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## **Introduction**

Whilst traditional forms of bullying have and continue to receive considerable attention in the literature, research on technology-enabled bullying remains in an embryonic stage and considerable deficits exist in our understanding of the nature, extent, dynamics and consequences of this new form of bullying. Of the limited studies that exist on this issue, much relates to the United States with only an emerging comparative data from the UK, Ireland and other EU countries<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, the question as to whether the nature, experiences and impact of cyberbullying among young people in different societies and cultures differ and of different genders remains an issue requiring further research. This chapter aims to redress that imbalance by reporting on research conducted in Ireland which examined the nature and extent of cyberbullying among adolescent girls.

As a case study the findings in this essay cannot be generalised to a wider population. However, it is hoped that the research presented here will help teachers and parents to reflect further on issues related to cyberbullying. It is also intended that this research will contribute to the ongoing international discourse on cyberbullying leading to the development of appropriate pastoral care in schools settings, in particular.

## **Context and Problem**

The widespread adoption of information and communications technologies has brought with it many social and educational benefits. Many schools have enthusiastically embraced communications technologies particularly as it has been

found that increasing access to such technology has the potential to increase students' social interaction and enhance collaborative learning experiences<sup>2</sup>. Adolescents have grown up surrounded by ubiquitous technologies that are an embedded part of their daily lives. The use of mobile phones, email, live chat applications and social networking websites is an intrinsic form of their communication and social life.<sup>3</sup> According to a survey in the USA, in 2004 some 45% of teenagers (aged 12 to 17) owned a mobile phone. By 2008 that figure had climbed to 71%.

Significantly, the study also suggested that 33% of teenagers send a minimum of 100 texts per day with 11% sending more than 200 messages per day. On average, boys send 30 text messages whilst girls send 80 messages on a daily basis. Among teens, age is the most important variable in mobile phone ownership. Older teens are much more likely to own phones than younger teens, and the largest increase occurs at age 14, right at the transition between middle and high school. Among 12-13 year olds, 52% had a cell phone in 2008. Mobile phone ownership jumped to 72% at age 14 in that survey, and by the age of 17 more than eight in ten teens (84%) had their own cell phone. The report also states that in 2008 60% of teenagers owned a laptop or desktop or, at the very least, had personal access to one in the family home.<sup>4</sup> While such pervasive adoption of communications technologies confers obvious advantages, particularly with regard to learning and education, these are paralleled by some challenges that to-date have not been previously encountered by many Western Societies.

One challenge that now presents itself to teachers and other adults is the fact that those who have grown up with communication technologies have a different understanding of privacy than those of previous generations. These 'digital natives' increasingly leave traces of themselves in online public places. Palfrey and Gasser

argue that “at their best, they show off who they aspire to be and put their most creative selves before the world. At their worst, they put information online that may put them in danger, or that could humiliate them in years to come”<sup>5</sup>. They conclude that young people today are exposing themselves in a way that will benefit marketers, bullies and paedophiles alike and as such they may end up paying the highest price. Although many teachers and parents recognize the problem of school bullying, it is difficult for them to identify when students are being harassed through electronic communication. For example, whereas traditional bullying usually takes the form of physical as well as verbal intimidation, the use of information and communications technologies enable harassment and bullying even when the intended target is not physically present. Also, since some “chat rooms” require passwords it means that without the victim’s cooperation, it is difficult to identify perpetrator and victim.

Traditional forms of bullying were more easily identifiable and could be dealt with according to individual school policies and government regulations. However, many schools in the UK, Ireland and the wider EU have no clear policy on cyberbullying and there seems to be little understanding of how this form of bullying requires a distinct pastoral approach. Hence, it is all too easily incorporated into the general school bullying policy with little or no understanding of its uniqueness and impact on students.

Whilst empirical research in other countries is also limited, there has at least been earlier recognition of the escalating seriousness of the problem. Ybarra and Mitchell in the US reported that 15% of their sample identified themselves as cyberbullies while 7% reported being targeted online<sup>6</sup>. In 2004, i-SAFE America (a non-profit foundation endorsed by the US Congress and dedicated to the Internet safety education), surveyed 1500 US students in grades 4-8. Data suggested that forty-two per cent were cyberbullied, one in four of these students more than once. In addition, just over half (53%) of the students in the sample ‘cyberbullied’ others and

one third of them did so more than once<sup>7</sup>. In Canada, a survey conducted by MNet found that one quarter of young Canadian internet users in the study sample reported that they had the experience of receiving online messages that made hateful comments about others<sup>8</sup>. Gender differences have also been identified in young adolescents experience related to cyberbullying in Canada (Li, 2006). The limited research on this issue in Europe indicates that the problem of adolescent cyberbullying is equally widespread. For example, a UK Report showed that out of 92 students from 14 different schools, 20 students, (or 22% of the sample), had been victims of cyberbullying at least once, with 6.6% of the respondents having experienced being cyberbullied frequently (Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho and Tippett, 2006). Finally, a report by O'Moore and Minton (2011) in Ireland found that one in seven young people had experienced cyberbullying. Whatever chance parents and teachers had in identifying traditional verbal and physical bullying and intervening, this relatively new form of bullying is far more difficult to identify and is largely dependent on the adolescent talking about it, which is something research has shown young people don't tend to do. Statistics show that 58% of those who are online bullied do not tell an adult or others about the experience (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). This unwillingness to tell is not only due to the fact they feel adults may not respond appropriately, but because they fear their internet usage may be taken by those who are trying to protect them.

According to Beran and Li (2005), the severity of cyber-harassment also varies with incidents ranging from 'annoying' to 'dangerous' and the occurrence of death threats. In addition, cyberbullying may alter traditional bullying at school. For example, if "electronic bullies" remain undetected, their bullying behaviours at school may become more severe and direct rather than indirectly exerted against a victim. Clearly, there is a need for research to explore how cyberbullying possibly decreases, maintains or exacerbates other forms of bullying.

Many researchers advocate that it is through education and awareness that progress will be made in the deterrence of cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Kowalski, 2008; Shariff, 2008; Willard, 2007). Common reactive practices by school systems to apply disciplinary and punitive actions against those who engage in cyberbullying have not proven to be particularly effective. Likewise, it is not always clear which

school system disciplinary responses against these acts are appropriate in the context of civil law. Reactive measures taken by schools may reduce aggressive incidents from reoccurring by those who are caught, but it takes programs that instill character and cultivate healthy behaviors to affect long term changes among young people (Perry, 1999).

The main body of literature on cyberbullying tends to be written from the perspective of the adult, to focus on how adults understand the issue and what they perceive the best practices to be in addressing cyberbullying. There is scant research addressing the viewpoints of adolescents and their experiences of cyberbullying. However, adolescents' voices need to be heard as their perceptions of the problem have the potential to shed a new light on adult understanding of the issue and would be of particular benefit to parents, teachers, chaplains and educationalists. It was for these reasons that we decided to undertake a case study on cyberbullying among girls in a post-primary school in Ireland.

### **Research Aims**

This research aimed to gain a qualitative insight into the conceptualisation and experience of cyberbullying among adolescent girls and their teachers in a post-primary school in Ireland. Specifically we were interested in finding out:

- What are adolescent girls' experiences of cyberbullying?
- How do they conceptualise and understand cyberbullying?
- How do teachers understand and respond pastorally to cyberbullying?

### **Case Study School**

As we were interested in doing research on cyberbullying among adolescent girls we approached an all girls' post-primary school in a medium size rural town in Ireland. The research was conducted between February 2011 and April 2012. The school was

chosen because it exhibited certain typicality and had students from a mix of social backgrounds including urban and rural. More importantly we were aware that teachers in the school were already concerned about emerging cyberbullying activities among the girls at the school. Arising from discussion with the senior management team in the school it was decided that we would focus our research on a sample of students from the school. We specifically conducted our research with 2<sup>nd</sup> year students aged 13 to 15 years, and 5<sup>th</sup> year students aged 16 to 18 years. We believed it was important to conduct the research with junior and senior students to allow us to explore the conceptualisations and experiences of girls at different stages of development and with different experiences of socialising within peer groups. In terms of awareness of bullying the school holds an annual anti-bullying week and the school policy on bullying is promoted by teachers throughout the year. The anti-bullying policy of the school is contained within each student's journals. There is an emphasis on pastoral care within the school as is evidenced by the presence of a pastoral care team which consists of counsellors, chaplain and year heads who meet on a weekly basis.

### **Research Methods**

In order to achieve our aims three methods were employed for the purposes of the study: a self administered questionnaire of students in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> year, in-depth semi-structured interviews with a sample of students from these year groups and a focus group with teachers.

#### *Self Administered Questionnaire*

The questionnaire was developed to address a number of general questions relating to the use of technology by the participants. It also sought to elicit any experiences of

cyberbullying which they may have had with particular reference to the online social network website *Facebook* and mobile phones. Initial questions in the questionnaire sought information on the girls' everyday use of the internet, focusing on where and when they accessed the internet as well as their favourite websites. The questionnaire then progressed to ask questions relating to any hurtful experiences arising from communications with others through the internet and/or mobile phones. The questionnaires were distributed to 62 students in 2<sup>nd</sup> Year and 54 students in 5<sup>th</sup> Year ( $n=116$ ).

On receipt of the completed questionnaires from the school each individual script was assigned a number from 1 to 116 and students' responses were entered into *Microsoft Excel*. Following the input of all data into the master workbook, a second excel workbook was created with a separate worksheet for each question asked in the questionnaire. This allowed data to be pulled from the original document and answers to be quantified. In the case of qualitative questions participants responses were counted and quantified accordingly. In instances where qualitative answers required coding the same coding structures were applied as in the NVivo analysis of the qualitative interviews to maintain consistency across our data set.

### *Semi-Structured Interviews*

Following the questionnaires, 15 students from 2<sup>nd</sup> Year and 11 students from 5<sup>th</sup> year volunteered to participate in interviews. These interviews were conducted in a room which was apart from the main classrooms and staff room, and situated beside the guidance counsellor's office, in order to ensure better levels of privacy. The interviews were semi-structured and consisted of open ended questions. Some of the questions covered by the survey were covered again at the start of the interviews, in

order to contextualise the following questions on problematic online behaviour, and also as a means of helping the students to be at ease. The questions then enquired from a practical point of view as well as a communicative point of view about the participants' use of social networks and other digital spaces. The interview then moved towards problematic behaviour incidences known to the students. However, we also allowed the students to explore issues that they wanted to talk about, and often the questions on cyberbullying led to participants talking about more traditional forms of bullying. In some cases, the students offered to log into their Facebook accounts so that they could show what they found difficult to describe.

The interviews were transcribed and uploaded onto the NVivo software for qualitative analysis. Each interview was first coded at source, under the alias of the student, which also contained information on age and school year. Even though this case study project was set in a girls' school, gender was included for possible future comparisons. The interviews were then read closely, and nodes were created for references to various spaces (school, primary school, home) as well as online spaces mentioned (Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr) or technology used (mobile phones, texting).

Nodes were also created in reference to various actors in the students' lives and mentioned during the interviews (parents, family, teachers, and school authorities). Those could then be cross-referenced with other nodes which described online behaviour, both positive and negative.

### *Focus group*

Following the analysis of the student questionnaires and interviews a focus group was conducted with members of the school's teaching staff. Six members of staff were in attendance including the deputy principal, guidance counsellor and year heads. The

researchers gave a report on the findings emerging from the questionnaires and interviews with students. The discussion was initially guided by the report, and the staff wanted to talk about the language used to describe cyberbullying. The researchers enquired about the staff's digital knowledge and habits, and after more discussion on language and instances of bullying they had encountered among students, the topic of what happens when students report incidents was discussed. They also discussed anti-bullying policies, current or desired, and their concerns for the future. The discussion was transcribed, and loaded on to the NVivo software for qualitative analysis. It was coded with regards to issues identified in the previous round of coding with regards to technology, space, language and power.

### **Ethics**

In advance of undertaking this research, ethical approval was sought and obtained from the University's Ethics Committee and the School's Board of Management. We had concerns that the topic of the research could lead to the disclosure of sensitive or painful experiences, or that latent psychological issues might be revealed. Consequently, we worked closely with the bullying program in the school, and in particular with the school counsellor to ensure that there was adequate support for anyone who might be affected negatively by participating in the research. In the case of emotional distress, it was planned that the interview would be immediately terminated, and the student would be cared for by the counsellor. All students and parents/guardians were informed that participation was optional and were asked to give consent in advance of the research process.

The questionnaire was filled in anonymously, only the age of the participant was required; participants in the interviews were attributed pseudonyms which they chose themselves. However, as this is a case study involving only just one school total

anonymity could not be guaranteed at all times, and this was indicated to the students, parents/guardians and staff. We did however undertake not to publish any sensitive material which the participants did not want publicized. The school themselves have a very well-established code of ethics and a strong duty of care to their students. They were consulted at the research design stage and were constantly informed of the progress of the interviews throughout the period of data collection. After the research was completed the research team returned to the school twice, once to give a talk to the parents' association, and once to report to the teachers and year heads on the findings of the study. Moreover, we have undertaken to give the students a workshop on digital literacy, which will take place during the current school year.

## **Findings**

### *Internet Usage*

The majority (98%) of students in this school either owned or had access to a personal computer, with the remaining 2% who didn't have this access stating that they used their mobile phones to access the internet when needed. In relation to the frequency of internet use 39% of students in this school reported that they go online several times a day and 23% once per day. Of those who access the internet less frequently 20% go online several times a week, 3% once a week and 13% from time to time. Respondents were most likely to access the internet in the family room in the home (48%), their bedrooms (33%) or on their phone (17%). Public spaces such as school (3%), Internet cafes (3%) and libraries (3%) were less frequently used by respondents to access the internet.

In relation to the time of day which respondents went online the questionnaire revealed that after school was the most popular time to go online with most students (75%) in this school accessing the internet between 4pm and 12 midnight with a peak

between 6pm and 9pm. While responses to the questionnaire suggested relatively low levels of internet use during school hours subsequent interviews with students and the focus group with teachers revealed an alternative view where online activity occurred throughout the day through the use of mobile phones. In terms of frequency of use, *Facebook* was the most popular (91%) site to visit among respondents followed by *YouTube* and *Twitter*. As well as a number of other social network sites, students also responded with special interest sites such as sport, music and celebrity news. When asked which was their favourite websites *Facebook* was cited by 75% of respondents followed by *YouTube* (13%) and *Twitter*(5%). When asked in what way do they use their favourite sites 49% of the girls in this school responded that they use these sites to chat with friends and family.

Students were asked if there was anything which they didn't like about using their favourite websites. While 33% of respondents said that there was nothing they didn't like about their favourite site, other responses to this question begin to introduce some of the problematic online behaviours which researchers encountered during the course of this case study, for example, hurtful comments (10.7%), bitching (1.5%), fighting (2.3%), teasing (1.5%), slagging (0.8%), profile being hacked (0.8%), gossiping (0.8%) and messing (0.8%). In relation to upsetting events that students or their friends had encountered online 53% of respondents to the questionnaire had either personally been upset by something on a website or knew somebody who had this type of experience. 94% of those who responded to the questionnaire agreed that it was easy to upset someone through the internet.

#### *Language, Insults and Misunderstandings*

Avoiding the use of the term cyberbullying which can be loaded with judgement and negativity, we included open ended questions on our questionnaire to ask students about things they disliked and about being “upset” when online and using mobile phones. In relation to upsetting events that students or their friends encountered online 53% of respondents to the questionnaire had either personally been upset by something on a website or knew somebody who had experience of this. Students responded by referring to “nasty texts”, “nasty things”, “nasty voice messages”, “nasty messages”, “nasty gossip”, and also “bitchy comments”, “bitchy fights”.

Similar words emerged in the interviews where respondents frequently relied on words like “bitchy” and “nasty”. The term “bitch” is solely used as an insult, usually collocated with terms related to weight (“fat”, “big”) or death and self-harm (“cut yourself with glass”, “go and kill yourself”). This however does not occur in conversation with the students, but rather when they relate occurrences of insults and unpleasantness online. Insults are also gendered, and often relate to appearance, data from the questionnaire showed that comments on appearance and comments on photos were singled out as examples of online activity the students disliked. During the interviews, a clearer picture of those insults and unpleasant comments on appearance emerged; one element very clearly related to weight issues, with the word “fat” appearing as a recurring insult in comments about photographs posted on Facebook. Others seemed to be general insults either in messages or in text messages on mobile phones.

Some other insults were specifically related to photographs, one student explained that:

*“you see all the photos and they were tagged in a sort of a timeline, the pictures they were tagged in. and they could be like tagged as the drag queen*

*or Down syndrome, I think that's kind of rude in a sense.”* (Caitlin, aged 15 years).

Two students referred to the website “Formspring”, which is widely used by girls in this age group. The site offers members the facility for asking questions in the form of quizzes to a wide number of people, anonymously, and where insulting questions tend to be asked:

*“Formspring is like, you put your page, no you have a page and you can put yourself as anonymous and post like something to someone's page. And mainly if you put yourself as anonymous it would be something bad.”*

(Jade, aged 16 years).

*“I will go on it sometimes, I go on it to see people's funny answers, cos some people are brilliant like they can take it, cos a lot of people they send the question but they send it to all the followers so it isn't a personal thing. So when you get the question, like I got a question telling me I was a snob once and I was like; oh. Like you just kind of, you don't know if it was meant for you or if it was sent to everybody, ...”.* (Pippa, aged 14 years).

It is clear that this type of experience can leave the girls who participate in the website feeling insecure while at the same time there is a considerable degree of peer pressure at work almost compelling these girls to continue participating in the website. Although the girls in this study were aware of the term *cyberbullying* they did not relate it to their negative experiences online. Furthermore, they often tended to categorise some bad behaviour as “messaging” based on who was doing it and against whom. There was no distinction in their responses between “messaging” in school or online. However, upon further questioning it did become apparent that it was more difficult to tell if someone was just “messaging” online than if you could see them and read their body language and tone of voice. Some of the teachers expressed the opinion that by not calling their behaviour online bullying that the girls were in some ways letting themselves off the hook in terms of being accused of bullying.

Our research draws attention to the existence of a division of space among students and teachers. This division is especially pointed in relation to online and offline spaces. For staff the online space, especially online social media, is characterised as native to adolescents, whereas it is not a space that many of the teachers inhabit comfortably. However, this adolescent space does infiltrate school life when instances of cyberbullying are brought to the attention of teachers, in most instances by parents.

The girls who participated in this case study made a distinction between their “real” friends, who understand them and their humour, and know when they’re “messing”, and other people, who may misunderstand their jokes and take offense. In that case, the most common responses are to delete the comment or to ignore the misunderstanding. However, teachers warned that it was important that problem behaviour online must be addressed swiftly otherwise a misplaced comment on a social networking website could leave to conflict that would inevitably spill and effect relationships in school. Students also confirmed that while “fights” online may not lead to direct conflict in school, they certainly led to a lot of passive aggressive behaviour among those involved. For example, one student explained:

*“They just don’t talk, they stay out of each other’s way and just start moaning and like shouting about them in class and then it blows over and then they are waiting for their next fight”.* (Mary, aged 17 years).

A number of high profile cases of bullying among girls in recent years were characterised by this type of non direct conflict such as the case of Phoebe Prince in the USA (*Boston Globe*, May 11, 2010) and the case of Natasha MacBryde in the UK (*The Guardian*, July 22, 2011). Students in this study relayed sentiments in both the

interviews and qualitative survey answers that often it was easier to leave hurtful comments either online or through text messages than it would be in a face to face situation. There was a sense that those who participated in such activity would not do so face to face and they were branded as ‘cowards’ hiding behind the screen, or else the fights on Facebook were a way of behaving online which, if not encouraged, is at least accepted.

### *Safe Spaces and Resolution*

Interestingly, overall the students’ comments about their school revealed that it is seen on the whole as being very pro-active and having a real power to help students when it comes to bullying and cyberbullying, even if those words are not used, and the students see the incidents more as fights and problems. Helena sums up the feelings of a lot of the students in the interviews:

*“I just think this school is like a little protective bubble and then whenever you leave it like the sixth years have that bubble is gone and you’re out in the world, you’re really out in the world. I just don’t want that to come. I just love it here, I couldn’t ask for a better school.” (Helena, Aged 17 years)*

The teachers also agree with the identification of the school as a safe space, apart from the rest of the world, and do their best to protect and uphold this.

When asked about how they resolve problem behaviour in school or online the students reported that they involve their parents, who in turn involve the school authorities, and in the eyes of the students, the issues are then resolved, although the students were unclear as to how things were resolved, only describing the end result as “it gets sorted”.

*Em my friends Mam told our principal and the principal of the other school and I don't know what happened but it's not happening anymore. (Mary, aged 15 years)*

This was a recurring theme in the interviews, where any instances of adult involvement resulted in resolution, yet the process seemed opaque, and the students did not seem involved or aware of the means of arriving to a peaceful solution. It seemed that as they left the online space where young people gathered, and took issues into the physical space of the home or the school, their own power diminished and was transferred to the adult authority figures. This interpretation, although more or less agreed by the teachers, was also staunchly defended by them. They felt in intervening quietly and resolving the issue in a discrete and private way, they were indeed exercising their duty of care to the students and maintaining the peaceful and safe environment of the school. When asked about this, they all agreed that the students do not know what has happened as the teachers take responsibility for “sorting it”. However, some teachers expressed concern that the heart of the matter may not be resolved even when the issue has been sorted out and may continue to be played out on social networking sites.

Most of the time, the “sorting out” involves talking to both parties separately in an office, and persuading them to remove offensive material online, and to promise to be civil to each other in school. This is done through persuasion by a strong authority figure in the school, and also some strong warnings as to the permanence of digital communication and the consequences of that permanence.

Interestingly, the teachers like the students, although they felt that online behaviour was often problematic, it rarely warranted the term of bullying. If it did, they saw it as part of a bigger picture or as one instance in a pattern of bullying.

## **Recommendations**

### *Whole School Approach*

The data collected in this case study reveals a complex picture of the relationship between cyberspace, families and schools. While parents and teachers associated with the school in this study are often rooted in the home and the school, their daughters' lives are equally based in all three spaces, but increasingly in online spaces. Such a reality presents those concerned with the pastoral care and wellbeing of young people with a great challenge. This challenge will be overcome by an integrated approach involving all those in the school and local communities with parents and families. Any pastoral response to cyberbullying must be developed as part of a mainstream or whole-school approach to the issue. However, several elements have to be considered in any action taken if the school is to truly develop a whole-school approach to the problem of cyberbullying.

The school principal can begin to make use of an existing working group such as the pastoral care team, the healthy schools task group, school planning working party or school council, to help increase awareness and manage change in relation to cyberbullying. If necessary the school may be able to form a specific cyberbullying working party, but it is probably preferable and more time-efficient to approach this issue from within an existing anti-bullying committee. This is also more likely to ensure any changes or developments to existing procedures will be properly embedded within the life of the school. However, it is probably advisable to ask one member of staff to take specific responsibility for the brief to ensure that it is kept on the agenda of the working group. This could be the anti-bullying co-ordinator, chaplain, guidance counsellor or some other person with an interest in the area as well

as the appropriate knowledge and skills required to develop awareness in a sensitive manner.

The working group must then develop a whole-school approach checklist. This will provide the criteria for effective practice. It is important that the school use the checklist to self-evaluate and decide what action is required to initiative, enhance, or change practices that promote acceptance of diversity within the school and promote an awareness of how to communicate appropriately both offline and online. This may be a difficult stage in the development of the whole-school approach as it will involve a re-conceptualisation of *who* are the school community and its boundaries. For some members of staff as well as parents the presumption that every student's life is contained solely within the physical realities of school and home may be difficult to overcome. The appreciation that more young people are now living out large aspects of their lives in cyberspace will need to be developed among parents, guardians and teachers. These are a number of essential elements that can be used as a check list by school leaders and working groups who are trying to develop a whole-school approach to addressing cyberbullying.

### *Leading and Managing Change*

While the roles of the board of management and principal are of great importance in animating a whole-school approach, leadership should also be understood to encompass the contribution of the national Department of Education, as well as deputy-principals, class tutors, year heads, chaplains, guidance counsellors, subject leaders, parents councils, and even prefects and other students. Fundamentally, it is the responsibility of all those who are identified as leaders within the school community to ensure that practical steps are taken to prevent, challenge and respond

to cyberbullying. This can be done by principals and other leaders in the school striving to engender an ethos in the school in which cyberbullying is recognised by students rather than minimised as “just messing”. It is also vital that school leaders involve both staff, parents/guardians and students in developing and implementing a vision of the school where diversity is accepted and celebrated. The desire to address and change the situation regarding cyberbullying will need to be included within the School Development Plan and underpinned by a values that promote inclusivity and acceptance as well as respect for diversity in the community.

The principal has a key role in modelling the type of behaviour that s/he wants staff and students to demonstrate both face to face and online. This includes understanding, respect and inclusiveness. The students in this case study overwhelmingly reported that they felt safe and respected in school. Nothing will undermine a school approach to bullying more than if the students and staff perceive those in authority to be failing in their responsibilities to develop an environment in which people feel safe, cared for and respected. At the very least this means that senior management must value the entire school community and be sensitive to the needs of individuals. This will need to be supported by the provision of specific training for members of schools’ boards of management, parents and staff and the results of this training will have to be monitored for effectiveness in bringing about positive relationships in school and online.

### *Policy Development*

All second-level schools are now required to have a number of policies in place including one on bullying behaviour. It is vital to have up-to-date policies including those on bullying, guidance, Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), and child

protection and to have associated procedures for dealing with cyberbullying. This policy should be developed and reviewed in consultation with all members of the school community, and should emphasise that cyberbullying and similar behaviour will not be accepted in the school. The policy should also state the school's commitment to taking preventative action to reduce the likelihood that cyberbullying incidents occur.

In developing this policy the school will need to state that any perpetrators of cyberbullying incidents will be dealt with severely and that those who are bullied will receive appropriate support. The school's policy on bullying should also refer to the school's commitment to celebrating the diversity of backgrounds and identities of all in the school community. This commitment will be evident in the school's RSE policy and programme. Finally, the anti-bullying policy will need to include an element of monitoring and evaluating incidents of cyberbullying and the mechanisms for these will need to be stated and operated clearly and efficiently. Teachers must never neglect to follow up on any reports of negative behaviour online.

### *Curriculum Planning for Teaching and Learning*

There are many opportunities across the curriculum to challenge pupils to think about their attitudes, to correct misinformation, and to raise awareness about the implications of prejudice, discrimination and other forms of bullying. However, this does not mean that the use of one off workshops or visiting speakers in a school is enough to tackle cyberbullying among young people. It is more appropriate to discuss relational issues within a broader context, rather than in specific lessons focusing solely on cyberbullying. Such discussions will help students to understand that difference is part of life, something to be valued and celebrated and that all forms of

communication must be underpinned by respect for fellow students, parents/guardians and teachers.

While some classes on Citizenship, Religious Education and Personal, Social and Health Education will provide obvious platforms for teaching and learning about positive communication and cyberbullying, there is a place within most subjects on the curriculum to promote values such as respect, inclusiveness and tolerance and to teach about cyberbullying as something that is wrong. From time to time, and when appropriate, teachers must ensure that they include reference to cyberbullying in their lessons and senior management should ensure that schemes of work reflect this.

### *School Ethos*

At the centre of a whole-school approach to addressing cyberbullying bullying is the creation of a positive school ethos. However, the ethos of a school is in itself an elusive entity, the result of many influencing factors at work in the school community. Fundamentally though, school ethos can be described as the atmosphere that emerges from the interaction of a number of aspects of school life, including teaching and learning, management and leadership, the use of images and symbols, rituals and practices, as well as goals and expectations. School ethos is the dominant pervading atmosphere or character of the school resulting from the habits of behaviour of those who are part of it (Norman, 2003:2; Williams, 2000:74). A positive school ethos is characterised by a respect for the individual regardless of his/her background or identity. Consequently, school ethos can be said to influence every aspect of school life and is a determinant factor in the success of work to address cyberbullying. It is important then, that all documentation including the staff handbook and student journals make it clear that the school does not tolerate discrimination or harassment of any kind either in school, in the local community or online. This can also be made

explicit in staff recruitment information and in student admissions policies as well as through the use of appropriate posters. What is most important is that no member of staff, parent or student is left with any ambiguity in terms of where the school, including trustees, stands on the issue of cyberbullying.

### *Student Voice*

The most effective way to obtain the support and co-operation of students in addressing cyberbullying is to involve them in developing ways of challenging negative behaviour by their peers in school, at home and online. Due to numbers, it is unlikely that it will be possible to engage all of the students at the same time with every aspect of a school's response to cyberbullying. However, it will be possible to engage groups of students with different levels of the school's response in different ways and thus over time all students should feel that they have contributed to and therefore own their school's procedures to address cyberbullying. Student councils where they exist can provide a platform for discussion about how to involve students in tackling bullying and negative behaviour online.

The Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) programme provides the main context for dealing with issues around bullying generally. As part of the PSHE programme students could design a survey to assess the extent of cyberbullying among their peers in school and then design and implement appropriate responses to address the problem. One example of how students might become involved in addressing cyberbullying is through the development of a charter against bullying. Pupils can also use suggestion boxes to express their opinions on bullying and how to address it among the school community.

### *Student Support Services*

While many of the elements of a whole-school approach are focused on addressing all forms of bullying across the school community, there is also a need to provide support directly to individual students (and sometimes staff) who experience cyberbullying. Research in Ireland and the UK confirms the importance of relationships of trust and mediation for young people who find they experience difficulties in second-level schools<sup>9</sup>. Generally, year heads, class tutors and other members of staff play an important role in helping young people to overcome the effects of bullying. This can be achieved by respecting requests for confidentiality from students and ensuring that a supportive atmosphere is maintained in tutor groups and subject classes.

The role of peer mentors has also been shown to be quite successful and within the limits of their competency they can sometimes act as a first port of call for those students who need to seek advice or support. This is definitely an area that could be developed further in schools. Senior Management Teams will need to identify funding to allow for the training of teachers and students who will provide this type of activity at a school level.

Furthermore, key support staff such as the school's chaplain, guidance counsellor, home-school community liaison and school nurse have a particular role in terms of animating the pastoral ethos of a school by offering specialised support to students who are experiencing difficulties. These key staff will also need to be aware of the emotional health issues that surround cyberbullying. In order to provide this support they will need adequate space and time to ensure that they are available when the students need them. It is important that other members of staff are aware of the contribution that these key staff can make and that clear referral procedures are in place. However, all members of staff take responsibility for the well-being of their

students and should not abdicate all responsibility to key staff such as the chaplain or guidance counsellor.

### *Partnerships with Local Communities*

Parents, guardians and local communities play an important role in a whole-school approach to tackling bullying. Schools need to seek ways of regularly consulting and involving parents, guardians and members of the local community when responding to all forms of bullying including cyberbullying, while being clear about the school's approach to the issue. Such a partnership will need to be planned and carried out in a very sensitive manner. Societal changes have been dramatic in contemporary Ireland and increasingly the school is expected to mediate between the contrasting cultures of home life, community, media, churches, and other stakeholders (Martin, 2006:3.1). Schools should not presume that all students are confident in dealing with parents, guardians, and professionals in the wider community. At the very least the school should develop mechanisms to encourage all parents and guardians to attend meetings and visit the school regularly. The school will need to frequently remind parents and guardians that any information they have about their personal lives will be treated confidentially. It is important that the school has in place a clear and confidential procedure for parents and guardians to raise their concerns including those about cyberbullying. These procedures should be well publicised and referred to in student handbooks, school policies, school brochures and websites.

### *Conclusion*

Implementing a whole-school approach to addressing the problem of cyberbullying will not be achieved over night. It will involve all of the elements outlined above and

will evolve over time. However, as our case study has shown, in order to protect young people, it is essential to make a start and to build on success no matter how small or insignificant it may be. It is vital that school leaders provide opportunities to validate and celebrate successes while keeping the school focused on what future challenges need to be met. Although cyberbullying is a new issue in school communities, in order to address it schools need to return to their core values and to educate students how to apply these values to their online relationships. To a large extent the horse has already bolted on this and online socialising among young people has evolved without any direction from parents/guardians and teachers. Cultural change is slow and staff, parents/guardians and students will need constant support and training to assist them in achieving their goals where cyberbullying is concerned. Students will need to be continually rewarded for contributing to a school community where diversity is appreciated and respected.

Finally, it is important to recognise the need to provide support and encouragement to members of the school community who experience cyberbullying. The experience of being bullied on line can be devastating and if left unchecked can be detrimental to the lives of young people and their families. It is essential that key staff members are available in the school to provide individual support when it is needed. During this time, students will need to know that whatever they say about their experiences online to key staff or teachers will be treated with respect and in confidence. How reports of cyberbullying are handled by school staff can be highly significant in determining how young people handle such experiences in the future. Fundamentally, a whole-school approach to cyberbullying is more than about protecting young people from being bullied online. It is as much about developing a

school ethos where staff, parents/guardians and students alike feel they are safe and will be treated with respect at school, at home and online.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> T. Beran, and Q. Li, *Is Cyber-Harassment a Significant Problem? A Report on Children's Experiences* (Calgary: University of Calgary, 2004)

<sup>3</sup> J. Palfry, and U. Gasser, *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* (New York: Basic Books, 2008)

<sup>4</sup> A. Lenhart, *Cyberbullying, What the Research is Telling Us* (Washington D.C. Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2009)

<sup>5</sup> J. Palfray, and U. Gasser, *Born Digital*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> M. Ybarra and K. Mitchell, "Youth engaging in online harassment: associations with caregiver-child relationships, Internet use, and personal characteristics", *Journal of Adolescence*, 27/3 (2004), 319-336.

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<sup>8</sup> MNet. *Young Canadians in a Wired World: Phase I – The Student's View* (Ottawa: Media Awareness Network, 2001)

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