

# **A Guiding Framework for Policy Approaches to School Bullying & Violence**

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Since the first European Seminar on School Bullying which was held in Stavanger, Norway in August 1997 (O'Moore, 1989), a wealth of statistics have emerged from many countries within and outside of Europe (Smith et al, 1999, Smith, 2003) and more recently from Northern Ireland [McGuckin, 2004]. These statistics confirm that school bullying and violence is an international problem.

In view of the complex and multi-facet nature of bullying and violence it is evident that individual efforts from schools alone will not be sufficient to counteract these negative forces. Instead a commitment will be required of Government and stake holders at all levels of decision making, local, national and international. This view is also recognised by the World Health Organisation.

Their report on Violence and Health (2002) states that “upstream investment brings downstream results”. Norway is a good example of this. In the early eighties, Norway invested in a national intervention campaign against school bullying (Olweus & Roland, 1983). The positive results that emanated from the intervention programme and the subsequent efforts of Roland & Munthe (1997) have been a source of considerable influence and inspiration for the development of prevention and intervention activities worldwide (Smith and Brain, 2000).

To curb the school bullying and violence that is evident worldwide, a global response is necessary that is both unified and co-ordinated. To achieve this requires a national strategy on the part of all member states to prevent the ill-effects of school bullying and violence.

In developing a guiding framework for policy approaches to school bullying and violence, I have been influenced by the recommendations of the World Health Organisation in their World report on Violence and Health (2002).

The steps proposed to form the guiding framework for policy approaches to prevent school bullying and violence are as follows:

- 1) Draw up, implement and monitor a national plan of action to prevent school bullying and violence.***

To adopt the recommendations of the WHO a national action plan needs to be based on a consensus developed by a wide range of governmental and nongovernmental representation. This should include representation from agencies and organisations working to tackle school bullying and violence.

According to WHO a national plan should include the following elements:

- Review and reform of existing legislation and policy.
- Build data collection and capacity building
- Strengthen services for victims
- Develop and evaluate prevention responses
- Set a timetable
- Develop a mechanism for evaluation
- Establish an organisation to monitor and report on progress

The monitoring authority should feature co-ordinating mechanisms at local, national and international levels. This should enable collaboration between the sectors that have the potential to contribute to the prevention of school bullying and violence.

e.g.

- education
- labour
- health
- social welfare
- criminal justice

Each country's national plan will naturally have to take into account the human and financial resources available to them. However, it is critical that the human resources that are available are harnessed. To ignore, block or to not nurture/expertise that is available is to reflect that problem of bullying subject has not yet gained a significant political standing in that country.

## 2) *Enhance the capacity to collect data on school bullying and violence.*

Comprehensive and reliable data on school bullying and violence is critical to influencing policy making. It will, as has been pointed out by the WHO (2002) facilitate the process of setting priorities, guiding programme design and monitoring progress.

Already all but six member states of the OECD have taken initiatives to deal with bullying and violence in schools. [Smith, 2003; Smith, Morita, Junger-Tas, Olweus, Catalano & Slee, 1999].

The country reports however, also illustrate the difficulties that exist in comparing and interpreting data on SBV across communities and nations, Contributing to the difficulty are the varying measurement techniques that have been employed. Another, complicating factor, not to be underestimated is the lack of a universal definition of bullying and violence in schools.

A key question that first and foremost needs to be addressed and which was raised by Devine and Lawson (2003) is whether 'school bullying' and 'violence' is to be treated as two distinct phenomena or a conflation of the two terms.

While this may not be the most appropriate platform to discuss the issue of definitions it is difficult to see how progress can be made in relation to prevention and intervention of school bullying and violence until there is a consensus among researchers and stake holders.

A clear precise and unambiguous definition of school bullying and violence is needed in order to facilitate on an international scale the collection of meaningful data and the design of preventative strategies.

Common to and at the heart of all school bullying and violence is abusive behaviour. Abusive behaviour as we know, can be verbal, physical, psychological, sexual and racial. To conceptualise school bullying and violence in this way would in my opinion capture the range of behaviours that need to be challenged in prevention and intervention programmes. To use the construct of abuse would also help to:

Overcome the theoretical and cultural diversities that currently exist  
Target more effectively the problem behaviour, i.e, the process as well as the product.  
Avoid unnecessary policies and programmes, e.g, racial and sexual.

I would therefore like to propose a definition that is not dissimilar to that adopted by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living Condition in relation to bullying and violence in the workplace. [Di Martino, Hoel & Cooper, 2003]

Namely, school bullying and violence can be defined as “*incidents where an individual or a group are abused, threatened or assaulted. The abusive behaviour involves an explicit or implicit challenge to their safety, well being and health.*” (Wynne et al. 1997)

### **3) *Define priorities for, and support research on, the causes, consequences, costs and prevention of school bullying and violence.***

Few will deny the importance of research for policy-making and planning of initiatives. The country reports on school bullying (Smith et al, 1999) and violence (Smith, 2003) together with the commentaries from Israel, American and Australia (Smith, 2003, Nordic Council) have pointed to many potential areas of research. If these were to be followed up within each country the results would undoubtedly advance our understanding of school bullying and violence to the extent that more effective prevention and intervention strategies could be developed.

#### Research Priorities:

Benbenishty and Astor (2003), for example, point to the need for a greater understanding of contextual characteristics that impact on school bullying and violence with each country, e.g. the role of religion and religious schools, the socio-economic status of the school neighbourhood and of the students parents and the relative roles, professional authority and power position of staff, pupils and parents vis-à-vis each other.

The size of schools and its impact on school violence is also according to Devine and Lawson (2003) ripe for an international research programme.

A greater understanding is also needed of the elements that are most desirable for inclusion in programmes of prevention and intervention. There is also a need to fill the disturbing gap in our knowledge of bullying and violence by teaches. It is absolutely essential, as has been pointed out by Beneishty and Astor (2003) to think about teacher-teacher and teacher-pupil bullying in the context of the socialising effect that an educational experience has on young people.

To further guide policy making and programme design there needs to be systematic and rigorous evaluations of initiatives to prevent and reduce school bullying and violence. Much valuable information has been lost due to the lack of evaluation of initiatives to cur school bullying and violence (Atria & Spiel, 2003, Schafer & Korn, 2003, Severson, 2003).

The relationship between sports and violence is another area that merits urgent attention. (Gulbenkian Foundation Commission on Children & Violence, 1995).

#### Who undertakes the research?

To advance the much needed research that is to help guide policy making and planning to prevent and counter school bullying and violence a range of researchers need to be involved these should include

- Government departments
- Academic institutions
- Individual researchers
- Network of individual researchers at local, national and international levels

#### ***4) Develop a national strategy to assist schools to prevent and reduce school bullying and violence.***

Many examples exist of schools worldwide that have, either on their own, or with the help of researchers or other stake holders taken initiatives to tackle school bullying and violence. However, there is also evidence of an ostrich mentality among schools, where little or no action is taken to curb problems of SBV (O'Moore, 1995, O'Moore & Minton, 2004). To overcome the reluctance that schools may have to implement prevention and intervention programmes it would seem reasonable to introduce on a global scale a statutory requirement on the part of all schools to implement a school policy/intervention programme. A programme that is underpinned by a political commitment will carry more weight.

As a result it should contribute to its effectiveness. However, that is not to underestimate the importance of the commitment of a school, its staff and its parents to determine the success of a programme (Roland & Munthe, 1997).

While it may seem of benefit to introduce a standard formalised intervention programme on an international scale, one must not lose sight of the benefits of a programme that is tailored to meet a school's unique characteristics. This was clearly illustrated by an intervention programme at Graug Skole, Norway (O'Moore & Minton, 2002).

It probably goes without saying that the design of a national school programme should be guided by the international evidence that is available on the effectiveness of individual programmes. The most promising method to prevent bullying and violence occurring in schools has so far been the whole school approach (Olweus, 1993, Roland & Munthe, 1997, Smith & Sharp, 1994, Ortega & Lora, 2000, O'Moore & Minton, 2004).

It has been shown from a meta evaluation of methods and approaches to reducing bullying that the earlier an intervention programme is introduced to children, the greater its effectiveness (Rigby, 2002). It is not unexpected therefore to learn that Norway's recent Manifesto against Bullying has, as one of its guiding principles that of introducing pre-school children to anti-bullying programmes.

The elements to be incorporated into a whole school approach will require careful consideration in view of the uncertainty that prevails as to which are the most effective. The most preferable for inclusion would be those that are evidence based. A good illustration of evidence based elements are those that are incorporated into the National Guidelines to counter Bullying in Schools in Ireland. Underpinning their school policy is the promotion of a co-operative school ethos where interactions between teachers, pupils and parents are characterised by respect, trust, caring, consideration and support.

In addition it is expected that schools will take every opportunity to promote the confidence and self esteem of their pupils and staff. Furthermore, advantage should be taken of the curricula to foster respect, tolerance and celebration of diversity. Moreover, schools need to develop interventions that are primary, secondary and tertiary i.e.

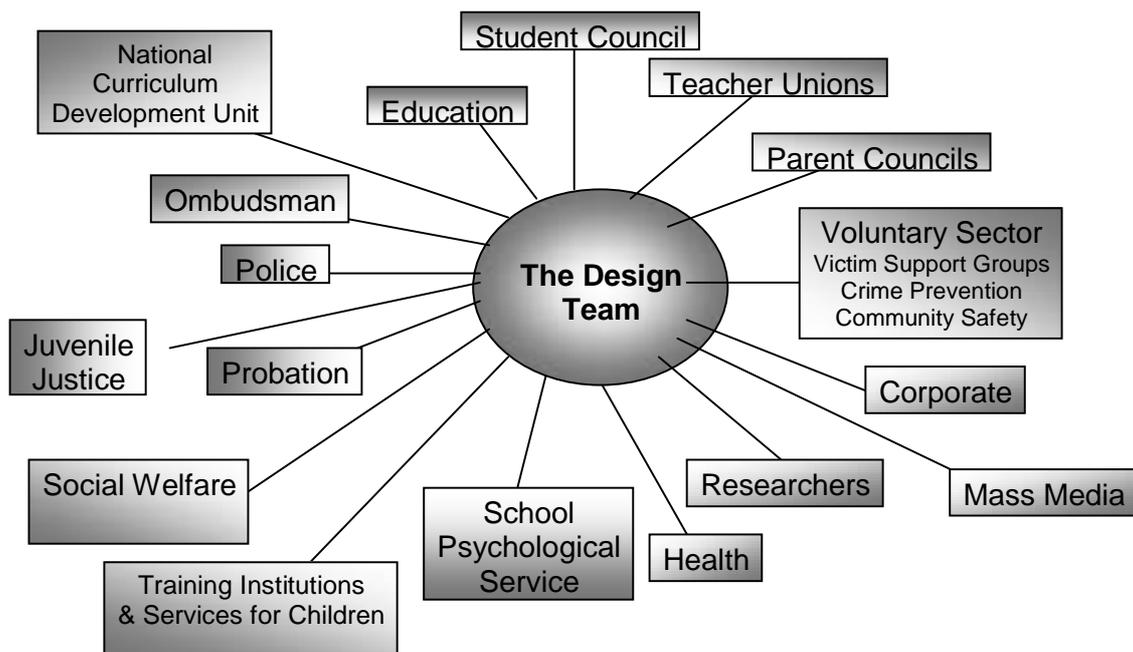
- Primary – reducing the risk of bullying and violence.  
*Survey, prepare policies or code of discipline reduce risk factors, establish student council, peer support, mediation, counselling, school home liaison*
- Secondary – responding to incidents of bullying and violence  
*Method of shared concern, No Blame approach, Restorative Justice, Denial of Privileges, Suspension, Expulsion*
- Tertiary – treatment and rehabilitation for those involved in incidents  
*Monitoring incidents, Counselling, referral to specialists*  
*Child – focused*  
*Teacher – focused*  
*Family – focused*  
*Community – focused*

To provide the necessary therapeutic services that schools would require would involve the assistance of multi-disciplinary teams, e.g. Health, Education, Juvenile Justice, School Psychological Service, Social Welfare and Probation Services.

To ensure that a whole school approach is a continuous process it is also essential to incorporate a regular audit and evaluation. To assist schools to achieve these goals an expert advisory organization needs to be established. To design a program or guidelines for national use it is imperative that representatives from the various critical stakeholders are invited to contribute to its development. In Ireland, for example, the National Guidelines to counter school bullying that were introduced by the Department of Education and Science in 1993 did not get the blessing that they deserved. This was because there was no representation from the Teacher Unions on the Ministerial Working Group that drew up the Guidelines. The bitterness that resulted from this omission left the Guidelines without the support of a major critical focus group.

The Design Team should therefore include representation from as many interested professional sectors as is possible. See figure below

## The Design Team



### ***5) Promote a media campaign to promote non-violent values, attitudes and behaviour.***

To work towards a non-violent society requires efforts that go far beyond the school gates. The values and attitudes that are promoted in schools need to be supported by the same values, attitudes and behaviour outside of school. Too often children are exposed in their homes and in the neighbourhood to violent ways of behaving and to resolving

conflicts. Indeed there are children, as has been pointed out by Remboldt (1998) whose experience tells them that violence is the most expedient and respect worthy means to achieve their ends.

There is a need therefore to challenge the social attitudes that condone violence. As Remboldt (1998) remarks, “the first order of business is a revolutionary adjustment in adult beliefs, attitudes and behaviour toward violence”.

One way to achieve this would be to introduce a government led and funded media campaign. This view finds support in the recommendations of the Commission on Children and Violence convened by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1995.

The media campaign should, as was recommended by the Commission on Children and Violence:

- Address fully the gender issue
- Challenge macho male images
- Highlight groups at risk of violence, i.e, infants, young people, people with a disability and minority ethnic groups.

To guide the media campaign there should be an Inter-Departmental Ministerial Working Group that reports to a Cabinet Committee on School Bullying and Violence.

Evaluations of earlier high profile campaigns could guide the programme planning that would be required to promote the pro-social and non-violent attitudes.

It should be further recommended that an national media campaign should be reinforced by efforts to build values that make for a non-violent society into services that work with and for children.

#### ***6) Integrate School Bullying and Violence Prevention into Teacher Education at both Pre-Service and In-Service Levels.***

One of the conclusions to be drawn from a review of the individual country reports on school bullying and violence (Smith, 2003) is the lack of systematic training for teachers on a national scale during their initial teacher education.

Teachers, as we are all aware, are in the forefront of intervention of school bullying and violence. Indeed, research has indicated that the commitment of teachers is critical to the effectiveness of intervention programmes (Roland, 2000). From my own experience of working with teachers at initial and in-service education levels, is the lack of commitment tends to be associated with inaccurate perceptions of school bullying and their inability to deal effectively with incidents as they arise.

#### **Initial Teacher Education.**

To ensure a greater level of competence of teachers to apply prevention and intervention strategies a module on school bullying and violence should be introduced as part of their initial teacher education. Initial teacher training on the subject of School Bullying and

Violence would also provide an invaluable means to sensitise teachers to the critical role that their own behaviour and that of their colleagues have in shaping pupil behaviour. For as long as teachers and head teachers engage in behaviour that can be defined as bullying or violence with their colleagues or pupils they are unlikely to be able to deliver anti-bullying programmes effectively and convincingly. (Minton & O'Moore, 2004). Key elements to be incorporated in to a teacher training module on school bullying and violence have been presented by O'Moore (2000) & Nicolaidis et al (2002).

### In Service Education.

In-Service training is now recognised as a critical component in the professional development of teachers. Evidence of the value of in-service training in reducing school bullying and violence can be gained from an Irish intervention study (O'Moore & Minton, 2004). This study also demonstrated the value of creating a teacher group that can be a resource for intervention programmes in their region as well as providing local support.

To strengthen the motivation of qualified teachers to participate in in-service programmes, it is to be recommended that a national strategy should make provision for accrediting teachers for their participation.

A post-graduate Diploma in Aggression Studies with the potential to advance to Masters and Doctorate level has for example been developed in Trinity College, Dublin to serve this purpose.

### ***7) To Establish An Advisory Body for Partners in Education.***

During the course of my involvement in research into school bullying it became apparent that schools were in need of evidence based advice and guidance on how to develop and implement school policies and programmes to counter problems of school bullying. Indeed it was the frequent request from school personnel and members serving on parent-teacher associations and boards of management for guidance on how to deal with problematic incidents relating to both school and workplace bullying that prompted the establishment of the Anti-Bullying Centre in Trinity College Dublin.

Since its establishment it provides a comprehensive service [See Fig.5]

Services provided by the Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre

- Advice and guidance [*website, helpline, drop in centre*]
- Professional Counselling
- Mediation
- Resource Materials for parents, schools and organisations
- In-service and staff development for schools and organisations
- Day conferences and workshops for pupils, parents, teachers and adults in the workplace
- Investigations
- Expert Witness

- Legal Advice
- Reference library
- Conducts research

From the demand to date on the Centre for its services to schools and other statutory and voluntary sectors it is clear that each country should establish a Centre(s) of expertise as part of a global strategy to combat school bullying and violence.

It is recommended that such centres be given governmental funding and an official status as is the case in certain countries, e.g. Scotland and Norway. This sends out a strong message that bullying and violence is recognised as a serious issue. National Centres of expertise would also be in a position to deliver on the recommendation of the WHO (2002). They recognise that better working relations are needed between international agencies, governments, research networks and non-governmental agencies, governments, research networks and non-governmental organisations engaged in violence prevention.

This is in order to share knowledge more efficiently, agree on prevention goals and co-ordinate action.

A further role for a National Advisory Centre of Expertise would be to form an alliance with other advocacy groups that work to prevent school bullying and violence. An alliance of this nature has been established in the UK ([www.ncb.org.uk/aba](http://www.ncb.org.uk/aba), 2004). An alliance would avoid un-necessary duplication, providing instead opportunities for the development, monitoring and evaluation of new preventative and intervention strategies.

### ***8) To Contribute to an International Research Network***

The establishment of an international network of researchers would enable important issues to be identified and examined in a rigorous and effective manner. The good scientific evidence that would emanate from such a collaborative effort would facilitate the further development of effective global preventative approaches that can be applied in a variety of contexts.

The first step in establishing an international research network is for each member state of the OECD to develop a strong research focus on the subject of school bullying and violence. Many countries have already achieved a reputable track record of research notably, Norway, Scotland, England, Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, France and Spain.

There are many potential areas of research in which an international network of research centres could play a critical role in the global prevention of school bullying and violence. Projects of major importance would be:

National baseline investigations where the same definition and tools of measurement are used.

- To analyse results according to defined standards

- To conduct indepth case studies of national policies
- To monitor and evaluate prevention and intervention approaches
- To assist OECD and National Authorities in raising awareness and national research.

An international research network will require leadership if it is to operate effectively. While any of the current Centres may have the capacity and indeed the willingness to provide the co-ordinating function it would seem not only prudent but expedient if the co-ordinating centre were to be located in a country that has demonstrated political commitment at the highest level to tackle school bullying and violence. The aims and objectives of the Network would then most certainly be given the necessary support that is critical for optimal progress to be made.

### ***9) Promote Legislation to Deal Effectively with School Bullying and Violence.***

Article 19 of the U.N convention on the Rights of Children makes it clear that children have a fundamental right to feel safe in school and to be spared as Olweus (1999) has pointed out, the oppression and repeated intentional humiliation implied in bullying.

Ananiadou and Smith (2002), have pointed out that only a few European countries have specific legal requirements against bullying, although more have requirements on the more general problem of violence at school.

It would seem reasonable therefore to introduce on a global scale a legal reform that is designed to take heed of the recommendations of the Commission on Children and Violence [Gulbenkian Foundation, 1995]. They recommend essentially that i) legal tolerance should be removed from any level of violence to children and ii) responses to violent behaviour should contribute to the solution rather than the problem.

Appropriate legislation should help to create as pointed out by Ananiadou and Smith (2002), a climate of opinion that reinforces the message that bullying is not acceptable behaviour in schools. Furthermore, it will require all schools to follow certain procedures, e.g., developing and keeping active a school policy.

It is to be expected that an introduction of legal guidelines may cause considerable resistance and nervousness among school personnel and their employers in view of the shift towards a compensation culture (Binchy, 2004). However, such anxieties can be overcome by clear guidelines to schools as to new litigation can be avoided by engaging in good practice.

From my own understanding of school bullying and violence, I believe the appointment globally of an Ombudsman for Child and Labour Relations would hold considerable promise. Cases that cannot be resolved at school level can be referred to the Ombudsman's Office. On their own or with the help of an official advisory body of excellence, as referred to earlier, investigations can be carried out and hurt parties can be referred for remedial help. The establishment of such a facility on a global scale would

undoubtedly alleviate the stress of unresolved conflicts, not to mention the prevention of unnecessary litigations.

Most importantly the office would also have the statutory powers to improve the welfare of children so as to meet the requirements set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of Children.

### Conclusion.

Two decades of major research or more has unquestionably indicated that school bullying and violence is a problem for society worldwide. It is clear, therefore that interventions are needed at local, national and international levels.

To have the required impact on a global scale, each member state should develop a national strategy to prevent and counter school bullying and violence. A guiding framework for such a strategy has been outlined in this paper. However, the extent to which preventative strategies can be implemented will undoubtedly depend on the resources available to the individual member states.

Additional challenges will most probably be experienced by countries that have a climate of poverty and political violence. However, a strong global response that is comprehensive, unified and concerted in its efforts to promote a non-violent society should contribute to making schools worldwide safer and healthier places. In our future efforts to make a difference we would do well to remember the lines, as I remember them, said by Yves Beernaert [International Conference on School Violence Prevention, Lisbon, 2001].

*“When planning for a year plant corn  
When planning for a decade plant trees  
When planning for life, train and educate people.”*

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