



RESEARCH STUDY ON VIOLENCE, HARASSMENT AND BULLYING IN SCHOOLS

A QUALITATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research study was commissioned by the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) as part of the project “*Forms of Violence in Malta – a gender perspective*”. One of the specific activities of this project is a Study on Violence, Harassment and Bullying in Schools in Malta.

The main aim of this study is to analyse forms of gender violence in school. In a bid to realise this objective, the research takes an overall look at the current situations in schools in Malta. For this reason, the study yielded feedback about a vast range of topics, including:

- Methods of bullying
- Factors contribution to likelihood to bully and to be bullied
- The short term and long term impacts of violence, bullying and harassment
- The gender element
- Diversity in schools – with a specific focus on race, ethnicity, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation and differential ability
- National and school policies in relation to violence, bullying and harassment
- Practices currently adopted by schools – what is being done and what can be improved
- Restorative justice measures in dealing with violence, bullying and harassment
- The idea of a whole school approach

In order to allow for in depth information to be gathered, a qualitative methodology was adopted. The study selected 50 candidates and conducted in depth interviews. A further 70 candidates participated in focus groups. So as to ensure a realistic and objective view of the current situation in schools, the research participants included students, parents, teachers and other professionals working in schools, professionals and activists working outside schools, policy makers, and other stakeholders in the field.

The study yielded several recommendations aimed at improving the current situation in schools. In the development of the recommendations, the feedback of students, parents and professionals alike were duly considered. The following recommendations were drawn from the study:

- To emphasise the need and duty to foster fairness and respect amongst the school community.
- To use informal education methods in order to accustom children to diversity from a young age.
- More training on what bullying really is for teachers and students alike to enable a common understanding.
- A focus on highlighting positive aspects of diversity and on commonalities of diverse groups.
- Making cultural mediators available in schools.
- Education of students about the short and long term impact of bullying.
- Educating teachers and students alike about children’s rights and about respecting the rights of others.
- Using more creative methods to engage parents in school life.
- Using more creative methods to encourage and enable parents to attend parental skills courses.

- To develop legislation which would enable specialised professionals to implement particular interventions, programs or initiatives, even without parental consent, when the circumstances so require, so as to ensure the best interest of the child.
- For schools to take a more active role in dealing with instances of cyber bullying.
- For schools to take a more active role in dealing with instances of bullying on school. Transport.
- To consider streaming students according to likelihood to learn from different teaching techniques, rather than streaming according to ability to learn from classic classroom methods.
- Synergising the anti-bullying policy throughout Malta and Gozo, adopting an external monitoring mechanism to ensure compliance of schools, and imposing sanctions for schools who do not comply with the policy.
- Adopting measures to enable students to feel confident and safe to seek help when an instance of bullying occurs. Measures may include more peer focused solutions.
- Giving children more of a voice, and reflecting their voice in policy and practice.
- Adopting a more consultative, rather than informative, approach with parents.
- The move to co-educative education for public, independent and church schools.
- For schools to be more present online; to target both students and parents in this manner.
- For school sanctions in relation to bullying to be reflected by the wider community so as to ensure that this behaviour does not carry on into adulthood.
- For restorative justice measures to be adopted with extreme caution and meticulous training and supervision.
- To focus on identifying 'bullying behaviour' as negative, rather than identifying 'the bully' as negative.
- To improve the education of teachers. Both prior to becoming qualified as educators and during teaching years.
- Ensuring that educators reflect values of non-discrimination.
- Training of teachers to deal with challenging and dangerous situations, and the adoption of measures to protect students and teachers alike.
- Improving the training of LSAs and increasing incentive to reduce the transit-like nature the role seems to have developed.
- Utilising the professionals in schools to their maximum potential, potentially by increasing staff compliment in order to enable this.
- Increasing the number of youth workers in schools and making more use of informal learning methods.
- Training and enabling teachers to use a variety of teaching methods which are more appropriate to the students' nature, including by 'learning through doing' rather than merely by listening.

The study concludes by stating that ultimately, it is not a matter of deciding IF such initiatives should be implemented, but WHEN? In view of the fact that this study clearly shows that the negative consequences of violence, bullying and harassment in schools have negative far-reaching consequences and that moreover, such incidents impinge of the students' rights to reach their full potential by hampering their confidence and attainment, it essential that action is taken immediately in order to reduce harm and increase the positive outcomes of the education system in Malta and Gozo.



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1 INTRODUCTION

This study is aimed at analysing the subject from a gender perspective in a bid to identify how different forms of violence, harassment and bullying in schools affect girls and boys.

The research examines different forms of violence, harassment and bullying in schools from a gender perspective and seeks to identify any emerging trends, circumstances, types and causes of violence, harassment and bullying in schools. The study seeks to establish a more contemporaneous view of the patterns and processes of such forms of violence in schools in Malta and Gozo.

The current research also seeks to analyse the effects as well as the immediate and potential long-term consequences of violence, harassment and bullying in schools on boy and girl victims and perpetrators of such acts. Discussions with interviewees and focus group participants also aimed to identify the reactions of victims of violence, harassment and bullying in schools and highlight any efforts undertaken by the victims to seek help and/or to stop such violence and abuse. The emergent themes delve into the victims' response to violence, harassment and bullying in schools and look into any initiatives taken by the victims to seek help. The study also looks into the identification of barriers for victims seeking assistance in case of violence, harassment and bullying in schools. Consequently, the current research also seeks to identify and analyse the needs of victims of violence, harassment and bullying in schools and whether such needs are met.

Forms of discrimination other than gender were also highly emergent in the analysis of transcripts, and the study thus sought to examine whether students are at risk of going through different forms of violence, harassment and bullying in schools on other grounds alongside their gender. These grounds include race/ethnic origin, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion or belief, age, disability, amongst others. Consequently the current study also sought to analyse the reactions to violence, harassment and bullying in schools of boys and girls who go through such violence due to multiple grounds alongside gender, and whether they face additional barriers in seeking help.

The current research also seeks to examine any characteristics related to perpetrators, or any risk factors that may trigger perpetrators of violence, harassment and bullying in schools to commit such acts. In this manner, the study was able to question the potential immediate and long-term impact of violence, harassment and bullying in schools on perpetrators and not solely victims. Thus, here we can look into the effects and consequences of violence, harassment and bullying in schools on students who are victims, perpetrators or witnesses of these acts due to multiple grounds alongside gender.

Alongside the measures which are adopted in order to deal with situation of violence, bullying and harassment, the study also sought to analyse any initiatives that contribute to prevent violence, harassment and bullying in schools and the effectiveness of such measures. The research seeks to analyse current protocols, policies and existing structures that are in place to guide victims of violence, harassment and bullying in schools and/or educators on what can be done in such cases, and identify whether and how such victims and educators are aware of these structures and to what extent they are utilised. The study was thus able to examine how these structures contribute to preventing violence, harassment and bullying in schools; identifying different forms of violence in schools; protecting victims and potential victims of such violence, harassment and bullying in schools; as well as in stopping or curbing such violent acts and attitudes.

Barriers to referring to such structures were identified, and the discussion explores resistance to seeking assistance when going through violence, harassment and bullying in schools. Recommendations on how such barriers can be overcome have been identified.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

“All children have the right to be protected from violence, exploitation and abuse. Yet, millions of children worldwide from all socio-economic backgrounds, across all ages, religions and cultures suffer violence, exploitation and abuse every day. Millions more are at risk” (UNICEF, 2014).

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) aims to protect children and young people, and it lays down clearly the rights of children (defined by the United Nations as anyone between 0-18 years). The UNCRC, in article 28, clearly establishes “the right of the child to education, with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity...” Furthermore article 28 lists the obligations of States Parties and in paragraph (2) it states that: States parties shall take all the appropriate measures to ensure that school discipline is administered in a manner consistent with the child’s human dignity and in conformity with the present Convention.”

Although the Convention does not specifically mention bullying and harassment, this kind of behaviour does breach a number of articles in this Convention, which consists of 54 articles covering four broad areas – education, healthcare, legal, civil and social services.

The UNCRC in Article 19 clearly stipulates the obligations of States Parties in relation to violence against children:

“States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child”.

In its legal analysis of Article 19, the Committee of the Rights of the Child gives an overview on the forms of violence, and in its explanation it clearly outlines the gender component in violence against children:

The following non-exhaustive lists outlining forms of violence apply to all children in all settings and in transit between settings. Children can experience violence at the hands of adults, and violence may also occur among children. Furthermore, some children harm themselves. The Committee recognises that forms of violence often co-occur and that they can span the categories used here for convenience. Both girls and boys are at risk of all forms of violence, but violence often has a gender component. For example, girls may experience more sexual violence at home than boys whereas boys may be more likely to encounter – and experience violence within – the criminal justice system (Convention on the rights of the child, 2011).

2.1 DEFINITION OF VIOLENCE, BULLYING AND HARASSMENT

The World Health Organisation defines violence as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation” (WHO).

The Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence [the Istanbul Convention] “is based on the understanding that violence against women is a form of gender-based violence that is committed against women because they are women...The convention leaves no doubt: there can be no real equality between women and men if women experience gender-based violence on a large-scale and state agencies and institutions turn a blind eye.

Because it is not only women who suffer domestic violence, parties to the convention are encouraged to apply the protective framework it creates to men, children and the elderly who are exposed to violence within the family or domestic unit” (Council of Europe).

The Istanbul Convention has a number of provisions dealing explicitly with children and covers prevention, protection and support, and prosecution. When it comes to defining violence it defines violence against women and it is “understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (Council of Europe).

A commonly accepted definition for bullying is provided the book, *Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do (1993)* written by Dan Olweus, creator of the *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program*,

“A person is bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons, and he or she has difficulty defending himself or herself” (as cited in www.clemson.edu).

This definition includes three important components:

- 1 Bullying is aggressive behaviour that involves unwanted, negative actions.
- 2 Bullying involves a pattern of behaviour repeated over time.
- 3 Bullying involves an imbalance of power or strength.

As Wallis (2010) points out, because bullying is often carried out by young people on young people, incidents which are against the law (such as physical assault, theft, racist taunts) tend not to be reported as crimes. Given that bullying may include physical or sexual harm, damage to property, may make the victim feel intimidated or afraid, or disrupts his or her daily life in a threatening way, in most cases it could be defined as assault or harassment and if reported would be punishable by law but in reality, according to Wallis (2010), bullying is hardly ever reported to the police and if reported at all to school staff or work employers or unions it is usually dealt with internally (Victim Support Malta, 2014).

The Maltese Criminal Code does not define harassment, but Article 251A of Chapter 9 of the Laws of Malta (Criminal Code) does mention harassment, without strictly defining it. The said article reads as follows:

- 1 A person who pursues a course of conduct:
 - a which amounts to harassment of another person, and
 - b which he knows or ought to know amounts to harassment of such other person, shall be guilty of an offence under this article (p. 111).

The law, under the same Chapter, Article 251C, also provides that harassment also includes “alarming a person or causing them distress” (p. 113).

Additionally, our Criminal Code also provides, in Article 82, a prohibition to incite hatred against a person or group of persons, in connection with their gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, colour, language, ethnic origin, religion or belief or political or other opinion.

The Black’s Law Dictionary (2009) (as cited in Victim Support Malta, 2014) defines harassment as “Words, conduct or action (usually repeated or persistent) that being directed at a specific person, annoys, alarms or causes substantial emotional distress in that person and serves no legitimate purpose” (p. 784).

In Maltese law a definition of harassment is also found in The Equal Treatment of Persons Order (2007), which “means to subject the person to any unwelcome act, request or conduct, including spoken words, gestures or the production, display or circulation of written words, pictures or other material and to ‘harass a person’ shall be construed accordingly” (Subsidiary Legislation, 460.15, Article 2, p. 1). This law implements the provisions of the the Council Directive 2000/43/EC of 29 June 2000 implementing the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin.

Despite the fact that the Black’s Law Dictionary and Maltese law are defining the same word, namely “harassment”, one can clearly see that although there is an extent of similarity, the definitions also differ. For example, the former is detailed on how the victim feels “annoys, alarms...” Whilst the latter definition is more descriptive as to what the harasser’s conduct is by giving concrete examples such as “spoken words or gestures”.

As seen above, various sources have been quoted in order to define violence, bullying and harassment and hence there is not a one single instrument which clearly defines and establishes the full extent of such behaviour. As stated by the UN Secretary General in 2006 “in most countries children spend more time in the care of adults in education settings than anywhere else outside of their homes. Schools have an important role in protecting children from violence.” It is therefore important to use these definitions to set the parameters for action required to be taken in educational settings. As pointed out by the UN General Secretary in 2006 “Sexual and gender-based violence also occurs in educational settings. Much is directed against girls, by male teachers and classmates. Violence is also increasingly directed against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people in many States and regions.” This assertion further highlights the need to acknowledge the gender dimension of violence, bullying and harassment and to act accordingly, also in line with the requirements of the Istanbul Convention and other human rights instruments cited above.

2.2 THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

There are eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), namely internationally recognised targets, “which range from halving extreme poverty rates to halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education, all by the target date of 2015 – form a blueprint agreed to by all the world’s countries and all the world’s leading development institutions. They have galvanised unprecedented efforts to meet the needs of the world’s poorest” (www.un.org).

Two of the eight Millennium Development Goals centre around education, and these are the following:

- Goal 2 – Achieve universal primary education (United Nations, 2013)
Target - Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.
- Goal 3 – Promote gender equality and empower women (United Nations, 2013)
Target - Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education, no later than 2015.

In relation to Goal 2 – “Significant strides have been made, with the primary enrollment rate in developing regions currently at 90 percent. This is up from 82 percent in 1999, but it is not close enough to the goal of 100 percent. In addition, 123 million youth between the ages of 15 and 24 lack basic reading and writing skills. This lack of basic literacy skills is found in areas where children are attending primary school, which has brought to light another problem: Primary education is not always effective” (United Nations, 2013).

In relation to Goal 3 – “The world achieved gender parity at the level of primary education. However, according to current UN statistics, only two countries (of 130 with verified statistics) have gender equality at all levels of education: Azerbaijan and Switzerland. Most regions have shown an improvement in secondary and higher education, with the exception of Sub-Saharan Africa where the gap in enrollment has grown from 66 girls per 100 boys in 2000 to 61 girls per 100 boys enrolled in 2011” (United Nations, 2013).

With regards to other goals, according to a 2010 UN Development Group thematic paper, the fact that these lacked a gender focus is one of the main reasons why equality has not been achieved. (International Relations Blog, 2014).

It may therefore be concluded that the MDG’s have meant an improvement in the targets it set however the work does not stop at 2015 and on-going measures and targets and even improvements on the goals themselves are necessary to achieve what the MDG’s were set for.



2.3 THE WORLD REPORT ON VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

“The World Report on Violence against Children is the outcome of the first comprehensive global attempt to describe the scale of all forms of violence against children and its impact. Violence is a problem that calls for a multi-sectorial response. This report approaches the issue from the combined perspectives of human rights, public health and child protection.

This report asserts that no violence against children is justifiable and all forms of violence are preventable. The commitments made at international and national levels and the accumulated knowledge described in this report give us the necessary tools to protect children from violence, to prevent it from happening in the first place, and to mitigate the consequences (Pineiro, 2006).”

In the introduction of the preface of The World Report on Violence Against Children, Kofi Anan states the following “Violence against children cuts across boundaries of geography, race, class, religion and culture. It occurs in homes, schools and streets; in places of work and entertainment, and in care and detention centres. Perpetrators include parents, family members, teachers, caretakers, law enforcement authorities and other children. Some children are particularly vulnerable because of gender, race, ethnic origin, disability or social status. And no country is immune, whether rich or poor” (Pineiro, 2006).

This report covers various areas where children may experience violence and it also dedicates a whole chapter to Violence Against Children in School and Educational Settings and it covers the following:

- Human Rights Instruments
- Background and Context

Nature and extent of the problem

- Impacts of violence at school
- Factors contributing to violence
- Responses to violence against children in schools and educational settings
- Recommendations

Amongst the various topics covered in this Chapter, the report does discuss evidence that there are links between discrimination and gender-based violence, and states that “gender based violence stems from gender inequality, stereotypes, and social imposed rules” (Pineiro, 2006). It also covers bullying, particularly bullying that targets the child’s sex and sexuality as well as the extent of bullying.

The report also reproduces data from the Health Behaviour in School Aged Children: A WHO Cross-National Study 2001/12. From the data dealing with the percentage of children aged 11, 13 and 15 years who reported having been bullied within the past couple of months, Maltese data shows that 18% were females and 30% were males. Furthermore in relation to other countries Malta ranks towards the lowest. It ranks 10th if compared to the Sweden which is the country with the lowest percentage of reported bullying in this category (Pineiro, 2006).

Other data featured in this report shows the percentage of children aged 11, 13 and 15 years old who reported having been in a physical fight within the last 12 months. Malta statistics show that 24% were females and 59% were males (Pinheiro, 2006).

Although statistics are helpful especially when they are gender disaggregated, there is always an underlying concern as to whether the statistics clearly reflect what is actually going on in various countries. The other question which arises is whether like with like is being compared, in that different countries have different methods of monitoring as well as different levels of awareness. Thus it may be the case that low figures could indicate a low level of awareness and/or limited resources, or no recourse to justice.

2.4 THE EU ASPECT

“The promotion and protection of the rights of the child is one of the objectives of the EU on which the Treaty of Lisbon has put further emphasis. Notably, Article 3(3) of the Treaty on European Union today explicitly requires the EU to promote the protection of the rights of the child. The rights of the child are furthermore enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union¹. Article 24 of the Charter recognises that children are independent and autonomous holders of rights. It also makes the child’s best interests a primary consideration for public authorities and private institutions” (European Commission, 2011).

This Communication covers various areas, from making the rights of the child an integral part of the EU’s fundamental rights policy, to building the basis for evidence-based policy making to cooperation with stakeholders as well as other aspects. It also makes reference to a very important reality, that is modern technology - and it outlines how children can be vulnerable in relation to this technology. It recognises that online technologies bring unique opportunities as it provides access to knowledge as well as benefitting from digital learning as well as participating in the public debate. It also refers to the Eurobarometer Qualitative study on the Rights of the Child, October 2010 and states that “Children are particularly vulnerable when they are confronted with harmful content and conduct, such as **cyber-bullying**, in audio-visual media and on the Internet. Children across Europe testify that physical and emotional **bullying in schools** is part of their everyday lives (European Commission, 2011).

A Directive which aims to protect children who are victims of a crime is the Victims Right Directive 2012/29EU. This Directive establishes minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime and replaces Council Framework Decision 2001/220/JHA. As stated in the preamble “In applying this Directive, children’s best interests must be a primary consideration, in accordance with the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted on 20 November 1989. Child victims should be considered and treated as the full bearers of rights set out in this Directive and should be entitled to exercise those rights in a manner that takes into account their capacity to form their own views” (European Parliament, 2012).

Besides legislative action, the Commission has also funded hundreds of projects aimed at supporting victims of crime. These include projects to combat violence against children, young people and women [some include Daphne, REC, Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme 2014-2020] (European Commission, 2015). The Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme replaced three earlier funding programmes which expired in 2013:

- Fundamental Rights and Citizenship Programme
- Daphne III Programme
- Progress Programme: Anti-discrimination and Gender Equality strands.

Its nine specific objectives are to (European Commission, 2015):

- Promote non-discrimination
- Combat racism, xenophobia, homophobia and other forms of intolerance
- Promote rights of persons with disabilities
- Promote equality between women and men and gender mainstreaming
- Prevent violence against children, young people, women and other groups at risk (Daphne)
- Promote the rights of the child
- Ensure the highest level of data protection
- Promote the rights deriving from Union citizenship
- Enforce consumer rights

The aim of this programme is to contribute to the further development of an area where equality and the rights of persons, as enshrined in the Treaty, the Charter and international human rights conventions, are promoted and protected.

The Fundamental Rights Agency published a report entitled: Women Against Violence. This report is based on interviews with 42,000 women across the 28 Member States of the European Union (EU). It shows that violence against women, and specifically gender-based violence that disproportionately affects women, is an extensive human rights abuse that the EU cannot afford to overlook.

The survey collected a variety of detail from all respondents concerning topics that could be used to analyse, at a general level, whether or not certain groups in society are at higher risk of experiencing violence. Issues examined in this analysis include (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014):

- age
- education
- household composition
- income
- type of area where women live (urban/rural)
- employment status
- occupation

For the purpose of this literature review the part of the report which is focused upon is education. The main results highlighted in the report with regard to education states the following:

“The survey asked women about the highest level of education which they have completed. Among women with only primary education, 23% have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by any partner since the age of 15, compared with 21% of women with secondary education and 20% of women with tertiary education. Therefore, differences in partner violence in terms of women’s education are not significant. However, women with higher levels of education experience higher levels of violence by non-partners: 19% of women with primary education have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a non-partner since the age of 15, whereas 22% of women with secondary education and 27% of women with tertiary education indicate that they have experienced this type of violence by a non-partner since the age of 15” (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014).

2.5 PROMISING PRACTICES

The World Health Organisation has a number of programmes, reports and fact sheets dealing with a range of topics; one of these is a Toolkit on mapping legal, health and social services responses to child maltreatment. This toolkit has been published by WHO, Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, and the University of New Hampshire. “This toolkit provides academics and decision-makers with strategies for conducting national or regional studies of the incidence of and agency response to child maltreatment. These studies are developed based on the collection of administrative data or through surveys of professionals” (WHO, n.d.).

As stated on the WHO website, “Such research is important to policy-makers who need information about which agencies have knowledge of the problem of child maltreatment, and their response when they encounter it. Based on this information, they can plan how to improve practices, enhance systems and strengthen professional capacity” (WHO, n.d.).

One of Unicef’s good practices is the The Unicef UK Rights Respecting Schools Award (RRSA). This award “supports schools across the UK to embed children’s rights in their ethos and culture. The award recognises achievement in putting the UN Convention on the Right of the Child (UNCRC) at the heart of a school’s policy and practice. It is based on principles of equality, dignity, respect, non-discrimination and participation” (UNICEF, 2015). The World Report on Violence against Children (Pinheiro, 2006) refers to a number of positive and best practices and for the purposes of this literature review two have been selected. These two practices have been selected on the basis that they are emanating from other relatively ‘new’ EU member states.

Cyprus – In Cyprus, the Ministry of Education requires all schools to establish committees to address needs for “prevention and confrontation of violence in the family and school environment”. These committees are empowered to receive and investigate complaints of violence before passing them on to the appropriate authorities (Pinheiro, 2006 p. 141).

Croatia – In Croatia, a campaign for “Safe and Enabling Schools” was launched and it achieved early results. “More than 4,500 teachers, twice the number targeted, had received training in nonviolent methods of teaching, discipline and intervention in violence among children. The campaign had covered 121 schools including more than 60,000 children, 20% more than targeted, and this had been achieved with 15% less than the projected budget. More than 92% of Croatian citizens had become aware of the campaign, while more than 80% of funding was now coming from individual donors and corporations within Croatia. Most importantly, there had been significant decreases in some forms of violence and increased awareness of others. For example, children and teachers were better able to recognise all forms of bullying and better prepared to stop it. More than 80% of students knew the rules against school violence, and knew of an adult they could turn to for help” (Pinheiro, 2006 p.144).

The Scandinavian countries “demonstrate the greatest equality between men and women” (Flip chart fairy tales, 2010) - hence it is pertinent to gain further insight from Sweden. As mentioned in the World Report on Violence against Children, “Sweden was the first State to prohibit all corporal punishment. In 1957, a provision was removed from the Criminal Code which excused parents who caused minor injuries in the course of ‘discipline’. In 1979, Sweden explicitly prohibited corporal punishment in its Parenthood and Guardianship Code: “Children ... may not be subjected to corporal punishment or any other humiliating treatment.”

Sweden’s experience shows that when progressive law reform is linked to comprehensive public education, substantial changes in attitude and reductions in violence against children can be achieved within decades. In 2000, a parliamentary committee enquired into the experiences of parents and children with corporal punishment since the ban. The data indicate that its use has decreased dramatically, particularly in relation to beating children with fists or with an implement, or ‘spanking’ them. In national parental studies in 1980, 51% of parents said that they had used corporal punishment during the previous year; 20 years later, in 2000, this figure had decreased to 8%” (Pinheiro, 2006 p.76).

In Malta we find The “Safe Schools Programme”. This is “a service offered by the Student Services Department and comprises three units: the Child Safety Services (CSS), which deals with cases and issues of Child Abuse; the Anti-Bullying Unit (ABU); and the Anti-Substance Abuse Unit. Each unit gives service through intervention, prevention and training. The Anti-Bullying Unit provides advice, understanding and support in developing whole-school responses to bullying and promotion of pro-social behaviour, and strives to co-ordinate the efforts of a school level anti-bullying programme. It also provides support to individuals (staff, students, parents) in order to increase their confidence and competence in dealing with incidences of bullying behaviour and acts as a resource centre” (Pinheiro, 2006 p.76).

Another practice worth mentioning is the EU Kids Online. This is a multinational research network. The aim of this platform is to develop knowledge of online opportunities as well as risks and safety for European children (Pinheiro, 2006 p.76). This network uses multiple methods to map children's and parents' experience of the internet, in dialogue with national and European policy stakeholders. It has been funded by the EC's Better Internet for Kids programme. The participating countries are the following: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, UK.

2.6 THE LOCAL SCENARIO

The National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) is an independent, government funded body set up by virtue of Chapter 456 the Laws of Malta in January 2004.

The NCPE develops and works on different projects to achieve its aims, and one of the projects which tackles the topic under review is the project **Facilitating Equality through Education** which "aims to correct the gender roles and stereotypes that form part of the formal education process, and that leads primary and secondary school students to aspire for work and private life roles influenced by their gender rather than their interests and capabilities. To achieve this objective policymakers, teachers and students alike, need to be sensitised to the need of greater gender equality, as well as the responsibility of men and fathers in carrying out a number of tasks that are still believed to be women's / mothers' responsibility. Men need to equally share the burden of family responsibilities" (NCPE, 2006). The current government is committed to further prevent or curb violence against women as stated by Minister Dalli (NCPE, 2006). An example of how the government is showing its commitment is the signing and ratification of the Istanbul Convention.

Other local initiatives tackling the topic under review are the following:

- During the Budget Speech 2015 (November 2014), the Government announced its plans for the NCPE to develop into a **Human Rights and Equality body** (Ministry for Finance, 2014)
- A new offence introduced in the Criminal Code (Chapter 9 of the Laws of Malta - *Causing others to fear that violence will be used against them*, Criminal Code, Art.251B.
- Further amendments to the Criminal Code passed in 2014 increase the punishment applicable to persons found guilty of harassment.
- Respect for All Framework which was introduced in October 2014 and as stated by Minister Evarist Bartolo in the foreward

“This framework places responsibility on each member of the school community to internalise these positive human values and to act as role models for the school community. The importance of the school community is becoming increasingly clear. By school community I am referring to all individuals and groups who contribute to the school and its success. Through this Framework, I would like to emphasise the importance that stakeholders should feel part of the school, rather than just in it. Each stakeholder, including the student, has duties that need to be carried out and rights to be respected” (Ministry for Education, 2015).

According to the Framework the whole school community is to adopt a number of values as the core of the school ethos and environment. The values listed are the following: Respect; Co-operation; Responsibility; Unity; Tolerance; Honesty; Peace; Love; Happiness; Freedom; Humility; Simplicity; Courage; Patience; Quality; Friendship; Social Justice; Equity; Diversity; Inclusivity.

Addressing Bullying Behaviour in Schools Policy– “Violence, harassment and bullying are human rights issues that profoundly affect the lives of children (United Nations 1989). Governments, schools and individuals all have a role in safeguarding these rights. Since bullying implies a lack of respect towards other people, it therefore brings about the violation of the following rights amongst others:

- The right to a safe and supportive educational environment free from violence and aggression both on an emotional and physical level.
- The right to be safeguarded from physical injuries and emotional distress, taking into account a person’s self-worth, dignity and wellbeing.
- The right to healthy mental, physical, spiritual, moral, sexual and social development.
- The right to be treated equally, free from discriminatory comments, labelling and stereotyping.
- The right to adequate access to recreation and play.
- The right to freedom of expression and involvement
- The right to privacy (Ministry of Education, 2015).

The policy also lists the National Objectives which give a clear picture of what the Ministry and Government aim to achieve:

- Developing child-friendly services.
- Curtail violence against and amongst children.
- Ensure that the rights of all children are being safe-guarded.
- Encourage child participation.
- Increase student attainment.

Additionally, the non-governmental organisation Victim Support Malta, recently published a research study entitled 'Not Just Offenders: Youth as victims of crime'. This document contains, inter alia, information about a number of crimes which youths are particularly susceptible to, including Harassment, Cyber Bullying, Domestic Violence and Dating Violence. In its concluding observations, the report provides that, inter alia, it is imperative to break the victim-offender cycle, in view of the fact that studies cited show 'that 70%-90% of juvenile offenders would have been exposed to prior traumatic events, either as victims or as witnesses.' In this context, the provision of effective support services for victims of crime, particularly children and youth, becomes imperative. This report also calls for effective multi-agency cooperation to 'ensure best use of possible resources' and facilitate early identification and intervention; mainstreaming of youth victim support services in various policy areas; and enabling disclosure of a victimisation experience possibly through the introduction of third party reporting procedures. In relation to this last recommendation, this report quotes the Victims' Directive, which provides that 'Practitioners who are likely to receive complaints from victims with regard to criminal offences should be appropriately trained to facilitate reporting of crimes, and measures should be put in place to enable third-party reporting, including by civil society organisations. It should be possible to make use of communication technology, such as e-mail, video recordings or online electronic forms for making complaints' (p. 64 as cited in Victim Support Malta, 2014).

The use of technology has shown itself to be an effective tool in supporting youth victims, as shown through the success of the Kellimni.com project – a partnership amongst SOS Malta, the Salesians of Don Bosco, and Agenzija Appogg. The service entails the provision of information and support to young people, in an anonymous manner. Youths seeking support from kellimni.com do so in relation to a wide spectrum of problems, including bullying, violence and harassment.

A survey which was led by Malta Girl Guides in collaboration with NCW and Agenzija Zghazagh shows that "Young people seem to be fully aware that they are vulnerable to violent relationships as more than 90% of them confirmed their exposure to such behaviour. They are conscious of the signs of violence such bruises and other psychological consequences. Whilst females view sexual abuse as more serious than males, the latter stated that physical abuse is more serious. However in the overall rating more than, 55% was rated sexual abuse as being the worst form of abuse, followed by physical (44%) and verbal abuse (40%)".¹

1 The perception of young people on violent behaviour by Jesmond Friggieri (Malta Girl Guides in collaboration with NCW and Agenzija Zghazagh – page 4)

The local media has also covered the topic under review and hereunder is a list of media coverage:

- Going against the current: bullying in schools (2014) in maltatoday.com.mt. This article also tackles online bullying which “is arguably one of the greatest contemporary challenges to parents and educators, by dint of the fact that it’s not only difficult to adequately monitor, but also because, unlike bullying in the ‘analog’ world, it can keep going on long after school hours” (Reljic, 2014).
- Teachers’ role to help combat signs around children raised in same-sex families highlighted (2014) in timesofmalta.com. Professor Abela states that “Teachers have a very important role to play in helping combat the stigma that still exists around children raised in same-sex families” (Calleja, 2014).
- Peer pressure one reason behind growth in self-harm (2014) in timesofmalta.com. In this article a psychologist “has seen self-harm cases increase from one to 12 every six months is urging society to take the issue seriously (Carabott, 2014).
- Educators now obliged to report potential bullying cases, new policy document states in independent.com.mt. As stated by Minister Evarist Bartolo “It is important for students to have rights but it is also vital that one exercises his or her rights by showing respect towards others, in this case other pupils,” (Bonnici, 2014) The new policy document also got coverage in the Times of Malta (Barry, 2014).

2.7 CONCLUSION

As discussed in this literature review it is clear that violence, bullying and harassment in schools are on the global as well as the local agenda. International organisations such as the United Nations, the World Health Organisation and the European Union have been working and are still working to provide more awareness as well as more protection for children in educational establishments as well as outside such establishments.

Both globally and nationally, it is important to have uniform definitions as well as well-defined parameters. Furthermore it is also important to share and learn from each other by sharing resources and also looking at best practices and implementing such. It is becoming clear that a multi-agency approach is required; this notwithstanding, the case for specialised youth victim support services is also strong. Nationally, it is important to have further pilot projects testing promising practices adopted in other countries, or building upon already existing success stories, in order to reach out to more victims. Further investment, both in relation to prevention and in victim support services is therefore required.



3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 RATIONALE FOR RESEARCH TOOLS

The aim of the current research is to gather in depth information as to the current situation of bullying, violence and harassment in schools in Malta and Gozo. For this reason, it was determined that a qualitative methodology would be most suitable.

Information was gathered using structured in-depth interviews that were open ended by means of an interview guide (Annex I), and semi-structured focus groups through the use of a guide to prompt discussion (Annex II). The use of more than one research tool ensured that relevant information was gathered in a manner which allowed for themes to emerge according to the perceptions of the participants.

3.2 SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

The research consulted with 120 participants of whom 50 were interviewed whilst 70 participants were recruited into focus groups. So as to ensure that the study was representative of the entire population concerned with schools, the participants consisted of students, parents, teachers, other professionals working within schools, professionals working with youth outside of schools, and other stakeholders in the field of education and social welfare. The study conducted a total of 10 focus groups. The focus groups were peer streamed so that professionals working in schools were grouped together, as were parents and students. This allowed participants to speak freely.

The rationale for selecting the participants that took part in the study is primarily purposeful yet random sampling. The individuals that participated amount to a large portion of those that showed their availability to participate in the focus groups after having received the call. A large number of people initially offered to participate yet these numbers didn't fully materialise for a number of reasons. Hence a purposeful group as the call was disseminated publicly and through selected channels was targeted, yet opt in and participation was random as it was based on the willingness of participants.

It is important to note that numerous stakeholders were contacted to disseminate the call for participants in the focus groups inter alia Malta Union of Teachers, various departments within the remit of the Ministry for Education and Employment, Agenzija Zaghzagh, Scouts and Girl Guides, NGOs, local formal and informal youth groups and aggregation centres for youths, youth associations, University Student Associations including KSU, the Archdioceses and the Malta association for parents of children in state schools (MAPSS). The call was issued for parents, teachers and youth, and numerous participants responded.. Participants also spread the word and brought in colleagues and friends. It should be said that the willingness of people to participate in a number of cases arose from the interest in the subject matter due to personal experience, more often than not directly with either bullying, violence or harassment. All those that supported in spreading the word also feel strongly about the matter and generally are involved as active citizens at one level or another. A number of participants in all groups were also simply happy to lend a hand. It must be said that schools were contacted to nominate participants, this was successful only in two schools.

3.2.1 STUDENTS

Students, or in certain cases, their parents, responded to our social media postings, or the call disseminated to the aforementioned channels inviting participation to the study. This in itself indicates their interest in the subject matter. Participants were not asked whether they had experienced violence, bullying or harassment, but some volunteered this information themselves. The participants selected are a mix of State, Church and Independent school students coming from single-sex or co-ed schools. The students were a mix of Maltese or foreign nationals, and come from a number of geographical areas in Malta. All students were in line with the requirements of the terms of reference for participation.

3.2.2 PARENTS

All parents responded to our social media posts or the dissemination to the above channels, inviting participation to the study. This in itself indicates their interest in the subject matter. Participants were not asked whether their children had directly experienced violence, bullying or harassment, but some volunteered this information themselves. The participants selected are a mix of State, Church and Independent school students; coming from single-sex or are co-ed schools, some are Maltese while others are foreign, and come from a number of geographical areas in Malta. All parents participating in this study are in line with the requirements of the terms of reference. It may be interesting to note that some parents shared information on their own experience of bullying, and some also offered their own and their children's participation.

3.2.3 TEACHERS

Educators responded to our social media posts inviting participation to the study, whilst others responded to the mailshot sent out by the Research Directorate within the Ministry for Education and Employment. Some educators also participated as a result of the MUT newsletter, contact through the Ministry for the involvement of the Anti-bullying unit, and in certain cases as responses to the dissemination through other channels (as listed above). This in itself indicates their interest in the subject matter. The participants selected come from a mix of State, Church and Independent schools; coming from single-sex or co-ed schools, in line with the requirements of the terms of reference for participation. Some of these participants are professionals who visit a number of schools, rather than being stationed in one single school – these participants provided an overall view of the situation rather than focusing on the situation in a single specific school, thus enhanced the study due to gaining different perspectives.

3.3 ANALYSIS OF DATA

The transcripts of the interviews and the reports emanating from the focus groups were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis** (IPA) is an approach to psychological qualitative research with an idiographic focus. Data collection does not set out to test hypotheses, and this stance is maintained in data analysis. The aim is to explore, flexibly and in detail, an area of concern. This allows for the analyst to reflect upon his or her own preconceptions about the data, and attempt to suspend these in order to focus on grasping the experiential world of the research participant. Transcripts were coded in considerable detail, with the focus shifting back and forth from the key claims of the participant, to the researcher's interpretation of the meaning of those claims.

Analysis in IPA is said to be 'bottom-up.' This means that the researcher generates codes from the data, rather than using a pre-existing theory to identify codes that might be applied to the data. IPA studies do not test theories, but they are often relevant to the development of existing theories.

After transcribing the data, the researcher worked closely and intensively with the text, annotating it closely ('coding') for insights into the participants' experience and perspective. As the analysis developed, the researcher catalogued the emerging codes, and subsequently begins to look for themes in the codes.

The data was then subjected to a second level of coding in which the text of the analysis was reformulated in more theoretical words. Upon a third level of coding, the researcher then proceeded by looking for coherence, differences, hierarchical structures and other issues relevant to the terms of reference.

The following chapter will deal with the findings, review and analysis of the study.

4 FINDINGS, REVIEW AND ANALYSIS

Following the analysis of results emerging from focus groups and interviews, which were conducted amongst students, parents, teachers, professionals involved in the school environment and stakeholders in the field, a number of themes emerged in relation to the topics of violence, bullying and harassment in schools. This chapter will deal with the discussion of emerging themes.

It was noted that the definitions of violence, bullying and harassment are often intertwined from the perspective of the study's participants. For the purpose of this study, the term 'bullying' will be taken in a wider perspective to encompass violence, bullying and harassment.

4.1 HOW AND WHERE DOES BULLYING OCCUR?

The results clearly indicate that bullying is happening in schools. This data was gathered from teachers and students alike. Many respondents offered reflections into their personal experience of bullying. The feedback seems to indicate that exclusion, verbal, emotional, and psychological violence have all become a growing concern, with one participant expressing that "No one has to punch you to make you feel very low". One concern expressed on this matter is the possibility of limited proof in cases of emotional and psychological violence, "I think it's mostly words because there aren't too many physical attacks that leave evidence. It's a lot of words, and words are what hurt and there isn't any proof".

The context of verbal, emotional and psychological violence seems to also be spreading online. A substantial amount of participants indicated that the most common form of bullying which they encounter is happening online. This is introducing a new phenomenon to the subject of bullying. A professional with significant experience in the field expressed that "I believe that certain comments, people would not have the guts to say it to someone face-to-face. It's easier and the ease of it all is making it more accepted. Another thing is also, you don't need to have a certain kind of build to bully someone. Anyone can be bully, there's no profile of a bully at all." Another professional explained that "What is different online is that the power imbalance is skewed, you can get the skinny scrawny guy picking on the big 100kg boy. A good example of this is picking on teachers, this wouldn't be done in my days, but the power imbalance allows for it."

Another factor which comes into play here is the lack of perception which the bully may have with reference to the impact on the victim. One professional explained that "People have this idea that behind the screen they can behave how they want and they don't realise that there are always consequences. It is a type of violence as is psychological violence... there have been cases documented abroad of youngsters driven to suicide because of cyber bullying."

A law enforcement official advised that in most instances, the victim is insulted and threatened online. This may occur through a medium in which the perpetrator is identifiable, but it may also occur through certain websites in which participants are allowed to comment on the victim's profile anonymously. In the latter case, a particular website www.ask.fm was identified. The target here is to insult and humiliate the victim. In one example, a participant explained how much more cruel people may be when they are not identifiable, "we had a case where a child's father passed away from brain cancer and that same day on ask.fm there were people saying 'I hope the same happens to you'."

Another tactic which is used in the cyber world is to hack into the victim's social media profile and humiliate them in some form or manner. Student's profiles have been hacked into and their passwords have been changed in order to "lock them out of their own account. Just to make your life difficult." One student also recounted an incident where a false profile was created to humiliate a fellow student. In this incident, a profile of a girl was created and this profile was used to make contact with the student and to ask him out on a date, the student turned up and he was left alone. He was then bullied at school in relation to this incident.

Social networking sites and applications are also used to purposely exclude targeted children. A professional working in a school explained that "We also get purposeful exclusion, it could be just from a group. The couple of cases I know about though, it wouldn't be just that. There would be exclusion and other forms of bullying online as well. We can go through an endless list of the types of bullying, editing pictures and putting them online, facebook pages dedicated to teasing people..."

The impact of such bullying can be clearly seen from feedback gathered from students. One student participant expressed that "internet has given a place to do it. Before it was personal now you can send anonymous hate in someone else's name. It's worse, they think that effectively everyone hates them... that insecurity that feeling you never belong or that you're worthless". A professional also expressed concern that there may be a link to an increase in self harming behaviour due to online bullying, explaining that, "We don't have statistics on how many suicides there have been in Malta, as unfortunately they are not published but then again there is time to issue more awareness on cyber bullying; physical bullying is very wrong, but can be acted; teachers see it and persons can act. Here the child is alone and it is difficult to identify. If they speak out, sometimes it's too late. For example we are getting more frequent episodes of self-harm, more in boys' schools, then again there are no official statistics about this. We do get reports of students doing self-inflicted pain. It's a worrying situation and I think it's about time to raise the awareness level for parents".

Many participants felt that this was a problem which needs to be urgently tackled by schools, one participant explained that "Cyberbullying is not without a context. It would have started in school and it continues online". The cyber world may not be the only environment allowing for bullying to occur outside of schools. A number of participants, particularly students and parents, expressed concern about the behaviour which occurs on the school bus.

One parent explained that “Basically, a lot of stuff happens on the bus... He had a lighter put almost on his cheek, he came back devastated”. Another parent explained that “Even on my son’s bus we had incidents ... children, they have pornography on their iPhones or whatever they’ve got, their gadget and they share it with the young ones. And that’s a huge problem. If you’re talking about violence, that’s where I think we’re beyond”.

The highlighted concern here seems to be that no one is responsible for dealing with bullying when it occurs outside the school. A number of professionals working in schools explained that when bullying occurs outside the school, becoming involved is at the discretion of the individual head of school. Whilst some schools have an administration who chooses to get involved of their own initiative, there seems to be nothing obliging schools to do so. A concern to be highlighted is that if no one is tackling this situation, parents and students may choose inappropriate means to deal with it in the course of frustration. A parent recounted an incident in which “...a parent who had his daughter on the bus who had encountered violence...The parent went on the bus and threatened all the children, he terrified the bus driver and all the bus. It shouldn’t be done like that”.

4.2 WHY DOES BULLYING OCCUR?

The findings have indicated that bullying related to the characteristics of the person does occur and needs to be tackled. Many participants indicated that bullying occurs because of a need that the bully is attempting to express, with one participant explaining that “Some of them want to leave their mark because they want to stand out and in order to do that they find the weakest persons from the group and they bully them.”

In this situation, students who are diverse from the majority of the group of students may be more likely to fall victim to bullying. A parent, who is also a member of a human rights NGO explained that “There is peer pressure, the need to try and conform, to be like everyone else...If you seem different, you’re more likely to be bullied and harassed.”

“With the older group the experience of bullying was very much related to difference. So whenever there was someone who was considered as different, ex learning disabilities, social background, they experienced bullying.” Another participant explained “from past experience I feel that there can be bullying because of colour or race or ethnicity or perhaps gender, but I think the most prevalent is low self-esteem, or else a student who is not the top of the class”.

A professional working in the field of migration explained that asylum seekers find it very difficult to integrate in schools, “They do face discrimination, bullying, harassment and even violence in schools. With our client group we get a lot of racial discrimination. Many migrant children are bullied on this ground, because of the colour of their skin, because of their religion, because they are seen as ‘illegal’ because they came by boat, because they came from an open centre. They might stand out because they don’t have the right uniform, packed lunch, the right school supplies... This isn’t only the students, we get comments from teachers as well.” Another professional in the same field explained that asylum seekers tend to experience racism and Islamophobia.

Student participants indicated that facets of diversity are not an issue for many students, however when there is conflict between students it is sometimes used as ammunition to attack others. One student explained that “they’ll be fine with the person until they’re friends and when they don’t become friends then they start passing racist remarks”. A parent of a secondary school stated “sometimes he (my son) says that there’s this particular child who calls him ‘chocolate’ or ‘black chocolate’”.

Students also clearly stated that bullying constitutes an element of power, and that it is used as a tool for status. One student stated “I think in my school the common thing would be that people who have so much pride in their ability for something pull other people down with it”, and another student claiming, “the popular, all the proud people are at the top”. Another student explained that she has also seen girls bully in order to impress boys; again reinforcing the notion that bullying is a tool used to gain power and superiority over others.

Similarly, a number of participants also indicated jealousy as a major cause for bullying. A professional in the field explained that “This very often starts from jealousy between girls, and they start a hate group and convince others to hate them too. People love to hate pretty girls.” A parent of a post-secondary student recounted, “I ask my daughter, ‘Why do you think they started picking on you?’ She never had real friends so she was always changing groups. Why was it this year that all this attack started? She said ‘I tell you when ma, when I got the first photo with 1000 likes.’ There they saw her as a threat, she’s no longer... the unnoticed, no, ‘ah boys like her’. Yes I blame this blessed technology.”

Whilst a correlation has been noted between low self-esteem and susceptibility to victimisation, it is likely that self-esteem is relevant to other aspects of bullying. Can low self-esteem make someone more likely to engage in bullying behaviour? According to participants in this study the answer is a clear ‘yes’. One student reflected “I think the reason the guy started to bully me was because he was going to senior school. He had too much fear. The only way to get rid of it was to offload it onto somebody else. I was probably the weakest in my group and I think he was a year or two older than me so he wanted to bully someone that wouldn’t be able to hit him.” An adult participant forming part of an LGBTIQ group once engaged in bullying behaviour as a child, and recounted “I remember a particular boy that I spent some time bullying because he was a bit effeminate. Today I think that it was all internalised homophobia from my end. It’s something that I’m very sorry about...”.

This concept indicates that we need to be extremely careful when working with persons engaging in violence, bullying and harassment. “Bullying is very problematic because generally a bully is an abuser, but that same bully is in effect is also a victim. So the emphasis should always be on the act you are against ... not against the person, as the person themselves is a victim of someone else or some other circumstances.” A professional working in the field of domestic violence explained that “When we visit shelters due to research or collaboration, there have been examples or situations where children of victims of domestic violence might be experiencing bullying or might be bullies themselves.”

It is essential for this to be tackled in a timely and effective manner so as to halt the continuation of the victim-perpetrator cycle (Victim Support Malta, 2014). A professional provided a clear example of this, stating that “very often the victims are bullies in order to stop being the victim. Especially boys will tell you outright, I stopped being harassed once I started being a bully. Don’t tell me to be good if this is the only way to protect myself.”

4.3 THE GENDER ELEMENT

Few participants indicated that gender roles were a motivation or target for bullying, violence and harassment. However, a staggering number of participants stated that boys and girls engage in bullying behaviour in a different manner:

“We’ve 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.”

“I have a girls secondary school and it’s 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.”

“I would say that boys would be more likely to engage in physical bullying from what I hear, verbal, isolation and online are more girls’ things.”

“From what the children tell us it often has to do with their appearance, especially weight when related to girls. As for boys, they mostly argue rather than bully each other. Most of the bullying that we had was with regards to the female gender.”

It was also noted that the form bullying takes may vary depending on the gender composition of the setting in which it occurs. One participant coming from a post-secondary education setting explained that “you might find different forms in different institutes. Let’s take, for example, engineering, which is male dominated. Bullying there might be different from institutes where there is a gender mixture.”

Surprisingly, few of the participants who highlighted this questioned the difference in behaviour which is exhibited by girls and boys in the context of bullying; and participants who mentioned this worked in the field of gender-based violence. One participant expressed, “I think bullying itself is gendered. I think boys and girls bully in different ways and they are dealt with in different ways. The teacher’s idea of what is bad is different for boys and girls... boys are allowed to get physically rough, and when girls do the same thing it is viewed in a very different light. I think that the type of bullying will take the form of what is accepted of them. I think girls will not bully physically because of this perception. Boys are rewarded for masculine and aggressive behaviour and girls are rewarded for being more docile. I think the forms of bullying often take on the form of what is rewarded.”

It seems quite likely that, similarly to the primary socialisation setting within the family, schools as the secondary socialisation setting may be perpetuating gender stereotypes. “... this is so strong that notwithstanding if you had been brought up in it, there will be some of it you absorb, not because somebody told you as a woman you have to sew and arrange flowers, however you absorb it much like a sponge in water, we absorb it by virtue of being brought up”.

This indicates the necessity of adequate training and exposure of persons working inside the school setting in order to ensure that gender stereotypes aren't preventing the full development of potential of students in schools. Another concern here is the link between gender stereotyping and gender based violence, more specifically relationship and domestic violence. One participant expressed "If 1 in 3 or 4 women experiences domestic violence then we are failing spectacularly. It's a lifetime prevalence...at least once in their life but it tends to be repeated... I think gender expectations are still very stereotypical and some of them come from home and some from the expectation of educators and how students are socialised in schools."

Concern about the gender binary still being reflected in school was also noted. "...we generally only look at male / female so it is not a comprehensive outlook towards gender – nobody is addressing this with regards to trans students – in fact we had to develop a specific policy which was just published." Although policy has been developed which tackles topics of gender in a much broader sense, it seems that persons working in schools and stakeholders in the field may still not be fully sensitised to the complexity and diversity of gender.

The existence of single gendered schools may have serious negative implications for persons who do not identify with their biological sex, and even in mixed schools, some gendered practices may be allowing for the further isolation of persons struggling with gender identity. "A lot of schools are still very much divided by gender, even in mixed schools. You have a row for boys and a row for girls. Even the bathrooms and the sports activities. In one particular private school, boys do football and girls do ballet. I carried out a study on the experiences of LGBTIQ persons in schools and it resulted that there was much more bullying in single sex schools than in mixed schools, because they have less areas to express their diversity. Children find peer groups more easily in mixed schools. Gender stereotypes tend to be perpetuated more in single sex schools than in mixed schools".

4.4 WORKING WITH DIVERSITY IN SCHOOLS

A number of participants; students, teachers, parents and stakeholders alike, indicated the need to work more towards diversity in schools. One participant expressed the belief that "all kinds of diversity are problematic as students do not feel comfortable with differences – you do find students who get on well, but generally I think it would be problematic and there should be more respect towards diversity as a whole". Another explained that "Sometimes the system bullies you as well, because if you don't fit into a box, you're out. If you don't perform in a certain way, you are considered a failure".

The majority of participants flagged issues of discrimination for reasons of religion or culture, and indicated the importance of more awareness on these topics. "At the moment we have people coming from the eastern countries with different mentalities, different upbringing. We have people coming with different religion, different culture...It's like all the food in one pan. The kids are mixed all together. Those kids that in the past used to tease those that didn't come from their village, now shift this on the outsider. The outsiders are not the Maltese nowadays."

Another participant stating “people coming from different cultures, especially people who look different – for example wearing a hijab, being black, and so on. I know someone who is constantly going in and out of Mount Carmel, a big reason of this is because he has always been ‘a black’. Bullying creates a domino effect. I think we’re going to have a new phenomenon of bullying within the context of culture, ethnicity and religion – especially with the Muslim religion.”

Over here it is essential that due consideration is given to the fact that many persons of different race and religion in Malta went through the asylum process. One participant highlighted “From what we’re experiencing, my impression is that... because of the migrant situation, a lot of children have become more aware of non-white children and there is a negative connotation towards that particular person. I know children of friends or family who were bullied because of their skin colour. And they could be Maltese. I know someone who had to move from Malta because of this situation.”

As noted above, perceptions on asylum seekers in Malta tend to blur the lines between nationality, race, religion, and even means of entry to the country. One quote which reflecting this came from a secondary student attempting to explain that discrimination on the grounds of religion is not an issue in her school. She explained “religious belief not really, because we have Arabic, Muslim, Orthodox...” Here it is clear that the student is mixing together ethnic characteristics (Arab) and religious ones (Muslim, Orthodox). Students might feel irritated because of assumptions. One parent explained that her “... because he is not Maltese, he is mistaken for a Libyan. It’s more annoying for him because yes, I’m not Maltese, but I’m not a Libyan.”

One professional expressed frustration about the link which has been drawn between asylum seekers and the emergence of different religions in schools. “...religion before was never addressed, because here we are Catholic, full stop....We have had Hindus since the first 1800, we have had a substantial Muslim community since the 1980s. Still people will say we are Catholic...the Jewish population, the Orthodox who lived alongside us for centuries, and we don’t even know that. So religion is an issue.”

Another participant expressed “In our area we certainly need to look at cultural diversity, religious diversity, differential abilities, gender... now even more. I think in Malta we really need to look at religion and culture, forget the refugees, even other cultures are really present in schools. Even ethnicity. The majority of schools are now facing it and there is still a lot of discrimination on these grounds.” Addressing these differences in schools may well lead to the reduction of stereotypes which are formed because of lack of familiarity and understanding. “Religion certainly needs to be addressed, and culture, there is much more mixed culture in the country. We may have children who live differently from how Maltese children live, and they might be perceived as strange by Maltese children, and this might cause bullying.”

Many participants indicated that adult perceptions may interfere with the natural tolerance of children, with one professional stating “my concern is that teachers, with all their good intentions, are unaware of their own stereotypes and biases and how behaviours and practices are always measured against a dominant norm and judged as inferior.” Another participant spoke specifically about gender and LGBTIQ issues, stating that “the majority of the teachers don’t know how to distinguish between sexual orientation and gender identity. Most teachers still go through the strong media stereotypes, and this filters down to the students”.

When asked if they believe that any particular ground of discrimination needs to be addressed, the main issues which arose were discrimination on the grounds of race, religion, ethnicity, culture, gender, and LGBTIQ.

The aspects of race, religion and culture seemed to overlap, with many participants identifying these traits simultaneously. One participant identified how schools are currently unequipped to deal with this, stating that “Different cultures also needs to be addressed. Even in the aspects of language and religion. I don’t think the teachers are trained in a manner to deal with this. I think this tends to depend a lot on the adults though, I think children when they are young, embrace different cultures and religions a lot more.”

A professional coming from an NGO working in the field of migration explained that “With our client group we get a lot of racial discrimination. Many migrant children are bullied on this ground, because of the colour of their skin, because of their religion, because they are seen as ‘illegal’ because they came by boat, because they came from open centre. They might stand out because they don’t have the right uniform, packed lunch, the right school supplies. This isn’t only the students, we get comments from teachers as well.”

Some participants indicated that schools are not currently equipped to deal with a diverse student body. One participant explained “...what I do think is that it has been very evident, is that teachers and school administrators are really struggling and are overwhelmed by the increasing diversity and nature of migration which is increasingly transient and diverse – unless teachers and schools are given necessary support and training to deal with this and to address these new challenges we will continue to struggle at an administrative and bureaucratic level. Teachers need to be given the time and skills to teach and to work towards an inclusive environment, and I do not think they are able to do so at the moment because they are overwhelmed.”

With reference to religion, it was highlighted that the current school tends to ostracise non-Catholics from the mainstream group, with one participant stating that “in my personal opinion we need to teach tolerance of different religions and culture. In Malta, I am a Catholic, but it doesn’t mean that everybody is Catholic, in all schools we still have a tendency to make a lot of Catholic activities. What’s happening is that the children who are not Catholic are left out...in schools where you have 40/45% who are from different religions, denominations...We now have the programme of ethics which hopefully will be introduced to in all schools and parallel to religion... is that enough?”

An advocate from a human rights background emphasised “With our Mediterranean culture we need to work on race, culture, religion and sexual orientation. Race and culture – particular Maltese that have this beleaguered mentality because we live on a small island we have some primordial memory of being colonized.” Another participant clearly stated “We are still a very racist society and we fear a foregoing element in our culture.”

Another element which was brought forward was that of the media influence on perceptions of race. “Unfortunately the media still puts these issues in the forefront but gives them a bad light. Articles in the newspaper usually tend to use a lot of labelling. Our recent case in Malta said ‘Black Hungarian’ rather than ‘Maltese still very intolerant’.” One participant clearly emphasised this by stating “The media creates this *us and them* dichotomy, it makes us want to ‘protect us’ against ‘them’. If we are more aware of what our schema is impacted by, we would be more aware of how we interpret things and more able to prevent certain attitudes. We need to educate people in order to prevent this. Like at the moment, there is this perception that all Muslims are violent and want to kill Christians, but they don’t know what the driving force behind ISIS is. People need to be educated, and people need to get to know people. Ideally getting to know people outside of school, such as youth exchanges and other informal settings. Getting to know a Muslim person as first a person, who happens to be Muslim.”

LGBTIQ and disability issues also came to the forefront, with one participant stating that they need to be addressed alongside issues of race. “The gender and race yes as well. With gender I mean sexual orientation, that gay rights are respected. And disability, and especially autism, because it is an invisible disability, even with the parents. How can we teach children about diversity in relation to autism when not even the parents, grandparents and society have... accepted them? They see the behaviour and they judge on the behaviour. We try to raise awareness, but there is still lots of work to be done.”

On discrimination against LGBTIQ groups, one participant highlighted “Sexual orientation - it is high time we have acknowledged the fact that we have wronged gay people for a long time and they deserve to be treated equally. From an early time we start educating the very young even when it comes to transgender people, the system should not only be binary. All that matters is the person not the passport and the demographic details.”

A parent of a transgender girl also emphasised the issue of gender, explaining that “It is such a big cause of bullying because it’s having to fit into those boxes. We are all effected by gender, it is part of our everyday life, and we’re bullied on it quite a lot. Even adults and even unknowingly bully each other about it. We need to teach that everyone is different, one child likes spaghetti and the other likes lasagna, it’s that easy to children. When the children saw how much happier my daughter is as a girl, they just accepted. We need to educate the adults to support the children in these new settings. There is so much ‘oh he’s not really a man’. We need to teach adults to support and teach by example. Once they feel they have support and education, we need to re-wire how we train our kids to see things.”

Today one of the themes that is on everyone's mouth is where identity is concerned. Many people who are bullied are those who feel that they have a different gender identity from the norm. Over the recent years there has been more focus on children in schools who are going through a certain identity crisis. Parents label at an early stage whether someone is a girl or boy, if the child does not identify with this label, it is very hard for the child to come to a place where they feel comfortable who they are. If a person does not find enough support, when coming out, when identifying themselves with a gender, it can be highly traumatic, and it has led on more than one occasion to suicidal ideation and even suicide. Now if you train people to respect others as persons and if you train that everyone is different, there won't be bullying and isolation, there will be respect and understanding.

Whilst issues of discrimination on the grounds of minority groups were highlighted, other issues of discrimination such as socio-economic background emerged during the study.

A participant from Gozo explained that situations of poverty are not all too uncommon, stating that "We meet situations in Gozo which seem to be normal, but when you look into it you find that there is extreme poverty. These children, you can imagine, face a lot of difficulty when there are school activities. There are some heads that pay for the activity for them, or provide stationary for crafts for them." This is however not standard, and may cause children to miss out on activities and opportunities.

Socioeconomic background issues do not only emerge in situations of extreme poverty, and it is important to highlight that these issues were solely identified by students and not teachers or professionals, possibly indicating a significant difference in perceived discrimination causes. One student explained that "it's also social bullying, in our school the most common form of bullying is more if you see someone, the way they dress, if you see someone with an iPhone or a gold watch...". This also seems to be the case when persons who are perceived as coming from a higher socioeconomic background are the minority, with one focus group of students discussing that "the stereotype is that if you speak predominantly English then you're a slight snob"

Overall, a great deal of participants did not believe that certain facets of diversity should be given greater importance than others. One participant explained that "Diversity is not a question of facets. Diversity is with us and has been with us and we need to become aware that our society is more diverse than ever. We definitely need to be looking at the intercultural aspect, and here I would say that we need intercultural competence. This needs to be directed at the teachers, and the parents. This is where we need to use the internet to target the parents and the families and the children to transmit these positive messages as part of their lives."

In general I think all of facets of diversity are equally important, gender, religion... we see a lot with the development and the recent laws that have been enacted for same sex unions. I think it's very important that diversity should be addressed and the respect. That is the main issue, the respect. There is not one that is more important than the other, children should be brought up sensitised to diversity whilst respecting the boundaries of different groups. I believe that we all need a reference point, we live in a rapidly changing world. Over the years values have changed and will continue changing. I think this goes back to trying to implement changes when we don't have the infrastructure to implement them, and the infrastructure starts from education. Whilst we all belong to our various groups of age, sex, sexual orientation, race... I think we have to start from the younger generation and tell them that 'you might have a way of living or a way of looking at the world, but there's place for everyone'. You need to make place for changing values and you need to respect others.

With regards to the bullying framework, one professional expressed that “I would rather that we emphasise the issue of respect rather than gender or race. Respect for the individual respect for the educator for diversity, I think that’s why the respect for all is the framework that these are all linked to.”

4.5 WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF BULLYING ON CHILDREN?

Throughout the study, the impact of bullying was echoed by parents, professionals and students alike. Participants were directly asked if they believe that violence, bullying and harassment will impact child participation and attainment. The feedback was a resounding yes.

One participant explained “Yes. 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.” A professional working in schools explained that “We had very bright children who attained and participated much less because they were bullied.”

Foreign research reflects similar indications. Bullying victimisation is associated with negative educational outcomes. In terms of bullying and academic self-efficacy, there are gender disparities: Girls who are victims of bullying have lower academic self- efficacy, whereas the links between bullying victimisation for boys’ academic self-efficacy are not statistically significant.

Bullying victimisation negatively impacts the victim’s educational achievement. It appears that bullying has a gender-specific effect on educational achievement. Interestingly, the detrimental effect of bullying victimisation appears to be greater for girls than boys. Girls experiencing bullying may be more concerned about their personal safety because of the bully’s physical attacks, threats, and/or destruction of the girls’ personal property than about achieving their educational goals. This supports previous research, which suggests that although bullying negatively impacts both genders, girls experience greater psychological distress as a result (Klein, 2012; Young et al., 2006), which in turn undermines their ability to perform on standardised tests.

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On the long term impact, one participant explained that "Obviously, many children are not only effected psychologically. There are issues with attention span, they won't want to go to school, they pretend they are sick. This issues will scar children for life and affect them academically. If children are traumatised from an incident in school they will be put off schools. Once they are put off school it can significantly impact the child's potential to achieve through continuing education. If children feel that they don't fit into a school, they will not wish to continue school."

Aside from the impact of violence, bullying and harassment at school, some participants offered reflections on the long term impact which on victims in other spheres of life. When asked about the impact of bullying, a participant from the mental health profession "One of the major effects of bullying at school can be leaving a child very traumatised, vulnerable and insecure... if you have a fear, if you're brought up and someone is bullying you at school and the person happens to be of the opposite sex or of a different race, you're going to perpetuate a cycle of violence which is related to issues of diversity. This is going to have a very big impact on a person's outlook towards life. These issues start from childhood, it's the way values are modelled".

Apart from issues of values and perception of diversity; violence, bullying and harassment can have a negative impact on the overall wellbeing of the victim. An advocate from a human rights NGO explained that "Trans children have a very high risk of self-harm and suicide, and that can come on just from a comment which you hear throughout the day. That's the worst part about bullying." Furthermore, apart from concern about harm to self, there is also concern about harm to others. One expert explained that "There is research that indicates that current perpetrators of domestic violence were either bullies or were bullied. They repeat what they saw and what they experienced. They learn that this is a way to achieve power."

4.6 HOW IS BULLYING DEALT WITH IN SCHOOLS?

Participants gave varied feedback with reference to how bullying is dealt with in schools. Perceptions seem to be highly dependent on the profession, the school itself, the interviewee background, and individual experiences of bullying.

The majority of students seem to have limited faith in how their school deals with incidences of violence, bullying and harassment. In one focus group, the children spoke about the anti-bullying policy, stating that “We have one and they talk about it a lot but they never do anything and it’s not effective at all, and in fact if anyone has bullying problems the worst thing you can do is go and talk to a teacher because it’s going to make it obvious to the entire class... the best thing is to have a close friend”.

Another expressed that there is not enough transparency and that the service is not confidential enough to instil the faith of the students “...our PSD teacher always says you can always come to me when you’re sad, but by school policy if I hear anything I have to report it straight away to the head and then I have to tell the girl...the teacher, the head, all the teachers...”.

It seems also as though there is a significant level of fear that other students will find out that one has reported, with one student stating “And the class tells the form, and the form tells form three, and you’ll be known as that little piece of crap that told on someone”. Other students echoed similar sentiments, stating “you’ll be known as the tattler”, “you’ll be the hated person for actually speaking up”, and “you’re THAT guy”.

One student attending an independent school also indicated that sometimes action is not because of the family background of the accused bully. “They find out who the student is and say ‘no his parents are so and so, so we can’t touch them...’ It will make it worse because the students will find out you told about it.” There is also fear of retaliation from the bully, “you’re worried that if you ask for help it’s another reason to get kicked... you worry you make more of a mess than trying to fix it.”

4.7 ARE SERVICES CHILD FRIENDLY?

There seems to be mixed feedback about whether or not services are child friendly. The students quoted above seem to indicate that they do not feel comfortable accessing services in school, and many professionals and parents seem to agree. Whilst credit is given to existing services, it is quite clear that there is room for improvement.

When asked whether services are child friendly, one participant responded “No not at all. Children know they have no power in schools, they are not part of any decision making process. They say that they should hear the children’s voice but it’s not put into practice. It’s not child friendly at all.” A professional working in schools stated “No. I think schools are not child friendly at all. Basically our institutions are adult led, the current school counsels are tokenistic. A lot of schools are improving in this, but ultimately children have no voice. They have no say about their curriculum, how they are assessed. Why shouldn’t children have a say about this? A PSD teacher who children can talk to about bullying isn’t enough. Why isn’t there a group of children who decide how bullying should be tackled?”

A parent also expressed “I wish there was a bit more child friendly language. I have a feeling that adults in Malta don’t connect with children, they use words that the children cannot understand. They don’t put themselves out to connect with children in a child friendly level. And we need to involve children more, they have a say and their feelings matter. This would promote self-esteem and would help children to feel more in control. This isn’t a language issue, this is a-being-on-the-same-level issue. My daughter was once told ‘if you have any problems, go to the authorities’ meant nothing to her. It’s also body language, you don’t want to remain aloof and large and inaccessible. I think you need to remember that you were a child once, it’s trying to see the world through a child’s eyes. It’s about being there and supporting”.

Some professionals, who perhaps have a better insight as to what is happening in schools, seem to put the problem down to lack of resources. “Usually the first contact is the guidance or the counsellor. The problem is that they are so busy and there aren’t enough. They cannot see them on a regular basis, they see people by priority or by emergency”. Another professional explained that “they (college counsellors) only see maybe 0.5% of the school population...”

A participant from the research background indicated that the lack of resources is also felt by professionals, explaining that “when speaking to psychosocial professionals, it does appear that schools have the professionals, but these professionals themselves claim that they are understaffed, and some colleges deal with more cases than others and more intense cases than others.”

There was also criticism about accessibility of services for children. A professional who often works with schools in cases of bullying contributed “I think the services are there, it is more the environment where the services are carried out that need to be tackled... There is also not enough information about the services.” The same participant went on to echo the concerns of others, stating “I think the social work service, the counselling service and the youth work services are very child friendly because they are very informal. The problem is that we have so much to do, crisis situations take priority over everything else. I believe that this happens at the expense of being in touch with students. But its part of our job, we have to tackle these as well...”

On accessibility, another professional stated “It could be a form of labelling as well, when one accesses services at school. This is why parents and teachers should be aware. Something afterschool could be arranged so that the student isn’t seen outside the counsellor’s door, or the whole class could be addressed. I’m not sure exactly how it goes, but I think there is room for improvement for someone to feel free to come forward and speak out and seek help.”

4.8 WHAT ARE PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL INTERVENTIONS?

Students also seem to resist the idea of confiding in their parents, with one student explaining that “telling your parents will end up in the same repeat; they will tell the school, they will do nothing and I will get picked on even more”. From the student feedback, it seems quite clear that the students require more reason to believe that reporting a case of violence, bullying and harassment will result in effective action.

Parents who participated in the study also indicated a lack of faith in the way which some schools tackle violence, bullying and harassment. A participant who is a parent of differentially abled children shared her experience:

My son was bullied by the administration. They were unable to handle the situation, they were unknowledgeable and untrained so they would bring up excuses to get rid of him. Once my son was pulled from the shirt by an assistant head, I was informed by the children, not my son, because my son is nonverbal. When we confronted the school about it, they told us it wasn't true because children lie and the children who told us about it were unreliable. Every day when I took him to school, he would have a temper tantrum on the door because he didn't want to go in. This had never happened before. It was getting worse, he had had issues before because of over stimulation, but never like that.

Other parents echoed experiences of which were made worse by the practices of the school administration. One parent explained that “Bullying here can even come from the adults. A trans girl transitioned from one year to the next, she was accepted by the children and not so much by the teacher. Two concrete examples of this would be: in 6th form, the teachers in the staff room made jokes about this person and the religion teacher kept talking about gender in a way that is dichotomous and not accepting this as a reality. We heard that there were even cases where they refused the child from expressing their gender through the way they wear their hair (this was a younger child). Refusing to use their name, and using the name on the birth certificate”.

Whilst most participants did not directly implicate the school as responsible for acting in a manner which made the child feel harassed or bullied, many participants claimed that the lack of intervention by the school or the wrong approach to intervention can cause a lot of harm on the students. One parent who is active in a human rights NGO explained that “Teachers can sometimes be quite slow to intervene. My daughter was quite upset about teachers just dismissing some bullying which was going on in her own class. And then you approach the school and they say that it's not bullying, and that it has to be continuous to be bullying, but they don't understand the slow trickle that can be caused. Especially with small children, teachers are a point of authority and safety. We can't always expect younger children to come forward when they're being bullied, so the teachers need to look out for them”.

A number of participants indicated that lack of proper intervention may stem from a lack of common definition on the term bullying. “Now the school approach also depends on how staff interprets the definition of bullying. I think all staff need to be trained, including teachers, LSAs, school carers, everyone who is present on school grounds. If this is not done you will have people who downplay the incident, or interpret it differently. This is a positive approach, everyone needs to do his part to interpret the problem”.

There may also be lack of common understanding of the term between parents and school administration. One parent expressed her experience with her daughter's old school, "I complain with the school about the bullying, and instead I get told of my daughter's missing (language and religion) homework (I can't help her with the subjects!). They say they'll look into the bullying, but it goes on. I complain again and I'm told that my daughter could be provoking it or acting a bit too sensitive, and that it might be that my daughter is taking the separation hard."

There is also the added element of concern in instances where the parents take matters into their own hands because they feel as though the school is not doing enough to protect their children. In a focus group composed of parents, one recounted that "once there was a parent who had his daughter on the bus who had encountered violence, and the parent went on the bus and threatened all the children, he terrified the bus driver and all the bus. It shouldn't be done like that". When asked about the perception that parents have of the school's effectiveness, a mental health professional explained, "At the end of the day you're dealing with situations which create very highly emotional states. If you have a parent whose child has ended up in hospital, in their minds the child would have not ended up in hospital if the school had handled it well in the first place".

4.9 WHAT IS REQUIRED FOR EFFECTIVE INTERVENTION ON BULLYING IN SCHOOLS?

Some participants provided insight on areas in which schools are perceived to lack effectiveness. Many persons stated that there is need for more training to be provided to teachers in order to enable them to deal with instances of violence, bullying and harassment. Participants also indicated that there is too much classical academic focus in school, which continues to create a gap with persons who express non-academic intelligence more intensely.

One participant stressed that there is need for more diversification of professionals within the school environment, and that professionals should not only be there to deal with crisis intervention.

Another professional spoke about how he feels that the diversification of professionals in schools is removing the care role from the teachers and inadvertently making them feel as though certain interventions are not their role or expertise. He recounted that he was told several years ago 'the moment we start PSD, teachers will no longer feel that their role is to take care of students as well, because they will simply refer to their guidance or PSD teachers'. And I think that this has actualised to an extent. We have a number of specialised professionals, both internal and external – all of these roles in the past were taken on by the teacher". The same participant went on to say "Students, children, young people, if they feel comfortable with someone - how can we just refer? I think teachers need to understand that their role is to take care of the students as well – we used to call this 'pastoral care'. This is what worries me about all these policies, I think we need to support the teachers more than the students. The teachers need to have more support systems to advise on how to help the student, not simply refer them to other professionals".

But does the education of teachers equip them well enough to deal with non-academic issues? Another participant explained that “The education system also does not equip professionals to work actively with youth. They have the book knowledge but not the active knowledge and they are not well remunerated enough to make the effort.” The lack of incentive for teachers to take action was brought up by other participants. Another participant stated that it may be the lack of recognition of the teacher’s expertise and the lack of knowledge sharing which is the base of the problem. “I was recently invited to a state school. And I could see that the way that the teachers were being approached was not as dignified as it should be. There is a perception that the teacher doesn’t know anything in relation to social work, psychology, etc. It’s about teaching the teacher how to identify that red light. It’s about getting the teachers to refer. One of the most difficult things that I see is this ‘exclusion’ of the teachers by professionals from social work and psychology backgrounds. The level of respect and the level of dignity should be a bit stronger. This will encourage them to keep an eye open and refer”.

Many participants had something to say about training of teachers and school administration. With some examples including:

“I think that one obstacle is the lack of teacher training. They have 3 days at the end of each year and that’s it. I think that training about these topics should go on throughout the year. During the year one can take stock of where the action plan is. They can review and see what was met, teachers need to come together and not only at the end of the year.”

“At the end of the day a teacher is an expert in their own subject ONLY and don’t have the necessary training to adopt this kind of approach.”

“Training for teachers as well. This is very important.”

“The staff needs to be better educated and trained. The staff are often more difficult than the children, and I mean administration and not only teachers.”

“Even though we are professionals and we have experience, times change. What was relevant 5 years ago, is not necessarily relevant now. For example in Gozo separation is now becoming common. You have to keep abreast of these changes.”

“LSAs, on paper, great idea...I don’t know if they are being trained properly, you have unqualified people in charge of very delicate children.”

Issues of teacher training are of great concern. Research indicates that without awareness, teachers are unlikely to provide any coaching or support to victims of violence, bullying and harassment. The failure of teachers to intervene can contribute to students’ sense that staff are not willing or able to prevent bullying (Bradshaw et al., 2007). Students may also develop the belief that teachers are uncaring and unable to protect them (Yoon and Kerber, 2003). The lack of faith in school interventions as highlighted by the students in section 4.6 above, highlights the need for teacher training to be given due consideration.

In a study which was conducted on teacher's reactions to indirect bullying, teachers were presented with vignettes with situations of indirect bullying before and after receiving a presentation indirect bullying (experimental group) or adolescent mental health (control group). "Compared with Controls, the Experimental Group scored more highly, after the presentation, on perceived seriousness of indirect bullying, empathy for victims, likelihood of intervening and self-efficacy, but not on knowledge of impact. It is concluded that teacher education about indirect bullying may be most effective if it focuses on feelings rather than facts, and provides practical intervention strategies" (Dedousis-Wallace, Shute, Varlow, Murrihy, & Kidman, 2014).

4.10 WHAT ELSE NEEDS TO BE DONE?

Many participants also indicated that school is too academic, and does not allow room for children to develop non-academic skills and talents. Moreover, the general feel seems to indicate that only a small cohort of children are given the opportunity to excel because not all children display their intelligence in an academic manner. This may be contributing to lower feelings of self-worth and self-efficacy in students.

"I think a lot needs to be done to balance out the academic achievement. We need to focus on participation, to learn to deal with issues. I suppose it's a big thing but there are changes that need to be made, but again we need to go back to the infrastructure and ask 'what do we want from our children?' 'How do we want our children to grow up?' We're looking at overhauling the whole education system. Obviously it cannot be done all at once, it needs to be done slowly with initiatives on different levels. We need to involve more stakeholders, we need the children's education to be shared between the parents and the schools. There needs to be a lot more collaboration."

A professional working in schools expressed frustration at the manner attainment is evaluated in schools, stating "Attainment isn't only about results, attainment is about how you manage yourself, 'Are you trying your best?' 'Who do you want to be?'" Another participant reflected similar thoughts, stating that "we fill them (children) with tons of detail which is completely irrelevant to children especially in the primary level who we need to teach values of how they need to live."

A parent gave some insight into how focus on classical academic achievement may lead to ostracising persons with differential learning abilities, stating "My girls did horribly in the benchmark test, so they were going to be sent to this CCP class. I don't think their results really reflected their true ability. The tests are not adapted enough for children with learning difficulties. I insisted that they won't be in these CCP classes on a full time basis. This will only separate them from their friends more, and they will be losing a system of help and support through the loss of their friends." Another parent also stated that "Children who were dyslexic in my son's school all used to do poorly in school, and there are a lot of them who are smart".

As previously mentioned in this review, focus on academic achievement may also be partly responsible for bullying on students. One participant working in a post-secondary education facility stated that:

I still believe that although we talk a lot about giving importance to the individual as a whole, the academic is always given more importance, so there should be more investment when it comes to dealing with the pastoral care of the students - not military type of approach but on a human level - and even on the level of time - students are so packed with academic work...time should be given even for other activities. Not necessarily talking about diversity or a particular issue but creating an environment where students feel they are individuals....not just here to learn their subject, but the main goal being that of having students graduating, ready for the work life, who are not only experts in their fields of study but are also civilized citizens - who have been trained, or moulded in a way, who also feel they have to give their say to the community, as whole person. If schools are rushed with curriculum and academic work and there is no time for anything else to be heard how can these children grow up to believe otherwise?

Another participant linked this to the *Addressing Bullying Behaviour in Schools (2014)* framework, stating that we need to focus on “The ‘learning to be’ pillar. I think this is the most crucial pillar in all of the policies, because we need to help youths and children to be whoever they are. To develop their talents, to work on their short comings, so that eventually they will be good citizens...”. A participant who worked on the policy stated that “The message needs to be that every individual has his own abilities and capacities, ‘I need to recognise who I am’. Everyone is important but everyone is diverse and different. And everyone should be treated with respect in society.”

There still seems to be scepticism as to the implementation of the policy however, one participant who works in the field of children’s rights recounted “We have all this policy. The message which I once received as a parent from the head, was that certain nuisances between girls was taking all of their energy and that it was detracting time from focusing on the academics. The school did not feel that it was worth their time, they directed the parents to tackle these issues so that the school could target maths, English and Maltese. I don’t know how this fits in with this ‘whole school philosophy’ and child friendliness.”

The general feedback seems to be that schools need to focus more on the needs of the students, rather than make the children fit into the goals of the schools. One participant explained “I think one of the problems that we have in our system is that it requires people to fit in. We need to find ways to be creative and to design the system around the people and not make people fit in.”

One participant who has a background in alternative education explained that “Education should be targeted towards the actual needs. What are these students thinking about this? They rebel. If there is no good reason for children to be sitting as they are sitting in a class room and learning things which they cannot find fitting into their lifestyle. This makes children rebel. Why are we forcing our children to learn maths, English and Maltese? Who are we to determine the norm, the core? I had a child who wanted to become a Landover driver because that is what she used to enjoy. Later she wanted to work in computers, because that is what she used to enjoy. Later she used to watch me at the track and she is now a graduated PE teacher.”

But does the current structure of schools allow for this? “Schools sometimes just don’t have the time. This seminar that we do is always before... holidays, but it’s very difficult to find slots to organise activities. Because of exams, because of tests. The teachers then complain that they don’t have time to study. These issues are also part of education, but it’s like they are secondary. The most important is the academic.” Another participant with a background in youth work suggested “Using informal methods to get the message through. This is where teachers need to be trained to be able to allow this sort of teaching in the class. I think that one disadvantage is our current curriculum. It is too full of formal learning and doesn’t leave space for these activities which could really help.”

One participant summed this up by stating “Teachers are physically swamped with curriculum content to be able to keep up with school work you don’t have enough time in the day to concentrate on issues that are so important. As an education system we concentrate on knowledge but not on wisdom.”

4.11 HOW ARE SCHOOLS DEALING WITH DIVERSITY?

A number of participants highlighted good practices which schools are currently engaging to promote diversity in a positive light and to tackle violence, bullying and harassment in schools. “The fact that there are now the anti-bullying focus points in schools helps, the fact that they have a reference person and the incident has to be recorded, obliges the school to take action and incorporate Anti bullying measures in their SDP.”

Well I know that for example a number of schools have started organising diversity weeks, I know one college has a diversity group, students on the lines of a gay-straight alliance but broader, but incorporating minority groups incorporating in the broader community. (A post-secondary institution) have a human library every year. The pathway programme is a very good measure. There is now the policy on transgender variant and intersex students in school that is another concrete measure in a way that promotes inclusion of a very small minority group of students but that also promotes gender expression, and the LGBTIQ action plan also has a number of measures that the government is committed to LGBTIQ issues in schools, teacher training, resources for school and teaching packs. I think the fact that you have youth workers in school is also a good measure in addition to the pastoral team in schools and they often work with vulnerable groups. In secondary schools the colleges have a youth worker they are present in the school day and they also have the youth group that meets after school, even in that context they tend to deal with issues of diversity in a non-formal education way.

Some schools take the initiative of creating structures which act as preventive measures for violence, bullying and harassment. A participant from an independent school explained that they "... have a buddy system in place as a prevention measure. Children in form 3 are trained (at the end of the year) in listening, communication and conflict resolution, obviously to their level. Then the form one students are buddied up with these form four students. Everyone in form one has a buddy, but it is left voluntary for the form 4 students; having said this we have about an 80% participation rate. In the first three months of their time in senior ground, they have these buddies who are there as a point of reference. This has minimised the bullying. Form four students don't bully because they are involved in this programme, and the form one students are more settled and more relaxed. This has helped very significantly".

The buddy system has also been used as a model to include children who come in at different times of the year or who are not familiar with the school procedure. "A buddy is either assigned to someone because of language barrier or other issues. Otherwise we assign buddies when we realise that someone is taking a particular interest in someone." Another activity that was viewed positively was circle of friends. "Circle of friends is also useful for children who find it difficult to make friends. In this thing they group people together and they decide how they're going to keep everyone in contact, how everyone will be included, and the teacher monitors."

A participant from a church school explained the importance of ensuring that training content is understood well, "We recently did an obligatory seminar were all heads and professionals were advised to attend and I asked for feedback from everyone. This forced everyone to go through the policies again and provide feedback. This way I was sure that they had gone through the material thoroughly".

A participant who works in a school explained that in her class, when persons with disability are introduced, they "conduct a peer preparation programme to prepare the rest of the peers to fully include persons with disability. In schools where they do this in every class, it is serving for any kind of diversity, not just for persons with disability. It's usually done at the beginning of the year and it creates a safe space. In one class there was a teacher who gave roles in the class, and there were peer wardens to 'make sure that everyone is happy'. It worked."

Another participant from an independent school explained that the school adopted a "programme from abroad which we call the SEL programme - Social and Emotional Learning. The form tutors have a lesson a week in middle school, and 10 minutes in senior school, where we would have prepared the teacher about a nonacademic issue. It's about teaching the kids the opportunity to discuss things like gender, inclusion, etc. It's all about developing the person in a holistic way and nothing academic. We have resources which we bought from abroad and we have another 2 members of staff who support that teacher. The (class) teacher makes it his own and delivers this message to the kids."

There were also a number of good initiatives which were identified with reference to the integration of persons coming from diverse groups. A participant working within a school advised “We also do diversity weeks where everyone speaks about some sort of different diversity. We do an international week. This year we did a day where we got children in a wheelchair to come and do sport at our school and our kids were in a wheelchair too. We also get Be Smart Online to school and we get cybercrime in form 4. Obviously this tackles the consequences of cybercrime more than anything”.

However, there is mixed feedback about the impact of activities targeted at celebrating diversity. One participant working in the field of migration explained that “Over the past few years I have seen teachers and head teachers organising activities, trying to involve parents, exercises like diversity trees... these are great but not enough and sometimes can serve to emphasise the diversity but not commonality – you run the risk of exoticising and essentialising – the Maltese aren’t all Roman Catholic, they don’t all eat pastizzi, and not all Africans have a bongo.”

Once again, returning to the idea that interference of adult pre-conceptions may cause more harm than good, one professional confided that “I think if we don’t interfere with children they will integrate very well. There was a black boy at my son’s school, my son was about seven or eight, and I asked my son if he likes this boy. He told me ‘he’s ok, sometimes we play, sometimes he annoys me off, sometimes ...’ I asked him ‘but doesn’t it bother you that he’s different?’ and he told me ‘yes, sometimes he can be a bit annoying’. But at no point did he address the race. Schools need to address parents more than children. In an ideal world I would let kids be – the only thing I would do is encourage that they have a common language. I think if we were to make language learning a standard amongst migrants we would solve a lot of problems.”

Another concern which was highlighted by the same participant was the importance of allowing children to have discussions with regards to diversity issues. “There are a number of activities, multicultural activities, targeting religion, such as the birth of Mohammed, we also have PSD – but what I think we need to do is create a school environment when people can collude. I want conflict in schools – I want students to state: “you’re black!”, “you’re playing with the doll!” We need an environment which can create a comfortable feeling so that people can ask questions. More than anything we need an environment for people to talk, where they can rest their minds. I believe in every relationship, the ability to recuperate after a conflict is what is the most important, rather than not conflicting at all. I think children should be able to ask questions, and say things that they don’t like... Having this illusion that it’s all dandy doesn’t teach how to process difference, it hides difference”.

4.12 WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO BETTER?

Participants, mainly professionals in the fields of human rights and persons working within schools have reflected that schools are not doing enough to deal with diversity on a holistic scale.

Here I am a bit critical, not in a cruel way, I recognise that many individuals and teachers have utilised their limited resources and knowledge to try and address this exclusion; but many of them have focused on activities such as cultural events that are great but are also very superficial. If you are not going to address the structural elements then very little will change. The reality is that we are, and increasingly will be, dealing with a very diverse population (migrants) and also an increasingly diverse Maltese population (Maltese black, Asians, Muslims and so on) so the reality of dealing with a relatively homogenous student population is long gone. There is recognition of this fact but very little has changed vis-à-vis education.

4.12.1 EARLY EDUCATION

Some participants stated that not enough is done from the primary level, and explained that “if these issues of diversity are tackled from a very young age... nobody questions different colored apples! If this becomes part of our culture the diversity as it is in New York and London – it’s accepted because it’s been there for years, this will happen also locally. It has to start very young and I don’t think it is an issue with the children, I think it is the parents – children carry certain opinions that they hear from home.” Another professional reflected “At primary level, I think more needs to be done, especially from specialised staff, even at kinder level. It’s easier to modify the children’s behaviour there then at secondary level. During the seminars (that we conduct for students in form two) you get certain discriminatory comments; it’s not impossible to modify but it’s challenging because you’ve got a whole family culture against you.”

4.12.2 DIVERSITY SHOULD BE INGRAINED INTO THE CURRICULUM

The most resounding theme is that inclusion is targeted solely through activities and initiatives. The perception is that diversity is not ingrained into the school ethos and the overall curriculum. “A lot of preventative work happens on a small level. These activities are nice, but they are not really effective. If you get someone to do a talk you are not being effective in changing attitudes.” Another participant added that “it needs to be tackled on a more wide spread level, and more often”.

Several participants offered insights into what can be done to target inclusion and positive perceptions about diversity. Many spoke about the curriculum, and how diversity should be ingrained within it. Material which is used for learning should include more material about alternative family structures, non-conforming gender roles and diverse lifestyles in general. “There’s that idea that certain books which we use with kids should contain more alternative family structures and other forms of diversity. I think that this could work quite well.” A parent working for an NGO focusing on gender contributed by stating that “We would like to see more educational books entering the libraries... We need to expose children to these educational books, we need to show children that everyone is walking on a different space on the rainbow and that’s fine”.

In fact some material to this affect has already been produced. A participant from the Commissioner for Children informed the current study that “We have also produced a book about children’s rights which speaks about how you have to respect others and to be respected. We also highlighted the issues of ensuring that you respect the rights of others when accessing your rights”. Jean Antide Foundation have also produced books aimed at youth which deal with the topics of childhood trauma and witnessing domestic violence.

4.12.3 NON FORMAL ACTIVITIES

Participants also indicated that non-formal activities should be organised more regularly to facilitate integration. One participant suggested “Live in’s, and good live in’s make a very big impact. Activities which are conducted outside the school environment really help. They’re an opportunity to teach children”. A professional from an alternative education setting spoke very passionately about the use of role models, “For success you need to get the role models to influence these young people and you get them to talk sense into them. It could be footballers, teachers, friends... anyone who influences them. Social media must also be taken into consideration.

4.12.4 THE ONLINE COMPONENT

An emphasis was made about the need to utilise the internet in order to tackle youth. Throughout the study it was made quite clear that schools have not done enough to be present online – both when dealing with online bullying and with reaching out online. A participant with experience in the field “... would say more information sessions and more on the internet. More education is needed. Extracurricular activities would also be an idea but it needs to be funded. The internet is the most important, that’s the place where it’s all happening. And the apps, the apps which are going to give these positive messages that we need”.

One professional explained that the anonymity of the cyber world may make it easier for persons who need help to come forward, “Sometimes the fact that there is the distance of a computer between people, makes it much easier for people to disclose issues. If schools had anonymous chat rooms, it would be much easier for people to disclose issues and someone could monitor it not to get out of hand”.

4.12.5 GIVING CHILDREN A VOICE

“It would be interesting to give children a voice, to create the space for children to speak and say what services they need.” Participants indicated that there is a great need to take the voice of the child into consideration. “I think it’s important for children to be able to express what they want as well, the problem is theirs not ours, they need to tell us what they want and need.” Another participant added that although children are sometimes consulted, their feedback is often not considered, stating “You need to make sure that you listen to the child. Children come forward and are made to feel that their voice is worth nothing. Children cannot stand alone. If you’re going to get children to work together with adults, they need to be listened to and they need to be supported. For us we’ve seen that it doesn’t happen, you can’t just tell children that you’ll listen and then make them feel that they’ve come forward for nothing. Children observe, and hear and take on board.”

“A top down approach is not always ideal. We don’t give enough weight to the voice of the children, if I’m honest. I feel that there are certain structures, like when children are invited to give their opinion on local issues - that is very beneficial. However, we need to emphasise what happens after. If we’re just listening to children for show, it’s not enough. They need to be made part of the policies.” Another participant stated “A bottom-up approach. Let’s go to the children and let them guide us. If we had to use the bottom up approach everything would be different”. One participant stated “going back to the drawing board I would say involve children and consult them – they may not be as articulate as us but they have the experience – they can give us the raw idea and we can make it more polished...”

A professional strongly stated “Any policy made without due consideration of every single stakeholder is not worth the paper it’s written on - having a bullying policy drafted... determining the gravity of the offence is viewed from a third party perspective - it ties in with who you are really focusing on. If you talk on child rights and participation then you need to look at who is affected.”

4.13 RESTORATIVE JUSTICE MEASURES

The policy document *Addressing Bullying Behaviour in Schools* (2014) states that the school should aim to “restore(ing) as far as possible the relationships between the students using the restorative justice approach”. The policy explains that:

When their behaviour becomes unacceptable students must be allowed to take responsibility for their behaviour, change their behaviour to a manner that is acceptable, and be required to make proper amends. All this can be facilitated in a context where restorative justice is promoted; where the needs of victims and bullies are addressed.

The participants were asked if they knew of any schools who were unofficially using restorative justice measures in order to deal with violence, bullying and harassment in schools. Few participants were aware of restorative justice being used in schools. Those who did had mostly provided positive feedback about the strategy. One participant explained that “We had done it. We wanted to look at what the problem was. There was something behind the bullying. We tried to find what the problem was that was causing this conflict to arise between the bully and my son. We worked with both of them to identify what was bothering the bully, and to stop the bullying”.

One participant had looked into the matter in depth, and explained that “We need to investigate through restorative justice why there is certain behaviour in bullies, as well as certain experiences which a victim might be going through. Abroad this concept has been implemented since the 1980s, and it started in schools. You can work to change behaviour when a person is as young as possible, you give them the skills.” The professional explained that the implementation of such interventions require preparation and the availability of the relevant resources. “We need trained people or we need teachers to be trained in mediation. There have been cases in Juvenile court where a child throws a chair at the teacher. We take the kid up to court but we don’t find a solution. If there is a trained person to speak to the child, to help the child realise... If we’re taking someone to court, we’re not doing anything. The aggressor hasn’t been sensitised to how they have hurt someone.”

Another participant indicated that such initiative may be beneficial in order to stop the victim / perpetrator cycle by providing support to the bully at a young age. “There has to be a balance with restorative justice initiatives, I believe that the bully is a victim, I do not condone what they do, but one would need to understand where they too are coming from. And in a just world that both the victim and the bully need to be treated as victims coming from different perspectives... the bully needs to understand what they have done is harmful to other people, and that is not enough. They need to be psychologically supported and otherwise I don’t think it will have life changing”.

Students, however, seem to have mixed feelings about restorative justice measures and its perceived likelihood to be successful. One student stated “I think both would stay silent throughout the whole thing”. Another explained that the students may show agreement during the intervention “...but the moment you leave the room it starts again... he’ll tell his friends he reported you and all their friends will turn against you”.

Whilst students didn’t seem to indicate much trust in the concept, there did seem to be an urge for the bully to understand the harm that he/she is inflicting on the victim, and a yearning to understand why the victimisation occurs. One person explained that “I know I said it could make it worse... but I think if you have the bully see and listen to the person explain how it made them feel and that it hurt them - if they have a heart they may understand and stop”. Another student also expressed that it is unfair that many a time, victims never understand why they have been subjected to so much pain and humiliation. The student explained that “they should make it mandatory for the person to tell the other person why they are bullying them, because most of the time if you ask a person why, they’ll be silent... you make it a rule!”

A number of professionals were hesitant on restorative justice measures. There was a resounding concern that such interventions could lead to the re-traumatisation of the victim. One participant expressed “I’m not sure to be honest. I don’t know if at this level there is an advantage. For example a public apology might backfire sometimes, humiliation of the bully isn’t the key.” Another participant also expressed concern with the process “It depends on the individual. Giving the opportunity to redeem himself but if he disobeys again he gets 2 weeks and not 1 week of no TV. But with the wrong type of individual that could be interpreted as a weakness and children tend to be extra manipulative. Ideally it would work but it doesn’t work with every bully – every bully is different. Sometimes they are one offs. They just tried it out, so it [restorative justice] would work since they would feel the pain incurred on the person...Of course it’s a sort of punishment but with the wrong type of person would be interpreted as the institution trying to wrong him and that type of bully could very well feel resentful and seek revenge on the abuser because from his perspective it’s the abused fault that he is being punished.”

There was also concern expressed about providing the bully with an opportunity to manipulate the environment to his or her benefit. One professional explained that “...they have to be extremely carefully managed, I think that where you have a bully and a victim, and I am using it purposely in this context, then bullies can be very manipulative, they know they have the power and they can still use that power...to further victimise the victim. If the person who is managing the meeting is not super trained and super aware then these sort of things can do more harm than good. That having been said...If the bully has truly accepted responsibility for their actions and it is very well managed by somebody who is sensitive to manipulation, than it can do good...”

Another participant explained that “We need to be looking at the implications and ramifications, the whole concept and the perpetrators being genuine about anything. We also shouldn’t drop the consequences just because someone says that they’re sorry. I’m a practicing catholic so the whole issue of forgiveness is built into me, but I think if my kid was bullied or my kid was the bully, I don’t think that the concept of forgiveness should mean that all is forgotten. I think that there needs to be a consequence”.

Concerns about power imbalance were common throughout the interviews. One participant explained that “To be honest in a school environment I wouldn’t advocate very much for putting a victim and a bully together, I don’t always necessarily think that that is the way to go about it, often the power imbalance remains. I know the anti-bullying uses the no-blame approach, the responsibility of the victim and the bully are not the same and sure it’s addressing the behaviour rather than stigmatising the bully, but if something’s wrong it’s wrong and some bullying incidents are quite severe. Saying no blame can sometimes be interpreted as they are not responsible or someone shouldn’t intervene or that they couldn’t help themselves. I think there should be a consequence so that if there is bullying happening then bullying has to stop and there should be a consequence. In an ideal world, the relationship between the victim and the bully is restored...that is not always possible. I think the most important is that the bullying behaviour is also stopped”.

The use of the term restorative justice as a concept in itself is wrong because what you are implying is that you can make something whole again - people who have been traumatised psychologically or physically through bullying...I can understand mediation as a tool for people coming together to draw a line, make amends, move on, but using a term restorative justice I see as very out of place.

There was also concern about using the readiness of the victim to deal with such an approach. One participant explained that “it should not be automatic mediation as it is in cases of marital separation. When it’s the right time then bring them in together if it’s opportune to do so.” One participant reflected similar sentiments, stating that “Obviously there has to be consent from the victim as it could be even scary, I am sure. Regarding disability, there has to be a certain level of cognition...”

Once again, here we need to consider the individual needs of the victim, the bully, and the environment. One participant summed it up by stating that “We’re setting up the garden of forgiveness - motivated by the fact that not everyone is ready to forgive - its fine, when you are this is one option out of many which are available - I think the biggest thing from a child perspective is that one size does not fit all”.

4.14 A RIGHTS BASED APPROACH

The policy document, *Addressing Bullying Behaviour in Schools (2014)* states violence, bullying and harassment in schools are responsible for the violation of the following rights:

- The right to a safe and supportive educational environment free from violence and aggression both on an emotional and physical level.
- The right to be safeguarded from physical injuries and emotional distress, taking into account a person's self-worth, dignity and wellbeing.
- The right to healthy mental, physical, spiritual, moral, sexual and social development.
- The right to be treated equally, free from discriminatory comments, labelling and stereotyping.
- The right to adequate access to recreation and play.
- The right to freedom of expression and involvement.
- The right to privacy.

Participants were asked about their perception of a rights based approach. The participants almost unanimously agreed that taking a rights based approach to tackling violence, bullying and harassment in schools was desirable.

It is the right of every child to receive an education without feeling threatened or afraid.

One participant explained that it is our national obligation to ensure that the rights of every child are protected, stating "Absolutely, yes! According to the convention on the rights of the children, which is the most signed convention worldwide, the rights of the children come before anything, before anyone's rights. Malta has ratified the convention, and in the education policy, there is written that every decision made by the government needs to be in consideration of the rights of the child and for the best benefit of the child. That supersedes everything. We need to think about identity, everything to do with development. Everything needs to be given to the children to protect them until they are adults". Another participant contributed that "Yes certainly. This is the whole scope of empowering the child to be aware of his rights and to feel comfortable to express what is hurting him and what is interfering with his rights to access an education. Persons who engage in bullying behaviour also have a right to access help and support." A student who confided that he/she was a victim of bullying, explained that she "think(s) a lot of children have issues as adults because they are deprived of their rights. Children who are abused develop behaviour issues."

One professional highlighted the necessity to begin education about rights from a young age, explaining that "In an ideal world yes – I believe in human rights and believe we should educate etc – but in practice people don't understand this or will just say 'I have the right to speak' – unless we are working in a framework where human rights are part of our educational system from day 1, yes, but we are not, so we cannot just come in at a certain point in these children's lives and tell them that on the basis of human rights you cannot bully someone – social studies is meant to address human rights but possibly it is at a too late stage."

A number of participants were concerned about lack of education about duties, and believed that rights and duties should be linked and that students should be educated about these simultaneously. One participant expressed that “I think that children know their rights very well, a bit too well at times, but they are not very aware of their responsibilities. Sometimes I feel that this has gone a bit full cycle. It is not your right to have a chocolate at lunch time, it is your wish. Ironically over-emphasising the rights will eventually result in impinging on the rights of others eventually. In everything there must be checks and balances.”

Many expressed similar sentiments. Some contributions include:

“I agree with a rights based approach, but it has to be balanced with duties. We might give the notion to children that they only have rights, but they also have duties. If we don’t incorporate this from a young age, it may be difficult to teach them at a later stage. This needs to be ingrained from a young age.”

“It’s good to know your rights and act on them if they are [in] breach but it’s also important to get to know your responsibilities very well. Of course this does not mean to say that there shouldn’t be someone to act if rights are breached. We also need to make people aware of their responsibilities as students, parents, workers and future workers, because at the end of the day you finally need to find a job, live in a community, you cannot stay in a glass house and be isolated”.

“My problem with it is that we have insisted on rights for such a long period of time that especially with young children we have stopped mentioning responsibilities. For example with 179, we have situations where if you raise your voice with a child, they mention 179 to you. These are experiences of children and teachers. We need to move to a situation where everyone is responsible for their actions. I like to tell people to treat others as they wish to be treated. I think we need a rights based approach but with a bit more”.

One participant however gave an example indicating that children may not know their rights as well as some perceive them to. “When we asked children to write about their rights on the wall, children had a problem to identify what their rights were. They wrote about different things. Children need more education about what their rights are. And I think that these adults who think that children are very aware of their rights, have no idea about what rights are”.

There were other participants who believed that persons working closely with children may not have a clear picture as to the definition of children’s rights. One participant explained that “Yes and I would advocate for a rights-based approach, I’m also a human rights activist, but also think that educators need to be trained in what is a human rights-based approach, what are human rights and how to put it into practice. I don’t think we can assume that people know what a rights-based approach is. Again it’s very hard to convince student administrators that it is an entitlement that children have and not that it’s optional”.

The lack of understanding about the nature of children's rights was highlighted by a professional working in a human rights NGO. The participant explained "... let me use an example (unaccompanied minors) some of them are under the age of 16, and have a right to education – whilst this right is acknowledged on a somewhat superficial level, very little has been done. It's very easy to say we're trying to get them into school and they don't want to go to school: Why don't they want to go? What are the obstacles and have you addressed them? Less about equality and more about equity. Same can be said for all the other migrants as well; saying we provide education for all migrant children because it's their right is a cosmetic approach: what are you doing to see that this right is realised to ensure that migrant children and Maltese children can actively participate in the educational process?"

Another participant stated that "For sure, always. A rights based approach is always the way forward,... Well, in Malta we don't really look at things with a 'rights framework', it's more like, 'be grateful for'. I think we need to move away from that". Another participant also highlighted that "It should always be based on a rights approach. Having a rights based approach will empower the child. It gives you a different sense of being. It would be better than a charity approach."

The strongest contribution to this discussion came from a professional working with children, and directly in the field of children's rights. The participant explained:

Yes. Basically a rights based approach can lead to more favorable outcomes in anything because it leaves no options. When you have a right it's a right, full stop. It's no longer optional to tackle it and I don't need to be grateful for it being tackled. Sometimes you hear people talking about how children have too many rights, it's because they have no idea what rights are. A right does not mean that you are abusing the system. With children rights are not tied into responsibilities.

Because children's rights are tied to their particular fact of being children, they are not adults. So it's not something like if I have a right there is a responsibility to balance it out. Rights have to do with the inherent fact that you're a child. You don't lose your rights if you are irresponsible. Obviously then the responsibility comes from not infringing the rights of others. But it's the responsibility of adults to see that that doesn't happen. I don't think children are as aware as they should be of their rights. Many children have their rights infringed and they not aware that it's not ok.

For example, the right to play; what is the responsibility tied into that? Children have a right to citizenship, to a safe household, to live in an environment free from violence...

The feedback from all participants seems to indicate with relative clarity that there is more need for education regarding the subject of human rights – on all levels. One participant explained that whilst "Children are being more educated about their rights... accessing the services is then blocked. The rights need to be clear to everyone, and the procedures need to be clear. If a child comes forward with a violation of his/her rights, action needs to be taken, it needs to be investigated. If the child says 'call my mum' they need to call their mum. Sometimes children who speak up are not thought of well..."

In this regard, some participants emphasised the responsibility of adults to ensure that the rights of the child are not infringed. One participant explained that “... as soon as anyone in the school community impinges on the other person’s right then the responsibilities and the consequences have to kick in. A teacher has the responsibility to keep a school safe and so does the student towards the students and the educator. I am a firm believer for students and adults to learn that rights and responsibilities go hand in hand and they can’t come without the other”.

A professional coming from a mental health background emphasised the importance of modelling the correct behaviour alongside educating children on rights, and the importance of the continuity of such education. “I would like to think that by educating on rights and duties...we should have more favourable outcomes, especially where violence in schools is concerned. I think part of the problem is the behaviour modelled. You need to continue educating the adults and how they are dealing with it, this has a very big impact on how the children will grow into dealing with certain situations.”

On the subject of emphasising responsibilities, one participant explained that it is essential for the persons educating the students to have proper training, understanding of and belief in the concept. “I think that we learn to respect everybody’s rights is very important... We need to teach children to respect the rights of their fellow children and staff. A rights based approach is a good and important approach but it’s notably just saying - look that that child has a right to having school books, let’s give them school books - it’s about teaching the children to respect the rights of their fellow pupils and peers... Starting off with having trained the staff to do so effectively, because children pick up if you have the right words and don’t have the heart, it’s not about political correctness.”

4.15 WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH

The Addressing Bullying Behaviour in Schools Policy adopts a whole school approach philosophy. This approach is defined as a unified collective and collaborative action in and by educators, administrators, parents and students that has been strategically constituted to improve student learning behaviour and well being and the conditions that support these.

(Addressing Bullying Behaviour in Schools Policy, 2014)

Participants in the study were asked about the adoption of a whole school approach philosophy – specifically, they were asked on potential obstacles in adopting such an approach.

It’s really important for everyone to realise that bullying and violence is everyone’s problem and not just the victim. We see this in domestic violence as well, if we just leave it up to the victim to find the solution then the perpetrator keeps going until the victim stops them. If it is the whole schools problem then it will likely not escalate.

Several participants highlighted the issue of having everyone on board. One participant explained that “Consistency from the members of staff is a big problem, and the sense of ownership from all stakeholders, including parents. Also, the priority which the admin team gives to the policy. If the admin works well towards the implementation it’s a different story”. One contributed that “Sometimes if you are including such a wide approach with a large amount of people there is the possibility that there you have more than one vision of what the school wants”. Another participant explained that “Listen, it all boils down to the cooperation from the school’s administration. We as social workers, we are outside the school, we visit schools regularly, but our office is outside the school. It depends on the head of school.” It was added that schools need to incorporate the policy into their development plan in order for such a policy to be truly effective. “Of the major obstacles is the way that schools are managed and the way that they formulate the school development plan ...in a way their business plan... could act as a hindrance to the implementation of the policy. SDP is developed in May for the following year and not taking into account that along the scholastic year there are other actions that need to be taken because a new policy would have been brought in and the SDP would not be reviewed.”

It was also emphasised that ‘everyone’ would require the inclusion of nonacademic members of staff, and perhaps even persons working outside of the school system. “The obstacle is that you would need everyone onboard and commitment from everyone, from the head to the janitors. The gardeners and the drivers might be witnessing bullying, so you need to have everyone on board. Now having said this, you need to train everyone. That is a challenge. And you would need good systems of monitoring and supervision, and someone who coordinates the whole process. So basically, coordination, training and cooperation from human resources”. Another participant explained that the policy needs to not only be implemented by all the people involved, but even beyond “... we also need to see that the strategy is in line with the rest of the school curriculum, mission, and the vision of the entire education department”.

... it doesn't take just peers or teachers - it could be the school watchman I think there is a responsibility of care by the school; once the child is in its care, once the child leaves home and is on the school bus and is in the school yard and sits on the school bench and waits at the school gate and should expect a duty of care - not to be harassed not to be bullied and this is not an option... but it's a right...

The commitment of the school administration itself cannot be taken for granted. A professional working with children outside the school expressed concern. “I think the resistance may come, from what I’ve heard, ... from a number of parents, the school can be very reluctant to take responsibility. There are two extremes, they either want the parent to take full responsibility or they don’t want the parents at all. I think the question is about clarity and whether we have the right infrastructure to cater for such a system.”

The idea of a 'two way process' resounded when speaking of the involvement of parents and students. "When the school is 'making it theirs' the parents should be consulted in that process. The same goes for the educators and the students. We cannot just sell it to them after it's done, it won't work that way." Another participant reflected that "If the policy is just talking about what should and shouldn't be done with everybody, I think it might find some obstacles in gaining ground". Yet another participant stated that "The approach needs to be that we are a team all together and not that someone is better than the other. We should combine a much more 'team-ish' approach. Parents should be more involved in their son's and daughter's lives and know what they are doing."

However, the ideology of schools still seems to be that parents need to be informed rather than involved. When speaking of the policy document one participant advised the researcher that "we need the parents to be aware of these policies and we need children to be experiencing the same messages at home. I think this is the biggest obstacle; we need parents to be on board and understand the importance. Even from their end. It is not acceptable for us to have bullying or certain attitudes... If parents know what we are expecting and if we are going to inform them in writing if their children are bullying, they are going to be well informed".

Often parents are informed rather than consulted; I don't think that this encourages participation. Parents should be consulted.

Participants have indicated a lack of faith that parents can be truly involved. One parent explained that there are big gaps between the school and the parent. The participant recounted an experience where she was called by the police and asked to present herself at the police station. She explained "...this woman sat there, she says 'your son is being a bully' that's how she started, I said 'do you mind telling me what's happening what this is all about?' she says 'well you know if something happens you and you will be behind bars' in that way she was saying and my husband said 'hold on' he almost stood up and said 'if you're not going to tell us what's happening we're walking out' and that's when she said there's this boy in your son's class, his dad has been making complaints and your son has been part of bullying, la la la, I was just shocked, I was shocked, I was absolutely shocked, and I said 'hold on a minute, before even knowing my story, my side of the story, speaking to my son, you have started off with saying, accusing.'" In this case the parents were not informed about the issue by the school before they were contacted by the police.

A lot was said about the issue of parental involvement. It is essential that in order for the whole school approach philosophy to work successfully, the parents need to be onboard.

"The parents first need to be trained on their own, they don't have experience. They need to be trained by specialised entities on how to deal with bullying, who to call, where to go. Then the whole school can be involved. First you need to be given the information of how to help, and then you can help. If parents are not informed of what the anti-bullying policy entails, they cannot contribute and participate". Another participant echoes similar beliefs stating that "I think there needs to be more meetings for parents, and these meetings need to include training on how to deal with their children before they are bullied and before they bully others. They need to explain what bullying is, and how they need to tackle it if their children are bullies or are bullied. Children go home to their parents, if their parents just brush off a case of bullying, it could seriously harm the child. They need enough support".

A parent explained that “Parents are not engaged enough. There’s an awful lot of telling the children to pass on information to the mother, involving parents a bit more would be a very big step. Schools don’t call if something happens to a child, you find out from the child. We need more communication, there needs to be more discussion about how we can work together. You have communication books that children take to school and they come home empty every day. Sometimes when my mum gives a note to the teachers, they just sign on it and that’s it, and I don’t get any feedback. That makes me feel very outside and very out of control. It seems like you’re causing a problem for asking questions. If you want involved parents, you need to involve them”.

Schools do take a number of initiatives in order to involve parents, but even in situations where parents are consulted, do schools employ effective measures to engage parents? “The ways our schools are designed do not reflect the reality that parents have commitments, work, schedules, and so on. I think the school needs to adapt to the real needs of the parents, otherwise they aren’t going to get involved. I heard that (a particular) school has a cafe near the school where parents meet informally after dropping their children off or picking them up. This is a great way to have parents more involved. I think we can be more adventurous in this way. We can involve parents more in outings, in activities, be more involved in the class room. There needs to be a balance”.

Current initiatives to involve parents seem to circle around the school requesting parents to attend information sessions. “I think parents need to be addressed differently, we need to change the method of how we meet them. Every year we have less and less parents attending our evening sessions. And it’s usually the parents of the ‘good’ kids who attend. I have about eight appointments per week with different parents and it tends to give more insight. Parents want to be part of the school but at the same time they don’t want to interfere, but if given the opportunity they will get involved”. Another participant echoed similar sentiments, stating that “When we used to organise meetings for parents the only parents who would turn up is the ones who didn’t need to address”.

I think the problem is that many times the parents who need to listen to this philosophy won’t be there. Usually even parent’s day, I’m often told by teachers that the parents who need to be there don’t turn up, especially if they’re coming from backgrounds which have difficulties. I think perhaps the parents need to be engaged... many times when the parents are asked to be engaged in anything that the schools are doing, you end up with a situation where the parents are in the audience and the head or teacher is preaching to the parents. I think parents need to be addressed in a hands on way. Perhaps you get the parents association working together on a project. It’s difficult to involve people when you expect them to just sit down and listen, and if you involve parents in this interactive way it will be beneficial. I think a lot of parents have lost faith in the school authorities to tackle the bullying, so if they were part of it and they got to participate it would be better.

There is a clear need for parents and schools to work together and to be on the same page vis-à-vis the needs of the child. “I think that the parents are the biggest obstacle. Basically because of lack of proper communication with the parents via the schools and in many many cases also the mollycoddling. Instead of looking at the wider picture and the core issue of why a child is being bullied, the parents become even more protective. There needs to be more education and training of the parents in order to help them support the policies of the school. When the parents go against school policies it makes it more difficult for the child”.

“This interaction between the school and the parents needs to be a bit developed and parents today need to be more part of the education. In today’s world if the parents both work there is an issue of time, how present can the parents be in the children’s school lives? This is creating realities which are totally different so we need to start communicating aggressively and informing aggressively with parents via the internet. If we don’t do this soon we’re going to have more problems. We need to help the parents to be present in a manner which fits into their lives. In a manner which is interactive and engaging”. It was suggested that if schools wish to effectively reach out to parents, they need to become more accessible to parents. “Perhaps they can contact the parents via email with information, so that they can know how to support their children if they are victims of bullying. They should be aware of what the process is, even through the school”. Another participant stated that “... obviously our approach with the parents needs to be different. We can send videos on youtube. Most parents find attending a whole seminar a waste of time”.

Other participants also indicated that involving parents in school life via the classic meetings might be an issue. “I mean how far can you engage parents? I would target parents more on a national level rather than through individual schools. Like we had the MGRM campaign for the LGBTIQ community. These were shown on a national level. I think this is more beneficial rather than getting parents to come to school for training”. Another participant also stated that “There should be a nationwide campaign about bullying characteristics and how you can actually create a bully. Most Maltese parents make it their life mission to give their children whatever they need and with whatever they don’t need but make them happy and there is a section of this children that are being spoilt and if they don’t get it right now they turn nasty. I have seen it happening across different sections of society, there are no limits. It has to do with upbringing if parents are not made aware of how detrimental their parental skills are in the raising of their children when it comes to bullying. Bullying starts many times at home – siblings that are joking around and you realise that there is a certain type of play that qualifies as play but it can turn nasty and they pull each other’s hair and they hurt themselves they insult themselves it turns very nasty very quickly. Unfortunately parents tend to excuse this....but it shouldn’t be tolerated. What is learnt in the home is transferred outside”.

Some participants were sceptical as to how far parents should be involved in school life, especially in relation to parents who do not model good behaviour in the home environment.

One needs to verify the environment of the child, what we are foreseeing here and experiencing is occurring at home, what they perceive they react and it is eventually replicated in school. So on a policy perspective it is better to address violence on anyone at home. We all say that education starts at home, you can’t have a policy that combats BVH in school it won’t work if there isn’t one that is working at home.

The issue of parental skills was highlighted in other interviews. One participant explained that “There are parents who lack parental skills, some parents, even those who are always aware of what is happening to their child, also need some meetings or workshops. I know that Sedqa have a parental skills course and they are very poorly attended. Instead of doing it at a national level, it can be done on a school level and the subject of bullying can be one of many others. Parents need to be taught that they have to be role models and they need to teach positive behaviour. There can be a brother or a sister that bullies a younger sibling, or there may be a lot of arguing at home. This does not portray positive behaviour to children. If there is positive behaviour at home this will be reflected in class”. One participant stated “It’s about time that more awareness is raised – informal awareness, having parental skills classes is very important but from my experience you are barking at the wrong tree because mostly its devoted parents that actually attend these courses. Those that really need to be addressed opt not to go because they won’t admit the problem.”

Some participants went a step beyond the *whole school approach philosophy*, and stated that the whole community needs to be involved. This may be an ideal approach to tackle problems occurring both at home and at school. One participant suggested that social security could be a useful resource. “I believe that we need to tap into Social Services more in order to deal with certain issues. District social security offices know everyone and everything that goes on in a community. So far they sort of help people fill applications, they tell them if they’re eligible for a service and that’s it...I can go to them and tell them that I lost my leg in an accident, and ask what am I eligible to apply for... and they will tell me my rights and obligations. We can use that system to actually identify the people who are in need because usually the people who have problems are also in social services. If we can get this massive block of funds and resources and push down into these offices, we will be more cost effective and we can tailor services to the people. But what happens is that because people are moving from one office and department to another, because it is all spread out it costs much more, it becomes more difficult for access”.

Other participants indicated that schools should tap into external resources in order to deal with situations of violence, bullying and harassment. One participant expressed that “... the school should not be afraid to report and refer. Often there may be concerns about the name and reputation of the school. We’ve had parents contacting us and they tell us that they haven’t contacted the school because they’re scared of their children being stigmatised. Referral, to the right structures, should be obligatory – stigmatisation is re-victimisation of the child, but if you don’t refer you are also re-victimizing the child. Schools should be referring! And they should be referring to the right structure. And they should be also referring to external entities which should be brought in for their expertise”.

One participant expressed that working within the school alone is “... not enough. And we need to coordinate services to be as efficient and cost effective as possible. *Kellimni.com* is a national service but it is not part of the national education system. Counsellors in school don’t use this service. In this area we need to get away from this territorial way of working, pool our resources and make our support much more effective. There is fragmentation in this area. If its schools it’s only in schools, if it’s outside school it’s different. We need a common referral system and that would make things much more effective and we would avoid duplication of services. Some families access services very easily and some have to wait, often until it’s too late to be effective”.

However, one participant expressed concern that utilising external resources, even when specialised, may create stigma. “If there is the availability to see the guidance more regularly, it is much better than involving outside sources such as anti-bullying. Anti-bullying creates a sort of stigma. I think it is very beneficial for the school, but it is not really child friendly, it makes the children stand out. Ideally there would be an in-house support system”.

4.16 MONITORING

When speaking of the *whole school approach philosophy*, many participants stressed the need for proper monitoring of the system. A professional working in schools expressed frustration, stating “And there are no surveys; we need proper systems to evaluate all of this effort”. Another participant explained that “Research in schools with children, staff, administration, isn’t really happening... We don’t have staff who is dedicated to get feedback from children in order to see what the problems and difficulties there are”. Another professional suggested that “Surveying in the classrooms should also occur from time to time, it should be anonymous. These could address the potential bully and the victim. It might be that someone doesn’t come forward once, twice, three times, but then they do”.

Another participant stressed that “At a policy level we really need to get a grasp of how we can evaluate stakeholders who are providing services and also how to analyse prevention work”. As echoed above, the concern of continuity was raised, with one professional explaining that “First of all it needs to be monitored on a regular basis. It’s not a onetime project and that’s it. It needs to be consistent and continuous. It may be that the first 4 months that everyone is understanding and learning, and then if it’s not monitored it might not continue to play out well. There are always new people entering the school. There needs to be a task force who monitors that this policy is being implemented well throughout the school year”.

It is also that monitoring should not only occur with those who are responsible for reporting the results of the school in relation to the policy. The feedback of children and parents should also be gathered in order to ensure that the service which is being provided is in fact holistic and gathering the full picture.

Wurf (2012) conducted a study which provided strong support for the use of a whole-school approach for the prevention and management of bullying in high schools. The study highlights that schools that include a greater number of successfully evaluated components in their anti-bullying intervention programmes can expect the greatest declines in student bullying.



5 SALIENT CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY CONSIDERATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has sought to analyse violence, harassment and bullying in schools from a gender perspective, inter alia, by examining the different forms of violence, harassment and bullying in schools, identify any emerging trends, analyse the effects as well as the immediate and potential long-term consequences of violence, harassment and bullying in schools, the reactions of victims. Additionally we set out to examine any characteristics which render students prone to become victims or aggressors, and any other risk factors that may act as triggers. We also aimed to identify needs of victims and to analyse the structures currently available and examine how these structures may contain or contribute towards such undesirable behaviour within the school setting. With all this in mind, we have raised a number of concrete recommendations emanating from the feedback provided during the focus groups and interviews, which can be used to form the basis for a comprehensive plan of action to combat violence, bullying and harassment in schools in an effective manner.

- 1 It has noticeably emerged that respondents did not make a clear distinction between the notions of bullying, violence and harassment. These three concepts are considered to be deeply intertwined. It is therefore recommended that any actions taken to address these undesirable phenomena should focus on the underlying denominator – the need and duty to foster fairness, respect and dignity for all persons, focusing here on the school community.
- 2 One of the main thrusts emanating from the interviews is that a heavy investment in education is direly needed in order to address bullying, violence and harassment. The value of diversity should be mainstreamed in the schools' ethos, procedures and actions. In particular, it would be beneficial if the concept of valuing diversity is addressed from a very young age. This can be done through the use of alternative informal and non-formal educational methods, such as through drama or art. Further integrating and strengthening these considerations into the PSCD curriculum should be considered. Another idea is to integrate these notions into the Religion and Ethics syllabi, focusing on basic values of tolerance and respect. Further examination of when this educational agenda should start, and what it should contain, is required.
- 3 An issue that clearly came up, both from students and from adults, is the fact that there is no clear understanding of what the terms 'bullying' actually implies, thus resulting in teachers or parents brushing off certain types of behaviour that need intervening as required. Therefore, any policy adopted by the school should include a thorough description of this term, backed by training that should delve deeper into this matter. Training should include examples, information and tools on how to tackle different scenarios. When dealing with diversity, training should move away from mere 'political correctness' and delve deeper into examining the value of diversity and how what is being taught impacts students differently according to their different needs and aspirations.

- 4 Nonetheless, it is widely agreed amongst respondents that initiatives should not focus on specific 'grounds' such as religion or disability, but be based on the need to value and foster the individual diversity of each and every student and the duty to respect and value human dignity. Additionally, it was pointed out by one of the respondents that one of the flaws of current diversity initiatives, is that they tend to focus on the differences and therefore 'exoticising' students who do not fall within the mainstream. It is therefore important that future diversity initiatives focus on both the differences as well as the 'commonalities'. The need for intercultural training, both for teachers and students, was repeatedly mentioned.
- 5 The findings of the research point to the fact that migrants, particularly asylum seekers, tend to be particularly prone to violence, bullying or harassment. Their inability to communicate effectively in a language puts them at further risk of social exclusion. There is therefore the need to develop and implement an effective training programme to include basic skills, particularly language skills. Students from international backgrounds would benefit immensely by the availability of cultural mediation services within the school system. Indeed, language has been pointed out as an important factor which would enable inclusion and reduce the risk of bullying, violence and harassment.
- 6 Any such educational initiatives should, *inter alia*, contain a well developed module which would raise students' awareness about the actual impact of negative behaviour, such as bullying, violence and harassment, amongst others. As was rightly pointed out by one of the respondents, it seems that the perpetrators of such behaviour do not fully understand the impact that such behaviour has on others. By using methods such as developmental drama, this message can be delivered effectively.
- 7 With regards to adopting a rights-based approach in tackling such issues, most respondents seemed to agree that this would be beneficial. It was pointed out that students need to be taught that all persons are entitled to enjoy their human rights and equality of treatment within a context of respect for diversity. Education should also aim at instilling a sense of solidarity with those whose rights have been breached. Once again, investing in staff training for such purpose is required in order for such initiatives to be successful. In this regard, it was also pointed out that educators need to be provided with training on what human rights are and how to respect them, fostering a culture of equal treatment and non-discrimination in their school. Focus should be put on the understanding that students have certain entitlements which can never be 'optional'
- 8 The need to enhance parental and community involvement is another factor that has been pointed out. This could be done, *inter alia*, by collaborating with designated individuals or entities from outside the school environment, who would have the necessary expertise to address this need and who would thus be tasked with this challenging task. Innovative ways in which this could be done, beyond the usual 'parent meetings', need to be identified and implemented.

- 9 The need for parental skills training was also highlighted. One respondent stated that there is a lot of interest on this subject and that parents are very responsive to initiatives held in this regard. However, a nuance emerging from another interview points to the fact that often, the parents who participate in such initiatives are those who already have a good understanding of the issues. Those parents who would perhaps benefit more from such training are more reluctant to participate. An outreach programme for parents and grandparents could be organised within the community as part of other activities that are well attended.
- 10 Many respondents provided substantial insight into the phenomenon of online (cyber) bullying. It was clearly highlighted that online bullying has a context and should not be addressed in isolation. Particularly, the bullying and harassment incidents prevailing in the cyber world would have started or flowed into the school environment. It is therefore important that schools should be responsible for incidents of violence, bullying and harassment occurring online and take appropriate action, rather than leaving it to the discretion of the relevant head of school, as is the current situation. A policy which reflects this position is required. A further suggestion in this regard was for schools to have anonymous chat rooms in which students would be able to disclose such incidents and be provided with the required support. It would be fruitful to synergise such an initiative with similar existing initiatives, such as [kellimni.com](#).
- 11 Similarly, incidents of violence, bullying and harassment occurring on school transport should also be within the school's responsibility and action should be taken accordingly. This should also be reflected in any relevant policy.
- 12 With regards to anti-bullying and anti-violence policies, it was pointed out that these are not sufficiently comprehensive, not sufficiently communicated to all relevant parties, and in many cases not enforced. Moreover, they tend to vary from one school to another, resulting in incoherence. It is therefore suggested that, a comprehensive and wide-reaching anti-bullying policy is developed by every school, in line with the principles outlined in the 'Addressing Bullying Behaviour in Schools' policy, and that this is effectively communicated to and discussed with all relevant parties through a variety of means, including internet communication. Adequate monitoring systems should also be adopted. With regards to monitoring, it might be opportune to consider an external monitoring system, which would monitor progress and provide feedback on various points concerning implementation on a regular basis. It would also be opportune for the monitoring exercise to collate feedback from staff, students and parents alike, in order to produce a well-represented reflection of effectiveness.

- 13 An issue highlighted by some of the children participating in the focus group is that there seems to be little confidentiality when dealing with such matters. Although the relevant staff would promise confidentiality, it appears that so many people would get involved that ultimately it would be known that someone filed a report. This seems to be something that discourages children from reporting, as they do not want to be 'the one who told', and also because they fear that this would only make the situation worse, particularly if the parents react negatively, bringing more tension and anxiety to the child. Children therefore indicated their preference to tell a friend. This is in line with the 'buddy system' measure explained by one of the interviewees, who works at a school. One participant also recommended training of students in peer to peer mediation. It is therefore recommended that similar initiatives, which seem to be the most successful, are implemented in other schools.
- 14 A concern identified during the study is that it appears that currently children have little or no say in matters that impact them. There is therefore a pressing need to give children a voice, by inter alia, engaging them and involving them in the design, development and implementation of all relevant activities, particularly those pertaining to the subject matter. Thus for instance, children should be able to participate in the formulation of the anti-bullying/violence policy, they should be allowed to develop and implement activities aimed at promoting respect and valuing diversity, and they should also be allowed to give feedback to the school about the way the policy is implemented in practice, which could be done in a variety of ways, such as workshops and online questionnaires or web-surveys. Such consultation and participation should be reflected in concrete initiatives and outcomes.
- 16 It was also noted that parents are not much involved in school matters and in matters of school policy and practice. Criticism was received about *informing* the parents rather than *consulting* them. Even in matters where the parents are informed (such as with reference to the progress of their children) the channels used may not be effective in reaching the entire parent population. This is particularly evident in the case of foreign parents, or parents and illiterate parents. For consultation and information strategies to succeed and be representative of all parents, it is essential that schools and education institutions employ communication methods which are respectful of parents' requirements.
- 17 According to one particular respondent '*there was much more bullying in single sex schools than in mixed schools, because they have less areas to express their diversity. Children find peer groups more easily in mixed schools. Gender stereotypes tend to be perpetuated more in single sex schools than in mixed schools.*' To this end therefore, the current policy of slowly transitioning from single sex state schools to mixed gender state schools is a step in the right direction. Church schools could also seriously consider this option and assess its potential and feasibility within their specific context.

- 18 One very specific recommendation, made by an interviewee, concerned the communication strategy required to tackle this subject. It was observed that currently, communication initiatives are not sufficiently effective. There is very little online communication – it was strongly recommended that communication via the internet, both targeted at students and at parents, should be strengthened. Not only should communication be done online, but this should contain visuals which would be appealing to the relevant target groups. An effective, wide-reaching communication strategy is required in order to address this phenomenon effectively. Once again, teaming up with relevant service providers already active in this field, such as kellimni.com, would be beneficial. It was also recommended that any such campaigns should be ongoing and not merely ‘one off’ initiatives.
- 19 One interviewee succinctly pointed out that “There is research that indicates that current perpetrators of domestic violence were either bullies or were bullied. They repeat what they saw and what they experienced. They learn that this is a way to achieve power.” - Therefore, it is pointed out that school interventions will not be enough unless they are reinforced by wider community interventions. The ratification of the ‘Istanbul Convention’ ratified by Malta in 2014 is indeed very positive and it is therefore recommended that the necessary resources are allocated to ensure that the said Convention can be implemented fully and effectively.
- 20 In relation to restorative justice measures, particularly victim-offender mediation, the majority of respondents took a very cautious approach. It is recommended that, if implemented, mediators should be thoroughly trained on how to conduct such measures. Applicability should also be strictly on a case by case basis to determine appropriateness to the specific situation and to ensure that both parties would truly benefit from the intervention.
- 21 It also emerged quite clearly that there are no clear cut victim and bully categories. In many instances, a student can be victimised in one context and then act as a ‘bully’ in a different scenario, possibly as a way to retaliate or to self-protect. It was therefore recommended that any specific initiatives targeting students involved in such incidents should not be framed within a ‘victim’ or ‘bully’ category, and should focus on the negative action rather than on the person.
- 22 It is felt that various professionals are currently resistant towards adopting a holistic approach to teaching. In this regard therefore, it may be opportune to ensure that teachers’ professional development addresses this issue during their years of study at university. On-going training for established teachers should also take on board such a concern.
- 23 With regards to training of professionals, a recurring issue emerging through a number of interviews was the need for more awareness and sensitisation on traditional gender roles and stereotypes, and how these influence students’ behaviour and that of society at large. Training initiatives should adopt a comprehensive outlook towards the concept of gender and not merely male and female. In particular, students falling outside the traditional gender binary may be more vulnerable to discrimination, and therefore such stereotyping needs to be addressed with due urgency.

- 24 Teachers and other educational staff also need to receive training on how to deal and cope with challenging circumstances. Additionally, intimidating behavior or assault by parents should be given due importance and reports should be submitted by school authorities for any abuse against teachers/educators. Also, measures that provide for the immediate protection of such teachers/educators, such as emergency barring orders, should be availed of.
- 25 Another proposal emanating from the interviews is to enhance the training and educational content currently provided during the LSA course. It was stated that on paper having LSAs is a good idea. However, LSAs might lack sufficient skills to deal with the very delicate children under their care. Participants also indicated that professional LSAs often leave the school after being employed for a short duration as the job is perceived by some professionals as 'entry level'. Increasing the remuneration and status of the position may result in attracting and retaining employees who are better suited and trained for the role.
- 26 The social work team and counsellors working within the schools were also discussed. It seems that the general perception is that the current service is focusing on absenteeism. In view of their link with families, they are ideally placed to work with students experiencing difficulties or exhibiting negative behaviour. It is recommended that this service is provided with additional human resources to be able to deal with more situations, and also to deal with other issues that may impinge on the subject matter. It may therefore be opportune to consider partnerships with existing service providers in the non-profit sector, who could assist in providing such services in a more cost-effective manner. With regards to the provision of counselling, this is deemed to be very beneficial, if anything, in order to give students validation for what they have experienced, and to help them deal with abusive behaviour, rather than allowing the trauma to develop into more complex psycho-social problems. It is however recommended that counselling services are offered in a manner which respects the student's right for confidentiality. Location of the counselling office and measures such as making counselling services available before or after school hours may have a significant impact in this regard.
- 27 With regards to human resources, consideration should be given to having youth workers in the community and inside schools who would engage with students. These would be linked to the school and help deal with students in a holistic manner. Participants indicated that informal mechanisms are more likely to be effective in changing attitudes and perceptions and can support the formal curriculum.
- 28 Another valid observation made in the course of the study is that pertaining to the lack of flexibility in the current teaching methods, which may be aggravating students' restlessness and increase their impulsivity. It is therefore being recommended that schools further develop different tailor made programme for different students, and that teachers are enabled to use a variety of teaching methods which are more appropriate to the students' nature, including by 'learning through doing' rather than merely by listening.
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6 CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that dealing with violence, bullying and harassment in schools is a formidable challenge that requires a strong, multi-faceted approach. There is no quick fix solution, but rather, the issue requires various interventions which are all inter-related and inter-linked. A heavy investment is required in order to tackle this matter effectively. Cooperation with existing external services, such as those provided by non-State actors, should be considered, as is indeed urged by the Istanbul Convention, in order to maximise resources in schools and the relevant support structures. Ultimately, it is not a matter of deciding IF such initiatives should be implemented, but WHEN? This is being said in the light of the fact that this study clearly shows that the negative consequences of violence, bullying and harassment in schools have negative far-reaching consequences, both on the individual/s concerned as well as society at large. Moreover, such incidents impinge of the students' rights to reach their full potential by hampering their confidence and attainment. The answer is, that we need to act now!

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