

A Cross-national Perspective on Cyberbullying among School Pupils in Northern Ireland: A Supplement to Mora-Merchan and Jäger (2011)

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Abstract: The aim of the present study was to provide a review of the current knowledge regarding cyberbullying in the Northern Ireland school system. There is great value in exploring cyberbullying from a cross-national perspective. Whilst recent literature presents cross-national perspectives on the nature, incidence, correlates and prevention of cyberbullying, encompassing a wide range of countries, Northern Ireland is not included. Given its volatile social, ethnic and religious history, Northern Ireland may potentially be an important addition to such cross-national perspectives.

Keywords: Bully/victim, cross-national, cyberbully, Internet, Northern Ireland

INTRODUCTION

Bully/victim problems among children and young people is an international problem. It is also a local problem. In their important review encompassing cross-national perspectives of bully/victim problems, Smith *et al.* (1999) presented a series of country specific reviews that detailed the current information related to bully/victim problems among children and young people in that jurisdiction (e.g., nature, incidence, correlates, law and policy, intervention, prevention). As part of the review, whilst national reports were presented for the Republic of Ireland (Byrne, 1999) and different countries within the United Kingdom (Mellor, 1999; Smith, 1999), no reference was made to bully/victim problems among children and young people in the other main part of the British Isles-Northern Ireland. In their supplement to Smith *et al.* (1999) and Mc Guckin and Lewis (2003) noted that whilst Northern Ireland is “geographically close” to these countries, it is also the case that, having endured the effects of over 40 years of violent ethno-political conflict (see <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk> for scholarly reviews and commentaries), the Province is “culturally distant” from them too. As such, any cross-national consideration of bully/victim problems among children and young people that ignores possible differences between Northern Ireland and its close geographical neighbours may be limited.

Coupled with this increased knowledge regarding “traditional” bully/victim problems (also referred to as “face-to-face” or “f2f” bullying: Mc Guckin *et al.*

(2010a)), there has also been increasing awareness of new, more contemporary, forms of such problems, such as “cyberbullying” (Campbell, 2005; Mc Guckin *et al.*, 2010a; Patchin and Hinduja, 2006; Smith *et al.*, 2006; Ybarra and Mitchell, 2004, 2007; Ybarra *et al.*, 2006). When asked about their experiences with the Internet and related technologies, most young people rate their experiences positively (Kowalski *et al.*, 2008). However, the undisputed benefits of the Internet and modern communication technologies cannot be experienced by young people if the technological environment is unwelcoming or inhospitable. As noted by Hinduja and Patchin (2008), cyberbullying is “... the by-product of the union of adolescent aggression and electronic communication.” (p. 131). Unfortunately, unlike f2f bully/victim problems, at present there is limited knowledge of how to counter the insidious effects of cyberbullying. For example, such is the importance of these new communication channels to children and young people that cyber-victims are often loathe reporting incidents for fear, not of the cyberbully’s retaliation, but of the fear that their access to the technology will be withdrawn as a safety measure (Shariff, 2009).

In a similar format to Smith *et al.* (1999) and Mora-Merchan and Jäger (2011) have presented a much needed and welcome cross-national perspective of the emerging knowledge regarding cyberbullying. However, like Smith *et al.* (1999), they also negate to understand the potential significance of omitting Northern Ireland from any presentation of information from the geographical area of the British Isles. Thus, as

a supplement to Mora-Merchan and Jäger (2011), this study presents, in a similar format, a country review of the current knowledge regarding cyberbullying in Northern Ireland.

Children and the Northern Ireland conflict: Despite paramilitary ceasefires and a reduction in the number of police and army personnel on the streets, aggression and violence are still very much a part of living in Northern Ireland, with sectarian murders and paramilitary punishment beatings still occurring. Paramilitary organizations on both sides of the community divide (Catholic and Protestant) still attempt to police their own ethno-sectarian communities, meting out punishment shootings (e.g., knee-capping), vicious beatings and exiling individuals for so-called “antisocial behaviours” (e.g., car theft and “joy-riding”). Research has highlighted the widespread experience children in the Province have of conflict and violence. For example, the Children’s Rights Development Unit (1994) reported that 10% to 12% of the children in Northern Ireland have suffered from excess stress under the conflict. Whilst some have reported little evidence that children have been psychologically affected by the political violence (Cairns and Wilson, 1989; Joseph *et al.*, 1993; Muldoon and Trew, 2000a, b) reported that children’s experience of political conflict may be related to behavioural maladjustment. Indeed, Wilson and Cairns (1992) noted the possibility that aggressive behaviour may be a form of coping response for young people, particularly boys (Fee, 1980). This position is consistent with the view that experience of political conflict and violence is particularly and perhaps causally, related to externalising and delinquent behaviour (Cairns, 1996; Shoham, 1994).

Northern Ireland: Sociodemographic and educational aspects: At the date of the last census (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2001), the population was 1,685,268 (males: 48.74%, $n = 821,450$; females: 51.25%, $n = 863,818$). Of this, 22.01% ($n = 370,953$) of the citizens were aged 0-14 years (males: 11.30%, $n = 190,375$; females: 10.72%, $n = 180,578$) and 14.16% ($n = 238,586$) were aged 15-24 years (males: 7.15%, $n = 120,511$; females: 7.01%, $n = 118,075$).

Whilst the education system in Northern Ireland is not overtly different from that operating in the rest of the United Kingdom, the context of Northern Ireland’s cultural backdrop exaggerates differences in schooling type, based on religious background. Thus, Catholic children are predominantly educated in “maintained” schools governed by the Catholic Church and Protestant children predominantly educated in “state-controlled” schools. It is rare for Catholic and Protestant children to be taught in the same school and the Integrated Schools

(Catholics and Protestants schooled together: see www.nicie.org) is still in the minority.

In relation to compulsory education in Northern Ireland, the number of students enrolled in First Level schools in 2008/2009 was 156,600 (student: teacher ratio = 20.4). In Second Level, the number was 147,986 (student: teacher ratio = 14 [non-grammar], 15.1 [grammar]) (Department of Education for Northern Ireland, 2009a, b).

Computer and Internet use by children and young people in Northern Ireland: The 2009 version of the Kids Life and Times (KLT) survey among children in the final year of primary school education (10-11 years old) enquired about the role of new information and communications technologies (ICTs), such as mobile phones and the Internet, in the lives of the “Net Generation” (Lloyd and Devine, 2009 [see the section on “Bully/Victim Problems: Prevalence” for further details of this survey]). The vast majority (93%) of the children reported that they had a mobile phone. Regarding the Internet, 98% said that their family had at least one computer or laptop, with 94% reporting that these computers had an Internet connection. Most (97%) reported that they used the Internet at school, with a slightly lower proportion (91%) using it at home. The majority of Internet users (86%) said they used it for schoolwork as well as for fun. In relation to “social networking”, despite the fact that the terms and conditions set out by providers such as Facebook state that children using these sites must be aged 13 years or over, almost half (48%) of the children reported that they were on social networking sites like Bebo, Facebook, or MySpace. Of those who said they were using these sites, 29% said they used them “a lot”. In terms of friendships, 17% reported that the good friends they had included those they had met online, with 35% reporting that they had “virtual” friends that they talked to online but did not meet face-to-face (boys: 41%; girls: 31%). Furthermore, 8% of boys and 4% of girls said that they had at least 40 “virtual” friends that they did not meet face-to-face. With regards to Internet safety, 35% of those with Internet access at home said they had access in their bedroom. Whilst this is suggestive of unsupervised access, most respondents (87%) did report that their parents or teachers had talked to them about Internet safety (1 in 20 were not sure). One in 10 children who used the Internet in their bedroom reported that their parents or teachers had not talked to them about Internet safety (boys: 14%; girls: 6%). Lloyd and Devine (2009) concluded that “... this Net Generation relies heavily on technology, which influences the way they think and behave in relation to leisure activities, communication and friendship.” (p. 3).

Bully/victim problems: prevalence: Whilst much of the early research regarding bully/victim problems conducted in Northern Ireland was sporadic in terms of methodology, instruments utilised and samples selected (Mc Guckin and Lewis, 2006), two large-scale studies commissioned by the Department of Education have provided useful data that allow for local and international comparisons.

Using Olweus' (1989) "gold-standard" Bully/Victim Questionnaire among their representative sample of 3,000 students from 120 schools (60 primary; 60 post-primary), Collins *et al.* (2002, 2004) reported that 40.1% of primary students and 30.2% of post-primary students claimed to have been bullied during the period of the study (March 2000 - June 2000). Indeed, 5% of the primary students and 2% of the post-primary students reported that they had suffered bullying for several years. Regarding taking part in bullying others at school, this was reported by approximately one quarter (24.9%) of the primary students and 29% of the post-primary students. Collins *et al.* (2002, 2004) also asserted that all of the evidence indicated that bullying was happening even in the best regulated schools, was not age or gender-specific and was sometimes underplayed by the schools and teachers.

In a follow-up study using the same methodology, Livesey *et al.* (2007) found similar prevalence rates among 993 primary students and 1,319 post-primary students: 43.3% of primary and 28.8% of post-primary students reported being bullied 'sometimes or more often' and 22.1% of primary and 21.9% of post-primary students reported bullying others 'sometimes or more often.'

As well as these important pieces of commissioned research, there are regular and rigorous surveys of the attitudes of school students in Northern Ireland. For example, every few years the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) administers the Young Persons Behaviour and Attitudes Survey (YPBAS: see <http://www.csu.nisra.gov.uk/surveys>) to students in the first five years of post-primary schooling (11-16 years old). In addition, ARK (a joint research initiative between Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster: see <http://www.ark.ac.uk>) carries out an annual Young Life and Times (YLT) survey examining the views of 16 year olds and the newly implemented Kids Life and Times (KLT) survey, focusing on children in the final year of primary school education (10-11 years old). Mc Guckin and colleagues have provided analyses some of these data with respect to bully/victim problems (YPBAS: Mc Guckin *et al.*, 2008, 2009; YLT: Mc Guckin and Lewis, 2006; Mc Guckin *et al.*, 2010a, b and c). In summary, despite involving large-scale data collection methods, these studies have reported disparate findings regarding the incidence of bully/victim problems, largely due to the

lack of consensus among the studies regarding methodological issues (e.g., definition, time-reference period for the bullying to have occurred, inconsistency in the reporting of findings - with some researchers reporting in percentages, some in numbers and others choosing to categorise the respondents). The general absence of methodological consistency has resulted in a smorgasbord of information about bully/victim problems that has not been easy to compare, either intra-survey across datasets, inter-survey, nationally, or internationally.

Cyberbullying: Media reports: In recent years, the development of the cyberbullying phenomenon has been reported in Northern Ireland's newspaper print and broadcast media. For example, Smyth (2007) reported that while there were no statistics specific to the extent of cyberbullying in Northern Ireland at that time, it was widely acknowledged that instances of bullying using mobile phones and the Internet were on the increase right across the UK. Coinciding with Smyth's report, the newspaper launched an anti-bullying campaign to coincide with Anti-Bullying Week (promoted by the UK's Anti-Bullying Alliance: www.antibullyingalliance.org.uk). Also in BBC News launched a report indicating that no specific anti-bullying policies had been introduced in schools in Northern Ireland and that teachers very often were working in a "vacuum" (BBC News Northern Ireland, 2007).

Cyberbullying: The political perspective: In the political arena, an increasing number of the Province's politicians have been voicing concerns about Internet safety and cyberbullying among children and young people. For example, on Tuesday 19th May, 2009, Miss Michelle McIlveen (Member of the Legislative Assembly [Parliament]: MLA) moved that the Assembly call on the Minister of Education (Caitriona Ruane, MLA) to outline how she is implementing the recommendations from the Byron (2008) in relation to the safeguarding and protection of children. The Byron Review made more than 30 wide-ranging recommendations that suggested national and regional action to comprehensively protect children (e.g., reducing the availability of harmful and inappropriate material on the Internet; restricting children's access to harmful and inappropriate material through work with the industry, parents and children; and working to build children's resilience to the material to which they may be exposed so as to give them confidence and competencies in using the internet safely).

Cyberbullying: Prevalence: Livesey *et al.* (2007) extended the work of Collins *et al.* (2002, 2004) by including additional questions regarding cyberbullying via the usage of mobile phones and or computers. The

research confirmed that cyberbullying was experienced by both primary and post-primary aged children in Northern Ireland, but suggested a higher prevalence rate in younger aged children. It was found that 12.9% of Year 6 students (primary) and 7% of Year 9 students (post-primary) reported having experienced victimization via mobile phones. Victimization via computers was reported to be the least likely form of bullying (7.4% of Year 6, 4.4% of Year 9).

Mc Guckin *et al.* (2010a) have reported upon the incidence of cyberbullying among primary school students in the Province, as recorded by the 2008 and 2009 iterations of the KLT. In 2008, whilst 10.3% (n = 353) of the students reported that they had experienced this type of victimization (i.e., by someone sending nasty texts or putting up bad things about you on the Internet), 3.4% (n = 115) reported that they had victimized others in this manner. In 2009, 12.9% (n = 470) of the students reported that they had experienced this type of victimization (the question related to involvement in cyberbullying others was not presented in 2009).

Utilising Smith *et al.* (2006) questionnaire, Espey *et al.* (2013) explored cyberbullying among a sample of 757 Year 8 and Year 11 pupils in attendance at five second level schools (age = 11-15 years [mean = 13.04 years]; male = 42.5%, n = 322, female = 57.5%, n = 435), representative of the diverse nature of second level education in Northern Ireland. Focus groups were also carried out with two groups of students (n = 8 Year 8; n = 6 Year 11). Whilst the incidence of cyberbullying (19.3%: victim = 11.9%; bully = 3.1%; bully/victim = 4.3%) was less frequent than f2f (52.1%: victim = 31.6%; bully = 6.8%; bully/victim = 13.7%), the levels were concerning. More girls were involved in cyberbullying overall, with significantly more as cyber-victims. Greater numbers of Year 11 pupils were involved overall, with significantly more as cyber-bullies. Bullying via text message was the most common and bullying through videos on a mobile phone was perceived to be most harmful. Over one-quarter of cyber-victims did not know their cyber-bully (ies). Pupils suggested blocking messages/numbers as the best coping strategy and many cyber-victims did not tell about their experiences.

Bullying and cyberbullying: A managed response:

As noted by Mc Guckin and Lewis' (2003), action aimed at preventing bully/victim problems in Northern Ireland's schools has traditionally come from three areas: Government (DENI), local Education and Library Boards (ELB: geographical area of centralised administration) and the independent sector (night-classes, community drama groups). The issue has been given considerable attention and significance by a range of strategic policy documents at both the UK level (Department for Education and Skills (DFES), 2004)

and more locally by the Northern Ireland Assembly (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2006), where emphasis has been placed on children and young people having "rights" to a safe and respectful educational environment.

In 2004, Save the Children (charitable organization), at the request of DENI, brought together representatives from organizations across Northern Ireland to establish a regional Anti-Bullying Forum. The Forum is comprised of over 20 regional statutory and voluntary organizations who are involved in the reduction of bully/victim problems. The resultant NIABF (<http://www.niabf.org.uk>) has developed guidance documents for schools and for parents/carers on how to deal with cyberbullying.

As the main thrust against bully/victim problems in Northern Ireland, the NIABF is a constituent member of the British and Irish Anti-Bullying Forum. With members from the research/applied community, as well as governmental representatives from each of the constituent countries of the British Isles, the Forum meets twice yearly to share information and best practice in the area, including cyberbullying. Indeed, with some Forum members being involved in EU commissioned research projects regarding a managed response to cyberbullying, policy makers in the Province are being kept abreast of latest developments regarding prevention and intervention in the area. For example, the recently completed Cyber Training Project (funded by the EU Lifelong Learning Programme: [Project No.142237-LLP-1-2008-1-DE-LEONARDO-LMP] <http://cybertraining-project.org>) has provided a well-grounded, research-based training manual on cyberbullying for trainers. The manual includes background information on cyberbullying, its nature and extent in Europe, current projects, initiatives and approaches tackling the cyberbullying problem, best practice Europe-wide, as well as practical guidance and resources for trainers working with the target groups of:

- Pupils
- Parents
- Teachers, schools and other professionals

The manual concludes with a comprehensive compilation of supporting references, Internet links and other resources for trainers (Mc Guckin and Crowley, 2012; Mora-Merchan and Jäger, 2011). The outputs from another EU supported project (COST Action IS0801: <http://sites.google.com/site/costis0801>) will also prove beneficial in this area, with detailed attention to definitional and measurement issues, national and international policy analyses, practice, experiences and outcomes (Perren *et al.*, 2012). Indeed, a new EU funded project, CyberTraining-4-Parents (Project number: 510162-LLP-1-2010-1-DE-GRUNDTVIG-GMP) will provide specific advice, guidance and resources for parents/carers.

At the curriculum level, “The Revised Curriculum for Northern Ireland” (introduced in 2007/ 2008) should enhance personal awareness among children and young people of the stressors in their lives and their capacity to deal with them. At primary school level, a new area of learning, “Personal Development and Mutual Understanding”, has been introduced. At post-primary, “Learning for Life and Work” has been introduced. These new areas of learning include Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) and Citizenship education where pupils explore, respectively, issues such as developing positive relationships and also diversity and respect for others, including those of differing sexual orientation. Young people are also encouraged to examine the organisation and structures of society and relationships.

Bullying and cyberbullying: The legal response: In terms of the management of bully/victim problems, legislation was introduced in the Province in 2003 (The Education and Libraries [Northern Ireland] Order 2003: DENI, 2003) which requires all schools to have a specific, standalone, anti-bullying policy (specifically Articles 17, 18 and 19). The implementation of this new legislation and accompanying guidance from DENI should serve to ‘copper-fasten’ Mc Guckin and Lewis (2008) finding that, in the absence of legislation, the vast majority of schools are proactive in the management of such problems.

Article 17 of the Order relates to the “Welfare and Protection of Pupils” and places a statutory duty upon Boards of Governors (BoG) to safeguard and promote the welfare of registered pupils at the school at all times when the pupils are on the premises of the school; or in the lawful control or charge of a member of the staff of the school. Accompanying guidance (DENI, 2003 [para. 4]) states that pupil welfare embraces all aspects of pastoral care, child protection, pupil behaviour, health and well-being, safety and security. The guidance also reflects that this new duty makes explicit an implied duty of care which is already exercised by school managers and provides BoG with the legal basis for taking an active interest in all aspects of a school’s activities that promote pupil welfare (DENI, 2003 [para. 3]).

Article 18 of the Order relates to “Child Protection Measures” and requires the BoG of all grant-aided schools to ensure that they have a written child protection policy. This policy must reflect any guidance issued by DENI, the Education and Library Board where the school is located (ELB: geographical area of centralised administration) and, where appropriate, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). The BoG is required to determine the measures to be taken by all persons associated with the school to protect pupils from abuse and to review these measures from time to time. “Abuse” as defined in the legislation

includes sexual abuse and abuse causing physical or mental harm to a child. DENI (1999) published a booklet *Pastoral Care in Schools: Child Protection* which is the principle guidance issued by DENI in this area and contains advice and procedures for handling child protection issues in grant-aided schools.

Article 19 of the Order amends Article 3 of the Education (NI) Order 1998, which is the primary legislation dealing with school discipline/promoting positive behaviour (DENI, 2001). Article 19 places new duties upon the school, as follows:

- The BoG shall consult with registered pupils and their parents before making or revising the school’s disciplinary policy
- The Principal shall determine measures to be taken to prevent all forms of bullying among pupils
- The Principal shall consult with registered pupils and their parents before deciding upon measures to encourage good behaviour and to prevent bullying

Accompanying guidance (DENI, 2003 [paras. 14 and 15]) recommends that all schools will need to be satisfied that their current discipline/promoting positive behaviour policy deals with the prevention of bullying in a sufficiently clear and robust way to satisfy this legal requirement. Any revision of existing school disciplinary/promoting positive behaviour policies must be preceded by a consultation exercise with registered pupils and their parents.

As well as the Articles within the 2003 Order, DENI (2007) issued a circular in relation to the acceptable use of the Internet and digital technologies in schools. The circular re-emphasised that BoG of grant-aided schools have a duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils (Article 17) and to determine the measures to be taken at the school to protect pupils from abuse (Article 18) and that in the exercise of those duties, BoG must ensure that their schools have a policy on the safe, healthy, acceptable and effective use of the Internet and other digital technology tools. The BoG is also guided to ensure the active promotion of safe and acceptable working practices for all staff and pupils – a measure that will serve to reassure parents and guardians. The circular contains a section on child protection, bullying and harassment, with specific advice on dealing with cyberbullying. The guidance also has sections relating to management responsibilities in school, best practice codes for safe Internet use, Internet safety education for people using school ICT resources and information on social software, including Internet chat rooms, instant messaging technology and social networks. As with the iterative development and implementation of any good policy, it is also pointed out that it is essential that

school policy and practices be kept under frequent review as new challenges, threats and legal requirements emerge regularly. This is made explicit in terms of the statutory duty under Article 18 and the need to revise child protection policies to ensure that they reflect recent DENI guidance on this issue.

In terms of criminal law, there are three pieces of legislation which may provide protection from cyberbullying (Protection from Harassment [NI] Order 1997; Malicious Communications [Northern Ireland] Order 1988; The Communications Act 2003).

Whilst the Protection from Harassment (NI) Order 1997 was passed following concern that stalking was not well dealt with under existing legislation, the Act goes beyond the issue of stalking and covers harassment in a wider sense. Article 3 of the Order states that it is unlawful to cause harassment, alarm or distress by a course of conduct and states that:

“A person must not pursue a course of conduct (a) which amounts to harassment of another and (b) which he knows or ought to know amounts to harassment of the other”.

In terms of dealing with perpetrators of harassment, Article 4 provides that a person guilty of an offence of harassment under Article 3 shall be liable, on summary conviction, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months, or a fine not exceeding £5000, or both. The legislation provides that a civil claim may also be brought by a victim in the High Court or County Court and that damages may be awarded for any anxiety caused by harassment and any financial loss resulting from harassment. The court may also grant a restraining order which shall prohibit the defendant from pursuing any further conduct which amounts to harassment or will cause a fear of violence. If without reasonable excuse the defendant does anything which breaches the court order this will amount to a criminal offence and the defendant shall be liable, on summary conviction, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months, or a fine not exceeding £5000, or both.

Under the Malicious Communications (Northern Ireland) Order 1988 it is an offence to send an indecent, offensive or threatening letter, electronic communication or other article to another person with intent to cause distress or anxiety. Under section 43 of the Telecommunications Act 1984 it is a similar offence to send a telephone message which is indecent, offensive or threatening. Both offences are punishable with up to six months imprisonment and/or a fine not exceeding £5000.

The most recent piece of legislation relevant to the issue of cyberbullying, The Communications Act 2003, deals specifically with the improper use of a public electronic communications network. Section 127 of the Act provides as follows:

“1. A person is guilty of an offence if he - (a) sends by means of a public electronic communications network a message or other matter that is grossly offensive or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character; (b) causes any such message or matter to be so sent. 2. A person is guilty of an offence if, for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience or needless anxiety to another, he - (a) sends by means of a public electronic communications network, a message that he knows to be false; (b) causes such a message to be sent; or (c) persistently makes use of a public electronic communications network. A person guilty of an offence under this section shall be liable, on summary conviction, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months or to a fine not exceeding £5000, or to both”.

Bullying and cyberbullying: The important supporting role of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI): In a comprehensive factsheet concerning cyberbullying and the law in Northern Ireland (http://www.niabf.org.uk/cms/index.php?option=com_contentandtask=blogcategory&id=36&Itemid=57), NIABF very usefully point out the role of the PSNI and encourage parents/carers to make contact and seek support from the PSNI when bullying occurs. The guidance highlights that contact, at an initial level, can be with the Community and School Officer or the Crime Prevention Officer who is placed in each Policing District. The factsheet offers guidance in relation to the importance of highlighting any evidence which may exist (e.g., downloaded website pages, text messages, or other notes). Considering the ethno-political context of Northern Irish society, the guidance offers the important reminder that where there are any specific references to Religious, Sectarian, Racist, Disablist, or Homophobic comments, it is important that these are highlighted to the PSNI as the incident may be considered a HATE Incident / Crime. In terms of the impact on the victim, the guidance also indicates the importance of informing the PSNI of any impact the incident(s) has had on the daily life of the child or young person. In terms of investigation, it is pointed out that the PSNI Officer will make enquiries, speak to the child/young person (with appropriate supervision) and try to establish any offending or “at risk” behaviour by the person involved. In terms of outreach activity, it is noted that the PSNI have a framework called the Youth Diversion Scheme, which allows for both types of behaviour to be addressed. The PSNI also deliver an educational programme entitled “Citizenship and Safety Education”, which incorporates lessons on Internet safety and bullying and can support schools/parents groups in delivering information on both subjects.

DISCUSSION

From research studies among children and young people in the Province, we know that whilst “traditional/f2f” forms of bully/victim problems continue to be pervasive, cyberbullying is an emerging form of peer aggression among this “always on” generation (Belsey, 2004), with involvement in such problems having a deleterious effect on health and well-being. With all of the legislative and practical support available to them, it would be an opportune time for schools to re-evaluate and update their policies and procedures in this area. Indeed, a follow-up to Mc Guckin and Lewis (2008) pre-legislation survey would be most welcome. The role of school management and the school community, as well as the input from psychologists and other professionals, is becoming even more important, as children continue to develop in a fast changing world. Everyone with an interest in the safety and well-being of children should re-double efforts in terms of prevention and intervention, especially in relation to the newly emerging cyberbullying phenomena. Indeed, it is not only schools that need to be aware of the impact of cyberbullying. All parents and adults with an interest in the safety and well-being of children should re-double efforts to understand the world of the net generation (Lloyd and Devine, 2009). As a cautionary note about cyber-safety: if you don’t understand it, you can’t teach it!

In 2013, Northern Ireland continues on a road of political and social reform (and ease), now celebrating six years of cross-community power sharing in a devolved Assembly (local Parliament). This stability, if it continues, would allow for more meaningful comparisons between Northern Ireland and those other countries reviewed in Mora-Merchan and Jäger (2011). However, considering that citizens (including children) still experience the effects of political aggression (e.g., existence of dissident republican paramilitary groups) and a school system that is still predominantly based on a categorical system of “Catholic” or “Protestant”, future research should aim to explore experiences of children in the Province regarding low-level aggression (e.g., f2f, cyber) in comparison to their peers in other countries reviewed in Mora-Merchan and Jäger (2011) so as to ascertain whether any differences exist in relation to focus, content and impact (e.g., health and well-being) of cyberbullying. Thus, any suggestion that knowledge of such issues is easily transferred from neighbouring countries requires caution. Country specific knowledge, as reviewed here, is vital in any cross-national consideration of bully/victim problems. Only by understanding the context of aggression in Northern Ireland society (historically and recently), can we explore the lasting effects of how societies make the transition from “conflict” to “peace”.

In terms of a future research agenda, it would be useful to make meaningful comparisons between the nature, incidence, correlates and personal experience of cyberbullying among children and young people in Northern Ireland and other countries with either similar or distinctive social and or political legacies. An obvious comparison country, one that made a social and political transition in a more peaceful manner is the Czech Republic. With country specific reviews of both Northern Ireland and the Czech Republic (for example), it would be possible to compare and contrast the ongoing knowledge, attitudes and perceptions regarding such issues.

Mora-Merchan and Jäger (2011) present an easily accessible companion reader for anyone with an interest in cyberbullying. The addition of a country specific review of Northern Ireland leads to a more encompassing understanding of how cyberbullying is experienced in a region with a turbulent recent history of aggression and violence and lends itself to the development of further questions for researchers, practitioners, policy makers and the general public to explore.

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