International Journal of Bullying Prevention
https://doi.org/10.1007/s42380-024-00278-x

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Mapping Gender Bullying Through the Lens of Intra-actions in a Private Day and Boarding School

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Accepted: 21 October 2024

Abstract
This paper maps a socio-ecological approach to gender bullying as part of a participatory action research project which took place in a private day and boarding school in Ireland. It applies the new definition of bullying proposed (and recently published in 2024) by UNESCO and the World Anti-Bullying Forum (2022) and explores the networks of relationships in the school and the underpinning social norms and power imbalances therein. The core research question asks: Does gender bullying happen at this school? Through active engagement with students as co-researchers, school staff as steering group members, and two university researchers, this question was explored through a qualitative research design using focus group interviews and a Digital Dropbox. The application of Barad's (1998; 2007; 2011) concept of agential realism is proffered to help unravel the entanglement and complexity of gender bullying. We propose that the mapping of the intra-actions of human beings with different discourses, objects, materials, spaces, and time, assists in making sense of the normativity of gender expectations and its complex array of inclusions and exclusions.

Keywords Bullying · Gender · Day and boarding schools · Intra-actions

Introduction

This paper presents the findings of Cycle One of a Participatory Action Research (PAR) study, exploring the core issues of bullying at a private post-primary day and boarding school. Our previous paper (O'Brien & Doyle, 2023) outlined how we worked with a group of self-selecting student co-researchers and a steering group of school staff to develop the research question related to the core bullying issues in the school. Discussions with these groups, coupled with further exploratory work with the rest of the school community, showed that gender discrimination was embedded in the very culture of the school and thus allowed the normativity of gender bullying to occur. Our research question was thus determined as follows: *Does gender bullying happen at this school*? We argue that gender bullying in this school affects male and female students and comprises a network of relationships, complex inclusions, and exclusions, which at times endorse normative gender discourses, intra-actions, and spacetimemattering as identified by Barad (2011). Each of these components needs to be addressed in any response or actions to change that culture.

Private Day and Boarding Schools in Ireland

In the Republic of Ireland, 7% of second-level schools are private fee-charging (Doris et al., 2019). The school in our research is a private day and boarding school. These schools do not receive state grants towards their running costs and depend on the fees set each year by the school for maintenance and building costs. However, the state pays the salaries of the teachers working therein. Most of these schools are co-educational and attract a wide range of international students due to the low fees in comparison to other countries (O'Connell & Marks, 2023). Post-primary schooling in the Republic of Ireland begins at age twelve and is divided into the junior cycle (12–15 years), the transition year (16 years), and the senior cycle (17–19 years). The senior cycle is completed by sitting the Leaving Certificate high stakes terminal

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Published online: 22 January 2025

examination which feeds into a points system used for entry to higher education (Doyle, 2023).

There is a paucity of research about bullying in private day and boarding schools, and Fredrick et al. (2021) argue that this lack of research is concerning because boarders spend most of their time at school so their experiences could be more impactful than students attending other schools. Indeed, Raji et al. (2019) suggest that boarders are five times more likely to be victims of bullying than those attending day schools. With this gap in knowledge, we see the potential of new understanding emerging from this study about these school types but with the strong potential of the transferability to schools across the globe.

Literature Review

Defining Bullying

The ongoing dilemma to define bullying in all its complexity and develop workable solutions is evident in recent literature (Tay, 2023; Milosevic et al., 2022). Traditionally, bullying is defined as:

> a person is being bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons. It is a negative action when someone intentionally inflicts, or attempts to inflict, injury or discomfort upon another. (Olweus, 1999, p. 10).

This definition has undergone critique (see Schott & Søndergaard, 2014; Ringrose & Renold, 2020) with researchers arguing that focusing on the psychological characteristics of the individual (bully and victim) ignores the social and contextual aspects at play (Hellström et al., 2021). Mensah et al. (2023) suggest that this definition has evolved, and cultural values and contexts play a considerable role in its conceptualisation thus highlighting the challenges of achieving a unifying definition. The use of psychological frameworks alone can create individual roles and dysfunctional restrictions around victim, bully, and bystander, which individualises and separates out the relations of bullying into fixed categories that may refuse the messy complexities of social relations in school and beyond (Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015). Research shows that efforts to protect those targeted for bullying, punish those who engage in bullying, and prevent future bullying drive a comprehensive infrastructure of anti-bullying policy, strategy, and practice (Ging & Neary, 2019). However, it 'can leave the institutionalisation of gender and sexuality normativity intact' (Ging & Neary, 2019, p. 228). Additionally, this traditional view is based on adult-imposed categories, which often negates the views of students (O'Brien, 2019).

Recently, O'Higgins Norman et al. (2022) revised the current definition of school bullying underpinned by consultation with experts at the 'The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization' (UNESCO) and the 'World Anti-Bullying Forum' (WABF). The new definition adopts a sociological approach and states:

> School bullying is in-person and online behaviour between students within a social network that causes physical, emotional, or social harm to targeted students. It is characterised by an imbalance of power that is enabled or inhibited by the social and institutional norms and context of schools and the education system. School bullying implies an absence of effective responses and care towards the target by peers and adults.

This new definition highlights that bullying is not just about personal harm, but the physical, emotional, and social harm experienced in a bullying context. It is concerned with how dominance has an impact on the social relationships of the victim and the wider group (Evans & Smokowski, 2016). According to Dunbar (1988), dominance relates to where on the hierarchy of relationships a person finds themselves and subsequently their ability to access resources. The social networks contain not just the binary of those who engage in bullying and those who are targeted, but also those who assist, the defender of the target or upstander (Barnett et al., 2019), and the bystanders, and connects to the rest of the school community. This research thus understands that bullying is influenced, not just by the school context and culture, but by the many nested socio-ecological networks inhabited by staff and students at the school.

Initiatives designed to respond to school bullying have had mixed responses (Gaffney et al., 2019), with many schools opting to take a 'whole school approach' in the stance against bullying. However, O'Higgins Norman et al. (2022) found that this response places additional pressure on single schools to address bullying whilst drawing on limited resources to do so. Indeed, actions in response to bullying must consider a myriad of interventions rooted within the school and the wider society to which it is nested, including consideration of how the intra-actions of humans, spaces (corridors, classrooms, changing areas), materials (curriculum, uniform, resources), time (timetables), roles (teacher and student), and rules (school, society, peer group), can support a bullying culture and consequently negatively impact the safe learning environment and educational progression of all students (Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015). To that end, the 'Whole Education Approach' to tackling school bullying was proposed (O'Higgins Norman et al., 2022). Within this approach, the school is just one contributor in the wider assemblage of educational stakeholders that need to act to deter a culture of bullying. This perspective is influenced by

an in-depth understanding of the school context and socio-ecological theory (Kenny et al., 2023). Indeed this approach recognises that bullying is not static with regards to time, space, and matter and moves and shifts as students grow and school culture's shift (Kenny et al., 2023).

Defining Gender

Like defining bullying, defining gender is problematic and is related to the complexities around the words 'sex' and 'gender' which are often conflated. At the beginning of this century, Pryzgoda and Chrisler (2000) suggested that 'sex' referred to the biological aspects of being male or female and 'gender' refers to cultural meanings associated with the behavioural, social, and psychological characteristics of men and women and usually labelled as masculine and feminine. 'Gender,' therefore, was about how a person felt, rather than just their physical bodies, and 'gender identity' was about whom a person knew themselves to be and the ways they expressed themselves in their actions, clothing, demeanour, etc. Gender was viewed as a social construct and linked to roles, norms, and values of a given society or era (Phillips, 2005). However, literature has begun to voice the concern of placing sex/gender into separate binaries. Lindqvist et al. (2021) suggest operationalising gender as consisting of several aspects, which can be divided into the four main facets of the following: (a) physiological/bodily aspects (sex), (b) gender identity or self-defined gender, (c) legal gender, and (d) social gender in terms of norm-related behaviours and gender expressions. Each facet does not stand alone but rather is inter and intra-related in a dynamic connectivity in the becoming of each human being. An important element in understanding gender is to see it 'as constantly in process and being made and remade in a myriad of ways' (Bragg et al., 2018, p. 431).

In contemporary culture, there is a diversity of gender types beyond the masculine and feminine. These include transgender, gender fluid, agender, non-binary, and gender diverse (Bragg et al., 2018). There is an emerging recognition of non-binary and gender-diverse cultures that whilst not new have built a growing awareness through social media and popular culture (Hines & Sanger, 2010). Research shows that young people are expanding their vocabularies of gender identity and expression, are critical about their own positions, and have principled commitments to gender equality, diversity, and the right of sexual minorities (Bragg et al., 2018). Gender matters to adolescents, and this matter is very much part of the world of the school and classroom. However, despite this shift, gender bullying still takes place in schools and is focussed on non-conformity to gender roles.

For the purposes of our study, we are defining gender bullying in line with O'Higgins Norman et al's (2022) definition to include targeting an individual or group because of their sex or gender. This can include misogynistic and sexist behaviours as well as degrading comments and actions aimed towards those considered non-gender conforming.

Gender Bullying: What It Looks Like in a School?

Gender bullying is any kind of threatening or harassing behaviour that encompasses sexual harassment, coercion, and/or assault (Meyer, 2009). Leaper and Brown (2014) state that sexism is gender-based prejudice or discrimination and argue that two kinds of sexism occur in the school context. Firstly, gender biases can be reflected in differential expectations for girls and boys in overall school success, particular academic subjects, or sports. Secondly, it can take the form of verbal harassment (unwelcome sexual comments, jokes, or gestures) but also forms of physical harassment. Texts, emails, social media, images, etc. can also be a source of sexism.

Gender norms are one element of a social system that can support a culture of gender bias. These norms are generally hierarchical and privilege what is male or masculine over what is female and feminine. Cislaghi and Heise (2020) define gender norms as:

> ... social norms defining acceptable and appropriate actions for women and men in a given group or society. They are embedded in formal and informal institutions, nested in the mind, and produced and reproduced through social interaction. They play a role in shaping women and men's (often unequal) access to resources and freedoms, thus affecting their voice, power and sense of self (p.416).

This definition encourages the understanding that gender norms are related to beliefs and behaviour. Within schools generally, although open to the diversity of genders beyond male and female, there is the belief that gender inequity and (hetero)sexuality are the norm (UK Feminista, 2017). This is produced and reproduced through the many day-to-day intra-actions and behaviours in schools.

Bullying and sexual harassment both refer to the harming of another at school, which brings about negative psychological and social effects. However, Stein & Mennemaier (2011) suggest that it is important to differentiate between bullying and sexual harassment. To use bullying alone to describe sexual harassment obscures the role of gender and sex in these incidents. The result can be that the school promotes bullying prevention but does little to prevent sexual harassment (Gruber & Fineran, 2007). One of the concerns across the literature is that students consider sexual harassment as normal behaviour with some considering it as banter or joking (Buglass, et al., 2020; Hill & Kearl, 2011; Odenbring & Johansson, 2021). Other literature suggests that young

people know the differences between right and wrong when it comes to sexist remarks, comments, or gestures, and this is encouraging for any educational intervention (Smith & Payne, 2015; Hill & Kearl, 2011).

Why Does Gender Bullying Happen?

Bullying literature highlights the importance of belonging to the peer group and a large peer group may work as a protection from selection as targets of bullying (Wang et al., 2009). Pellegrini & Long (2002) argues that the transition into post-primary school at the age of twelve requires students to renegotiate their position in relationships, and bullying is thought to be a deliberate strategy used to attain status in their new peer groups. Young people form and develop social relationships with the expectation of fulfilling goals and profiting from their interactions with others (Lin et al., 2001). The benefits from these relationships are referred to as 'social capital'. According to social capital theory, individuals invest in social relationships to access the resources embedded within these relationships (Evans & Smokowski, 2016). Resources such as information, influence, and self-worth (Lin et al., 2001) ensure that the group and individual benefit, and this social capital works to protect the group and the relationships therein. Evans and Smokowski (2016) state that targets of bullying have few friends or social ties and have minimal social capital. They also suggest that those who engage in bullying use bullying tactics as a means of acquiring social capital in the form of perceived popularity. Students, who are non-conforming or who are viewed as not belonging to the heterosexual normative group, can be seen to have less social capital and therefore are prime targets for gender bullying (Evans & Smokowski, 2016).

This paper moves beyond the psychological frameworks and the resultant definition of bullying often into demonising individual types, dispositions, and accountability (Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015). Rather, we move to understand bullying as the experience(s) of harm and domination through a social network enabled or inhibited by the socio-ecological nestedness of the human being in particular contexts and cultures. Gender bullying is thus understood as comprising a network of relationships, complex inclusions, and exclusions, which at times endorse normative gender discourses, structures, and processes.

The Theoretical Framework

To assist our understanding of the core gender bullying issues in an educational setting, we draw on Barad's (1998) concept of agential realism emerging from new material feminisms and post-human performativity. The work of Barad (1998, 2007) incorporates the agency of the non-human such as nature, objects, technology, and material. At its core, agential realism challenges the traditional distinction between the subject (the observer) and the object (the observed). Barad (2007) does this by arguing that we must begin to see reality not through interactions but intra-actions. Interaction is a familiar concept where two distinct entities (e.g. a subject and an object, or two objects) engage with each other. In this view, the entities are pre-existing and separate before they come into contact. Intra-action, on the other hand, suggests that the entities involved do not pre-exist in their relationship or engagement. Instead, they come into being through their interaction. In other words, entities are co-constituted—they emerge, evolve, and take form in relation to each other in a process of intra-action. This idea challenges the traditional view of the world where subjects (observers) and objects (things) exist independently of each other. Barad (2007) argues that humans 'are not outside observers of the world…rather we are part of the world in its ongoing intra-activity.' (p.184).

The work of Barad (1998, 2007) views agency as distributed across both human and non-human actors. Agency is not something that one has but emerges through the phenomena generated by the intra-activity of matter and the human world. Biesta and Tedder (2007) note that agency is achieved from the interplay of 'individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situations' (p. 137). The intra-actions of these many components create meaning and reality. For Barad (1998), everything matters, including matter. As researchers, we argue that in order to make sense of the school world in relation to gender bullying, matter and its agency make all the difference. In dealing with bullying situations, the lens is often focused on the actions of the human being, what was said, and the language used. The concept of intra-activity suggests that we need to take the matter into the equation—classrooms, corridors, timetables, desks, technology, etc.—and not just focus on the power of the humans in their social, cultural, and political relationships captured often in the discursive components of bullying through language, symbols, and meanings (Barad, 2007). Ringrose and Rawlings (2015) explain that the material and the discursive are mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity and define intra-actions as 'profound relationality' (p.87).

The concept of 'spacetimematterings' (Barad, 2011) reflects Barad's understanding of reality as a process of becoming. In Newtonian and Cartesian worldviews, these three elements, time, space, and matter, were often treated as separate and independent entities. Barad's concept of 'spacetimematterings' highlights that space, time, and matter are co-constituted and emerge through intra-actions. She places each of them together to highlight their close entangled relationship. This concept draws our focus in the research to the

intra-actions of the human (students and staff), non-human (objects), and more than human (environment) in the school (space), at particular moments (time), and how different matter (curriculum, structures, policies, rules, and roles played by students and staff), together either encourage or inhibit gender bullying. It helps us rethink how students, teachers, materials, knowledge, and learning are part of an entangled system where every actor (human and non-human) is part of the process of producing knowledge and shaping reality. It will help us flatten the hierarchy and see the human as only part of the mix (Pickering, 1995) in relation to gender bullying. The use of Karen Barad's framework offers a way to address gender bullying not as an isolated issue tied to individual behaviours, but as something that emerges through the intra-actions of various human and non-human elements in the school environment.

Methodology

This paper maps Cycle One of a PAR methodology (O'Brien, 2016) which 'involves people whose lives are the subject of study in some or all aspects of research design, process, dissemination and impact, with a focus on generating socially just change' (Banks & Brydon-Miller, 2018, p3). It responds to O'Higgins Norman's (2020) call for 'a new sociology of childhood perspective as represented in the UN Convention' (p.166) and recognises young people's agency and contribution to knowledge about bullying in their school. The exploratory stage of establishing the co-researchers and steering group and the quest for the core research question have already been outlined (O'Brien & Doyle, 2023). Using the findings from an online questionnaire and engaging in many discussions over three months, the two groups determined the core bullying issue to be gender bullying. Our research question asked: Does gender bullying happen at this school?

Methods

The qualitative methods of focus groups and a Digital Suggestion Box were decided to answer the research question by the research team comprising the student co-researchers and two university researchers (authors). The selection of a qualitative approach opened the potential of exploring the layers of complexity of bullying in the school. Yilmaz (2013) notes that qualitative research is 'emergent, inductive, interpretive, and naturalistic approach to the study of people, cases, phenomena, social situations and processes in their natural settings in order to reveal in descriptive terms the meanings that people attach to their experiences of the world' (p.312). This approach clearly aligned with the PAR design.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were carried out by the authors. Our purposeful sampling consisted of students from 2nd year of junior cycle due to our previous findings from the study's exploration stage, that most bullying in the school is happening within this age group. We also invited students across non-exam years, but uptake was low. As a result, we invited the incoming student council comprising junior and senior cycle students, and the co-researchers themselves who wanted to have their views added to the combined data collection. Whilst the sampling might be considered small, in qualitative terms, this cohort allowed us to explore an in-depth and rich textured construction of the network of relationships and intra-actions happening within the school context (Sandelowski, 1995).

The focus groups took place at a time which caused the least disruption to the school day (Table 1). The staff, co-researchers, and student council groups took place after school and the second years' focus groups were held at break time. Short vignettes were developed with the co-researchers, and further open-ended questions were used to facilitate the discussions. Students and staff were asked the same questions related to gender bullying and their perceptions about how the school addresses this.

The 'Digital Suggestion Box' was chosen to capture the voices of students and staff in the school who were either not able to participate in the focus groups or had not been given the opportunity. The research team was conscious that not all students and staff were being provided with participation opportunities in the research. The co-researchers suggested that this digital method would allow for anonymous responses where some staff and students might feel more at ease to be honest in their responses. This data would also support the focus group discussions. Consequently, all

Table 1 Focus group participants and codes

Who	Male	Codes	Female	Codes
Staff	2	Staff Focus Group (SFG)	2	Staff Focus Group (SFG)
2nd Year Students	4	Focus Group (FGM)	6	Focus Group (FGF)
Co-researcher team	2	Co-researcher boy (FGM)	2	Co-researcher girl (FGF)
Student Council	3	Student Council boy (FGM)	3	Student Council girl (FGF)
Total	**11**		**13**	

students and staff were emailed two questions on a Google Form:

(1) Does gender bullying happen at the school?
(2) How does the school deal with gender bullying?

This was an anonymous online method and yielded some very interesting findings. Fifty-two responses were received as follows (Table 2):

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was used to analyse the data. Initially, the two authors coded the data and arranged the text under broad themes for discussion with the wider research team. The co-researchers supported the semantic analysis of the data through focussing on the broader research questions and reaching an agreement together about what the data were telling us (O'Brien, 2016). The authors applied a further layer of analysis through applying the conceptual framework of intra-actions and spacetimematterings. Throughout the analysis process, it was important that we returned to the original semantic analysis to ensure nothing was missed and that we were not applying an 'adult lens' to the interpretation of the data. Provisional findings were thus presented to the research team and steering group which provided clarity for this process. A report was written and presented to the headmaster for further distribution. Ethical approval was granted by the DCU research ethics committee (DCUREC/2022/010).

Findings

There was general agreement that gender bullying happens in the school. Whilst the research team operated a very broad understanding of gender as discussed in the literature review, gender bullying as by the research participants was very much confined to the binaries of male/female and masculine/feminine. The reasons offered by participants were to do with the normativity of bullying for males and females and the perception that 'there's not much to say because like it happens to everyone or to most people here anyway' (Focus Group Female 1 (FGF1). They acknowledged that other genders were bullied but it occurred through direct targeting of people rather than an overall acceptance about expected gender roles:

> I'd say it's more related to gender identity … I'd say it's more between two genders like boy/girl bullying each other rather than if someone was transgender…..I think that's more targeted. (FGF4)

Students and staff noticed that bullying related specifically to gender tended to be located in the junior years with it 'dying off' by the senior cycle. Staff spoke about younger students exerting their sense of power, finding who they are and where they belong in the school:

> And they're insecure and they're trying to put other people down to up their own social status… (Staff Focus Group 1 (SF1).

However, further exploration of data showed that when we peeled back the layers of normative behaviour around gender and applied the theoretical framework concepts of intra-actions and spacetimematterings, gender bullying was subtly engrained across the culture of the school.

The findings are presented under two headings to capture the complexity of gender bullying in the school:

(1) The different intra-actions that suggest reasons why gender bullying happens at the school
(2) The elements of the school climate that promote gender inequity

Table 2 Digital dropbox participants

Who	Male	Codes	Female	Codes
Students	23	DBM	26	DBF
Staff	2	DBSM	1	DBSF
Total	**25**		**27**	

Theme 1: The Different Intra-actions That Suggest Reasons Why Gender Bullying Happens at the School

Discursive Intra-actions

Data repeatedly evidenced the use of inappropriate language and slurs being used in the school such as 'slut', 'whore', 'bitch', and 'gay'. Students were 'slut shamed' because of their sexual history and young male students engaged in promoting rumours after a disco in which they 'were bragging and talking about touching girls' and 'ranking them based on their bodies' (FGM3). A senior student highlighted the use of words such as 'birds' and 'moths' in relation to referring to women and how he felt younger male students were just latching on to these words without real understanding (FGM17). The use of gossip as a tool to spread false information against someone popular was accepted as part of life in the school and in society. There was toleration that 'there's going to be people who are going to be gossiping about you, you're not going to get along with everyone' (FGF2). Social media had inflated the potential of sharing gossip and as one student remarked 'Ah there's certain people like in my

year, honestly, they're like a newspaper. They could run any story (FGM17). Students noted that at times, this language was used in a sneaky, sly, and subtle way and at other times was out and out rude.

> ….it's all very subtle just like you'd be passing the desk, and they'd remark, 'God look at the state of her, she's so fat'. (FGM8)

Bodies, Materials, and Gestures

Appearance, what students' wear, and their body, height, and weight were often catalysts for both males and females to be the target of gender bullying. The school culture promoted a sport-orientated agenda, and for males, this meant that their height, weight, muscles, and 'how big you are' (FGM12) were given positive/negative attention by other students. Girls were 'body shamed' and 'didn't have a personality apart from what you look like' (Dropbox Female (DBF). Girls' body parts were often 'touched', 'grabbed' 'smacked', or physically 'tripped', and gestures were used often to degrade and humiliate girls. Comments were made about girls 'being flat' and how they wore their hair. Girls constantly spoke about being objectified and sexualised in data. The length of a girl's skirt often raised gender concerns. Discussion of a hockey skort being banned in the dining room because of its inappropriateness, resulting in the banning of boy's shorts to show gender equality in the school, demonstrated the result of focusing on only one element (skort/shorts) rather than the multiplicity of understandings and traditions such a piece of clothing inhabits.

Spaces

Many spaces were identified as prime locations for bullying. Classrooms, locker rooms, the dining room, and corridors were named as places where it occurred. The dining room was viewed as a space of intimidation and where the sense of entitlement of senior students came to the surface in relation to them skipping the queue and taking food from students. Whilst this is less about gender, girls did state that it was mainly male students who engaged in this behaviour. Classroom intimidation was a source of concern for the school and the subtle demeaning of a female student during a group activity by a strong-willed boy, 'who made the girl cry', was raised as an example of gender bullying at the senior level. Students noted that in a transition year, a space in which there is 'an opportunity to build trust and cooperation', male and female students sit separately from each other, and that division remains right up to the sixth year (DBSF).

Some boys reported that in previous years the locker rooms were viewed as a private space for them to share pornography, 'so you'd go in there and it would almost be like a porn library' (FGM18). Boys would also engage in 'Fight Club', where they proved their maleness, strength, and bravery. Once aware of these issues, the school responded very quickly to changing these locker spaces, ensuring privacy but at the same time safety. Whilst dormitories might offer a space for intimidation, students acknowledged that these areas were highly supervised by staff, and they stated 'now I think like it's a lot more controlled. The duty staff are a lot more vigilant about the stuff going on' (FGF4).

Time

Time played an important role in relation to how gender bullying unfolded in the narrative. Students presented time through the lens of history and told many stories about experiences they had heard about gender bullying. They recounted how no one took the time to step into the situation and assist the person being bullied: 'I do not think we call out and challenge these gross behaviours until they happen by which time the damage is done' (FGM13). They referred to repeated incidents 'time after time' (DBF) and how time was seen in a linear way—'we wait from first year to become sixth years and take on the same behaviours' (FGM12).

Time spent online and the viewing of toxic approaches to masculinity were compared to the lack of time given in school to exploring what it means to be masculine.

> I think what meets a lot of younger men is you shouldn't do x, y and z. There isn't really as much of how you should behave as a man, this is what your role could be…(FGM8).

Time was also viewed as a prize given to the male boarding students in relation to going to the shopping centre whereas girls were not allowed. Male sports received more time allocation on pitches and in the swimming pool. Female boarders had to go to bed a half an hour before their male counterparts. Day students and boarders were separated at break times and 'have no common area and I don't think that helps in the long term' (FGF5).

Figure 1 below summarises theme one and the main intra-actions that suggest reasons why gender bullying happens at the school.

Theme 2:The Elements of the School Climate That Promote Gender Inequity

Curriculum

The school offers a broad curriculum with lots of choices for students. What was interesting was the students' own interpretation of what subjects they needed to take to ensure that the expected role they were to play in family and society was met. Boys noted the ratio of boys to girls in some

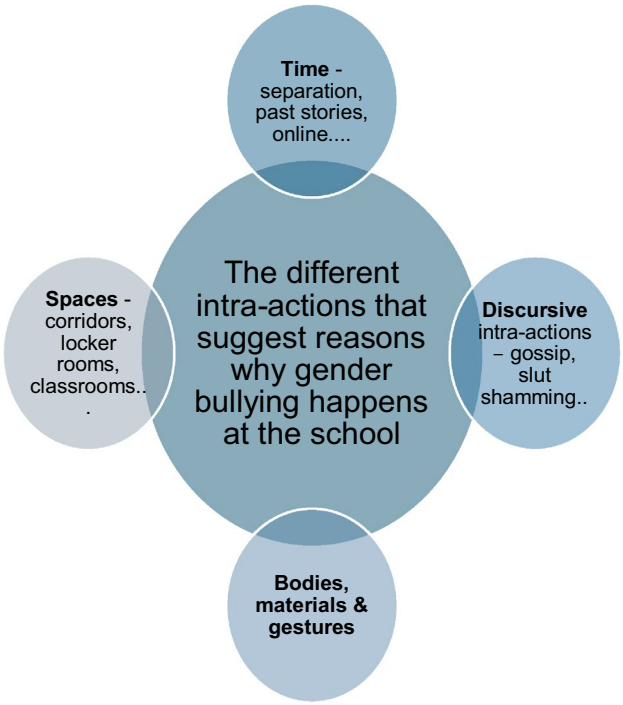

Fig. 1 The different intra-actions that suggest reasons why gender bullying happens at the school

subjects and remarked that 'in my business class there's only 5 girls and 15 guys' (FGF6). The subject alternative to business was art and many girls noted that boys did not want to take this subject. In one technology class we were told there were 5 female students and twelve males (DBM). One staff member spoke about how 'a lot of students from different ethnic backgrounds will go into the most competitive fields in college because of that pressure to provide' (FGM11). This pressure impacted the curriculum choices for some students. Curriculum choice for these boys is just a fallacy as the choice hinges on a 'career that is going to make you the most amount of money' (FGF5). The influence of society on role expectations was also evidenced by the difficulty encountered by some males who take drama. One staff participant explained that one student was reluctant to join because 'all the [class year] lads slag him (oh its gay to do drama and stuff like that, you know)' (FGM9).

Roles and Rules

The school has a strong historical and cultural link to sport and is viewed as a 'rugby' school. Indeed, students noted a vast investment in rugby when compared to other activities or other sports at school:

> …the boy's rugby team would get new jerseys every year and the girls just don't like ever get rugby jerseys. But then for hockey it's similar but like not as bad, not as noticeable as the rugby I think between like boy's hockey and girl's hockey. (FGF3).

Students noted the importance of being sporty, very skilled at it, and on the first team for rugby. These are the students named as 'popular', 'esteemed', and 'more admired'. The more academic male student role was dismissed with 'no one really cares' (DBM).

> As a male role or man in the school, or boy, you're expected to be sporty you know, a bit, like very good at basketball, rugby, hockey, all that stuff……there were some previous problems I believe years ago, if a man likes to do 'Home Economics', he might get bullied and called gay. (FGM8)

Within the focus groups, only when asked for clarification by the researcher did the male participants begin to see that there might be a problem with these normative role expectations. The acceptive competitive nature of males and having 'to be the best…and having to have a solid career, you know, earn a certain amount of money' (FGM11), worked simultaneously with an understanding that the male role was about 'looking after a family' (FGM12).

Some girls in our data saw their role as 'academic', 'sensitive', and 'conforming'. They felt that some staff favoured boys over girls: 'The teacher takes the boys' jokes…like they'll laugh with them. But the girls' jokes, they're kind of just taken like disrespect' (FGF21). Girls experienced different expectations about how male teachers viewed them. One episode in the gym was recounted as an example of this divide:

> We were in the gym and we were like comparing the weight of our weights and the teacher comes over and he was like, oh what are you talking about, and we were like, oh we were just saying the weight of our weights, and he goes, oh no, you're probably talking about make-up or boys and that was like the first thing that came to his head (FGF20)

The cumulation of timespacemattering and the discursive in this example provides a nexus of the complex elements that embed gender expectations into a school culture. The space (gym), time (PE lesson), material (weights), and discursive (make-up and boys) all entangle to become an experience of gender stereotyping for the girls.

We noted that some of the rules encouraging gender bias (e.g. allowing boys to go to the shopping centre and not the girls) had been revised alongside the anti-bullying, uniform, and behaviour policies. There was a reluctance to report gender bullying and the confidential process used to deal with

it meant students often felt nothing was being done. Staff noted students knew the reporting process but refrained: 'I guess she felt nothing would be done and she didn't want to be seen as a rat'(SFG2). Students conformed to the rules of their peer group and saw reporting as 'ratting'.

The Peer Group

The peer group, particularly the leader of the peer group, polices the normative behaviour of the group. Some students suggested that to avoid being the target of bullying, students conform to this leader to fit into the group. They were fearful that 'if they went against them, they'd think that you wouldn't want to be friends with them anymore. So, they just go along with it' (FGM9). Students spoke about the context of the friendship group and how boys and girls interact with each other. For some girls, they felt that banter and 'slagging' related to gender was okay within the confines of the friendship group but if the comments were made by someone outside of this then this was not okay:

> Yeah, like its different if your friends are slagging you, like that's fine. But if it's like some random guy, do you know what I mean, that you never talked to (FGF19).

During one of the focus groups, the boys tried to explain the banter as 'our joking is never related to sex, about talking bad about women or in the kind of sense, you know. It's just like, it's just boys being boys, slagging each other, you know' (FGM17). When asked to unpack the statement 'boys being boys,' the students wanted to highlight the importance of humour for boys and how it is different for girls. They explained that they find the simple things funny, and they need to use humour to entertain girls. However, they often do not know when to stop and they see the girl laughing 'and you just keep going on and on and on' (FGM18). They did acknowledge that the flip side to this is that if the response to this slagging was that someone acted negatively to what was said, they would see that as an opening to 'prey on that' (FGM17).

However, as the girls spoke about this type of 'slagging' being 'okay' from boys within their social circle, the boys present in the focus group suggested that this could be perceived as a 'double standard':

> …if someone is near your group and you let one of your friends say something more severe …. and you just ignore it, you know you put it away. That guy is just going to be like, okay she's going to ignore it so let's go for it. (FGM18).

Students saw that the 'line' between banter and bullying is when the behaviour becomes personal, unwanted, or targeted.

> You know when it really gets personal, not… You know when it's not more than a throwaway comment, like there's meaning behind it, d'you know. There's a high degree of malice behind the comment (FGF20).

Figure 2 below summarises the key elements of the school climate that promote gender inequity.

Discussion

From the findings of this study, we argue that in order to comprehend and respond to gender bullying, we need to frame our understanding in a socio-ecological approach (Kenny et al., 2023). This will support the new 'Whole

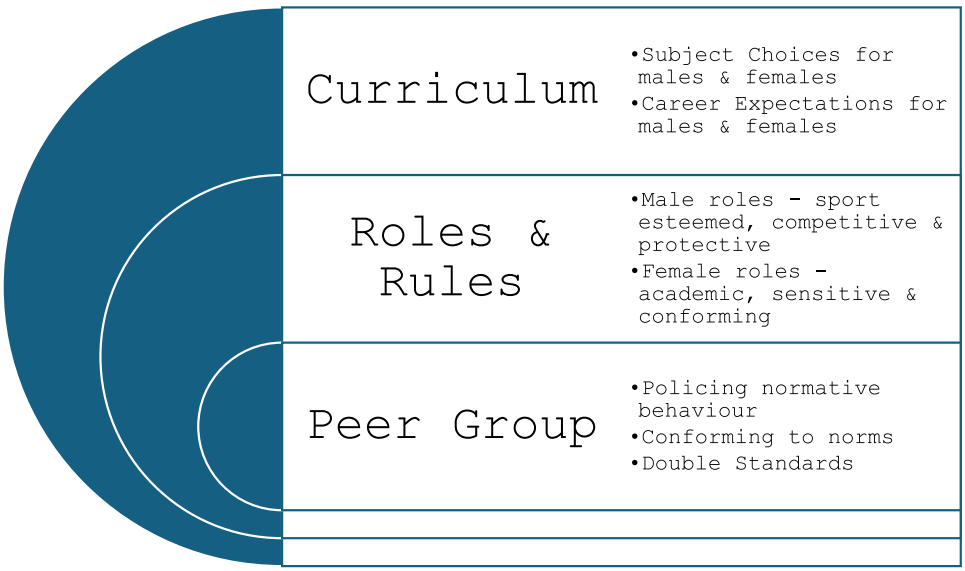

Fig. 2 Theme 2: the elements of the school climate that promote gender inequity

Education Approach' to bullying (O'Higgins Norman et al., 2022) and highlights the many socio-ecological networks inhabited by staff and students and the holistic harm that can result from dominance and bullying in a school (Evans & Smokowski, 2016). The school nests within a larger society with distinct social, cultural, political, and historical attributes and does not exist in isolation. It draws on and is influenced by this society but also creates its own distinct culture, environment, and social networks. Each component of the school's culture is created through a myriad of complex intra-actions and relations between staff and students, students and students, and day and boarding students. The human relationships are framed by the school culture which has a particularly long history and many traditions and rituals. These have developed from the school's beliefs and values and are practised by certain normative roles carried out in the day-to-day life of the school. The intra-actions show that gender bullying consists of discursive forms of bullying such as name-calling, gossip, and body shaming, but it also includes the use of 'spacetimematterings'; matter or objects such as the clothing, bodies, and photos; spaces such as pitches, corridors, and dining rooms; and times where day students and boarders are separated, spend time online, or time is given as a reward. Figure 3 below highlights how all these elements draw our attention to the complex ways that gender bullying is experienced by both girls and boys and is nearly invisible or implicit in the very way of life of the school (Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015). It moves our understanding of bullying away from the psychological characteristics of the individual and places it in the wider socio-ecological complexity of the multiplicity of intra-actions.

The findings demonstrated that the mapping of the many human and non-human intra-actions through discourse, matter, space, and time can provide us with a more in-depth understanding of the nature of harassment and gender bullying happening within the school. We agree with Ringrose and Rawlings (2015) that sexual harassment and gender bullying are made possible through the messy relationships and entanglement of these intra-actions, which enact complex inclusions and exclusions. Each intra-action holds its own agency in the enactment of the normativity of gender expectations and roles and contributes to the school climate and culture. The acknowledgement and understanding of the power of these intra-actions informed PAR Cycle Two 'The Action' and helped in the process of making sense of the multiplicity of actions and responses needed to change the culture of the school in relation to bullying. It places the human being, whether target, partaker, bystander, or upstander, as only one part of the gender bullying phenomena.

Findings highlight how the school had different expectations for males and females. Literature acknowledges gender differences in young people's experiences of education are very much in existence (Skipper & Fox, 2020). Research

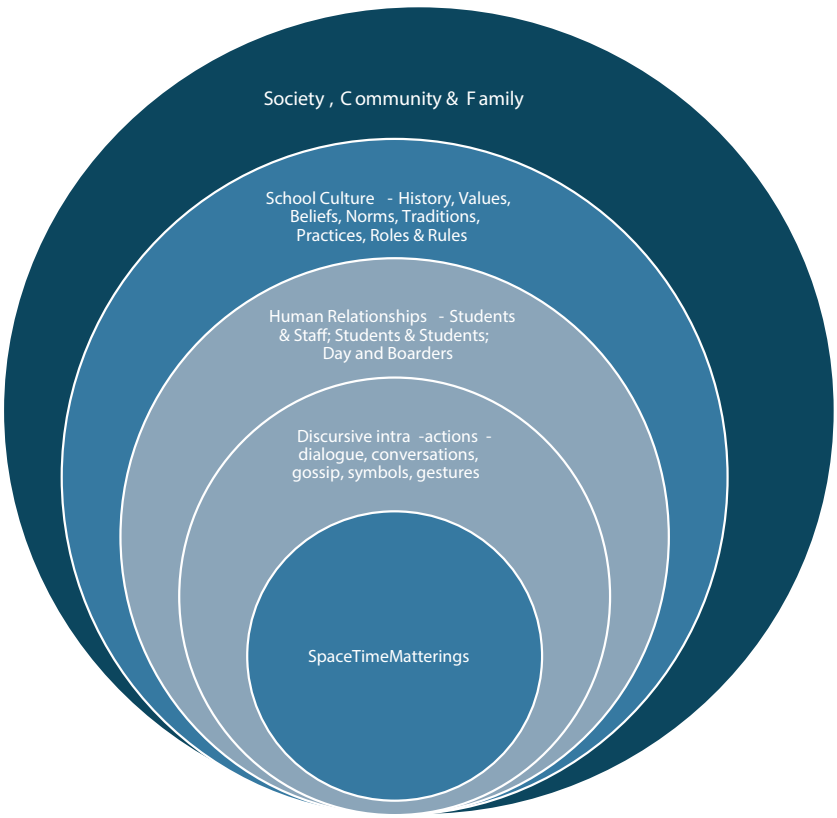

Fig. 3 The nested intra-actions that generate the normative environment of gender bullying

from UK Feminista (2017) shows that from the perspective of students and teachers, sexual harassment in schools is prevalent, with many suggesting this behaviour is 'normal'. Their research shows that in co-educational schools, 37% of their female sample had personally experienced a form of sexual harassment, whilst 4% of boys experienced unwanted touching of a sexual nature. They also report that gender stereotypes are reinforced by schools due to differential treatment. Furthermore, in their teacher sample, UK Feminista (2017) found that only 20% had received training in recognising and tackling sexism as part of their Initial Teacher Education. Our data confirm similar findings in this private day and boarding school in Ireland.

Whilst the curriculum offered a broad choice for all students, the choice was stymied by students' perceptions of role expectations. The presence of a powerful hidden curriculum which houses the normativity of gender roles highlights the utmost importance of viewing gender bullying through the lens of a Whole Education Approach (O'Higgins Norman et al., 2022). The findings revealed how some males embody the role of the provider and protector for their future families. They tended to choose subjects that will help them to achieve these roles. Amongst staff, there was a sense that girls are expected to be academic and go to university with less expectation for their role as providers for a future family, and thus, their subject options cover a greater range of choices. Sports emerged as one area that played out the difference in gender roles. Girls were not given the option of rugby in the first year, and boys were not given the choice to take hockey until later years. Boys were expected to be very good at sports, tough, and heroic. The funding of sports uniforms, allocation of pitches, and student support at matches all intra-act to portray the differing attitudes and expectations for male and female sports.

The hegemonic ideal of (hetero)sexuality was played out in the peer groups in the school, confirming Butler's (1993) view that hetero-normative discourses permeate all aspects of the world of the school. This was particularly evident in the second and third years (14- and 15-year-olds) which is supported in the wider literature on increases in bullying behaviour (Bradshaw et al., 2007). Leaper and Brown (2014) note the role of peers as sources of sexism in school is particularly influential during middle school and is exhibited by peers through sexual harassment of classmates as well as rejecting or taunting those who are not gender-conforming. Our findings show that harassment was not just related to name-calling, body shaming, or demeaning language; it was also linked to materials such as skirts, shorts, photos, hair, and make-up. Different spaces like the locker rooms, classrooms, dormitories, and corridors are all considered spaces where bullying happens. Some spaces are more supervised than others and sometimes students are separated into day students and boarders in their free time. These factors together contribute to bullying and harassment. Certainly, these spacetimematterings move the focus away from the individual, psychologically driven human agent and allow us to explore a range of intra-acting agents, materialities, and space–time contexts in which events designated as bullying emerge (Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015).

Data described the power and dominance of the peer leader in friendship groups and how conformity to the group's social norms often allowed for behaviour that students would not usually engage in as individuals (Evans & Smokowski, 2016). An example can be seen with girls accepting misogynistic banter from boys within their friendship group but not from boys outside this group. According to Buglass et al. (2020), banter is a form of social interaction and enhances social cohesion between friends. The focus groups demonstrated different forms of banter such as the use of humour, teasing, and even insults between friends of equal power status. Banter is used at the school, to initiate relationships and to overcome some awkward moments in sports. However, it is also clear that not all banter is positively intentioned and at times goes too far or 'over the line'. Kotthoff (1996) argues that such communication can promote social divergence and exclusion and may be similar to relational bullying.

The question about intent to harm was raised in our data and the immaturity of boys was offered as a reason for the crossing of the line. Learning the social cues such as reading physical gestures, tone of voice, and facial expressions (Kruger et al., 2006) is an important skill to be taught in the early years of post-primary. In the school, crossing the line into gender bullying depends on the context and the interpretation of the intent by the receiver and the bystander. Hellström et al. (2021) note that student's definitions of bullying include the perception of the recipient. This is highlighted as important to young people in terms of how they define bullying (XX BLIND FOR REVIEW XX). However, reading intent can be complex, and Buglass et al., (2020, p.289) suggest 'irrespective of whether the speaker has negative intentions, if the target perceives the banter to be negative, offensive or hurtful, then the exchange potentially imposes psycho-social harm.'

Several participants, including students and teachers, suggest that boys, in the younger years, are unaware of how their behaviour, views, and opinions impact others. Earlier research from Boulton and Flemington (1996) suggests that those who bully others might not always be aware of what they are doing. These researchers acknowledge this as a valuable finding because it is only when young people realise the impact of their behaviour on others that they can abstain from acting in this way. This also extends to the views and opinions of others. We saw this in relation to the boy who didn't want to do drama because he might be targeted as 'gay'. It was the clarity of explanation by the staff member

that changed his belief. The social and gender norms of the school need to be repeatedly reframed and reimagined, not only through the curriculum, but in the rules, policies, and roles played out in the school. An ongoing educational commitment to disrupt and interrupt the normativity of expectations and harassment around gender is central to changing the culture of gender discrimination that exists within schools.

Implications for Practice

The implications for practice lie in the important consideration for school leaders and researchers of the sociological approach to bullying which encompasses the many entangled intra-actions of the discursive, materials, time, and space in the context of the school. These intra-actions will help assist the understanding of the physical, emotional, and social harm that occurs in such encounters and how they bring to the fore the complexity of power imbalance in relation to gender. This research evidences the need for actions and responses to gender bullying to consider the importance of the social norms of the school, its multiplicity of relationship networks, and how they play out within the different intra-actions of language, materials, space, and time.

Implications for Research

Further research has been conducted by the authors (PAR Cycle Two) on the types of actions that need to be considered in this research. Such actions and responses had to rise from within the school community as they navigated the understanding of their school culture in response to the research described above. The role of the headmaster in the pioneering of this change was inspirational. However, there is also a need to further map the application of this sociological approach to bullying to a wider school context and gain further insights into the complexity of the core issues of bullying for schools more generally and how schools can respond.

Abbreviations *DBM*: Drop box male; *DBF*: Drop box female; *DBSM*: Drop box staff male; *DBSF*: Drop box staff female; *FGF*: Focus group female; *FGM*: Focus group male; *PAR*: Participative action research; *SFG*: Staff focus group; *UNESCO*: United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization'; *WABF*: World Anti-Bullying Forum

Author Contribution This article was co-written by both authors with Audrey Doyle taking the main lead in its overall production.

Funding Funding was received from the private day and boarding school.

Data Availability Due to the very sensitive findings in this article, data is not available for public repository as the anonymity of the school must be protected at all costs.

Declarations

Ethical Approval Research Ethical permission was received from the Dublin City University Research Ethical Committee (DCUREC/2022/010).

Consent to Participate All human participants signed consent or assent forms to partake in this study. Parents of students under the age of 18 years of age signed consent forms and students then signed assent forms. Teachers and adult participants signed consent forms. They all had the option to withdraw from the study if they wished.

Consent for Publication Participants were made aware that anonymised data will be shared for publication purposes through the Plain Language Statement and verbally.

Competing Interests The second author is an editorial manager in this journal. There are no financial or non-financial competing interests.

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