

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM OIDEACHAS, BREISOIDEACHAS AGUS ÁRDOIDEACHAS, TAIGHDE, NUÁLAÍOCHT AGUS EOLAÍOCHT

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SCIENCE

Déardaoin, 5 Samhain 2020

Thursday, 5 November 2020

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 11.30 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 11.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Teachtaí Dála/Deputies	Seanadóirí/Senators
Rose Conway-Walsh,	Aisling Dolan,
Jim O'Callaghan,	Eileen Flynn,
Pádraig O'Sullivan,	Rónán Mullen,
Marc Ó Cathasaigh,	Fiona O'Loughlin,
Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire,	Pauline O'Reilly.
Aodhán Ó Ríordáin.	

Teachta/Deputy Paul Kehoe sa Chathaoir/in the Chair.

Scrutiny of EU Legislative Proposals

Chairman: I propose that COM (2020) 485 warrants no further scrutiny. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Bullying in Schools: Discussion

Chairman: On behalf of the committee, I welcome: Dr. Angela Mazzone, a psychologist and post-doctoral researcher in anti-bullying studies; Dr. Seline Keating, assistant professor in social, personal and health education and research fellow in anti-bullying studies; and joining us online is Dr. Tijane Milosevic, the Marie Sklodowska-Curie ELITE-S post-doctoral fellow. Our guests are all from the National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre in Dublin City University, DCU. Professor James O'Higgins Norman, director of the centre, cannot be with us today but I would like to thank him for his assistance and support while we were trying to organise this meeting. I will shortly ask our guests to brief the committee on school bullying with specific reference to cyberbullying and Internet security during Covid-19.

Today is a special day. It is the first United Nations Day against Violence and Bullying at School including Cyberbullying. On behalf of the committee, I would like to say that we are honoured to have the opportunity to publicly support such an important international event. I would also like to commend the National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre, which has been instrumental in establishing this day. I genuinely hope it plays a pivotal role in highlighting the issues and encourages all those involved in education to commit to an inclusive culture in schools so that bullying is never tolerated. I also hope the voices of young people are heard and listened to in this important work.

I will invite the witnesses to make a brief opening statement, which will be followed by questions from members. I will invite our guests to make a brief opening statement which will be followed by questions by members of the committee. The committee will publish the opening statement on its website following the meeting.

Before we begin, I remind members of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person or body outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

Many school principals from primary and second level schools will be watching this morning. Transition year classes across the country are also watching for what will be an important conversation. Bullying in schools includes many types of bullying, including physical and verbal. In recent years, it has changed in recent years with the occurrence of cyberbullying. This bullying can have serious effects on many people, including suicide.

Witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their presentation to the committee. This means they have an absolute defence against any defamation action for anything they say at the meeting. However, they are expected not to abuse this privilege and it is my duty as Chairman to ensure that this privilege is not abused. If their statements, therefore, are potentially defamatory in regard to an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative that they comply with any such direction. Dr. Milosevic is giving evidence remotely from a place outside of the parliamentary precincts and, as such, may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as a witness who is

physically present. Witnesses have already been advised that they may think it appropriate to take legal advice on this matter.

As a witness participating in this committee session from another jurisdiction, they will have been advised that they must also be mindful of the domestic law and how it may apply to the evidence they may give.

They are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person or body outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. If their statements are potentially defamatory to any identifiable person or entity they will be directed to discontinue so as not to repeat that.

At the conclusion of today's meeting, I will ask all members to stand for a few moments to show that this committee stands against bullying.

I ask Dr. Mazzone to make her opening statement

Dr. Angela Mazzone: We thank the committee for inviting us to discuss school bullying with specific reference to cyberbullying and Internet security during Covid-19. I am delighted and honoured to be here.

I will outline the main points of our submission to the committee. Concerns about children being bullied online have increased in recent months due to the measures adopted in response to the pandemic. When children use educational platforms and social media and are more connected with peers online, the opportunity for cyberbullying and other forms of online abuse might increase. Cyberbullying consists of negative behaviour occurring through electronic means of communication that is either repetitive and long-lasting or occurs once but is intrusive and leaves the target unable to stand up for themselves.

Cyberbullying can involve a large audience, a distance between the perpetrator and the target and anonymity. The national Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre conducted a research study on the online experience of Irish children aged ten to 18 years and their families during the Covid-19 lockdown. It found 28% of children in the sample have been the target of cyberbullying during that time and 50% have seen others being cyberbullied. It is important to underline that online interactions are likely to mimic in person dynamics, meaning that some adolescents may have already had problematic peer interactions before the pandemic. However, international research also shows that maintaining online social connections has been important for mental health outcomes during the Covid-19 restrictions. Furthermore, not every risk will result in harm and some risks will help develop resilience and digital skills.

Although cyberbullying incidents often occur outside school grounds, fall out and consequences can filter into the school environment. Overall, research suggests that stopping bullying and cyberbullying should be a combined effort of students, parents and educators. Based on this, we suggest the committee considers the following points. Research shows that it is challenging for school principals to implement the most practical aspects of the anti-bullying procedures. These challenges could be overcome by offering more support and training to both principals and school staff. It would be beneficial to schools to have in place a specific anti-bullying audit tool in place to assist with the oversight management of their anti-bullying policy. Additional funding should be provided for the establishment of a permanent observatory based at the National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre to continually measure

bullying and cyberbullying nationwide. We propose revising the current anti-bullying procedures for primary and post-primary schools to represent current bullying prevention and intervention research and the changes in society. Online safety and anti-bullying and cyberbullying prevention programmes implemented in schools should be evaluated continuously. Online safety messages must be designed in such a way that they resonate with children and young people. We suggest enhancing engagement with social media and other online platforms and other stakeholders such as online organisations to optimise the reporting process and provide schools with effective ways to report cyberbullying and work on take-down measures. Existing social structural inequalities are being exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis. Victimised children belonging to minority groups may not have access to social support services. These children may be in great need of counselling and psychological support. Continuing professional development for teachers, special needs assistants and ancillary staff should include a strong focus on tackling bullying and cyberbullying in line with the Teaching Council guidelines. Any future anti-bullying changes should reflect current developments at policy and curriculum content level. We recommend that anti-bullying prevention and intervention be embedded in existing school policy and curriculums.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: This is a subject I know quite a bit about because I worked on papers before. I published a paper with Dr. Stephen Minton and did a lot of work with Trinity College Dublin's anti-bullying centre going back years. My greatest frustration is that the subject keeps being analysed and talked about but there is a lack of mainstreaming or implementation of models of very good practice. I was glad to hear Dr. Mazzone speak of the necessary training and supports. It is probably more than ten years since we developed a whole-community approach to anti-bullying, which involved school transport, efforts outside and inside school and training for teachers that was approved by the Educational Research Centre in Drumcondra. All of that was done but the resources to implement and mainstream it were not forthcoming. How can we all work together to stop talking about the issue? It is almost like there is an industry around it - I sometimes feel the same about mental health - but we do not actually get to take action. Young people's lives are being destroyed while we analyse all this. All of us on the committee, the Government, academics and everyone else have a responsibility to ensure there is implementation and resources for schools. They do not have the resources - let us face it. They are just trying to cope with what they can do. There are the most fantastic anti-bullying policies, but there will be schools that say bullying does not happen in their school, which always worries me because bullying behaviour can happen anywhere there are human beings. We have to recognise and face up to that. How do we better work together in order that the resources are in place, that the audit tool is in place and accepted and that there are resources for continuous evaluation of what is happening? I mean a 360° evaluation whereby the students and the young people are involved as well as the bus drivers, the parents, the GAA team and everybody else. I know that was a bit long-winded but I am passionate about this subject because I have seen too many lives destroyed because bullying behaviour was not addressed.

Dr. Angela Mazzone: As the Deputy said, anti-bullying policies are important. As we have shown in our submission, however, teachers or other school staff and even parents may not integrate the school-level changes or contribute to such change or even to the policies. The school may tick the boxes and have the policy but, for instance, children might not be even aware of the policies. Perhaps we need to make the policies available in an accessible language for the children. That is the first step but it is clearly not enough. In the international context there are countries where one anti-bullying programme has been implemented nationwide based on research. If there is lots of fragmentation and lots of commercial programmes, they might not work. Programmes should be evidence-based. We need to rely on evidence-based

programmes. They have proved effective in other nations because they are grounded in theory and research, updated regularly and receive support from the state or the ministry of education. Finland, for example, has a national anti-bullying programme which is implemented in 95% of schools across the country. A national evidence-based programme could help, but these programmes should be also sensitive to the context. We need to adjust them to the needs of each context. In addition, bullying is a very complex phenomenon. Deputy Conway-Walsh mentioned the bus driver. Bullying happens especially when supervision is low, so we need to involve everyone, all social actors. That is the main idea in the whole-school approach. With bullying, children are embedded in many social contexts, so it is essential to involve all those social contexts and raise awareness about the problem. In addition, children need consistent messages. The message they get in school should be in line with the messages they get in other contexts, online and offline.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Would the witnesses say we have failed as a State to invest in tackling bullying within both our schools and our communities when Finland is considered? I am very familiar with the models used there.

Dr. Seline Keating: It is not necessarily that we have failed. The year 2013 was a huge positive step in that every school in Ireland had to have an anti-bullying policy. Where we are struggling is having these policies active and engagement. The role of parents and guardians in supporting schools can never be overestimated. Parents need to know what to do if their child is being bullied or is the bully. They need support. The model that may be in place is parent talks and teacher talks. I do not think talking is enough. School staff and parents need to be involved in an experiential approach whereby they are not being talked at but are actively involved and trained and have acquired a skill set to handle bullying, which is really important.

Perhaps one of the failures, if there is one, is that anti-bullying policies and the oversight management are not being evaluated annually, as recommended in the 2013 guidelines. Much of that is down to curriculum overload, administration overload, not having the time and, most importantly, not knowing how even to approach this element. Having an audit tool will make it feasible for all schools to check in on their anti-bullying policies and see what is working. Most importantly, when we look at what schools are doing, we need to look at the positives as well such that there is a balanced view and that when schools analyse their anti-bullying policies, that audit tool gives them the opportunity to see the areas in which they are succeeding and then the areas that need improvement. This will enhance the self-esteem of school staff as well. Perhaps they will feel that the communication of the school's anti-bullying policy is working really well but that they really need to work more on including the pupils in their school. Perhaps they will suggest that for the next school year they focus directly on that and involve staff, pupils and parents in the ways in which they can do that and then, the following year, check whether they tackled that and devise another action plan such that there is a realistic cycle approach each year.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I appreciate the opportunity to speak second because I have to go the Seanad for the Order of Business. The witnesses are very welcome. This is a very emotional but very interesting topic. It is one of the biggest challenges of our times in education when we consider some of the research that has been carried out show the levels of anxiety among young people, to show that one in three is being bullied in school and that one in ten is being bullied through social media. The huge increase we have seen in the past few months in the number of young people being bullied through social media is quite frightening, to say the least, particularly those who are bullied because of their identity, sexuality or race or colour.

That really opens up what a difficult world we are living in and shows the tools and resources we need to give our young people. Life is difficult enough, but when they have to deal with this on top of everything else, it makes life very difficult for the individual, his or her family members and the members of the school. In all this we have to think about the perpetrator as well. While the victim is at the heart of what we want to do, the problem is that there is somebody who is perpetrating this behaviour who may not understand the impact it is having. This may be for myriad different reasons in their own lives. Examining such behaviour is every bit as important because if we deal with a case of bullying in which one child or student is rescued, there is the absolute likelihood that if the behaviour is not addressed by the person perpetrating the bullying behaviour, he or she will go on to do it again.

I have spoken to a number of principals and teachers about bullying and how they handle it. I completely agree with the view that we need to invest more funding in longitudinal studies to examine the types of interventions that are there. I have come across three different areas that seem to have made a positive difference, and I would be very interested to hear the witnesses' views on them. One principal spoke to me about a restorative justice practice that she has introduced in her school. She has found it incredibly effective, particularly in dealing with ongoing behaviour from a child bullying others. I would certainly like to see that rolled out. I would like to hear the witnesses' views on it. The Joint Committee on Education and Skills of the previous Oireachtas looked at the area of positive mental health and the potential and positive possibilities of introducing mindfulness in schools. I spoke to some of the schools in my area in Kildare. A local drama teacher, Paula Conlan, introduced mindfulness sessions. She did them online during Covid, which was fantastic, and the schools disseminated them. They found that a positive tool in bringing harmony and serenity to the classroom.

The other area is drama and the creative arts, specifically improvisation and role play, with young people playing the role of a victim or bully and exploring the feelings that brought out. Peter Hussey of Kildare Youth Theatre has done incredible work. I have attended some of the workshops. That type of initiative is happening outside schools, which is important because we are looking at this as a whole-school community and as a society in the context of how we can deal with bullying in and outside schools. One can lead to the other. I am interested in the witnesses' views on that.

Looking at some of the submissions, it is shocking to see peer bullying going on even at preschool and early childhood centres. That is obviously a situation where early intervention is important, to help both the victim and the bully.

Dr. Seline Keating: The continuity and early intervention are important. Each education sector needs to have a spiral approach so that they add to the learning from the early childhood setting to primary and post-primary school, and that connections are made between the three sectors of education. The Senator raised a good point about the role of the perpetrator. One important thing that is present in some existing anti-bullying programmes is looking at the bullying circle and the role of the bystander. If one looks at the anti-bullying role that pupils can play, Daniel Olweus has led much theory in the field, looking at the relationship one has to the bully and the victim and how one responds. When standing up for someone, one does not have to put one's self in danger and directly go to the bully. Telling someone, knowing who to tell and how to tell it can be effective.

The Senator mentioned drama, which is a good tool to use in the classroom. Having opportunities for pupils to have the opening sentence, to start this conversation with a parent or teacher, to develop empathy, to walk in the shoes of what it is like to be someone experiencing

that, and to look at feelings and emotions, is key to bullying prevention and intervention.

Chairman: Does Dr. Mazzone want to add to that?

Dr. Angela Mazzone: I think I would just repeat what was said.

Chairman: Okay. We will have plenty of time at the end.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: The witnesses mentioned Finland. I am always interested when people mention that country, which is very different from Ireland. It has a different education system, fundamentally underpinned by the radical idea of equality. It does not have the multitude of patrons that we have here. When the relevant legislation was introduced in 2013, it was considered slightly controversial because we were asking schools with a religious ethos to put in place anti-homophobic and anti-transphobic policies which, it could be suggested, were not in keeping with their ethos. Is there evidence of the nature of bullying changing from school to school here? In Ireland, we disproportionately separate children and decide that difference is important. Approximately 17% of children attend single-gender schools. One third of Irish second-level schools are single gender. I have already mentioned the religious dimension. We separate children on the basis of income. Many other European countries are like that. Are there different dynamics of bullying in different types of school and is the way to address it different? Is addressing bullying now different to how it was 20 years ago because of the nature of social media? I know the witnesses will say yes. Would the witnesses agree that it can be difficult for a school to tackle bullying regardless of resources because it does not stay in the school? There used to be a time when a child went home from school where the bullying took place and back into his or her family's embrace, and had to endure or worry about it the next year. Now it follows the child via a mobile phone, smartphone or other connectivity that young people have. It is not necessarily something that they can switch off, or it is more difficult to.

The next question that I have is about what bullying actually means. Some parents do not understand the nature of bullying and what it means. A fight, scrap or name-calling can happen in a school but that is not bullying. Bullying is a repeated action over a period of time. It is about power. Sometimes many interactions between a school authority or parent body are about incidents which are called bullying but are not bullying. I know Senator O'Loughlin had to go but I am interested in what she said about the person who is the bully or is called the bully, how that person identifies and views himself or herself and how our policies can get that person to change his or her behaviour. I know we have this no-blame approach that has been used in certain circumstances and in certain schools. Parents do not like it because they want a perpetrator and a victim. If their child has been victimised, they will then say that that person has done it, but if one stands back from it, both children are victims. One child is trying to act out something that he or she feels gives him or her power in a dysfunctional, destructive way and that needs to be analysed and corrected, because that child is feeling hurt as much as the child who is on the receiving end of it.

I know I am asking a lot of questions but I will give the witnesses time to respond. Parents are a significant part of the answer. What strategies do the witnesses feel have worked? Children do not live in schools. Regardless of whether there was or was not connectivity with on-line devices, parents have to accept that children live in a community and a family, so school is only one element of their lives and cannot solve all their problems. Parents also need to realise that confrontational, humiliating behaviour, if it has come into our culture, which I believe it has more than in the past, will be identified, copied and repeated by children in their own lives and interactions. Parents have a powerful role in finding solutions.

Dr. Seline Keating: I can answer part of this.

Chairman: I will ask Dr. Milosevic to speak too because I see her nodding. Does Dr. Keating wish to speak first?

Dr. Seline Keating: The Deputy raised one of the most important issues, which is defining bullying. From my own experience of being a primary school teacher, before I began work in DCU, bullying can be a buzzword and is often used incorrectly. One of the key steps that schools have to take is to have a clear definition of bullying. Its three features are repetition, the imbalance of power and the intent to hurt someone. It is important when working with pupils and adolescents that they know the difference between having a laugh and slugging, and when that moves into the realm of being bullying behaviour. Pupils are sometimes unaware that they are actually bullying. We need to be clear in our definition and make it accessible to parents. The definition should not be too wordy. It should be in language friendly to pupils, adolescents and parents. I spoke earlier about parental involvement. There is not a one size fits all approach to get parents involved. Schools have to be adaptable and flexible. They know the community that their school is positioned in. One has to give schools some agency in how to approach this. It involves giving guidelines regarding approaches that are inclusive of parents so that they are not just listening and being told what to do but are part of the conversation, can ask questions and get some type of training. This training should be provided at times that are flexible such as at the morning drop-off time, rather than during the evening after a day of work. It involves utilising and optimising Zoom and online platforms to allow parents to connect in from home and still be part of anti-bullying prevention and intervention. We need to look at different models because one size may not fit all. We need options for schools so that they can choose those that suit the needs of the communities in which they operate, which is really important.

Dr. Tijana Milosevic: I would like to add to the discussion one actor that has not been mentioned so far but is very important in addressing this issue, namely, the role of online or social media platforms. This is the research with which I have been dealing. We need to add that to the discussion. There have been regulatory efforts in Ireland in the form of the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill, which is in the works, that have proposed to enhance the role that social media companies play and ensure they assist in ensuring that children, teachers and parents have effective ways to report when cases like this happen. One of the problems we see is when a case happens, even now, especially in the context of Covid when much schooling has happened online, the line between school bullying and out-of-school bullying will become ever more blurry. It is extremely important to have a way to effectively report and engage the platforms to assist cases when these happen. That is one actor whose responsibility in all of this needs to be brought into this discussion.

The second point is the issue of culture, which has been mentioned, and the difference between drama and the cases of cyberbullying and what is not cyberbullying and bullying. Children get involved in conflict and there is a lot of issues around the issue of drama, which happens in the process of social positioning. This means that children, especially adolescents, are trying to find their way and their identity. In this process of establishing power, power and balance happen as well and the line between cyberbullying and drama can be very blurry. It is extremely important not to flood schools with cases of bullying and cyberbullying that do not actually amount to the definitional criteria. At the same time, it is extremely important to provide help to those children who might be suffering the process of drama because they do not have sufficient resilience in this process of social positioning and establishing who they are in a group. It is extremely important to make sure everyone gets the help while maintaining this idea

of the boundary between definitional bullying and cyberbullying is and what falls outside it. It involves the role of school culture and an understanding of how the broader culture in which we live affects bullying. We see that in the case of the US elections and the discursive culture of the past few years. At the same time, we see the culture on social media where children learn to take their value and identity from how many likes they have, how many shares they have, how they look and if they look good enough and get social approval. All of that needs to get into anti-bullying and cyberbullying prevention. It involves bringing in the social media platforms and, at the same time, understanding what is the role of the broader culture in all of this and how we are teaching children to derive their self-worth. That is a broader cultural issue.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I thank the witnesses for the presentation. From what Dr. Mazzone said, the nature of bullying has changed and there is less of a safe space. Deputy Ó Ríordáin referred to it as well. Even in terms of the bleed between what happens within school and outside the school gates, it now does not stop at the front door but goes all the way to the child's bedroom if he or she has a smart device. It no longer necessarily stays local. It is no longer necessarily within a child's school community or town. It has the capacity to go nationwide or wherever else. It is certainly increasing pressure. Children have fewer and fewer safe places to go where they can be themselves and engage in that business of identity-finding, to which Dr. Milosevic referred, in a non-social media-mediated environment.

Dr. Milosevic referred to some of the social media platforms. Are we seeing any new platforms emerging. I always find it difficult. I have just caught up with TikTok but I am sure that the next one has already superseded it. I also wanted to ask about online educational resources. What we often see is bleed between those things. If people are using Seesaw, it might not be the case that the bullying is happening on Seesaw. It could be screenshot and shared somewhere else. Are we seeing any evidence of an emergence of bullying patterns in educational software or are we seeing that migrating to other social media platforms? To simplify the question, where is cyberbullying happening and is it changing due to Covid?

Dr. Tijana Milosevic: I would be careful about singling out any particular platform. We have seen an even increase across different types of platforms. We did a Covid study in collaboration with the joint research centre of the European Commission. Europe's Anti-Bullying Campaign did a study that we reported in our submission regarding cyberbullying patterns. We asked children if they had experienced it on different types of platforms. We see that the increase is evenly distributed so we do not see a spike in any particular platform. We must also be careful about how we talk about an increase and not undermine the importance of the issue of bullying and cyberbullying in any way. We see that this sharp increase during Covid is only visible for certain groups - at least in our study - for example, younger boys. We do not see that pattern evenly distributed but short sharp spikes so I cannot tell the Deputy that we need to pay attention to a specific platform. As Teams, Zoom and other platforms are being used for educational purposes, cyberbullying can slip in. I still do not have the qualitative research that our partners are doing where I would be able to give the Deputy specific examples of how this is happening during Covid on different platforms. Once we have that evidence, I will be able to provide the Deputy with it.

In terms of overall patterns, I just received the preliminary report from the study I mentioned, which shows that children in Ireland followed by children from Germany and Italy have seen the highest frequency of different types of meanness. Nasty or hurtful messages were sent to them, nasty or hurtful messages were passed around or they were excluded from group or activity on the Internet. Again, I do not have the data for specific platforms. I am saying that Irish

children are among the top frequency numbers in Europe. That is worrying in and of itself but when we look at the specific platforms, I cannot say that we must pay attention to one platform. We must bring more attention to the better use of educational platforms for online schooling.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I have a few questions for Dr. Keating, who has experience of primary classrooms and referenced curriculum overload. She knows that a lot of this ends up happening in an SPHE lesson, which is 30 minutes per week and, right or wrong, is the one that is most easily pushed to the side. Are we seeing interface with the NCCA to help redesign? Our SPHE curriculum is still largely from 1999 - two decades ago when the world was completely different. If we are interfacing with the NCCA, are we seeing follow through in terms of CPD courses and summer courses for teachers? Are we seeing it in terms of in-service? As much as the SPHE curriculum was designed in a different world, teachers inhabit a different world that also lags two decades behind the reality of the children in front of them. That needs to be updated. Is there sufficient interface between the type of expertise the witnesses are developing and the NCCA, and then translating that down into the primary or secondary school classroom?

Dr. Seline Keating: The Deputy made very good points. Being a lecturer in SPHE, it is frustrating to see that it is only allocated 30 minutes, as that is the subject area where all the skill set for bullying prevention happens. One learns how to become a good decision maker and the consequences of one's decisions. One learns how to manage and regulate feelings and emotions, and how to communicate and resolve conflict. However, 30 minutes per week is not a meaningful way in which to address it. In February this year, the NCCA launched its draft framework for the new primary school curriculum and more time has been allocated to SPHE. It is now in the realm of well-being. Well-being includes SPHE and physical education. There is an open consultation at present on the format the NCCA has proposed. I am chairperson of the SPHE Network in Ireland so I was invited by the NCCA to a meeting and I have given two written submissions in the capacity of being a teacher educator as well as being the chairperson of the SPHE Network. The NCCA has been very open and active in hearing my voice and the voices of others in SPHE.

It extends further through the curriculum as well. At initial teacher education, one cannot forget about the pre-service cohort. There are more than 400 students per year in training colleges such as Mary Immaculate College and DCU. Having SPHE spread across the four-year bachelor of education, B.Ed., programme is very important so students will acquire that skill set and the confidence to deliver SPHE and realise the value and importance of the subject. However, only having such a short time in the four-year course, which represents the 30-minute allocation from the curriculum, does not give students the opportunity to engage in the subject in a meaningful manner. When the Teaching Council reviews the B.Ed. programme model, which is now four years, SPHE should be adopted in a spiral approach, beginning in first year and adding in during second and third year and getting a strong top-up in fourth year, before they are out working with children. That would be very important.

Looking at post-primary level, which has arisen a great deal, I was the lead author-----

Chairman: I must ask you to conclude, Dr. Keating. I will give you a few more seconds to finish as I have to call the next speaker.

Dr. Seline Keating: I was the lead author on the research paper for the NCCA in the review of relationships and sexuality education, which was begun in 2018 by the then Minister, Deputy Bruton. What was echoed in the feedback in the consultation with schools was the need for a post-primary qualification in SPHE. There is none at present. If teachers had that qualification,

students at post-primary level would get the content delivered by a person qualified to do so, rather than it being added-on hours for somebody who might teach mathematics or geography and not have the capacity or competency level to teach it as well. That is a very important element as well.

Chairman: I call Senator Dolan.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I welcome the witnesses. It is great to meet them and to hear such a good debate today. It is wonderful that today is the inaugural UN international Day against Violence and Bullying at School Including Cyberbullying. It recognises the right of children to education, health and well-being. It is fantastic that the President of Ireland, the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, and the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, have released a video this morning highlighting how important it is for all of us, including parents, teachers and especially public representatives, to call this out. I was taken aback when I heard the statistic of 30%, one in three, in every classroom in Ireland. I welcome the resources that are available. I have had a chance to go through websites like *tacklebullying.ie*, *webwise.ie*, *soar.ie* and *spunout.ie*. I am curious about what other proactive measures are being taken along with these websites. What programmes are being delivered, especially during the Covid pandemic? Normally, workshops might have taken place. What else is happening in a proactive way?

There are many symptoms for the students. There is anxiety, distress, a drop in school performance and low confidence and self-esteem. Sometimes it is hard to recognise that this is happening. It is the definition of bullying. We have probably seen it to some extent in all walks of life, or we have heard about it or we know of people to whom it has happened. It is about the tools we need to help. What are the tools for parents and teachers to help them with mediation and, specifically, what mediation training is being given to teachers to help them deal with students who are impacted by bullying and also the children who are doing the bullying in certain instances?

Dr. Angela Mazzone: The Senator asked about corrective initiatives. I can talk about the FUSE programme, an anti-bullying programme which has been implemented since 2019 by the National Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre, ABC, in DCU. Initially, this programme was implemented in post-primary schools and now it will be adapted for primary schools as well. The programme is grounded in theory and research. It is the result of research that ABC conducted in 2017. This research showed that principals had some difficulty putting in place the procedures the national action plan established in 2013. Clearly, principals and school staff need support. This programme aims to train teachers. Again, we rely a great deal on teachers, but they need support and we try to provide the support they need. Teachers are trained to put the programme in place. The FUSE team, my colleagues in ABC, are trying to recruit more schools. Ideally, we would like to recruit as many schools as possible because they could benefit from this programme.

In addition, the programme has a strong focus on by-standing behaviour. That is very important. Bullying is a group phenomenon so we cannot just focus on the perpetrator and the target. We must look at bystanders as well and try to empower them. We are not asking them to behave as heroes, but we try to change the fear norms, meaning that everyone in the group should consider bullying a wrong behaviour. That would empower children to help.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I asked about mediation. What training in mediation has been done with teachers? It could potentially be divided. As the witness says, it is a cross-community approach. We have Garda vetting for people engaging with children. If this is happening

to 30% of children, what training has been put in place for people who will be engaging with children, be they the bus drivers, coaches of clubs and parents, with regard to mediation?

Dr. Angela Mazzone: The FUSE programme was just implemented last year. It does not include this component yet, but I can talk about the international literature. We know of the two approaches - the non-confronting approach and the confronting approach - which are used with the perpetrator of bullying. There are contrasting findings in the literature. Some research shows that the confronting approach, meaning having a serious conversation with the perpetrator of bullying and explaining that the behaviour is unacceptable, seems to work, but there is also research showing that this approach works with short-term episodes of victimisation, those cases where children are victimised for a short time. There is research that shows both approaches are effective in reducing victimisation. As long as bullying is tackled and addressed and not ignored, and the school staff are trained to adapt these two approaches, bullying can decrease.

Senator Aisling Dolan: The witnesses mentioned all the recommendations - the anti-bullying audit, national campaign, monitoring centre, teacher CPD and minority backgrounds. If we are able to implement these, how will we measure success? What will be the measure a year or two years hence?

Dr. Angela Mazzone: Does the Senator mean how we will measure the success of anti-bullying programmes?

Senator Aisling Dolan: Yes.

Dr. Angela Mazzone: Normally, we measure bullying at the base line before implementing the programme. The programme is then implemented and we deliver a post test, meaning that we assess the same behavioural and conduct variables that were assessed at baseline and see if there are any changes in the behaviour and prevalence of bullying and victimisation.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I congratulate DCU for having the only UNESCO chair in bullying. Our guests are world leaders in that respect.

Dr. Angela Mazzone: I thank the Senator.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I thank the doctors for coming in. It has provided great insight. I suppose, while we are not directly involved in how schools deal with this on a daily basis, upset parents come to our constituency offices. I recently had contact with a family of a child who has been through two secondary schools and is currently seeking home schooling. It has a profound, traumatic impact. It can be a traumatic few years that also has a considerable impact on the parents who are impossibly upset and grieving during severe bullying episodes. It can be absolutely appalling.

To speak frankly, I feel lucky in some respects. I turned 18 and did my leaving certificate examinations in 2007 so I was the last to get through the gap before social media and video phones became prevalent. While I had difficult episodes at various stages during my lifetime, at least there was respite when I went home. I have sympathy for children who go through episodes of bullying and do not have that respite because it can follow them home. I also have sympathy for parents who are facing these issues at the moment and who may not have, or feel that they have, the skills to deal with it.

I will ask my questions together. While they are not separate, there are two different ele-

ments to them, the second of which will be digital element. We need to have a sense of how well we are doing to deal with the problem. How successful has the 2013 strategy been? How do we feel those policies have worked? The FUSE programme has been tremendously successful but it has reached in the region of 400 schools while there are approximately 4,000 schools in the country. How much can that programme be expanded? How well are the teacher training colleges doing in ensuring that teachers are sufficiently well trained to deal with bullying incidents?

I am taken with the point that has been made about the bystander approach because the culture within a school is crucial. Sometimes when parents come to us, they suggest that teachers who might be sympathetic may not have the skills and training. They may have said to the parents that they have not been able to demonstrate that there has been bullying because there is no proof and so on. A whole-of-school approach is needed.

It is absolutely right that there be a definition of “bullying” but the problem with a definition is that sometimes people will fall short of it and may not feel that is a fair evaluation. I can imagine a difficult situation for a teacher or a school if a parent comes in and says that their Seanie got a puck on Tuesday and something was said to him on Friday, only to be told that is not bullying. The parent may feel profoundly that it is bullying. That would be a difficult place for a school, stating that an experience, while traumatic, falls short of bullying.

There have been proposals from the Law Reform Commission on digital safety. I introduced the Digital Safety Commissioner Bill 2017, proposing the establishment of a digital safety commissioner and other measures relating to online safety and takedown measures. I understand some proposals from Europe on takedown measures are at the early stages of development. I do not know whether an update can be given on that and whether we are hopeful that European legislation can tackle social media. We can do a lot here but we cannot do it all because they are global entities.

There is a lot in what I have asked for our guests to answer in two minutes. I ask them to do the best they can and to write to me if they do not get to it all.

Dr. Seline Keating: I thank the Deputy for his questions. I will address the issue of the level of success of the 2013 anti-bullying procedures. One of the major positives is that they have created an awareness of bullying at all schools. Every school now has an anti-bullying policy. That was not the case before 2013. Rather, anti-bullying was the subject of a paragraph in the codes of behaviour of schools. That progression is a strong positive. However, elements of the procedures are not being implemented. Some schools may adopt an *à la carte* approach to dealing with bullying. They may not have the confidence or skill set to tackle transphobia or homophobia elements of bullying and, as such, they pick and choose which types of bullying to address. The 2013 anti-bullying policy procedures should be updated soon, rather than allowing another ten or 20 years pass before so doing. The updated procedures should provide guidelines on how to deal with homophobia and transphobia, as well as highlighting to schools the programmes that are in place to help them, such as the All Together Now programme or the Gender Equality Matters, GEM, project at European level that tackles gender-based bullying, gender-based violence and gender stereotyping. Schools should be made aware that there is support available. If pupils and parents can have confidence that a situation will be addressed, that will have a significant benefit. Pupils need to feel there is consistency.

In a case such as that highlighted by the Deputy where a parent contacts the school regarding a matter that may not involve bullying, the parent still needs to be listened to. It may be

preferable to keep a record of that contact. If schools are consistent in recording all incidents, that will highlight patterns such that the school can see at the end of a school year that cyberbullying is a significant issue that keeps coming up or identity-based bullying or racism seems to be prevalent in the school in the past year. When the issue is identified, it needs to be tackled. If a school does not record incidences of bullying or keep records of what has happened, it will not have the opportunity to see the pattern. It needs to be a mandatory component of any revised procedures that schools keep records and that there is consistency among staff. Staff should have a responsibility to keep a record of what was discussed with a parent who contacts them, as well as noting the follow-up in terms of the intervention that needed to be explored and whether it was effective. If the intervention was ineffective, there should be a consideration of what the school could do differently. There should be a consideration of the effects of implementing something but not going back to check in on all of the children involved. The school should also check in with parents and have follow-up questions for and discussions with them.

Dr. Angela Mazzone: The Deputy referred to the FUSE programme and asked how more schools can be reached. It is important to raise awareness of the programme in the first place. Last week, I received emails from teachers who wish to participate in the programme. It is always rewarding to see that schools are at least looking for support and are willing to engage. It is great that the programme will also be implemented in primary schools.

The Deputy raised a point about the definition of “bullying”, but I think that has been addressed by Dr. Keating.

Dr. Tijana Milosevic: On the social media aspect and the regulation part, the online safety media regulation Bill proposes a positive change. I also have high hopes also for the super complaints scheme, which would assist in monitoring what is happening on social media platforms and, when there is a problem, would effectively alert the commissioner in order that the codes can be adjusted. It would also ensure collaboration with social media companies in such situations. In addition, the digital services legislation that is currently being discussed at EU level may enhance the duty of care of social media platforms.

One aspect I wish to emphasise that we still do not have in Ireland and that relates to the difficulties in transposing the audiovisual media services directive is that the individual complaints scheme, which would allow for parents, teachers or children to alert a company regarding a case of persistent bullying on the platform that is not being taken down, is not being instituted at this time. It is important to bear in mind that the fact that the item or items have been taken down can, in and of itself, be of assistance to the child in the case of persistent and serious cyberbullying. The take down first helps to signal that this is wrong behaviour that is not tolerated, and that take down has to happen, but take down in and of itself is not enough. It has to be the full system of assisting the child, which happens at school and family level, which my colleagues have discussed. Viewing these take-down measures and the role of social media companies in isolation is not sufficient. At the same time companies are proposing, and have developed and are innovative in the field of, artificial intelligence. They are using proactive measures to monitor their platforms to catch cyberbullying before it is reported by an individual user. Companies in their transparency reports say the use of artificial intelligence is very effective in addressing the issue. There has to be more transparency in how this is done, however, and also to ensure that we tap regularly valuations from the children’s perspective of these proactive measures.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I thank all the witnesses for coming in today. I apologise that I have my back to the screen, I hope they do not mind. Will Dr. Mazzone or Dr. Keating give an overview of the research they have conducted into the impact of the lockdown on children?

It appears to be the case they were able to assess that children's cyberbullying increased during lockdown. Is that correct?

Dr. Angela Mazzone: Actually, my colleague Dr. Milosevic led that project. I read the report also.

Dr. Tijana Milosevic: As I mentioned earlier, we conducted a study with the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission. This study was also done in ten other European countries with children aged ten to 18. We conducted research into the children's use of digital media, the experience of risks and the exposure to different types of online harm, with cyberbullying being one of those. We have seen a 28% increase in cyberbullying victimisation during the lockdown. We asked children how much cyberbullying they had experienced and if they had experienced it less frequently, with about the same frequency or more frequently during the lockdown than before. That was our focus. We gave them a definition of cyberbullying. This was an increase when compared to previous studies in Ireland that have shown a cyberbullying victimisation rate of about 14% for primary school ages and just under 10% for post-primary school ages. There had been an increase, but as I hinted earlier, I would be careful because while it is an increase it is not as huge a spike as we might have expected based on the media reports we saw during the lockdown. I just have to be careful about that. When we break down the numbers across age groups and gender, one realises that the most frequent answer is "as frequently as before the lockdown". Only for some age groups do we see a large spike with regard to children saying "a lot more frequently during the lockdown than before".

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Was that increase in Ireland correspondingly so in the rest of Europe?

Dr. Tijana Milosevic: As I mentioned, the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission is publishing the report on 20 November, so I just have this one piece of information they were able to share with me, which is that these numbers are among the highest in Europe, among the 11 European countries we studied, followed by Italy and Germany, I believe. To be precise, the measure we recorded in our report is a different one to that recorded in the European Commission's larger study. We must bear in mind that with cyberbullying the issue is that operation-wise analysis is done in different ways and the frequency varies significantly from study to study. It also depends on how we ask the children and how we define cyberbullying in the survey and so on. We must be very careful when talking about frequency with regard to what it is we are actually measuring. This large study reports on a different measure to our study in Ireland. We added questions about cyberbullying in the study in Ireland.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The conclusion of the study was that 66% of all children between the ages of 14 and 16 experienced significantly more cyberbullying during the lockdown. Is that correct?

Dr. Tijana Milosevic: That figure of 66% of 14 to 16-year-old victims relates to direct messaging. It was wrongly reported in the media as referring to 66% of all children in Ireland. That is not correct. Some 66% of children aged 14 to 16 experienced significantly more cyberbullying in direct messaging through applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I will move on to a separate issue about social media companies. Such companies have repeatedly told legislators that they are committed to resolving the problem of online bullying and harassment. Do our guests believe that social media companies are doing enough to meet this challenge?

Dr. Tijana Milosevic: That is a difficult question to answer. Social media companies can do a lot more and that can be achieved through effective regulation. They are doing what they can while being mindful of their business models. There needs to be more transparency there.

One company recently issued a report that shows how different regulatory measures might incentivise a company, advertently or inadvertently, to change its behaviour in regulating online harm. We have to be mindful as to how we design our proposed regulatory measures in order to properly incentivise companies to do what we want them to do. That is difficult to assess if there is insufficient transparency in terms of how the mechanisms of companies, particularly their artificial intelligence, are actually working. More transparency would help us understand how effectively the companies are dealing with these cases already. Especially important in that respect is that there is insufficient research on how the policies of those companies are affecting children. It is extremely important to involve children in the process because there is insufficient research into how the measures that the companies have in place at the moment are impacting children and whether they find them effective. My previous research, for instance, found that social media companies are providing safety centres and other educational measures for children, parents and teachers. Large companies have specially designed sections on their online platforms where they provide a lot of information about how to tackle bullying on their platforms. Based on my research in Norway, many children are not aware of these and are certainly not using them sufficiently. There has to be a greater effort.

In my view, based on research, companies should invest more resources in assisting children with the psychological consequences that they face when they encounter cyberbullying cases on their platforms. There can be a way for regulators to incentivise the companies to assist more.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I thank our guests for their valuable work and for joining us today. I know of hundreds of families around the country who home educate their children. The research from the UK is fairly old and we do not have any research on the reasons people home educate. For this reason, much of my experience is based on anecdotal evidence. That said, the research in the UK shows that approximately 50% of families who home school take their children out of school rather than starting home education for ideological reasons. I am a former chair of Home Education Network Ireland and from the contact I have had, I would say that the same is probably true in Ireland, excepting the current blip of Covid-19 related home education. I have heard stories from one particular family in Galway of a child crying before going to school every day for two years. The family finally took the steps to take the child out of school and found the experience to be like chalk and cheese. Not every family can do that. We are dealing with the problem after the horse has bolted in a sense. We are looking at how we deal with bullying. In the Growing Up in Ireland study, 40% of nine-year-olds - this is going back years - said they had experienced bullying in the previous year. We are dealing with that problem when instead we should be asking how we are organising our education in a way that is facilitating that.

The Sudbury school system in Boston, with which I have many links, has done research on bullying which has shown that if children are with mixed-age groups, it brings out a sense of empathy in them. Are there other steps and changes we can make to our education system rather than dealing with bullying happening in the system as we see it now?

Other families are affected. For instance, transphobia is a significant problem. Many children in the home education community would have experienced transphobia and homophobia. What is it we can do with the schools? Rather than the anti-bullying policies, what can we do with the school structure that would suit our society better and better reflect what is going on

outside school?

Dr. Seline Keating: Schools need to be proactive rather than reactive in that they should not wait for a situation to happen to then respond to it. It goes outside the policy in the sense of looking at different initiatives which schools could be doing.

For example, BeLongTo does a stand-up awareness campaign which is a good opportunity for post-primary schools to get involved with LGBTI inclusivity and promoting a safe climate in their schools. While the policy is a key component, having assemblies and an ongoing awareness throughout the schools is important. It should not just be once-off tokenistic events. It should start in September and be ongoing until the end of the school year in May and June.

There are many different awareness campaigns in schools. Pupils have a voice through student councils in which they can tell what is happening and what they are experiencing. The decisions made at management are representing the reality of what students and children are experiencing. It is important to have their voice, as well as the voice of the parents, to find solutions to ensure that families do not feel they have to pull children out of the school system.

Every child and adolescent in Ireland has the right to feel safe in school. We should be looking at it through the lens of a rights and equality approach to education. Parents should feel safe sending their child to a school. For example with transphobia, if a child is going through that state, then it is important that they are supported by the school and that it is involved with organisations such as Transgender Equality Network Ireland, TENI, to help them. If schools do not know how to help deal with a situation, they should know exactly who to go to for help. TENI and BeLongTo could support both the family and the school. It is important support services are involved and it is not just the schools.

Dr. Angela Mazzone: I could not agree more that a once-off programme does not work and we need continuity. From a behavioural point of view, it is important to work not just on empathy but also on children's attitudes. There is research showing most children actually have anti-bullying attitudes. Why do they not intervene when bullying happens? It is because they believe that the other children would disapprove of their behaviour in standing up. When bullying happens, it is hard to stand up because the other children might be silent. The ones who would like to stand up might have the false belief that the others would not approve of their behaviour.

One step we can take is making children aware of the real beliefs of the others. Many children believe that bullying is wrong and we should make them aware that they can tackle it together. When it comes to diversity and inclusion, transphobia and homophobia make it a complex matter. Children's prejudices and stereotypes are affected by the larger society. Children are embedded in many contexts, so a strong focus on diversity and inclusion might help.

Senator Rónán Mullen: I welcome the witnesses. It strikes me that the problem of bullying is often, sadly, related to what children are experiencing at home. We need to recognise that problematic home lives lead to problematic behaviour in schools. This illustrates the complexity of the problem we have. I have a particular memory of a very impressive school principal in my life who spotted something going on in the classroom with a child at a young age who had prominent ears or something like that. I remember her saying that she would come down like a ton of bricks on anybody who picked on anybody else. It strikes me there is a need to keep matters simple and we must recognise that bullying is a moral issue. Bullying is wrong.

One school principal of whom I am aware operates a three-part formula, saying that bullying is wrong, that one needs to be strong and that one should not leave it too long. He means by this that from the get-go he imparts a strong moral message that bullying is not fair and that it is wrong to pick on somebody, whether it is because of a perception of sexuality or whatever else. He emphasises that the need to be strong is about the building of resilience and children must be helped to see that they can change other people's behaviour in a more positive direction.

The third part, namely, that one should not leave it too long, involves acting quickly and posing questions to parents. For example, parents should consider if their children are too young to be given smartphones. Very often, some of these problems manifest when it is too late for some parents to have considered the necessary strategies that would have prevented them arising in the first place. I am interested in hearing views on that formula. Could steps be taken to increase parents' knowledge of common apps, programmes, social media platforms and particularly the dangers they pose to children? It seems the education of parents is a key part of all this.

The scoping note sent to the committee mentions building resilience in children and young people. We must take every step to prevent bullying in all its forms from occurring but we can look at what happens in the adult world with social media and the likes of Twitter, etc. We can see nastiness and toxic behaviour is not just experienced in childhood. Perhaps it is another reason we must focus on building resilience. As much as we try to work on this in schools, people will face challenges in real life.

Are the witnesses familiar with restorative practice courses in schools, particularly with regard to mediation, as mentioned by Senator Dolan? This is about dealing with schoolyard incidents involving elements of bullying and so on. Is the practice widespread or useful? Will the witnesses comment on such courses?

There is a big debate about identity politics and there are concerns about politics coming into this issue. Bullying is a moral issue and it is a question of how we treat each other. It will ultimately be a stronger approach than seeing this as a legal issue, although we must look at mechanisms. There is a very difficult issue of transpersons and schools will have different views and philosophies. The evidence is not in with many of these areas. We must be careful not to politicise these matters when the strategies we need to combat bullying may be much simpler. Whether a child is being bullied about perceptions of his or her sexuality, body features or as a result of slow learning or a stammer, the same thing is in play and, in a sense, there to be tackled.

I am concerned when I hear one particular reason for bullying because I wonder if it distracts from the need to realise that bullying takes many forms, with each form as bad as the next. I would welcome the thoughts of the witnesses on that matter.

Dr. Angela Mazzone: As the Senator notes, bullying is a very complex phenomenon and it does not just relate to one aspect of life. I can confirm that bullying is viewed by many researchers as amoral behaviour and perpetrators of bullying miss what we call empathic concern towards the target of bullying. These people have the ability to realise their behaviour is harmful but they do not feel a strong concern towards the target. Some successful intervention programmes, therefore, have worked on empathy. This is, of course, a way to address the programme when looking at those children who perpetrate bullying.

Morality is also important when we look at the bystanders because research shows that they

sometimes do not feel the moral responsibility to do anything. They do not even feel the responsibility to report the bullying because they assume it is not their responsibility. Increasing the sense of responsibility, therefore, could be a way to address the problem.

The Senator also mentioned mediation and restorative justice. I am not familiar with this but I can look into it and email some research to her. I know one method called the support group approach has been adopted with the target of bullying and the shared concern method implies having informal meetings between the teachers or some appointed members of staff to talk to the perpetrator of bullying in a kind of indirect way. It is a non-confrontational approach. They try, in a way, to enhance moral compassion and enhance the perpetrator's sense of moral responsibility. This should be a kind of restorative way to somehow address the problem.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I am one of the final speakers and many of the pertinent questions have been asked. I apologise in advance if I end up repeating a few points. I will pick up on Dr. Keating's contribution earlier where she referenced that many teachers who teach the social, personal and health education, SPHE, modules in schools are not qualified to teach that very module. As a teacher, I found myself as one of those and I got the extra few hours in civic, social and political education, CSPE, SPHE or whatever it was. Going forward as a profession, it should be the minimum that teachers are qualified to teach that relevant subject considering the importance we place on well-being.

From much of the testimony given by the witnesses today I put it that we are ticking many boxes in terms of what our boards of management and school management must comply with. We need, however, to recognise that tackling bullying goes beyond just ticking boxes and having anti-bullying policies and so forth. Many people in this room will have sat at board of management meetings over the years and the one thing that comes up is the bullying incidents that month. It might not always be a box-ticking exercise but, certainly, looking from the outside in, it feels that way on reflection.

Many of my questions have already been answered but I will focus on one or two practical issues from a school point of view and being a teacher. In its submission, the ABC made the point that teachers do not always feel responsible for helping students deal with cyberbullying. Will the witnesses elaborate on the responsibilities teachers have with regard to being professionals and employees? What are their responsibilities?

My second question relates to the reference that teachers often respond ineffectively and express a need for additional training. Will the witnesses elaborate on what training is currently *in situ* for teachers and what training, if any, they propose would be beneficial to teachers in terms of continuing professional development, CPD?

My third question relates to guidance counsellors. A number of years ago, as everybody is well aware, a number of guidance counsellor roles were taken out of the education system. Since the restoration of guidance counsellors have the witnesses found instances of bullying and cyberbullying are being treated more efficiently or are the instances of bullying and cyberbullying continuing to escalate despite their restoration? Perhaps the witnesses could just comment on the importance of the role of guidance counsellors in that respect. There was a reference to research carried out by ABC at the end of 2016 that less than half of school principals had a designated person to deal with anti-bullying cases in schools. When I heard that I was astounded. My experience with boards of management goes back perhaps five or six years and every board I have been involved with, which by my count is seven, has had a designated person to deal with it and has ticked those boxes. I was astounded to see, albeit the research

goes back to 2016, that half of schools were non-compliant in that regard and no research might have been done since that report in 2016. Even if ABC has anecdotal research, however, has that improved? Is there further compliance with that?

My final question concerns the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Bill 2017, or Coco's law, which is before the Dáil. I believe it is on Third Stage at present. Can I get the witnesses' professional opinion on that? Perhaps, the question is for Dr. Milosevic. What is her professional opinion on the premise of that Bill and criminalising online bullying? What are her opinions on that?

Dr. Seline Keating: I will tackle the teacher training element and I will split it. I spoke earlier about the in-service element and that there needs to be more at pre-service level so those high numbers of qualified teachers coming out at primary level with the specific SPHE qualification have the confidence and competency levels to deal with anti-bullying situations.

One needs to adopt a CPD model that is realistic if one is taking a whole-of-school approach. I have recently been part of a project where I undertake continual professional development with both primary and post-primary teachers. I have also designed a tool they use as part of it. The feedback has been that adapting it to suit the school's needs by having it straight after school, which fits into the Croke Park hours done by schools, makes it much more feasible.

Looking forward to a possible Government revision of the anti-bullying policy, perhaps schools would be obliged to engage in this for X amount of years so newly qualified teachers and new members of staff do not miss out on that; it will happen again and it is an ongoing CPD that is in line with the Cosán programme.

What is really key with CPD is who delivers it. Schools need guidance on the experts and facilitators they should go to when it comes to CPD. That needs to be considered strongly.

Dr. Angela Mazzone: I thank the Deputy for his question on the criminalisation of bullying. I am in favour of an educational approach because of the reduced responsibility of children. I have also been looking at international laws where cyberbullying is criminalised. First, there are various cyberbullying behaviours. We can think about some behaviours like social exclusion which could be less harmful than other types of behaviour that could be more serious. Of course, I am not saying online social exclusion is not serious. I am not trying to say that because it is harmful as well. Social exclusion is one of the most painful experiences. We need, however, to be careful about the types of behaviour we want to criminalise. As I said, I am in favour of an educational approach. In some countries where cyberbullying is criminalised, educational measures can be literally imposed. I believe education should be a right and an opportunity. It should not be seen as an imposition. We need, therefore, to work on prevention measures.

As for cyberbullying that does not happen on the school grounds, I believe teachers and appointed members of the school staff have a duty of care. I am in favour of supporting them to tackle and not to ignore those incidents because when they are aware of these episodes and ignore them, it could give the false belief to children that this behaviour is tolerated. That is a dangerous message for children because it leads to the normalisation of bullying and cyberbullying. That is something we do not want, of course.

Dr. Tijana Milosevic: I will add that I agree with the point made by Dr. Mazzone about criminalisation. Different Departments have to have different initiatives in mind. In the case of Coco's law and the online safety and media regulation Bill, I favour the other approach because

as we have seen from other calls for criminalising cyberbullying, it can be quite problematic. At the same time, we have to be wary of linking cyberbullying as a cause of suicide. While it certainly can contribute to it, we know from previous research that labelling it as a main cause does not do justice to the complexity of the issue. There has to be an effective way for the companies to remove abusive content but criminalising it may not be conducive to the educational solutions we seek.

On teacher education, which was mentioned, we are developing modules on social media and youth well-being to be delivered to pre-service teachers. It is very important to make teachers aware of the digital environments, and different technological developments and how they relate to cyberbullying. Much work has to be invested into that.

Chairman: I wish to raise a couple of points before I call on other members. Senator Mullen made a point about keeping matters simple. I have had many conversations with school teachers and principals about keeping it simple because much of this can go over the heads of both parents and teachers. Will our guests comment on giving parents the skill set to identify school bullies and where their child may not be doing as well as he or she should be?

There are a number of forms of bullying, such as from pupil to pupil, teacher to teacher, teacher to pupil, and pupil to teacher. Will our guests comment on that? There are isolated incidents where teachers bully pupils, and others where pupils know a teacher is bullying another teacher and feel that because the teacher is doing it, it is okay and they can do it too. In recent days, the US election took place. We have seen some of the tweets that have been posted and the President of the United States, Donald Trump, has been sending out unbelievable tweets. It is almost the case that if world leaders do it, anyone can do it. I would be interested in hearing our guests' points of view on that.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan asked whether social media platforms are doing enough and Dr. Milosevic replied they are doing what they can. Will she comment on that? I believe that they are not doing nearly enough. Some are very good but others are not so good. Will Dr. Milosevic comment on which are good and which are not? Social media platforms include Snapchat, Facebook, TikTok and many others.

Senator Mullen referred to the age groups of people on social media. In some instances, there are children as young as seven and eight years of age on Snapchat. As we know, there have been instances where naked pictures have been sent around on Snapchat. If that is happening at the age of seven or eight, one can imagine what they will be doing when they are 13, 14 or 16 years old.

Dr. Keating spoke about student councils. Is there evidence that if there is a very good student council in primary or secondary school, there tends not to be as much bullying in the school, whether online, physical or mental?

As for teacher training, the Minister for Education will appear before the committee next week or the week after that. Is there something we should pick up on to ensure teachers are educated to tackle this issue? If our guests believe there are teachers who have not been trained in educating pupils on the matter, is there something we can follow up on? The Department action plan on bullying was published in 2013. I would like the witnesses to comment on whether there is a need to update the plan considering how bullying in schools has developed over the years.

The other point I want to raise is the reporting of bullying in schools through the inspectorate. Has evidence been gathered and shared with other schools? For example, a school in Donegal could pick up on what is being done by a school in Wexford. Are incidents that are reported inputted centrally in order to educate other teachers on what is happening so they can pick up on an incident that might have happened in a school?

Dr. Seline Keating: The anti-bullying policy procedures need to be revised. They were published in 2013 and they need to include current research on bullying prevention and intervention. The societal landscape in which children and adolescents are now growing up has significantly changed. Having appendices would be helpful, as would having a section for schools which includes a list of support services that are there to help them if they have specific queries. With regard to child protection procedures, schools have a list of services that can help them if they have an issue, and there should be something similar in the anti-bullying procedures.

It would be good to have a specific tool to measure bullying. If schools are serious about tackling it, they need to see what is happening in the school. Having a tool to measure it could be linked in with the anti-bullying centre, which could work with schools to design a tool. In one school that I taught in, we measured the level of bullying and it was very good to see the level in classes so we could zone in on it. This highlights that a lot of media education and education on social media can happen too late in that it is mainly at fifth and sixth class, and we need to start earlier to educate pupils before they begin their journey with social media.

It would be good to have Department of Education and Skills-approved anti-bullying programmes. There are so many programmes that schools are inundated with them, whereas they need to have one, two or three that are recommended and that they can use. Particularly at primary level, there needs to be a cross-curricular approach so this it is not isolated and where bullying is seen through the holistic development of the child, and where there are opportunities to integrate with the arts and other elements of the curriculum.

We need to have a list of skilled and qualified organisations and facilitators to help with home-school continued professional development and having exemplars in the new procedures for child-friendly and parent-friendly anti-bullying policies that keep it simple so it does not have to be lost in translation. There is a need for readability in these policies. I listened to what the Chairman said about keeping things simple. A lot of this comes down to respect and teaching children, beginning at a young age in early childhood settings, how to respect people. This can have a huge impact as they progress through childhood and adolescence, and even when they go into the workplace. It is very important that, in anti-bullying work, it is not just talking about what bullying is but about promoting respect, celebrating diversity, creating that culture from the get-go in education settings and acknowledging what schools are doing. We need to take the focus away from the “nots” and the things they are not doing. We should look at what they are doing so they get acknowledged for the work they are trying to implement and we can actively look at how to provide support. We all know they need support but action is needed now. It is a question of how we are realistically and authentically going to provide this support to principals and to schools.

The Senator mentioned the student councils. I have not engaged in research on that element but it might be an area that could be explored to see if having the voice of students through a student council is working to help schools deal with bullying. To have school anti-bullying committees and the use of care teams in some schools so they can identify at-risk pupils from an early stage and intervene quicker, rather than leaving it to be reported, might be also beneficial.

Dr. Tijana Milosevic: On the question about social media, when I said the platforms are doing what they can I was referring to established social media companies. I was advised not to name any specifically but it is along the lines of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, that is, the more established companies that have been around for a longer time and that have more resources. That is not enough, because there are many cases that are not dealt with effectively, but one of the challenges is the volume of content and the ability to monitor it adequately.

Another issue I would emphasise in regard to the large companies is there has to be more transparency in respect of how they do what they do and how they regulate the content. In the case of one company, for instance, my research team asked for an anonymised data set to help us optimise a machine-learning tool we were developing to assist it with cyberbullying on its platform, and it was not able to provide us with such a data set. There is not enough transparency for the wider research community outside of the large volume of research that is being conducted in the companies already, given that these companies tend to have their own research initiatives in house. They have access to all our data to do all that research, but they are not necessarily sharing it in a way that is helpful to our community of outside scholars to scrutinise their policies. They are being protective of their business models in ways that are not always transparent to us, and there has to be more transparency in that respect.

For the smaller companies, the problem is different. Very often, a start-up will gain considerable popularity in a short period and will not have the e-safety expertise. Such companies are too small, although they may have gained venture capital and are growing in popularity, so there has to be a system to make it a requirement for certain safety measures to be in place for smaller companies too. Smaller and larger companies, or the more established, older companies and younger companies, face different challenges. Where regulation can assist is in providing the requirements for the smaller companies to have certain standards of effectiveness. At the same time, when a large company tells us that it relies on artificial intelligence to proactively catch cyberbullying cases, it is not enough, in my view, for it to tell us it has caught a certain percentage of cases proactively. We have to be able to understand how that happens and why the company did not catch the cases where children have complained their case was not addressed. It is not enough for social media companies to work in a vacuum and to look solely at their responsibility. There has to be a collaboration between the broader educational system, as my colleagues have outlined, and the social media companies in this respect.

There is a great opportunity, in asking for resources from companies, to assist not only the educational system and also the counselling system. Given that they are established in certain countries and they are complying with the laws, more can be asked of the companies to assist in enhancing the capacity of the entire educational system.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: It is important to acknowledge all the teachers who are doing a fantastic job and all the schools that have created an ethos of zero tolerance to bullying. I return to the community approach, which is very important and works. Baseline studies, measurements and so on were carried out ten years ago and the evidence is there. We need to listen to teachers to determine what resources they will need and to connect that to class sizes, in the context of what teachers and teaching principals are trying to cope with as it is. There is a connection there and we cannot just treat anti-bullying initiatives in isolation.

To what extent do the delays in psychological assessments impact on addressing the bullying behaviour of perpetrators? How much collaboration is there among universities on the research being done? Should legislation in respect of cyberbullying be passed at a member state level or an EU level, or should it be a combination of both? Have any EU member states brought in

legislation that addresses the responsibility of the platforms and the companies involved?

Senator Rónán Mullen: On the question of building up the knowledge of parents, is there more the witnesses can say about what can be practically done to bring them forward and to engage them? It strikes me that with the lifestyles people have now, it is very difficult to get education done outside of school, yet this seems to need a broader community response than simply what goes on in the schools or at occasional parent-teacher meetings.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I want to make an observation and perhaps the witnesses would like to respond. It seems that, in the area of social media, gaming is a conduit for forms of bullying, not just in regard to how people play but also with regard to the gamer-to-gamer chat. I thank the witnesses for attending today.

Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin: I thank the witnesses for their contributions and for their responses to the questions. We have a significant problem. It has always been there but, with the advent of social media, it has escalated to a different level. Whereas, before, if young people were bullied in school or in the school yard, at least they were away from bullying while they were away from the school. However, the type of bullying we have now can pervade somebody's life 24 hours a day, which is hugely regrettable and sad. We have to do what we can to combat bullying, to build resilience and to promote a shared culture of inclusivity and of diversity. We absolutely need to tackle head-on the bullying on social media and to tackle the companies that allow it to happen.

Chairman: To follow up on the point made by Deputy Ó Laoghaire about gaming, this is an issue that comes up quite often. Members who have children, in particular those who have boys, will be very aware of Fortnite. I would be interested in hearing the views of Dr. Milosevic on Fortnite. I ask the witnesses to sum up and I first call on Dr. Keating.

Dr. Seline Keating: I echo Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh in saying we should acknowledge the work that is being done in schools. In my earlier point, I said we should not look at what they are not doing but look at all the wonderful things they are doing. That is evident when we see how happy children were to return to schools, and there is strong evidence in the education system that children love school and love mixing with their friends. That is a positive to take out of the challenging year we have all had.

In regard to the training of parents, I mentioned earlier that we need to look at the different models to enhance the inclusion of parents in training. That training should not just be talks and talking at parents as they need a chance to engage in dialogue and to acquire skills to help them deal with bullying. We also need to accommodate their busy lives and to have it available, say, at drop-off in the mornings, not just at parent evenings. We also need to look at platforms like Zoom and to link in with the National Parents Council, which does webinars for parents. If we can engage parents in this area, it would be of huge benefit.

Since 2013, we have taken steps and I do not think we should be looking only at the negatives. However, while these steps have been taken, bullying is a social problem, so it is a complex challenge to tackle. Any future changes should look at current developments and international developments, and should be embedded in existing policy and curriculum in schools, so we are not adding to the workload of teachers and schools. It is a question of embedding it. Much of it is there already. It is just to give confidence and a skill set. I thank the committee for inviting me today.

Dr. Angela Mazzone: I will address the question about the psychological support that we need to provide for targets and perpetrators. Sometimes we are very focused on the targets and obviously we need to provide support and help to them, but the perpetrators also need help. These children need help before the cyberbullying or bullying escalates. Prevention measures should be put into place and teachers should not be left alone. Children need more psychological support and counselling. I watched a video that was posted today on

www.tacklebullying.ie, posted by two teenagers. Teenagers are calling for more counselling and psychological support in schools, which is a clear sign that children need more support.

On the question of how to engage with parents, we are developing some tools and an action plan for parents that provides concrete steps on how to respond to bullying. Of course, this is a reactive measure, and we also need prevention. However, sometimes parents can become overwhelmed and emotional when they learn that their children are being bullied.

Senator Rónán Mullen: Or are bullying, that is, when they learn that their children are part of the problem.

Dr. Angela Mazzone: Exactly. The parents may become defensive and might deny the problem. They need guidance and support, and we are developing those.

Dr. Tijana Milosevic: I am unable to comment on Fortnite, but I am happy to look into the research that has been done on the game. I can tell the committee that our research, and in particular a Covid study which I cited earlier, found a 60% increase in cyberbullying on online multiplayer games during the pandemic. It is an issue that we need to look into further, and there needs to be more research done into how cyberbullying specifically happens. I am happy to provide the committee with that.

At the same time, there is a large body of research on the influence of gaming, and aggressive games, on children, which dates back to the digital era. It is not a straightforward case that games which contain some elements of aggression and violence necessarily lead children to become more violent. It is a large research field with extremely contentious conclusions, and contradictory evidence. We must be careful to avoid creating a panic around specific types of games, because that has happened before. There have been incidences where one individual game has been blamed that for something that is a broader cultural phenomenon. Therefore, we need to take care, but I am happy to provide examples for the committee.

In respect of the legislation and different examples from Europe and further afield, the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill was, in a way, inspired by the Australian e-safety Bill and the creation of the office of eSafety Commissioner. I have hopes that the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill can facilitate collaboration between policymakers, the educational system, the charities and the social media companies, and that it will be able to assist with some of the problems that we are seeing on social media platforms. Other models have tackled hate speech specifically, such as the *Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz*, NetzDG, law in Germany which requires companies, on receipt of the notification of the presence of the content, to act within a certain amount of time and to take it down. Those models can be more or less effective, but hate speech is a different issue from cyberbullying. I would also be careful of following the example of such takedown systems. In the e-Commerce Directive, which dates back to the early 2000s, companies are exempt from liability based on the fact that they are online intermediaries. There is a greater acknowledgement that companies are not only intermediaries, but they are actually actively curating our content and data. The exemption from liability is currently being debated

and there is an emphasis on a duty of care, safety by design, and age-appropriate safety mechanisms. These efforts will move towards understanding how the design of algorithms and of the platforms might contribute to certain behaviours. The issue of digital ecology, and how cyberbullying happens in the context of children's interactions online, is one which is extremely important and does not get sufficient attention. This includes how many likes one receives, and behaving in such a way as to augment the attention one is getting. There is a certain design to digital media that perhaps inadvertently enhances certain aspects of our psychological characteristics. For instance, one of the platforms introduced a change where users can no longer see how many likes other users have received for an image they have posted. Efforts, such as these, which are not directly aimed at suppressing cyberbullying, but instead consider how the design of technology can inadvertently influence our and children's behaviour, might be the way to actually understand why all these efforts have, to an extent, been ineffective. It is because we have failed to address the broader cultural issue of what we get from social media interactions.

When I previously mentioned age gating, I raised the issue of whether children should have mobile phones in a certain place and at a certain age. In my opinion, and that of the community of researchers, one has to understand that taking technology away does not take away the problem. There is the issue of peer pressure to consider. It could be, for example, that the parent of a nine-year-old child does not think he or she should be on social media, and according to the terms of service of the social media platform, he or she is not supposed to access it until the age of 13 and, if one also considers the GDPR in Ireland, the age of digital consent is 16 years. At the same time, the child's school social circle and their social life is happening on a certain social media platform, therefore, by excluding him or her, it may result in the unintended consequences of excluding him or her from a broader discussion of what is happening, and his or her participation.

Going back to the issue of children's rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, we have to protect children, but at the same time, children have rights of participation. Therefore, ensuring that there is a balance is very important, and we must encourage design that is conducive to delivering the outcomes that we want to see. The question of how to deliver this is an incredibly difficult one, and one that companies and regulators are trying to address.

Chairman: I am going to have to ask Dr. Milosevic to conclude. We are running over the two-hour time slot allotted for the meeting. I know the witnesses will not mind if members have further questions or clarifications that they wish to get from them. Before the meeting concludes, I ask members to stand for 30 or 40 seconds to show that this committee stands against bullying and bullies.

Members rose.

Chairman: I thank the members for that. I say genuinely that I leave this meeting feeling enlightened by the statements of the witnesses. Their answers to all the questions were very forthright. I thank Dr. Mazzone, Dr. Keating and Dr. Milosevic for their contributions today. I have no doubt that the committee will invite them back. I have no doubt that they will appear before the committee again to give us an update on their work. If this committee can progress their work in any way, they should not be afraid to ask for assistance. If they have any issues they wish to raise with the Minister, they should talk to the clerk to the committee, Ms Tara Kelly. I very much appreciate that other school principals and students have joined in this morning to listen to the contributions to this meeting. I thank them as well.

We will meet again on Tuesday, 10 November when officials from the Department of Edu-

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cation will be here to discuss the important subject of the 2020 leaving certificate grade calculations and preparations for the 2021 leaving certificate.

The joint committee adjourned at 1.31 p.m. until 1.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 10 November 2020.