

Enacting Anti-Bullying Procedures in Dynamic School Environments: Insights from Primary School Principals in the Republic of Ireland

Irish Educational Studies

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Enacting Anti-Bullying Procedures in Dynamic School Environments: Insights from Primary School Principals in the Republic of Ireland

This paper explores how primary school principals in the Republic of Ireland engage with the *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* (DES 2013). Informed by theoretical literature on policy enactment, the paper illustrates the complex, context-dependent process of enactment. Through qualitative interviews with ten primary school principals, the research uncovers the challenges they face in enacting standardised anti-bullying procedures in their unique school environments. The findings highlight the crucial role of principals in cultivating a positive school culture and managing the expectations of various stakeholders, including parents and teachers. Although distributed leadership is encouraged, the paper reveals that principals often carry the primary burden of responsibility, leading to feelings of isolation and significant pressure. Additionally, the research identifies considerable gaps in teacher education and professional learning. The paper advocates for more flexible, context-sensitive policies that provide better support for school leaders and recommends improved professional learning, shared leadership, and parental engagement to enhance the effectiveness of anti-bullying efforts. As the Department of Education in Ireland revises its anti-bullying procedures, this paper offers critical insights that can guide the development of more effective, supportive policies tailored to the complex realities faced by school leaders.

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Introduction

Efforts to address bullying in Irish schools have become a central focus of educational policy, as reflected in several key government publications, including the *Action Plan on Bullying* (DES 2013a), the *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* (DES 2013b), and the *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying* (DoE 2022a). Irish legislation further mandates that all schools establish a code of behaviour, as required by the Education Welfare Act (Government of Ireland 2000). This code must be developed in alignment with the *Code of Behaviour Guidelines* provided by the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB 2008). A critical element of this code is the inclusion of an anti-bullying policy, which must comply with the *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools* (DES 2013b), hereafter referred to as the ‘anti-bullying procedures.’ These procedures set the guidelines that schools must follow in creating their anti-bullying policy. Principals are highlighted as playing a pivotal role in these procedures. They are specifically tasked with establishing accessible and effective reporting mechanisms and fostering a positive school culture through inclusive leadership practices. Prior quantitative research in Ireland (Foody et al. 2018) has identified significant challenges faced by principals in addressing bullying and flagged the need for more detailed research into the enactment of anti-bullying policies at the school level. This paper responds to that call by providing qualitative, in-depth accounts of how principals enact the anti-bullying procedures in Irish primary schools.

The structure of the paper is as follows: it begins with an overview of the policy and practice of principalship in Ireland, setting the context for the central focus on school principals. The paper then situates anti-bullying policy within the broader landscape of educational policy, critically examining the implications of a centralised, top-down approach. The literature on the role of principals in addressing bullying is also discussed, providing a foundation for

understanding their critical position in bullying prevention. Following this, the concept of policy enactment is introduced as a framework for understanding how policy at the school level is not simply implemented but experiences complex enactment. In the findings section, the paper presents qualitative insights drawn from interviews with primary school principals during the 2022/23 school year, focusing on their experiences with enactment of the ‘anti-bullying procedures’. The discussion then explores the implications of these findings for both educational policy and practice, advocating for a more flexible and context-sensitive approach to policy that better supports principals in their leadership roles. The conclusion offers recommendations for future policy development, emphasising the need for support that enables school leaders to enact anti-bullying policies effectively.

Principalship in Ireland: Policy and Practice

Historically, leadership appointments in Irish schools often favoured seniority or a “safe pair of hands” (Sugrue 2015, 107). However, recent policy changes suggest a departure from this approach, aligning more with global trends that view leadership as a collaborative process (Wang 2018; Wenner and Campbell 2017). Distributed leadership is now widely accepted as a school leadership model worldwide (Harris 2013; Spillane et al. 2015; Wang 2018; Wenner and Campbell 2017). The Irish education system reflects this change by promoting leadership that is shared among various stakeholders within the school community instead of being concentrated in a single individual, such as the principal. For instance, the *Looking at Our Schools* framework, used by the Department of Education (DoE 2022b), provides a structured approach to evaluating the effectiveness of school leadership, with a focus on distributed leadership. According to Murphy’s systematic review and thematic synthesis of research on school leadership in Ireland (2018), although policies such as the above promote distributed leadership, its practical application faces several challenges. The disconnect between the

rhetoric of distributed leadership and its reality in schools is a significant issue. Bureaucratic pressures hinder the actual practice of distributed leadership in schools where school leaders, especially principals, are overwhelmed by managerial demands, shifting the focus from leadership to management (Lárusdóttir and O'Connor 2017). This intensification of work creates a gap between the ideal of distributed leadership and its execution in daily school operations (Lárusdóttir and O'Connor 2017; Sugrue 2011). Research has also shown that targeted professional learning (PL) opportunities are required to support school leaders in effectively practising distributed leadership (Fitzpatrick Associates Economic Consultants 2018).

Anti-Bullying Policy

The centralised policy approach to behaviour management, including anti-bullying, is not unique to Ireland. For example, in England, Maguire, Ball, and Braun (2010) explain how behaviour management has become a national policy priority, requiring schools to develop policies in line with national policy requirements. According to Maguire and colleagues (2010), the push for such national policies comes from two primary factors. First, societal concerns about social disorder and fragmentation often influence national policies, reflecting broader worries about student behaviour and the need for schools to maintain safe, orderly environments. Behaviour management is also seen as crucial for improving educational outcomes. This is expressed in the idea of “behaviour for learning” where schools are expected to show that they are raising academic standards by implementing different behaviour management strategies (Maguire, Ball, and Braun 2010, 155). In Ireland, the national *Code of Behaviour Guidelines* (NEWB 2008) is positioned to enable the school authorities to “support the learning of every student in the school” (NEWB 2008, 2). Through the establishment of standardised expectations for positive behaviour and clearly defined criteria for implementing

sanctions, a standardised method of behaviour management across all schools is reflected therein. Schools are required to adhere to these national for managing behaviour, regardless of their individual contexts. The anti-bullying procedures also reflect a standardised method of overseeing bullying prevention in each school. A standardised policy framework is provided within the anti-bullying procedures text (DES 2013b), and all schools must follow the approaches established therein.

The Role of the Principal in Tackling Bullying

Despite wider policy reforms advocating distributed leadership, the anti-bullying procedures (DES 2013b) spotlight the school principal as having a pivotal role in leading the school's commitment to tackling anti-bullying. This stems from research emphasising the importance of the school leader, particularly the principal, in how the school attends to and prevents bullying (Brown et al. 2020; Corcoran and Mc Guckin 2014; Foody et al. 2018; Sebring et al. 2006). Principals play an essential role in developing an inclusive school culture, which is viewed as proactive and effective in preventing bullying (Skinner, Babinski, and Gifford 2014). A supportive and inclusive school culture is essential for the well-being of all children, particularly those at higher risk of bullying (Yoon and Bauman 2014). Moyano and del Mar Sanchez-Fuentes argue that schools can be a “hostile place” but where children “feel more integrated into their education community tend to report less school violence” (2020, 1). A positive school culture can also enhance teachers’ feelings of belonging, job satisfaction, and perceived autonomy, resulting in shared goals and values, collective decision-making and collaboration (Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2021). The support of principals plays a crucial role in improving the expectations and self-efficacy of teachers, alongside being an important factor in developing whole-school approaches to reduce bullying (Skinner, Babinski, and Gifford 2014). On the other hand, where an absence of support is evident, this, in turn, can negatively

impact how teachers respond to how school staff address bullying incidents within classrooms. Developing and maintaining a positive culture requires effective school leadership. Such cultures are not static; instead, leading and developing a school culture is a continuous process, particularly as schools face new challenges (Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2021).

The values and emotions that principals bring to the role can also have an impact on how schools address bullying and the culture of the school more broadly:

The emotional climate of schools influences and shapes the emotional experience of principals, impacting on their actions and decisions, which in turn affect the quality of staff relationships, the emotional climate of schools and the emotional experience of principals” (Brennan and Mac Ruairc 2011, 145).

Research by Farrelly, O’Higgins Norman and O’Leary (2017, 156) on principals’ perspectives of homophobic bullying in primary schools found that principals and their leadership styles were critical in successfully responding to bullying:

If a school principal does not recognise homophobic bullying as an issue worth addressing, then his/her values can impact on the extent to which a school is ready to prevent and address this type of bullying. The extent to which a principal’s values are linked to equality and non-discrimination in education will affect his/her ability to animate a school environment where LGBT pupils, staff or parents feel safe and free from homophobic bullying.

When a principal responds negatively to bullying and does not prioritise it as an area of concern, it impacts how the school can collectively address the issue (Moyano and del Mar Sanchez-Fuentes 2020). Grissom, Egalite, and Lindsay (2021) flag the importance of principals embracing equity-oriented school leadership. Equity-oriented school leadership fosters a positive school culture by prioritising inclusivity and meeting the unique needs of all children.

Principals collaborate with teachers to implement culturally responsive teaching and create supportive structures where every child is supported (Ylimaki et al. 2012). Equity-oriented principals favour restorative justice approaches that emphasise reconciliation over punitive measures (Skiba et al. 2014; DeMatthews et al. 2017). By cultivating an environment where diversity is celebrated through inclusive leadership, equity-oriented school leaders create a school culture where all children feel safe, valued, and supported in their educational journey (Demerath 2018).

Theoretical Framework: Policy Enactment

The critical policy research community challenges the assumption that policy is simply implemented (Ball et al. 2011). Ball, Maguire, and Braun argue that the enactment of policies is “always more than just implementation” because it brings together “contextual, historical and psychosocial dynamics into a relation with texts and imperatives to produce action and activities that are policy” (2012, 71). Policies are negotiated or enacted in contextual situations by actors who bring specific values, perspectives and lived experiences (Ball et al. 2011). Policy enactment is a creative and complex process (Braun et al. 2010) where “policy is detailed and circulated through texts and artefacts, and it is interpreted in equally complex and sophisticated ways (Maguire et al. 2015, p. 486). Furthermore, the school in which policies are enacted is neither a “simple nor a coherent entity ... schools as far more differentiated and loosely assembled than is often the case. Schools are not of a piece. They are precarious networks of different and overlapping groups of people, artefacts and practices” (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012, 144). The “rich underlife” of individual schools generally results in policies being differently read, interpreted, and translated differently (Maguire, Ball, and Braun 2011, 157).

Ball et al.'s typology of enactment (2011) illustrates that enactment within schools demands specific roles or positions (see Table 1). These roles are not static; policy actors (senior-, middle-leaders, and teachers) can assume multiple roles and work creatively in diverse ways to “fabricate and forge practices out of policy texts and policy ideas in the light of their situated realities” (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012, 142). Weick (1995, 2005) and Spillane (2004) highlight the context-dependent nature of sense-making during the policy enactment process, emphasising the significance of understanding how individuals interpret their surroundings and context in this process (Gu, Sammons, and Chen 2018). Spillane et al. (2002) argue that leaders can leverage policies to support their own reform initiatives, using "accountability measures to add considerable clout to their own efforts to transform practice in particular ways" (760). Honig and Hatch (2004) recognise that multiple policy demands can challenge schools' ability to function cohesively and effectively, but these demands can also open up new opportunities for school improvement. Within schools, the process of policy enactment is shaped by leaders who determine the school's direction and can initiate organisational redesign. The way these leaders interpret and make sense of specific policies—deciding “whether and how to ignore, adapt, or adopt” them locally (Spillane et al. 2002, 733)—affects how teachers perceive the policy and how successfully it is enacted.

Principals, however, can often be challenged in enacting school policies (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012). Top-down policies can often push for individualised responsibility that “far over-emphasise the individual nature of responsibility and far underplay the collective element” (Torrance 2017, 93). So, while all teachers may shoulder responsibility for policy outcomes, the burden of responsibility can often lie with the principal (Maguire and Braun 2019). Principals have to respond to a “rapidly changing external policy environment”, which “does not always sit comfortably with principals’ desire to avoid ‘top down’ decision-making”

(Holmes, Clement, and Albright 2013, 282). This requires engaging with staff with different levels of experience as well as addressing issues that staff may raise or encounter regarding the policy (Holmes, Clement, and Albright 2013), which can also present significant challenges, leaving a responsibility on the principal to facilitate PL for staff to achieve the policy goals (Barron, Gorman, and Looney 2023; Clement, and Albright 2013; Maguire and Braun 2019; Murphy 2023; Spillane and Anderson 2014). School leaders can also frequently face the challenge of managing demoralised staff or those who may be reluctant to support the school leader for various reasons (Crow 2006; Kelly and Saunders 2010). Crow and Weindling (2010) also note that the school leader's role has an interpersonal and political dimension, both of which are crucially important for policy enactment. When a policy requires engagement from the wider school community, such as the school's parent body, the school leader is tasked with building relationships to gain collective and shared agreement. This adds complexity to the enactment process, as leaders must not only understand and enact policy but also navigate the intricate social and political dynamics within and beyond the school environment.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative narrative research approach to deeply explore how primary school principals enacted the anti-bullying procedures, aiming to uncover nuanced insights and challenges they encountered in this process (Creswell 2017; 2022; Marshall and Rossman 2014; Miles and Huberman 1994; Woods and Sikes 2022). The data-gathering process was conducted during the 2022/23 school year. A purposive sample was employed in the data collection process involving 10 school principals working in the Republic of Ireland. For variation within the dataset, the purposive sampling procedure (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011) explicitly targeted diverse schools by demographic (single-, co-educational, urban, rural) and patronage (denominational, Educate Together, Community National Schools

Gaelscoileanna) as illustrated in Table 2. All school leaders who engaged in the research were in the role of principal for 2 years or more. Semi-structured open-ended interviews formed the basis of the data for analysis (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Within these semi-structured interviews, questions included their perspectives and experiences of enacting the anti-bullying procedures, their perspectives on PL and support (for principals, for teachers, including newly qualified teachers (NQTs), and for other stakeholders, including parents/guardians), and recommendations for future anti-bullying procedures. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Transcripts were member-checked by each of the participants. None opted to make changes to the transcripts.

[Table 2 near here]

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data, as it provided a systematic approach to identifying, organising, and offering insights into patterns or themes across the semi-structured interview dataset (Braun and Clarke 2021). Inductive coding was adopted as the predominant approach, where data were coded to capture the meaning within the data. Deductive analysis was also employed to ensure that the coding process was relevant to the overarching research objectives and the theoretical constructs examined in the literature review. Coding combined semantic and latent approaches where the semantic approach produced a descriptive data analysis and the latent approach moved beyond description, identifying underlying or hidden meanings (Braun and Clarke 2021). The analysis followed six recursive phases—phase one involved familiarisation with the data. Phase two began with initial coding, which involved systematically working through the data set and recording succinct labels relevant to the research question. Phase three examined how codes that shared similar features were combined to form potential themes. Phase four involved reviewing potential themes. Phase five presented the three key emergent themes. Careful examination was required to ensure that each theme was consistent with the data, the preceding analysis

phases, and the research objectives (see Table 3 to illustrate the coding process). Phase six involved the write-up of the themes, which will be presented in the forthcoming section. This research was conducted within the ethical guidelines of the authors' university. Written consent for participation in the study was sought and granted by all participants, and the right to withdraw at any stage during the data collection phase was clearly explained. Pseudonyms have been used in the thematic analysis to protect the identity of the participants.

[Table 3 near here]

Findings

In response to the research question and focus of this paper, the findings explore the experiences of principals in enacting anti-bullying procedures within their schools. The findings are presented thematically.

Enacting the Anti-Bullying Procedures at School Level

Overall, the majority of principals found that the anti-bullying procedures provided a valuable foundation for developing their school's policies. While some principals, like Fergus, praised the strategies provided within the anti-bullying procedures for being “incredibly helpful” and grounded in best practices, most principals felt that the procedures did not sufficiently account for the diverse contexts of different schools: “It doesn’t take account of different school contexts ... it needs to recognise that schools are different, like different sizes, profiles, cultures, and it needs to be mindful about it” (Brendan). Robert expressed concerns that the strategies endorsed in current anti-bullying procedures are “so reductive, so traditional”. He emphasised the need to move beyond these approaches, stating, “as a DEIS Band One school, that just won't work here. Prevention and blame-and-name tactics aren't enough. Instead, the focus should be on building awareness of behaviours and emotions”, echoing critiques in the literature that advocates for more contextually relevant approaches to policy (Maguire et al.

2011). Caoimhe pointed out that the procedures fall short in the clarity regarding the school's role in addressing bullying incidents that occur outside of school: "I don't think the current procedures are strong enough around what's the remit of the school to investigate and to address all that allegations of bullying that happen out of school".

All principals agreed on the importance of fostering a positive and inclusive school culture and providing effective leadership to combat bullying, which is strongly endorsed in the anti-bullying procedures. However, some felt that the current approach was somewhat superficial. As one principal, Caoimhe, put it, "if a school doesn't celebrate differences or promote inclusivity, it's going to contribute to bullying. But I think schools work very hard to build an inclusive environment, often with minimal support". When asked about the lack of support, she elaborated: "as an ETNS principal, inclusivity is central to our school's ethos, and we are supported by our patron body, which does excellent work around inclusion. However, this support comes from our patron, not the department or any other external body." The understanding of what constitutes an "inclusive school" varied among the principals. For Martin, inclusivity meant providing opportunities for all children to engage, citing that "the introduction of autism classes has significantly enhanced inclusive opportunities, allowing children to understand better and navigate social situations". Robert emphasised the role of cultural events, stating, "we ensure that our school hosts events celebrating different cultures and significant holidays, promoting respect and understanding". Seán focussed on creating a welcoming atmosphere, noting, "we aim to make the school environment colourful, warm, and inviting. Our core values—kindness, openness, and honesty—are communicated from the very first day the children join us".

Leading Anti-Bullying Policy in Schools

Within the findings, principals emphasised the critical role of their own involvement in leading anti-bullying efforts. Most principals believed the principal needed to be actively involved in all aspects related to bullying, as highlighted by Martin's statement: "I have a 33-teacher school, but I need to be on top of this when bullying arises, as it can not only impact the child or parent, but it can impact the teacher too and may lead to further issues". This view is in line with the literature that emphasises the crucial role of school leaders in leading anti-bullying efforts (Brown et al. 2020). However, some principals, such as Ciaran, question how the principal's involvement aligns with the broader idea of shared responsibility within a whole-school approach: "On one hand, they say it should be the whole school approach, but then as principal, it is me that is named and where does distributed leadership come in. Can I delegate this to an AP1 [assistant principal]?". This reflects the tension identified in the literature regarding how distributed leadership is practised (Lárusdóttir and O'Connor 2017; Murphy 2019). Furthermore, all participants reported experiencing feelings of isolation when handling bullying issues despite the emphasis within the anti-bullying procedures on adopting a whole-school approach. Martin, reflecting on his dual role as a principal and mentor to other principals, stated:

Luckily, I never had a big issue with bullying, but I have seen what it does to principals in my cluster. Things can be going swimmingly, and then this happens, and you can be down in the trenches for months.

Ciaran, a teaching principal, echoed this sentiment, describing how the broader responsibilities of school leadership could become overwhelming when a bullying incident occurs:

I have to say I am lucky that any bullying or allegations have been resolved as we are a small school, but if I had to deal with a big issue where legal action might arise, then I don't think I would be able to cope along with doing everything else.

While the principals' commitment and involvement are crucial, the data illustrate an over-centralisation of responsibilities. The findings here raise questions about the whole-school approach to bullying prevention that is strongly promoted in the procedures (DES 2013a). If a whole school approach was functioning effectively, principals might feel more supported and less isolated.

Additionally, some principals faced challenges in ensuring that all staff, not just teachers, adhered to the anti-bullying procedures. Martin spoke about the initial challenges of "getting teachers on board":

It wasn't that they were difficult, but I suppose when the 2013 document was rolled out, they felt that all this reporting was unnecessary, particularly when they knew the children, and it might have been just a scuffle.

When asked about present-day activity, Fergus explained that while the policy is embedded, at times, "teachers might not follow the steps, such as talk with parents without following what's in the policy, or an email". Siobhán also flagged where "a teacher doesn't say follow the steps [within the school policy, as specified in the anti-bullying procedures], it gets very tricky for the principal". The difficulties in getting all staff on board highlight the challenges of policy enactment in schools, where varying levels of commitment and understanding among staff can hinder consistent application (Crow 2006; Kelly and Saunders 2010).

Support for Anti-Bullying Policy Enactment

Within the findings, school principals emphasised the need for enhanced teacher education and greater support to enact anti-bullying policies successfully. All principals agreed on the vital importance of teacher education, particularly considering past shortcomings. Fergus reflected on when the anti-bullying procedures were initially rolled out in 2013, noting that the lack of

accompanying PL left many schools unprepared to enact the policies effectively. When discussing the type of PL needed, the principals emphasised the need for contextually relevant PL tailored to the specific needs of their schools. Lorraine suggested that PL should be “tangible” and involve the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) to ensure it is grounded in the realities of school life while multidisciplinary. Others suggested the focus of PL should be on “restorative practices” (Robert) and “no blame, no name, no shame” to “build a more positive psychology from the infants up (Siobhán).

The principals collectively expressed that current PL offerings are too focussed on classroom prevention strategies and do not provide sufficient support for dealing with incidents when they occur. Robert pointed out that while support from the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) was available for broader topics like Social, Personal, and Health Education (SPHE), it fell short of addressing specific bullying-related needs. A key concern among the principals was the lack of direct support available to them. Brendan compared the situation to his wife's experience in the private sector, where managers have direct access to HR departments for issues such as bullying. He argued for the establishment of a dedicated support line for principals, which could provide immediate assistance for both pupil and staff-related bullying incidents. Fergus echoed this sentiment, stressing that principals should have access to legal or support teams beyond the school.

Principals also felt that initial teacher education (ITE) could more effectively prepare effective teachers to deal with bullying. Lorraine noted a discrepancy in the emphasis placed on this topic by different higher education institutions (HEIs). Lorraine also observed that graduates from the two-year postgraduate programmes seemed better prepared than those from the four-year undergraduate programmes. Brendan described the preparation of graduates as “adequate”

but emphasised a critical gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. Specifically, he noted that NQTs are often unprepared for the complexities of “managing real-world bullying scenarios”, such as handling conflicts and communicating with parents. He felt that the shortfall in NQTs' practical skills is not necessarily due to the HEIs alone but rather a broader challenge in translating theoretical knowledge into effective practice within schools:

That’s not the fault of the colleges [HEIs]. It is just that they do the theory, but when they [NQTs] have to deal with conflict and difficult conversations, that’s where they are not prepared. Even note-taking, things like that, and emails, like if I'd always tell new teachers, especially new qualified teachers, make sure you run an email by me, as more often it is badly written or not factual or too long.

Fergus was more critical, asserting that NQTs are generally ill-prepared to manage bullying incidents effectively:

I have a set of questions that I ask at interviews. One of them is what would you do if the parent came to you and said their child is being bullied? And I can tell you now that having done, I would say, probably interviewed over a hundred people, if they're newly qualified, the vast, vast majority of them cannot answer correctly or fail to answer.

Fergus’s observation that NQTs’ failure to answer this question indicates a gap in their ITE—one that goes beyond merely knowing that bullying is wrong. When confronted with a parent’s report of bullying, he felt they struggled with the procedural and policy-driven responses required in a school environment.

Finally, the principals identified a critical need for better guidance for parents in understanding bullying behaviour. Lorraine noted the difficulties in communicating with parents who may misinterpret a bullying incident:

Ultimately, a child has been investigated for a bullying incident and six weeks gone. That same parent comes in and makes an allegation against a different child. And you would have to go through the same procedure even though you may have a doubt or concern that it's only a vexatious claim in response to a claim that was made previously.

(Lorraine)

Ciaran felt that more could be done nationally to educate parents through an “information campaign around what constitutes a bully”, where a child is being bullied; he also suggested that the campaign should identify “signs” to look for, alongside educating parents on “what is not bullying.” He felt this may “temper parents’ expectations”.

Discussion

This discussion section is organised to systematically address the key findings of this research and their connection to the existing literature and the theoretical framework. Policy enactment is inherently complex, involving the interaction of various contextual factors. In this research, the principals’ discussions about the challenges of applying standardised anti-bullying procedures across schools of different sizes, cultures, and socioeconomic profiles highlight the context-dependent nature of policy enactment (Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012). The tension between the standardised approach to anti-bullying procedures and the need for flexibility to address local contexts reflects the broader theoretical discourse on the need for policies to be adaptable to the situated realities of schools (Braun et al. 2010).

The findings also reflect school principals as central figures in the enactment of policies. Spillane et al. (2002) argue that leadership is not just about the actions of individual leaders but about how they interpret and make sense of policies in relation to their specific school contexts. This is evident in how principals in this study navigated the anti-bullying procedures,

balancing the expectations of a standardised policy with the need to adapt these policies to fit their school's unique needs. Furthermore, the variation in how principals viewed their roles—whether as central figures in anti-bullying efforts or as leaders who should delegate these responsibilities—also reflects the broader debate within leadership about the distribution of leadership responsibilities. Distributed leadership, as discussed by Spillane et al. (2015), suggests that leadership tasks should be shared among different members of the school community rather than centralised in a single individual. However, the findings from this research indicate that while some principals recognise the value of distributed leadership, there was still a strong expectation for principals to be directly involved in managing bullying issues, which reinforces the tension between the ideals of distributed leadership and the practical demands of the designated principal (Lárusdóttir and O'Connor 2017). The principals' experiences suggest that while distributed leadership may be the ideal, the reality is that principals are often left to manage the most challenging aspects of bullying on their own. The literature on distributed leadership also highlights the importance of structures in enabling principals to share leadership responsibilities effectively (Harris 2013; Spillane et al. 2015). However, in the context of anti-bullying procedures, the explicit centralisation of responsibility on the principal within the text itself consequently undermines the principles of distributed leadership, as the text itself explicitly places individualised responsibility on the principal (Holmes et al. 2013; Torrance 2017).

In discussing school culture, the principals involved in this research emphasised celebrating cultural diversity events and creating welcoming environments. However, there is a potential concern that an overemphasis on such events might inadvertently reinforce stereotypes or lead to tokenism rather than fostering genuine inclusivity. For children, especially those vulnerable to bullying, the cultivation of a truly safe and inclusive atmosphere that moves beyond

celebratory events is essential (Moyano and del Mar Sanchez-Fuentes, 2020). While Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2020) highlight that a positive school culture also enhances teachers' sense of belonging, job satisfaction, and autonomy—thereby fostering collaboration—the principals in this study primarily focussed on the pupil experience when discussing how they cultivated a positive school culture. Although pupil experience is crucial, a comprehensive approach that also addresses the well-being and belonging of teachers is essential. This holistic perspective can contribute to a more authentically inclusive and supportive school culture (Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2020).

The principals' concerns in this research about the increasing expectations placed on schools to manage bullying both within and outside the school context reflect this broader societal expectation for schools to act as agents of social control (Maguire, Ball and Braun 2011). The findings highlight the ways in which principals are positioned at the intersection of these social expectations, responsible not only for enacting educational policies but also for managing the broader social implications of issues like bullying. The principals' experiences reflect the growing burden placed on schools to address a wide range of social issues. Furthermore, the principals' concerns about the lack of clear guidance for parents on what constitutes bullying and how it should be addressed also point to the broader societal expectations placed on schools as sites of social regulation (Beck 1992; Maguire, Ball and Braun 2011; Slee 1995).

The findings also highlight significant concerns regarding the adequacy of teacher education and PL in preparing teachers to handle complex issues such as bullying, which the principals report creates an additional barrier to enactment. Participants such as Brendan, Lorraine, Fergus, and Siobhán pointed out inconsistencies in ITE, as well as differing levels of preparedness among graduates. Additionally, the gap between theoretical understanding and

practical application, as Brendan remarked on the challenges NQTs face, is also highlighted in research by Lester et al. (2018), which found that while pre-service teachers often understand what constitutes bullying in theory, their ability to intervene effectively is hampered by a lack of practical experience. Interestingly, principals did not discuss the *Droichead* NQT school-based mentoring year, which supports “the professional learning of NQTs during the induction phase, thus laying the foundations for subsequent professional growth and learning for the next phase of their career” (Teaching Council 2017, 3). Research in the Irish context has shown that behaviour management is one of the areas where NQTs require the most support (Uí Choistealbha and Ní Dhuinn, 2021).

In terms of PL, the principals' call for more opportunities that are contextual and tailored to the specific needs of their schools also resonates with the literature on effective PL (Brennan and Gorman 2023; King, Poekert, and Pierre 2023). This suggests a need for PL that goes beyond generic transmissive delivery and instead offers targeted, practical strategies that can be directly applied in the school environment. Research supports that PL is a complex, context-sensitive process best addressed by those embedded in the school's environment (Clarke and Hollingsworth 2002; King 2014; Opfer and Pedder 2011). In this research, however, principals tended to look towards externally facilitated PL and failed to account for how teachers within the school might deliver and sustain PL initiatives. Finally, principals often emphasised the need for individualised external support for them to manage these challenges. While this support may sometimes be needed (Crow and Weindling 2010), the lack of focus on internal resources could prevent the development of a more cohesive and internally supported leadership model. Indeed, promoting a distributed leadership model that taps into internal expertise could help address the burden that often falls solely on the principals' shoulders. Sharing leadership responsibilities and empowering teachers and other staff members to

contribute to complete problem-solving processes could alleviate pressure on individual leaders and enhance the overall effectiveness of the school's leadership practice (Harris 2013).

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations.

This paper provides valuable insights into how principals are enacting anti-bullying policies in primary schools. The varied interpretations and applications of the anti-bullying procedures by principals in this paper reflect the broader challenges identified by Maguire, Ball, and Braun (2011), who argue that policies often fail to fully account for the diverse and complex environments in which schools operate. The research emphasises the crucial role of leadership in the policy enactment process. Principals don't just enforce policies, but they actively interpret and modify them in their schools, often under challenging circumstances. The expectation for principals to handle complex bullying cases, often with limited support, also reveals the tensions between the ideal of distributed leadership and the realities of school life, where principals usually end up shouldering most of the responsibility. The findings also draw attention to reported inadequacies in teacher education and ongoing PL. The discrepancy between the theoretical knowledge and the practical knowledge needed to manage real-world bullying incidents points to a gap that may need addressing. Opportunities to foster stronger links between ITE and the *Droichead* induction year might address this challenge, given that wider behaviour management is an area in NQTs that requires support. Such an approach could involve structured opportunities for ITE students and NQTs to observe and participate in case-based learning involving bullying, with feedback and reflection sessions to deepen their understanding and refine their knowledge (Gravett et al. 2017; Lester et al. 2018).

In terms of other key recommendations, policymakers should consider developing more flexible frameworks that allow for adaptation to the specific needs of different schools. This

would involve a shift away from rigid, standardised procedures towards policies that provide clear guidelines but also permit schools the autonomy to tailor these guidelines to their unique contexts. Such an approach would align with Braun et al.'s (2010) call for policies that are responsive to the lived realities of schools rather than assuming a uniform application across diverse school environments. As an alternative to centralised policy, Snow and Bowen (2021) suggest that school-led data-driven evidence-based policy, often regarded as the "gold standard", allows schools to develop strategies that are more likely to succeed and better address the needs of their student population. However, Snow and Bowen (2021) caution that an evidence-based policy approach in schools faces significant challenges. One major hurdle is the lack of time, expertise, and resources among school staff, who are often already stretched thin due to high workloads. In addition, the school may have limited access to research-driven knowledge to drive changes. Secondly, the proliferation of policy publications has created a significant burden on Irish schools, posing a notable challenge for school leaders (Hickey, Flaherty, and Mannix McNamara 2024). To effectively manage this challenge, schools could be supported in strategically integrating anti-bullying procedures with other essential policies. For example, in Ireland, the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (DoE 2019) and *Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024-2033* (DoE 2024). The school self-evaluation (SSE) framework (DoE 2022c) mandates schools to critically assess their current practices and identify areas for improvement. Future revisions to this framework, along with its accompanying document, *Looking at Our Schools 2022* (DoE 2022b), could empower schools to tailor these policies to their unique needs and contexts. For instance, the SSE process could help schools strengthen the alignment between anti-bullying procedures and initiatives under the wellbeing framework (DoE 2019), ensuring a cohesive and supportive policy environment. Additionally, schools could integrate their anti-bullying strategies with the digital strategy for schools (DoE 2024), particularly in the context of addressing cyberbullying

(Burke and McGuckin 2022; McGuckin and Corcoran 2010). This integrated approach would not only reduce the burden of policy overload but also enhance the effectiveness of anti-bullying measures, ensuring that they are deeply embedded in the school's culture and practices. Furthermore, policies in Ireland, such as *Looking at Our Schools 2022* (DoE 2022b), strongly support professional collaboration and networking across schools. The findings from the paper reveal that principals often feel isolated when dealing with bullying incidents despite the emphasis on a whole-school approach within the anti-bullying procedures. A specific anti-bullying policy and practice platform could allow for shared support and cross-school collaborative problem-solving (Chapman and Hadfield 2010; Harris, Azorín, and Jones 2021). Recent research by Bourke (2023) indicates the potential benefits of cross-school networks in Ireland but also cautions that school networking is gaining prominence in Irish and international education policy, outpacing the accumulation of sufficient evidence regarding its effectiveness. Therefore, additional research in this area is crucial. Lastly, the findings highlight the need for better engagement with parents to manage expectations and improve understanding of bullying behaviour. National- and school-level information campaigns, as suggested by one participant, could play a role in educating parents about what constitutes bullying, how it is handled in schools, and what they can realistically expect from the school's response. This would help align parental expectations with the realities of school policies and reduce misunderstandings that can complicate the enactment of anti-bullying procedures.

In concluding this paper, it is also important to identify limitations. This is a qualitative study, thus flagging that the findings are not generalisable to every principal in Ireland. The focus of this research is solely focussed on primary school principals. The absence of voices of teachers, children, and the wider school community in the study is a further limitation. Finally, the data is solely focussed on the anti-bullying procedures. At the time of data gathering, the updated

Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying (DoE 2202a) was only published, but the data gathering process had been conducted with participants prior to this. Furthermore, the Department of Education (2022a) has signalled that the anti-bullying procedures are in the process of revision and are near completion. That said, this paper comes at a critical juncture. The paper illustrates the complexities of enacting the existing anti-bullying policies in schools, requiring principals to navigate not just the text of the policy but the unique and often unpredictable landscapes of their schools. Reflecting the recommendations of UNESCO's International Scientific Committee on School Violence and Bullying, recent and future policies from the Department of Education on tackling bullying (DoE 2022a) should reflect a move away from a whole school approach towards a whole education approach, which in turn could address issues of over-reliance on school principals.

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Table 1. Policy actors and ‘policy work’ (Ball et al. 2011, 626).

Policy Actors	Policy Work
Narrators	Interpretation, selection, and enforcement of meanings, mainly done by headteachers and the SLT (senior leadership team)
Entrepreneurs	Advocacy, creativity, and integration
Outsiders	Entrepreneurship, partnership, and monitoring
Transactors	Accounting, reporting, monitoring
Enthusiasts	Investment, creativity, satisfaction, and career
Translators	Production of texts, artefacts, and events
Critics	Union representatives: monitoring of management, maintaining counter-discourses
Receivers	Mainly junior teachers and teaching assistants: coping, defending and dependency

Table 2: Participant profile.

Name	Principal Experience	School	School Type	Location
Fergus	15 years	Cherry Hill	Vertical – boys	East (Urban)
Robert	8 years	Oak Heights	Vertical – co-ed	East (Urban)
Seán	3 years	Willow View	3rd to 6th class - co-ed	East (Urban)
Ciarán	3 years	Ivy Road	Vertical – co-ed	East (Urban)
Martin	18 years	Sycamore Park	Vertical – co-ed	West (Urban)
Brendan	9 years	Rose Field	Vertical – co-ed	Southeast
Miriam	3 years	Birch Terrace	Vertical – girls	Southeast (Urban)
Caoimhe	4 years	Holly Lane	Vertical – co-ed	Northwest
Siobhán	11 years	Pairc na Coille	Vertical – co-ed	Northwest
Lorraine	7 years	Beech Meadow	Vertical – co-ed	South

Table 3: Development of Codes, Categories and Themes

Theme	Category	Code	Example Quotation/Memo
Enacting the Anti-Bullying Procedures at School Level	Perceptions of Anti-Bullying Procedures	"Very good start-off base"	"Brendan referred to these procedures as a 'very good start-off base'."
		"Transferable between schools"	"Siobhán highlighted the uniformity of the procedures noting that they are 'transferable between schools.'"
		"Elevated its [anti-bullying] status"	"Robert mentioned that this reporting 'elevated its [anti-bullying] status,' emphasizing the role of school leadership in maintaining the visibility and importance of anti-bullying measures."
	Challenges in Enactment	"Unreasonable expectations"	"Brendan felt that the procedures did not sufficiently account for the diverse contexts of different schools alongside creating 'unreasonable expectations' for schools to address bullying both inside and outside the school environment."
		"Challenges of policy enactment"	"The difficulties in getting all staff on board as described by Martin highlight the challenges of policy enactment in schools where varying levels of commitment and understanding among staff can hinder consistent application."
	Critique of Current Strategies	"So reductive, so traditional"	"Robert expressed concerns that the strategies endorsed in current anti-bullying procedures are 'so reductive, so traditional.' He emphasized the need to move beyond these approaches stating, 'As a DEIS Band One school that just won't work here. Prevention and blame-and-name tactics aren't enough.'"
		"A fantasy or the answer to all ills"	"Robert described the anti-bullying procedures as 'a fantasy or the answer to all ills. And I think it's not realistic to expect schools to be dealing with what's happening outside of their environment and then to be foisted upon us and to deal with that.'"
	Adaptation and Flexibility	"Valuable and consistent framework"	"While the anti-bullying procedures provide a valuable and consistent framework for schools, their effectiveness depends on adaptation to diverse school contexts and the commitment of all staff members."

Leading Anti-Bullying Policy in Schools	Principal's Role and Responsibilities – Individualised vs Distributed	"Need to be on top of this"	"Martin: 'I have a 33-teacher school but I need to be on top of this when bullying arises as it can not only impact the child or parent, but it can impact the teacher too and may lead to further issues.'"
		"Can I delegate this to an AP1?"	"Ciarán: 'On one hand they say it should be the whole school approach but then as principal it is me that is named... Can I delegate this to an AP1 [assistant principal]?'"
	Challenges Faced by Principals	"Feelings of isolation"	"All participants reported experiencing feelings of isolation when handling bullying issues despite the emphasis within the anti-bullying procedures on adopting a whole-school approach."
		"I don't think I would be able to cope"	"Ciarán: 'I have to say I am lucky that any bullying or allegations have been resolved as we are a small school but if I had to deal with a big issue where legal action might arise then I don't think I would be able to cope along with doing everything else.'"
		"I cannot give the answer"	"Fergus: 'I am now the experienced principal who gets calls from other principals with questions. But sometimes for issues like this [bullying incidents] I cannot give the answer.'"
Support for Anti-Bullying Policy Enactment	Preparation of NQTs	"Unprepared for the complexities"	"Brendan: 'NQTs are often unprepared for the complexities of managing real-world scenarios such as handling conflicts and difficult conversations with parents and children.'"
		"NQTs are not prepared"	"Fergus: 'NQTs are not prepared. There is a solid straight answer. I have a set of questions that I ask at interviews... the vast, vast majority of them cannot answer correctly or fail to answer.'"
	Professional Learning Needs	"Contextual and tailored"	"Lorraine suggested that 'professional learning should be practical and involve the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) to ensure it is grounded in the realities of school life.'"
		"Focus on conflict resolution"	"Brendan felt that professional learning needed to focus more on issues around conflict resolution."
	Support Systems for Principals	"External Supports"	"Brendan: 'There needs to be a dedicated support line for dealing not just with pupil bullying but allegations of staff bullying too.'"
	Parental Engagement	"Most commonly misused word"	"Caoimhe: 'Despite the attention you give to bullying and that you stress the definition to the children it is still probably the most commonly misused word in the school.'"

		"Information campaign"	"Ciarán: 'An information campaign around what constitutes a bully and if you or your child is being bullied here are the signs...'"
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