Scottish Council of Deans

INQUIRY INTO SCHOOL BULLYING

WRITTEN SUBMISSION FROM

THE SCOTTISH TEACHER EDUCATION COMMITTEE INCLUSION GROUP

and

THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH SAFE AND INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS NETWORK (SISN)

on behalf of the

SCOTTISH COUNCIL OF DEANS OF EDUCATION

The nature and extent of bullying in schools

Issues of harassment, prejudice and bullying continue to be a major concern for children and young people in schools. Evidence of the extent and depth of the problem comes from a range of research, including recent reports from Ditch the Label (2015), EHRC (2015), RespectMe (2014) and McAra and McVie (2013). Such research has highlighted how much progress we have made in terms of young people feeling better able to report bullying, but also reveals how much work still has to be done.

The Scottish Council of Deans of Education is committed to ensuring that all initial teacher education (undergraduate and postgraduate) and career long professional learning (CLPL) programmes across the Higher Education Institutions include and prioritise teaching about issues of bullying, including identity-based bullying, harassment, prejudice and discrimination, whether it be face to face or online; assisting teachers to deal effectively with this key issue within the broader context of the National Framework for Inclusion. 

This Framework is a key outcome of the Scottish Government funded Inclusive Practice Project (IPP), which focused on developing approaches to teacher education to ensure teachers have a greater awareness and understanding of the educational and social problems and issues that can affect children’s learning; and have developed strategies they can use to support and deal with such difficulties.

Supporting this task, the Safe and Inclusive Schools Network (SISN) researches, teaches and communicates the latest learning on inclusive pedagogies, restorative approaches and the intersections of violence in schools with educational practices and learning outcomes.

Our research emphasises the key importance of building positive school ethos in which bullying is less likely to happen but also where children and young people feel more able to report it when it does happen, and where learners can have confidence that teachers have strategies and skills to take sensitive but decisive action to tackle discrimination and support diversity.

How do schools respond to bullying and how are they supported in that role?

Schools and teachers draw on the following policy guidance, A national approach to anti-bullying for Scotland’s children and young people (2010) and also the excellent teaching resource,

Recognising and Realising Children’s Rights,⁸ and information specifically written for children and young people themselves such as Cyber-bullying; what you need to know, as well as the overarching policy framework provided by Better Relationships, Better Learning, Better Behaviour (2013)⁹ underpinned by the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, as amended, with its accompanying Code of Practice (2010).¹⁰ This is further supported by, for example, the world-leading and internationally respected development of Restorative Approaches in Scottish schools,¹¹ which aligns with the distinctive approach to inclusive pedagogy¹² developed by the Inclusive Practice Project and actively seeks to reduce the marginalisation that can occur for some learners in school.

We welcome the duty imposed by the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 on Ministers to consider UNCRC rights in all Ministerial decisions, including in education, and also the duty to present a report to Scottish Parliament every three years on progress and plans on UNCRC rights. However, we are concerned about the potential negative impact of the UK Government’s plans to replace the Human Rights Act with a British Bill of Rights.

There are still significant gaps in the supports available to schools:

- The recent decision to discontinue the work of Education Scotland’s national Rights, Support and Wellbeing team is a retrograde step, particularly within the context of deep concern about the impact of disadvantage on school outcomes and attainment.
- National advice to parents is variable and in some cases very dated.
- The gains made in the introduction, embedding and sustaining of proven approaches such as Restorative Practices in schools, are undermined by the effects of severe financial pressures on local authorities and schools.
- The pressure on schools for improved academic attainment often means that non-examined subjects such as Personal and Social Education have low priority and little time allocation.
- The extent to which teachers are supported to develop, adopt and extend inclusive pedagogical approaches remains variable.
- Terms such as ‘bullying’ and ‘harassment’ have taken on new, expanded definitions in light of very helpful work by groups such as RespectMe, but school staff report confusion and uncertainty about the boundaries between ‘harassment’, ‘bullying’ and other types of unwanted behaviour, and when and how to take action.¹³

What needs to change to ensure schools can deal with cases of bullying and promote inclusivity?

1. Closer listening to children, young people, their families and those working to support them.

Many schools have developed sophisticated ways of seeking feedback from students in recent years but the use of this feedback is often ad hoc. Equally worrying is the lack of progress on building effective school-home partnerships. School staff report that they still find this a major challenge. Research has provided convincing evidence of the positive impact of engaging with children, young people and their families and policy now needs to be strengthened to ensure this happens in practice.

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¹⁰ http://www.scolecot.gov.uk/KF31060211/0149000720/21
¹¹ http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/inclusionandrelationshipsandbehaviour/approaches/restorative/about.asp
¹² http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/inclusionandrelationshipsandbehaviour/approaches/restorative/about.asp
2. Information to inform policy and change practice

a) The Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research (undertaken every three years) should seek to understand and report on bullying, from the viewpoint of children and young people. The most recent survey in 2012\(^{16}\) reports bullying only in terms of adults’ views rather than from the viewpoints of children and young people. Questions should specifically seek to understand bullying of all kinds. By gathering data at regular intervals, through the three yearly Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research, it will be possible to monitor and evaluate change and progress of efforts to address bullying and harassment.

b) A review of the impact of the ‘loss of registration’ time in secondary schools should be undertaken to understand the impact on children and young people’s reporting of bullying.

3. Training and Communication

a) Scottish Government should introduce and support mandatory, high quality training and support for Guidance Teachers (also known as Support for Pupils) in secondary schools and key staff in primary and special schools, as the principal means of ensuring nationally consistent, whole school approaches to preventing and responding to bullying and creating inclusive and safe learning environments.

b) Education Scotland should be allocated resources to effectively support local authorities and schools to ensure that all schools have a cadre of trained staff with expertise to teach about harassment and bullying in all its different forms, and who are also well equipped to ensure that the structures and curricula of schools challenge discrimination and celebrate the diversity of children within them.

c) Local authorities should be supported to ensure that regular, structured and accessible training and communication about bullying within the context of the National Framework for Inclusion is available to all school staff including support staff, who often have valuable informal relationships with children and young people.

4. Anti-bullying advice

a) A national approach to anti-bullying for Scotland’s children and young people (2010) should be refreshed and updated to reflect the findings of recent research and new understandings of the impact of bullying.

b) This refreshed Guidance should include a clear and nationally agreed definition of ‘bullying’. Advice needs to be specific about different forms and levels of bullying behaviour (including homophobic and racial bullying and bullying behaviour within adolescent relationships, etc.)

c) Advice and support for parents, such as Good to Know: advice for parents and carers of teenagers about bullying (2005)\(^{16}\), should also be refreshed and updated to reflect new understandings of the impact of bullying on LGBTQ children and young people.

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