also, it is helpful that you know that if a child in your school has a sister or brother in another school, even in secondary, the same procedures are used, so I think that is helpful to parents.

Fergus also reported that it was important that the anti-bullying procedures were presented as a unique document: "I think making them distinct from the Code of Behaviour and to my knowledge there was talk at the time of just the Code of Behaviour and not covering anti-bullying, but I think they are more robust, and I feel that should continue". Principals also remarked that monthly reporting at Board of Management meetings was necessary as "it elevated its [anti-bullying] status and made the Board aware of its importance" (Robert). Caoimhe shared a similar observation: "I have a Board of Management meeting tonight, it is on the minutes, it is on the principal's report, it will be in the minutes". When asked why she felt that to be necessary, she explained: "you have a record so if anything comes up, like a data request, you can show that". Robert discussed that the stipulation to report at Board of Management meetings ensured consistency across the system: "the fact that it is reported at every board meeting and whether it is a school in Dublin 4 or a school in Kerry, at each board meeting it is reporting bullying incidents and it puts it on an equal footing to child safeguarding".

While the principals felt that anti-bullying procedures were helpful, they suggested that aspects of the procedures needed attention. Robert noted:

> When you look back to the 2013 document [Anti-Bullying Policy and Procedures], there was too much expected of schools in relation to bullying to be the fantasy or the answer to all ills. And I think it is not realistic to expect schools to be dealing with what is happening external to their environment and then to be foisted upon us and to deal with that.

Fergus spoke positively about the strategies offered within the procedures: "I think they are incredibly helpful. And to schools, I think they are extremely useful. You know, they do use best practice and research in a practical way to get to know of the issue". He draws further on the best practice and research in a practical way by explicitly drawing on school culture and a positive school: "They are written in a proactive than a reactive way, and I think that is the nub, where they are not just focussed on say reporting but how do you create a happy school, not just for the kids, but for staff too". Others, however, felt that the procedures could be more helpful for schools. Brendan felt that the procedures "don't offer enough strategies, and it doesn't take account of different school contexts … it needs to recognise that schools are different, like different sizes, profiles, cultures, and it needs to be mindful about it". When asked for suggestions on how to address this, he explained that an account of how different schools might approach anti-bullying would be helpful, and then he and his staff could reflect

on the different school descriptions and gain ideas. Lorraine felt that as "an experienced principal of 7 years, I can make sense of them, but I think new principals need support, particularly around a positive school culture, effective leadership, all of it actually". Caoimhe felt that the "most important people" are ignored in the current version:

> They are written for adults; they should be written for the most important people, the children, so that a child knows what to do if she is being bullied or observes bullying. I know the school should teach them, but I do not know if you can always depend on that.

Robert felt that the strategies were effective but that the policy was vague around cyber-bullying: "It blurs the lines around cyberbullying. And that is becoming more and more contentious". When probed why he thought it was contentious, he explained:

> I see at meetings that a lot of principals are entrenched in the belief that in no way should any bullying that happens outside of school be the school's responsibility. It should not have anything to do with the role of the principal. That is definitely an area that needs to be addressed.

While Robert disagreed with the position expressed by such principals, signalling that you cannot view these incidents outside of school as "stand-alone events", he did comment that "parents do need to step up when it comes to cyberbullying". Other participants in this study shared a viewpoint similar to that of Robert. For example, Brendan felt that the school is becoming "the new community police person", and that creates "unreasonable expectations to tackle bullying, not just in your school, but now outside of it". Caoimhe expressed concern about allegations of bullying that occur outside of the school and the challenges for the school to investigate this appropriately: "I do not think the current procedures are strong enough around what is the remit of the school to investigate and to address all that allegations of bullying that happen out of school, and I suppose greater clarity in what that looks like and I think a commonality through all schools in how this is tackled, the bullying outside school".

In discussing the key principles of best practice within the anti-bullying procedures, all principals felt that a whole-school approach was important, and all signalled that this was occurring in their schools. Fergus pointed out that this was a significant strength of the anti-bullying procedures as it ensures that the "same message is being carried from junior infants to sixth class". The only challenge for some principals was ensuring that all staff followed the anti-bullying procedures. For example, Lorraine spoke about the importance of making the message move beyond the teaching staff to "the SNAs, caretaker, wardens, community police, cleaners" and while each school "shares their policy, they too should be receiving direction from the Department as principals and teachers do". Martin spoke about the initial challenges of "getting teachers on board, it was not that they were difficult, but I suppose when the 2013 document was rolled out, they felt that all this reporting was unnecessary particularly when they knew the children and it might have been just a scuffle". Fergus shared a similar perspective documenting that it is an "awful amount of work, even with my teachers. I know in the early days, some were like it is not really bullying, and this kind of went on, so it took a lot of work around this". When asked about present-day activity, he mentioned that while the policy is embedded, at times "teachers might not follow the steps, such as talk with parents without following what's in the policy, or an email". Siobhán also flagged that while the anti-bullying procedures are helpful, they "can be used against you". When probed what this meant, she answered: "a teacher does not say follow the steps, it gets very tricky for the principal". She discussed how "an allegation was made that bullying was occurring outside the gate at 3.00 pm, and the teacher did not follow the steps, and then it came to me that the issue was not handled properly … not only then had an issue of bullying come across my desk, so too did a complaint about the teacher".

A variance of practices concerning prevention and awareness strategies was discussed. Some participants, such as Ciaran and Brendan, discussed that each month, the teacher would do a dedicated lesson on bullying. As part of this, the students would complete a 'Friendship / Anti-Bullying Questionnaire'. This questionnaire (shared with the researcher) focuses on two questions: (i) Would you like to talk to someone about bullying, and (ii) do you know anyone who is having a hard time? Both questions contain a Yes/No tick box, and there is additional space for the pupil to write further information. The questionnaire records the name of the pupil, class, and date. Brendan felt this was helpful as "it always shows things up". Caoimhe also raised the questionnaire, but did question the value of it:

> It was suggested some time ago by a PDST [Professional Development Service for Teachers] advisor to use this with other resources, but I think you have to be careful. Even though you might teach children about what bullying is, they still might see a child play on their own and think this is bullying. It can be helpful maybe for teachers to keep a check on something, but it needs to be carefully done.

Some principals discussed that the SPHE curriculum, specifically the *Walk Tall* programme, was an effective approach. At the same time, Fergus suggested that the most effective approach was specialised intervention programmes, such as the DCU Fuse programme:

> I heard about Fuse on the radio, and I felt well that the Anti-Bullying Centre is probably in the best position to advise and support schools, so I reached out, and they provided excellent support for the senior classes. The materials were handy, and we felt they could be used by all classes … I think you need to sometimes look outside the school for help on this, and that could be from PDST or FUSE or a local speaker, and I think schools should be encouraged to do it.

Robert and Siobhán both felt that the emphasis on prevention strategies was problematic. Robert felt that this "language is so reductive, so traditional, we have to move beyond this". He reflected on his school context:

> As a DEIS band one, that just won't work about prevention and blame and name. It should be about building awareness of behaviours and emotions. We do a programme called 'Stop, Think, Do, a four year programme. So, it's two teachers in the room for maybe two months to three months working with kids and give them the tools to recognise their behaviours, their emotions, how to manage that and how to communicate with each other.

He felt that programmes that focus on positive relationships are more effective as they remove the stigma of "one on one interventions on behaviour, and it is whole class, and it is done pre-emptively". Miriam, who was also teaching in a DEIS school, made a similar observation: "Programmes such as 'Incredible Years' which focuses on the positives never seem to come into the discussion around bullying. Why? Because it is resource heavy and time intensive, but it works".

All principals agreed that a positive school culture and effective leadership are important in dealing with bullying. "Of course, if a school does not celebrate difference or is inclusive, then of course that is going to add to bullying. But I think schools work very hard to build an inclusive school and with very little support" (Caoimhe). When probed about the lack of support, she explained: "well as an ETNS principal, it is at the heart of our school and we are supported by our patron body who do wonderful work around inclusion, but that is our patron body, not the department, not anybody else". While principals spoke about the value of "inclusive schools", their descriptions varied. Martin spoke about how "the opening of autism classes has really opened up inclusive opportunities in our school as children have the chance to get a better understanding of social situations". Robert focused more on school events: "we make sure to have events in the school that mark different cultures and important holidays or days for them". Seán described how he tries to "make the school colourful and warm and welcoming – our school rule says that we are kind and open and honest and we get that message across from the first day in infants". When asked about effective leadership, most participants suggested that it was important for the principal to play a central role in all aspects relating to bullying: "I have a 33 teacher school but I need to be on top of this when bullying arises, as it can not only impact the child or parent, but it can impact the teacher too and may lead to further issues" (Martin). Others, however, felt that a principal should have the space to delegate this role to an assistant or deputy principal in the school: "On one hand they say it should be whole school approaches, but then as principal, it is me that is named and where does distributed leadership come in. Can I delegate this to an AP1?" (Ciarán).

Support for principals

All participants in the study reported feelings of isolation in dealing with issues of bullying. Despite emphasising a whole-school approach within the anti-bullying procedures, they felt that the principal carried the overall responsibility. Martin reflected on his experience as a principal and mentor to other principals: "Luckily, I never had a big issue with bullying, but I have seen what it does to principals in my cluster. Things can be going swimmingly, and then this happens, and you can be down in the trenches for months". When asked if he could elaborate further, he discussed, "you have parents, not just one group but maybe two groups, you have the children, you have the teacher who might be upset, and then you have everything else that a principal has to do". Others, such as Ciarán, felt that the wider workload duties can "create a serious headache when a bullying incident arises". He reflected on his role as "a teaching principal" and "I have to say I am lucky that any bullying or allegations have been resolved as we are a small school but if I had to deal with a big issue where legal action might arise, then I do not think I would be able to cope along with doing everything else". Brendan also spoke about how bullying incidents can create a myriad of issues for principals, and how the lack of support adds "distress and annoyance":

> Often at my principal network meeting, principals would verbalise their distress and annoyance about bullying issues and how they are dragging on in schools, and they are at the centre. And if they are managing the conflict, they are managing the fallout for staff, the fallout for pupils. They talk about liaising with different agencies and get nowhere. Then you go to a level where some principals have data access requests or notes regarding bullying issues, and that takes the workload to a whole new level.

All principals felt that more direct support was needed for principals. Brendan remarked: "My wife works in the private sector, and she is a manager, and she has an HR department, and if there is an issue with bullying or anything, she has a direct line; we need that. There needs to be a dedicated support line for dealing not just with pupil bullying but allegations of staff bullying too". Fergus also felt that principals should have access to legal or support teams, that are not just in education:

> I am now the experienced principal who gets calls from other principals with questions. But sometimes, for issues like this, I cannot give the answer. I had access to an organisational psychologist, organised through the CSL (Centre for School Leadership), and for six sessions, the learning gained from that was unreal. For something like this, I would love to be able to call that person, but that is no longer available for me.

Miriam felt that while she was only in the role for a "short time", she felt that her "mentor has been great, particularly around dealing with bullying issues. She [the mentor] has been brilliant. Even how to reply to an email from a parent who is making an allegation of bullying, she will talk me through it. That is invaluable". She did flag the need for "better training around things like that in relation to things like an agitated parent who you know has not read the policy and how to communicate that to them, because that can be really challenging". All principals felt that the current support services were centred around prevention strategies in classrooms, rather than supports for principals. For example, Robert explained: "we had a person from the PDST come out and offer us support on SPHE, and we asked could we focus on bullying, but to be fair as best they could do, they were not really able to help beyond viewing our anti-bullying policy and checking all was in line". He felt that there should be targeted support where an "incident arises, and you can liaise with somebody around how you are handling it". Overall, a growing concern was expressed around the burden that fell on principals in dealing with incidents of bullying and the time and emotional demands that it made.

Support for schools

When asked about how wider schools might be supported concerning anti-bullying procedures and practice, two key recommendations arose. Most participants discussed the need for more robust teacher education and professional learning. From a teacher education perspective, initial teacher education was discussed by four participants. Brendan and Lorraine felt that newly qualified teachers (NQTs) had a very good understanding of the anti-bullying policy and the broader code of behaviour in the school. However, on occasion, Lorraine felt that certain higher education institutions (HEIs) had emphasised this more than others. She also felt that graduates from the 2-year postgraduate programme had a better understanding than those from the 4-year undergraduate programmes. Brendan felt graduates had "an adequate understanding":

> That is not the fault of the colleges [HEIs]. It is just that they do the theory, but when they [NQTs] have to deal with conflict and difficult conversations, they are not prepared. Even note-taking, things like that, and emails, like if I'd always tell new teachers, especially new qualified teachers, make sure you run an email by me, as more often it is badly written, not factual, or too long.

On the other hand, Fergus was highly critical of the lack of knowledge that newly qualified teachers had about anti-bullying:

> NQTs are not prepared. There is a solid, straight answer. I have a set of questions that I ask at interviews. One of them is what would you do if the parent came to you and said their child is being bullied? And I can tell you now that having done, I would say, probably interviewed over a hundred people, if they are newly qualified, the vast, vast majority of them cannot answer correctly or fail to answer. They will say what I would say bullying is wrong, you know, I would say that it is a terrible thing this happened and I say, you know, and then I would talk to the bully, I talked to the bully's parents and I would say, whoa, whoa, you have to follow the policy.

Siobhán felt that for any future training that happens, it has to be the same in the "colleges [HEIs] and what is happening in schools":

> I already have concerns around the different expectations that colleges [HEIs] have, and then they are doing different things, and maybe the PDST are giving us different advice. Bullying and behaviour is just too important. Mixed messages cannot happen – it is too serious. When these are rolled out, everyone should have the same level of training. It does not matter if you are 18 or 60, everyone needs the same training.

In terms of professional learning for schools, all principals felt that this should be provided. "When the 2013 version was rolled out, nothing was provided. At the time, it was all literacy and numeracy, and now look where we are. This is a time to invest in this" (Fergus). When asked about the type of professional learning they sought, all principals felt it needs to be contextual and tailored to the individual school. Lorraine suggested that "it needs to be tangible and NEPS [National Education Psychological Service] needs to play a big part, it cannot just be passed over to PDST or Oide [the new national support service for teachers in Ireland] and we get sessions on Walk Tall". Brendan felt that it needs to focus more on issues around conflict resolution, while Robert and Siobhán argued that it needs to focus more on "restorative practices" (Robert) and "no blame, no name, no shame", in order to "build a more positive psychology from the infants up" (Siobhán).

Finally, all principals flagged the need for better direction and guidance for parents concerning understanding bullying behaviour. All felt that this was lacking, and this created further difficulty in dealing with bullying behaviour in the school. Caoimhe felt that "despite the attention you give to bullying and that you stress the definition to the children, it is still probably the most commonly misused word in the school, 'he bullied me as he looked at me and was smirking, he did not let me into play the game so I was bullied today on yard'". She felt that often this would then be perhaps communicated to the parent, and may naturally flag concern. She explained: "when I need to communicate that it is very unfortunate that this happened and it will be dealt with, it is not bullying as it is a once off event, but that does not go down well, particularly for an anxious parent". Brendan remarked that often parents are very concerned about bullying or their child being targeted as a bully:

> As a parent, I would sometimes worry. But then parents might say, even to me, he was bullied for years, or he has been bullied the last couple of days, and it is getting that awareness that he was absolutely treated unfairly, castigated or even demeaned at a certain time, but he was not bullied because it was not persistent.

Lorraine stressed the need for better guidance for the parent body, due in part to the time that it takes to deal with:

> Ultimately, a child has been investigated for a bullying incident. Six weeks gone. That same parent comes in and makes an allegation against a different child. And you would have to go through the same procedure even though you may have a doubt or concern that it is only a vexatious claim in response to a claim that was made previously.

While certain principals, such as Brendan and Siobhán, spoke about the value of informing the parent body through parent association meetings and newsletters, all participants felt that the responsibility lies at a national level:

> And we see the Government has a lot of information campaigns around adult-based things like domestic violence and sexual exploitation and cyber stuff and like that an information campaign around what constitutes a bully and if you or your child are being bullied, here are the signs and here is like what is bullying and what is not bullying and when to report and what to expect. This may temper parents' expectations about what can be done and what should be done.

Thus, there is a collective agreement that better professional learning across the continuum of teacher education is necessary. However, professional learning beyond the teaching staff, mainly targeted information for parents, is also necessary.

Discussion

Policy enactment entails interpreting and translating policy, involving "creative processes of interpretation and translation, that is, the recontextualization through reading, writing and talking of the abstractions of policy ideas into contextualised practices" (Braun et al., 2011, p. 586). Based on the data in this report, it is evident that levels of translation and interpretations vary across the different schools. While principals welcomed the anti-bullying procedures, and there was an overall sense of compliance regarding what was required, leadership experience, principals' viewpoints, and school context were varied, thus illustrating the complex nature of enacting a centralised policy such as the anti-bullying procedures. This was evidenced in how certain principals viewed the more nuanced content of the procedures, where some valued the strategies and approaches provided. In contrast, others critiqued them as aspirational or unrealistic. This was illustrated in the case of Robert, who, having fifteen years' experience, spoke positively about the strategies within the anti-bullying procedures. Brendan and Fergus, on the cusp of ten years experience, were more critical of the strategies, where they felt they were too aspirational. Reflecting on the comments of Brendan and Fergus, both would have been in the early-career phase of principalship when the anti-bullying procedures were introduced to schools after 2013. Given the lack of support or professional learning in 2013 and placing the unique responsibility on the principal to fully enact the anti-bullying procedures (at an early phase within their career), this may have led to developing more critical viewpoints than their peers. Indeed, within the literature, the emotional demands of leadership, as illustrated in the research of Brennan and Mac Ruairc (2011), can illustrate how certain emotions can impact practice. Brendan later spoke of the challenges of rolling these out when the policy prioritised literacy and numeracy attainment in Irish primary schools. There is merit and reason to place these two participants under an interpretative spotlight. Specifically, if future iterations of the procedures are to be rolled out, opportunities for professional learning that include critical dialogue (Brennan & Gorman, 2023) may need to be considered to challenge how principals interpret the revised strategies. Failure to do this may lead to certain emotions and values being cast on these procedures, thus inhibiting meaningful enactment of the revised procedures.

School context and demographics also illustrated how schools interpreted and translated the policy. This came to light in the data when schools spoke about prevention strategies and school culture. Robert and Siobhán, for example, felt the language of the anti-bullying procedures was "reductive". Working in schools within DEIS (a national scheme targeted for additional resources and support towards schools serving disadvantaged populations), Robert emphasised the importance of moving away from prevention strategies and exploring positive programmes around social, emotional, and relationship building. Braun et al. (2011, p. 586) discuss:

> Policies also enter different resource environments; schools have particular histories, buildings and infrastructures, staffing profiles, leadership experiences, budgetary situations and teaching and learning challenges (e.g. proportions of children with special educational needs, English as an additional language (EAL), behavioural difficulties, 'disabilities', and social and economic 'deprivations').

Thus, the critical challenge for anti-bullying procedures that are mandated centrally and what may be deemed a 'one-size-fits-all' approach for schools may potentially become unravelled by the unique context of each school, recognising that context is not static but rather shifting, dynamic, and shaped by events within and outside the school (Ball, 2011; Braun et al., 2011).

The data also supports the position of Ball et al. (2011) that a school principal may take multiple positions when enacting policy. Revising Table 1 and the typology of enactment in the literature review section of this report, the data illustrates examples of principals taking different positions. For example, the previous paragraphs in this section illustrated vivid examples of policy critics, expressed in the position of Brendan and Fergus. However, the data strongly suggests that the ten principals in this report are narrators, entrepreneurs, enthusiasts, and translators. Narration, as described by Ball et al. (2011), involves a process of explaining policy and deciding what must be done and what can and cannot be done. In addition, narrators "recount narratives about their schools, how they operate and function, and how they strive for improvement" (Skerrit et al., 2021, p. 703). All participants discussed what must be done within the data, such as placing bullying prevention as a stranding item at each Board of Management meeting. In terms of what can be done, principals spoke of different approaches. Robert spoke about the focus on positive relationships through the *Stop, Think, Do* programme, but this may not be possible for other schools due to resource demands associated with the programme. The principals shared accounts of how they strived to improve bullying prevention. Some spoke about drawing on support interventions, such as the DCU Fuse programme, while others drew on approaches such as restorative practices.

Additionally, there was evidence of entrepreneurship evident in the data. Principals spoke about addressing the perceived shortfalls in the existing anti-bullying procedures and proffered suggestions for addressing this in future policy development. While policy entrepreneurialism is defined as "actors who originate or champion and represent particular policies, or principles of integration" (Ball et al., 2011, p. 62), and examples of the above may not be visible in the data, Ball et al. (2011, p. 62) also describe entrepreneurs as "forceful agents of change, who are personally invested in and identified with policy ideas and their enactment". The 10 participants were invested in anti-bullying procedures and felt they played a crucial role in the schools. Furthermore, the recommendations and suggestions around sustained and contextual professional learning and improved parental information at a national level were borne out of their personal and professional motivation to improve the process for pupils, parents, and teachers in their schools. "Enthusiasts and translators recruit others to the possibilities of policy, they speak policy to practice, and join up between specialist roles and responsibilities, to make enactment into a collective process" (Ball et al., 2011, p. 631). Within the data, there were many instances of enthusiasm for anti-bullying procedures. Aligned with the previous point around entrepreneurialism, all found the value of anti-bullying procedures and proffered recommendations on how to improve them. While translation varied, and specific approaches and strategies may have appeared more effective than others, it was evident that procedures were being translated into practice. It could be argued that this may be predominantly due to compliance, given that schools must enact the procedures. Thus, positioning the principals as policy transactors. While that can be acknowledged, there was an overwhelming call by participants for professional learning to support schools in translating the procedures.

The issue of principal workload, stress and burnout also merits discussion. At times in the data, words such as "frustration", "distress", "burnout", and "in the trenches" were used to describe how issues and manifestations of bullying exacerbated the complex roles of principals. It would be important that any future iterations of anti-bullying procedures take stock of previous research around the challenges of the role, as examined in the literature review (e.g. IPPN, 2022; Leithwood, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2019; Murphy, 2023; Spillane & Anderson, 2014; Spillane & Lee, 2014; Stynes & McNamara, 2019; Sugrue, 2015). As Foody et al. note (2018, p. 129), "individual principal's skills and attitude are central to setting the standard for other members of staff tackling bullying successfully". Where there is a sense of burnout or stress on the principal due to wider competing demands, this may directly impact how they can tackle bullying successfully and enact policy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This project was guided by two overarching research objectives: (i) exploring principals' interpretation of the anti-bullying procedures and (ii) unpacking their experience enacting them. Overall, this report provides in-depth insights into the experiences of principal teachers in translating and enacting anti-bullying procedures in primary schools. It is important to note that this report was written when bullying prevention became a policy priority of the Department of Education, as illustrated in *Cineáltas* (DoE, 2022). Finally, this is a small-scale study, and the findings cannot be generalised or represent all principals. However, while this is a small-scale study, the findings corroborate with the large-scale quantitative study conducted by Foody et al.(2018). Specifically, lack of guidance and absence of professional learning remain dominant issues. At the same time, variance in approaches to prevention remains, although all 10 participants in this reported anti-bullying strategies and approaches that were delivered through a whole school approach. In addition, a third objective of this report was to proffer recommendations for developing future anti-bullying procedures. Arising from the presentation and interpretation of the data, three key recommendations are offered:

Professional learning and teacher education

National professional learning initiatives that are appropriate to the school context need to be considered. Cascade or off-site professional learning approaches may fail to account for the school's unique context and thus impact how the procedures may be translated. It may be worth looking at more sustained models of professional learning. Funded university professional learning graduate programmes could be considered to allow for specialised professional learning for a principal or their nominee. This model is currently in place for other areas e.g. Graduate Diploma in SPHE/RSE, Graduate Diploma in Special Education Teaching. The national rollout of the Teaching Council's framework, *Cosán* (2016), aligned with the recent iteration of *Looking at Our Schools* (DoE, 2022), might support schools in planning forward for professional learning. Finally, at the initial teacher education level, more experience may be needed to observe anti-bullying procedures and processes on school placement, such as record-keeping and communication approaches. This may be streamlined with the Teaching Council's priority focus on working with parents within *Céim* (Teaching Council, 2020) and *Guidelines on School Placement* (Teaching Council, 2021)

Information for parents and the wider community

A specific information campaign might prove beneficial in explaining bullying, the impact of bullying, prevention strategies, and reporting mechanisms. This campaign may be delivered across a range of media, including radio, television, print, and social media.

Improved support for school leaders

A stronger focus may be needed on sustainable leadership, given the concerns raised within this report, alongside other studies (IPPN, 2022; Leithwood, 2019; Leithwood et al., 2019; Murphy, 2023; Spillane & Anderson, 2014; Spillane & Lee, 2014; Stynes & McNamara, 2019; Sugrue, 2015). This may be reflected in future iterations of the policy that advocates more distributed leadership and consider replacing the term 'Principal' with the 'Senior Leadership Team'.

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