

Bullying: experiences of girls and boys

“The result of bullying could be that a child becomes very subdued and not feel confident enough to participate. They would internalise feelings of lack of self-confidence, self-esteem. And school attainment is highly impacted on the emotional wellbeing of a person. Bullying makes school overall a very negative experience”. This is how the effects of bullying on children were portrayed by one of the participants of a study carried out last year by the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE).

It is through education that children have access to new, socially produced and systemised knowledge. Schools, are not only responsible for the children’s academic education, but are also a privileged space for the promotion of quality of life in a broader focus. However, it is a reality that there are children who experience times of difficulty relating with their peers and are victims of bullying both in schools and outside.

Bullying includes a wide variety of behaviours, but all bullying involves a person or a group repeatedly trying to harm someone who is weaker or more vulnerable. Researchers believe that to characterise bullying in schools, gender is one of the fundamental variables in understanding this phenomenon. Studies show that there are significant differences in how boys and girls bully. Boys tend to be physically aggressive, and girls tend to bully other girls indirectly through the peer group. When boys engage in bullying behaviour, they tend to bully both boys and girls equally, while girls tend to bully mostly girls.

Boy bullies are usually easy to identify. One can certainly catch a bully punching or kicking a victim or threatening or intimidating someone else. Because girls use indirect methods of bullying, it can be harder to recognise this conduct and even more difficult to notice and identify.

The research study published last year by NCPE gathered in depth information on the current situation of bullying, violence and harassment in schools in Malta and Gozo confirms these assertions. The participants of this qualitative study included students, parents, teachers, other professionals working within schools, professionals working with youth outside of schools, and other stakeholders in the fields of education and social welfare.

A staggering number of participants confirmed that boys and girls engage in bullying behaviour in a different manner. It transpires that the gender differences in bullying in primary and secondary schools are similar. In fact, one of the participants recalled that they *“had cases with the younger children where there was physical violence, especially with the boys. With the girls and older children it’s often isolation. They’re alone on the playground, nobody plays with them”.*

Similarly, another participant from a girls’ secondary school also related that bullying among girls is *“rarely on a physical level, it’s more emotional. They try to isolate the person, they speak about them behind their back, they try to mock them. In boys’ schools there is some sort of violence on a physical level, there are also threats”.*

However, it cannot be said that girls won't be physically aggressive or boys won't exclude others. These are not hard and fast rules on what bullying looks like. They are tendencies of behaviour.

All throughout NCPE's study, the impact of bullying was echoed by parents, professionals and students alike. When asked whether they believe that such bullying will impact the child's participation and attainment in education, the feedback was resoundingly in the affirmative.

On the long term impact, one participant said that *"Obviously, many children are not only affected psychologically. There are issues with attention span, they won't want to go to school, they pretend they are sick. These issues will scar children for life and affect them academically"*.

The study emphasises the importance of early intervention to prevent the lasting effects of bullying. Although schools are doing more to help students, the role of the parents is crucial and it's never too early to start having a conversation about bullying. A strong sense of self-respect, combined with a basic respect for others, can help the child avoid and prevent bullying. With the help of teachers and parents, the child has to learn to take action against bullying when they feel hurt or see another child being bullied.

The challenges of bullying are being addressed by the Ministry for Education and Employment through their policy *Addressing Bullying Behaviour in Schools* published in 2014. This policy acknowledges that violence, harassment and bullying are human rights issues that profoundly affect the lives of children. It aims at developing child-friendly services; curtailing violence against and amongst children; ensuring that the rights of all children are being safeguarded; encouraging child participation and increasing student attainment.

Particular attention is given to bullying that occurs against vulnerable students. In this case, the Ministry for Education and Employment recognises that a greater understanding has been gained on how a significant proportion of bullying in schools is rooted due to lack of respect for diversity and in social inequalities, so called "identity-based bullying". Through the effective implementation of this policy, children strengthen their self-confidence and their self-esteem. They can develop to their full potential in safe and caring environments away from bullying and harassment.

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