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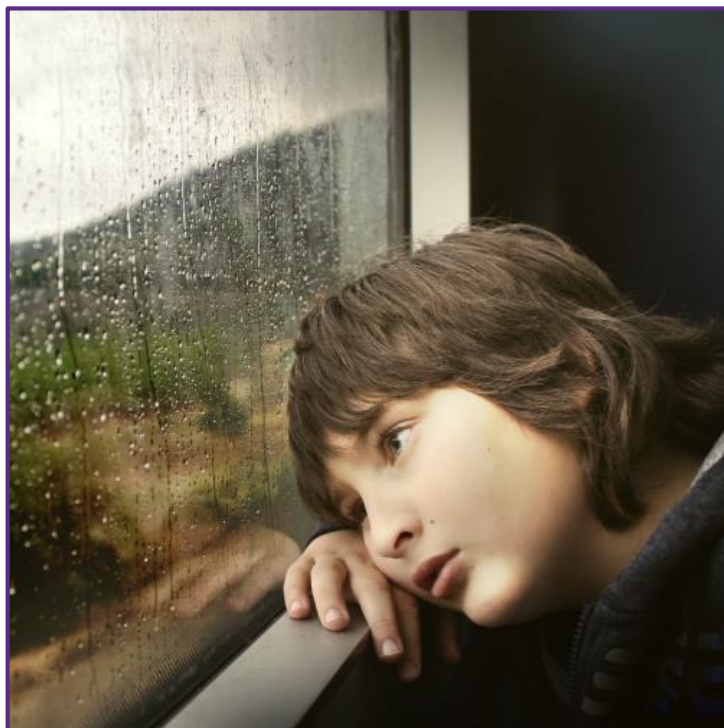
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Tackling bullying in Scotland's schools: a view from the sidelines

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IPPI POLICY BRIEF

Tackling bullying in Scotland's schools:
A view from the sidelines.

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Abstract

This policy brief considers the proposals to reduce bullying in Scotland's schools. A number of interventions have been introduced in Scotland's schools that that place an emphasis on peer-initiated interventions. However these interventions often fail to consider the mental health and wellbeing of the pupils involved. The role of the so-called pupil 'bystander' is fundamentally misunderstood as these pupils often have multiple roles within 'school yard' culture. The lack of independently evaluated evidence on the success of direct pupil-initiated interventions to reduce the level of bullying in schools should be of concern to policymakers. A key recommendation is that schools, education authorities and policymakers pause, review the evidence and have an informed discussion about the most effective interventions to deliver safer schools in Scotland.

I   How many young people witness bullying at school in Scotland?

In Scotland around 57% of pupils in secondary school witness bullying, with 24% witnessing prejudice-based bullying (Lough Dennell & Logan, 2015). Among LGBT young people in particular, 69% reported having experienced homophobic or biphobic bullying in school, with 81% reporting being aware of others experiencing these forms of bullying.

II   Witnessing bullying in school

Two decades of research shows that very few pupils intervene when they see bullying taking place (Salmivalli et al., 1996; Quirk & Campbell, 2015). One UK study suggests that pupils who offer support to peers who are bullied account for approximately 30-35% of the school population. However, this depends on the behaviour observed (McLaughlin, Arnold & Boyd, 2005). Pupils are more likely to reporting bullying when it is physical (hitting, kicking, punching or other forms of observable harassment) rather than verbal (name-calling and labelling). Additionally, we know that those who witness bullying in the classroom, playground or on the way to and from school, are also aware that bullying can take place online (Quirk & Campbell, 2015). In Scotland, respect*me's* research shows that 41% of pupils who experience offline bullying also experience it online (Donnelly et al., 2014).

III   Mental health consequences of young people who witness bullying

Research by Rivers et al. (2009) found that secondary school pupils who witnessed bullying demonstrated higher levels of psychological distress when compared to those who did not witness such

incidents (see Figure 1). And those pupils who had either engaged in bullying others or had experienced it themselves were at an even greater risk of depression and anxiety.

Figure 1:   Mean scores for depression and anxiety for pupils who witness bullying, by reported reason for bullying.
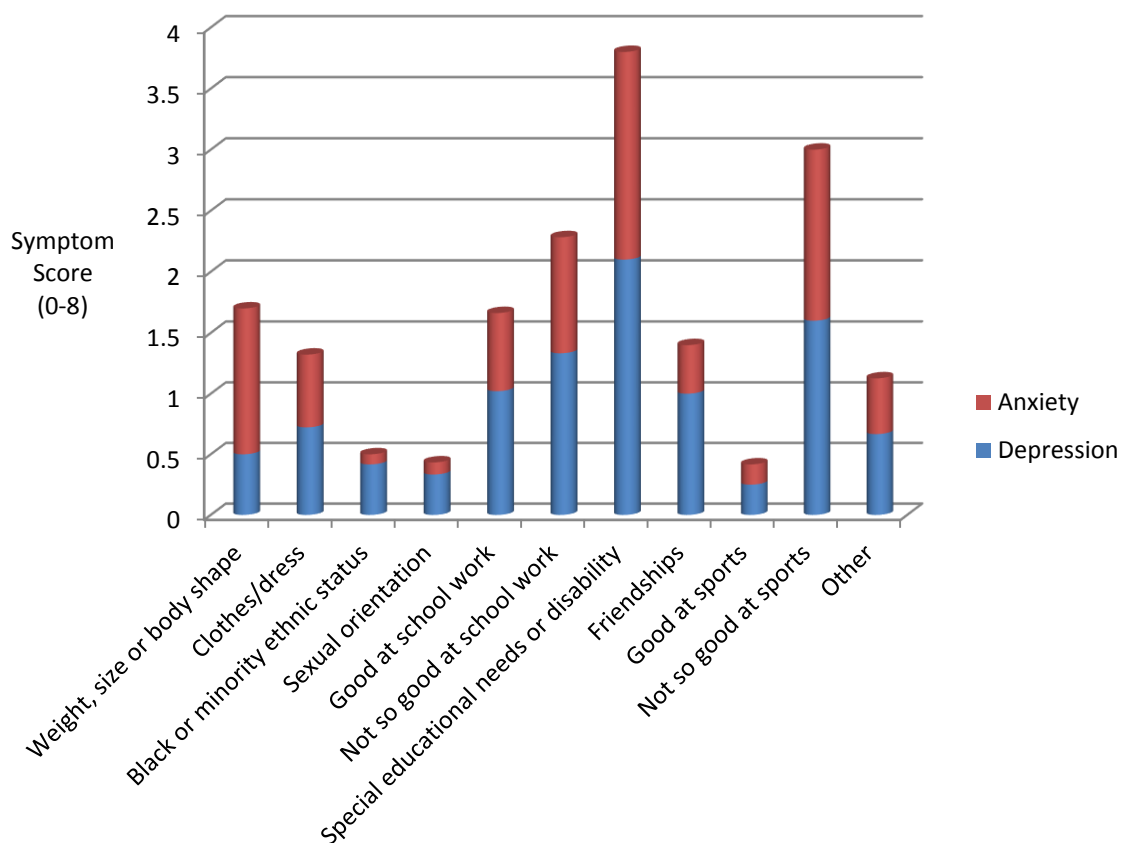
IV   Why pupil witnesses don't intervene

Social psychologists argue that there are several reasons why those who witness aggressive interactions do not intervene. Individually, these reasons include: self-protection; moral disengagement (the behaviour is not viewed as immoral, unreasonable, or the target is devalued as a human being); and cue ambiguity (uncertainly about the originator of the behaviour or its seriousness). Collectively, issues such as the sanitisation of language (describing behaviour as justifiable punishment rather than unjustified aggression) and the use of expedient historical examples to justify behaviour (e.g. condemnation of particular groups from history or significant cultural or religious texts) play a significant part (see Bandura, 1999; Forsberg et al., 2014; Wiens & Dempsey, 2009) or example, in Scotland, in a study on prejudice-based bullying, when pupils were asked if they would report bullying when they witnessed it, choices were made according to the perceived severity of bullying, its perceived justification, and familiarity with the issue came into play (Lough Dennell &Logan, 2015). Indeed, justifying the bullying of pupils who represent particular groups within society may have the effect of reducing psychological distress of witnesses, but it does not necessarily increase the likelihood of intervention.

V   Barriers to effective intervention – pupil agency and social capital

Initiatives such 'pupil school council's' have been shown to be an effective institutional strategy to raise awareness of bullying, especially for minority groups. Additionally, peer-support / counselling networks have been found to be effective in resolving disputes among pupils and in bringing together those involved in bullying incidents (Cowie, 2011). However, ordinarily pupils simply do not have agency or appropriate social capital to intervene when they see bullying taking place. This may be particularly the case if they have also experienced bullying themselves. By agency, we argue that many pupils do not intrinsically possess the necessary cognitive, linguistic and social skills they need to diffuse an aggressive situation. Such skills are learnt and need to be taught.

Those with the most social capital in the school environment – who are connected with their peers and have high quality / quantity relationships - sometimes do not wish to compromise it by challenging perpetrators of bullying and their followers. Ultimately pupils who witness bullying often engage in a form of 'protectionism', preferring not to be associated with 'victims' because of a particular perceived characteristic or achievement. In our view, while stepping away from a bullying incident may offer physical protection for a witness, it does not always offer emotional protection.

VI   Proposals to effectively reduce bullying in Scotland's schools

We propose three key issues that should be at the forefront of plans to develop, fund or expand peer-led, anti-bullying interventions in Scotland's schools.

- Education Scotland should commission an independent evaluation of bullying interventions and initiatives to confirm that they:

  1) Have a direct impact in reducing bullying in schools;
  2) Improve pupil well-being and engagement;
  3) Do not place pupils who intervene in positions where they can become distressed by their actions.

- Education Scotland and local authorities should scrutinise interventions that claim to reduce bullying for pupils with specific protected characteristics, or those who experience gender-related or sexualised forms of aggression.

- Head teachers should ensure that peer-led schemes (such as mentoring schemes) have appropriately-qualified adult supervision, endorsement and are monitored.

In terms of policy initiatives we recommend that Scottish Government and local authorities:

- Review the evidence and have an informed discussion about the most appropriate interventions to be delivered in Scotland's schools.

- Adopt a new and better-understood approach to engage with pupils who witness bullying ('bystanders').

- Provide clear recommendations on how to create school environments where bullying cannot thrive. To achieve this, we recommend that policy makers should:

  1) Use the very best examples of interventions / initiatives where there is solid evidence of success in reducing bullying;

  2) Better understand how school 'culture' impacts upon the scale and incidence of bullying;

  3) Better understand how the entire school community (pupils, parents and teachers) can be energised to make Scotland's schools safe learning and working environments.

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