



Enhancing Family-School Partnerships to Address and Prevent (Cyber)Bullying

A qualitative ethnographic study of how students, parents, and teachers understand and experience online/offline bullying, and how responsibility is allocated and contested among them.



NAME

Isabel Machado Da Silva

AFFILIATION

Dublin City University

BIO:

Sociologist researching educational inequality and social stratification

RESEARCH SUMMARY

As online and offline spaces increasingly merge, bullying is no longer bounded by place. Social media and school life shape each other: what happens in one spills into, and feeds back on, the other. This research asks how young people and the adults in their lives navigate and understand bullying in that entangled reality.

MAIN FINDING

Bullying reflects existing social divisions around race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and ableism, while harmful online content increasingly shapes young people's experiences in school and on screens.

This reframes bullying as a social phenomenon, not a simple individual issue. Addressing it means acknowledging the role of wider actors, such as Big Tech companies, who profit from the very content that shapes these dynamics.

WHY IT MATTERS

How we frame bullying determines how we respond to it. Current framing and anti-bullying programmes demand those who suffer to cope, to "fix themselves", and those who cause it to learn empathy. This doesn't allow for accountability nor structural change.

KEY CONCLUSION

Addressing bullying means confronting inequality: not just in schools, but in the platforms, political discourses, and media ecosystems that profit from the very divisions young people are asked to navigate.

Inside the Research

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

An ethnographic study across two Irish post-primary schools; one middle-class, one in an area of socioeconomic disadvantage. Parent interviews were conducted across the Republic of Ireland. The study aims to understand how students, families, and schools navigate (cyber)bullying together, and how to better support them.

STUDY AT A GLANCE

country: Republic of Ireland

participants:

- Young people (12-18 years old)
- School Staff (Principals, Teachers, Special Needs Assistants, Councillors)
- Parents and Guardians

method: Ethnography, observations, in-depth interviews, PhotoVoice, focus groups

focus: (Cyber)Bullying, responsibility, family-school relationships, social class

FINDING 1

Online tools (anonymity and algorithms) have made the policing of gender, race, and class borders more pervasive, more violent, and harder to escape.

FINDING 2

For students, anti-bullying procedures and restorative practices were hollow rituals: changing nothing and sometimes making things worse.

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

Bullying is socially learnt, performed, and rewarded. But beyond individual acts lie the social and political contexts that enable and sustain these dynamics. As families and schools grapple with growing divisions and newer forms of (cyber)bullying, there's a need to acknowledge the implications of those who benefit the most from it. Resilience/empathy programmes will not fix a system that is, for some, working exactly as intended.



Funded by the European Union

