An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Perspectives on Bullying Behaviour (2023)

The first in a series of five annual reports, 2023-2027

Contents

Foreword from
Chief Inspector Yvonne Keating

The social environment in which the education system functions has become increasingly complex. Schools are operating within a broader context of economic uncertainty, global conflict, climate change and growing inequalities. The use of technology and social media has become more common among children and young people and their families; the prevalence of online bullying is increasing (WHO, 2024). Notwithstanding these challenges, schools continue to strive to be welcoming and inclusive places of learning.

Now, more than ever, there is a need for every school to actively promote diversity, tolerance and a culture of respect for all. The Department of Education aims to ensure that every school is a place where each child and young person feels welcomed, valued and understood.

Many children and young people benefit from a positive school experience; they are happy, confident and feel recognised and included in their school communities. However, there are also many other children and young people who are likely to have experienced some form of school bullying (Foody et al., 2017). Recent research by Belong To and Trinity College Dublin (2024) highlights the challenges that LGBTQI+ students continue to encounter in school. It serves as a stark reminder that there is still considerable work to be done to ensure the full inclusion, safety and belonging of all children and young people.

This report by the Department's Inspectorate, presents the views of children, young people, parents, teachers and principals on the actions taken by their school to prevent and address bullying behaviour. Informed by the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2019*, the *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying 2022* and the associated *Cineáltas Implementation Plan for 2023-2027*, it offers an insight into a range of perspectives on the work of schools to prevent and address bullying behaviour. Many key strengths are highlighted, including a general perception that schools are positive places, and that bullying behaviour is not tolerated in school communities. However, the report also highlights areas for improvement, including the need to ensure that children are empowered to recognise bullying behaviour and to be confident in knowing how to report and seek support when they need it. The Inspectorate is committed to overseeing the implementation of the actions outlined in this report.

While this report highlights key actions for schools, it also recognises that children and young people are actively shaped by the broader social contexts in which they live. A child's

personality, interests and activities are rooted in, and significantly influenced by, their relationships and interactions with the broader social, environmental and cultural networks to which they belong (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). While schools have a key role in preventing and addressing bullying behaviour, it is also important to acknowledge the broader societal and system-wide responsibility. Bullying behaviour is a 'whole-education issue' (UNESCO, 2020). It is not a problem that individual schools can solve on their own.

The *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying* (2022) provides both a collective vision and a clear roadmap for how the whole education community and society can work together to prevent and address bullying in primary, post-primary and special schools.

This is the first in a series of five annual reports, resulting from a direct action outlined in *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying Implementation Plan 2023-2027*. Subsequent reports will have slightly different emphases. While the lived experience of children and young people will remain at the heart of each report, there will be an additional focus on the broader social, environmental and cultural factors that can influence bullying behaviour.

I am grateful to all the children and young people and their parents, teachers and principals who generously shared their views. Their contributions are invaluable. I believe that their experiences, as presented in this report, will contribute to the Department's goal of ensuring that every school is a place where every child and young person is welcomed, recognised, valued and understood.

Yvonne Keating

Chief Inspector

**June 2024**

1. Introduction

Background

In December 2022, the Minister for Education launched *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying*. This plan was developed by the Department of Education, in collaboration with a steering committee which had a diverse membership including civic society representatives, academics and those working directly with children and young people.

Cineáltas is the Department's whole of education approach to preventing and addressing bullying behaviour in schools including countering cyber bullying, racist bullying, gender identity bullying, sexual harassment and other types of bullying behaviour in schools.

Cineáltas adopts a child rights-based approach and provides a collective vision and clear roadmap for how the entire education community and society can work together to prevent and address bullying behaviour in schools.
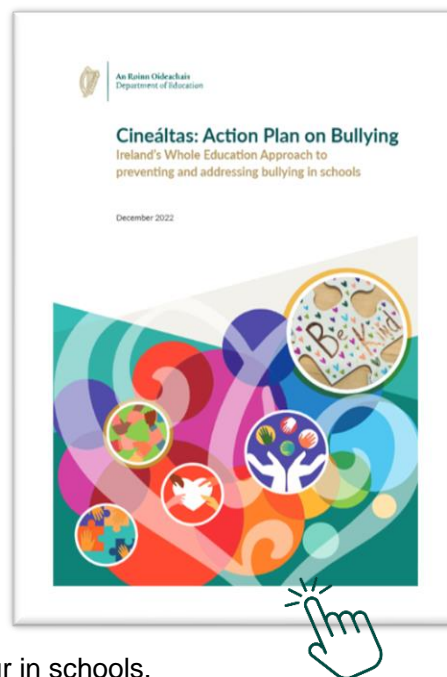
Cineáltas incorporates each of the nine components of UNESCO's Whole-Education Approach to prevent and address bullying behaviour. It is rooted in four key principles:

PREVENTION   SUPPORT   OVERSIGHT   COMMUNITY
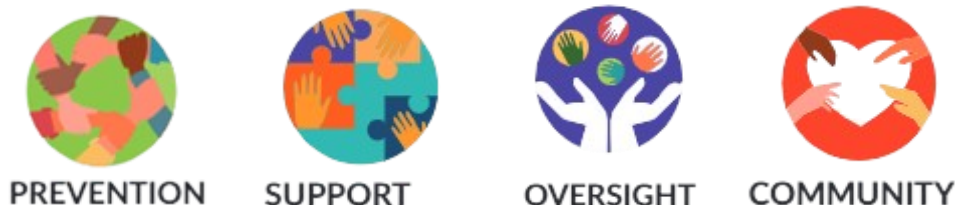
An implementation plan for *Cineálta*s was published on 10 April 2023 and commits to implementing each of the sixty-one actions contained in *Cineáltas* within a five-year period. An Implementation and Evaluation Group has been established by the Department of Education to oversee implementation of the actions in *Cineáltas*. One of the actions is to publish annual implementation and evaluation reports, informed by feedback from children and young people, parents, school staff, education partners, key stakeholders and relevant agencies. This group is chaired by the Secretary General of the Department of Education.
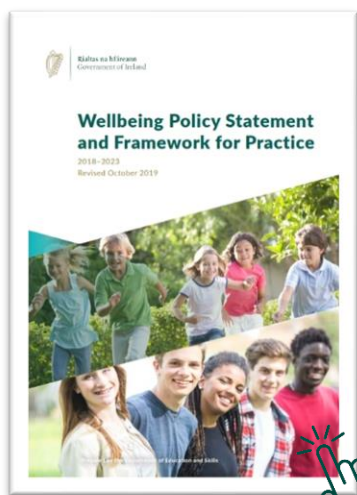
Schools play a key role in promoting and supporting the wellbeing of children and young people. Equally importantly, the wellbeing of children and young people is also influenced by their experience of and interactions with the wider world. As recognised in the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* (Department of Education, 2019), wellbeing is associated with and connected to a range of risk and protective factors and the roles of the broader community, culture and society are critical. A society which is underpinned by the core values of justice, equality, tolerance and social fairness is a significant protective factor in the development of wellbeing.

With this in mind, it is important to acknowledge that the 2,346 children and young people (see Appendix), who shared their views in this report, belong not just to their schools, but also to a broader community. Their experiences in school cannot be separated from the wider social and cultural context in which they live. Promoting wellbeing and preventing and addressing bullying behaviour are, therefore, shared community responsibilities. They are everybody's everyday business (Department of Education, 2019).

The implementation of the actions contained in *Cineáltas* is intended to ensure that children and young people are kept safe from harm and that their physical and psychological safety remains central to all aspects of school life. The Department's *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* also helps to ensure effective implementation of a multi-component, whole-school approach that positively impacts on all children and young people in line with best international practice.

Cineáltas contains a commitment that the Department's Inspectorate will prepare an annual report incorporating the views of children, young people and parents about how their school works to prevent and address bullying behaviour. In May 2023, in response to this commitment, the Inspectorate carried out surveys of principals, teachers, parents, children and young people. This report summarises the outcomes of those surveys. The tables in the Appendix provide details in relation to the number of schools and the breakdown of survey respondents.

Schools' work in preventing and addressing bullying behaviour is a clearly identified priority for the Department of Education and the Inspectorate. In its evaluative work in schools, the Inspectorate monitors aspects of the implementation of the *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary schools* (2013).[1]

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[1] In parallel with undertaking the survey, the Department was working to update the *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary schools* (2013).

Focus of this report

In line with the commitments outlined in the *Cineáltas Action Plan on Bullying,* this report addresses three key questions:

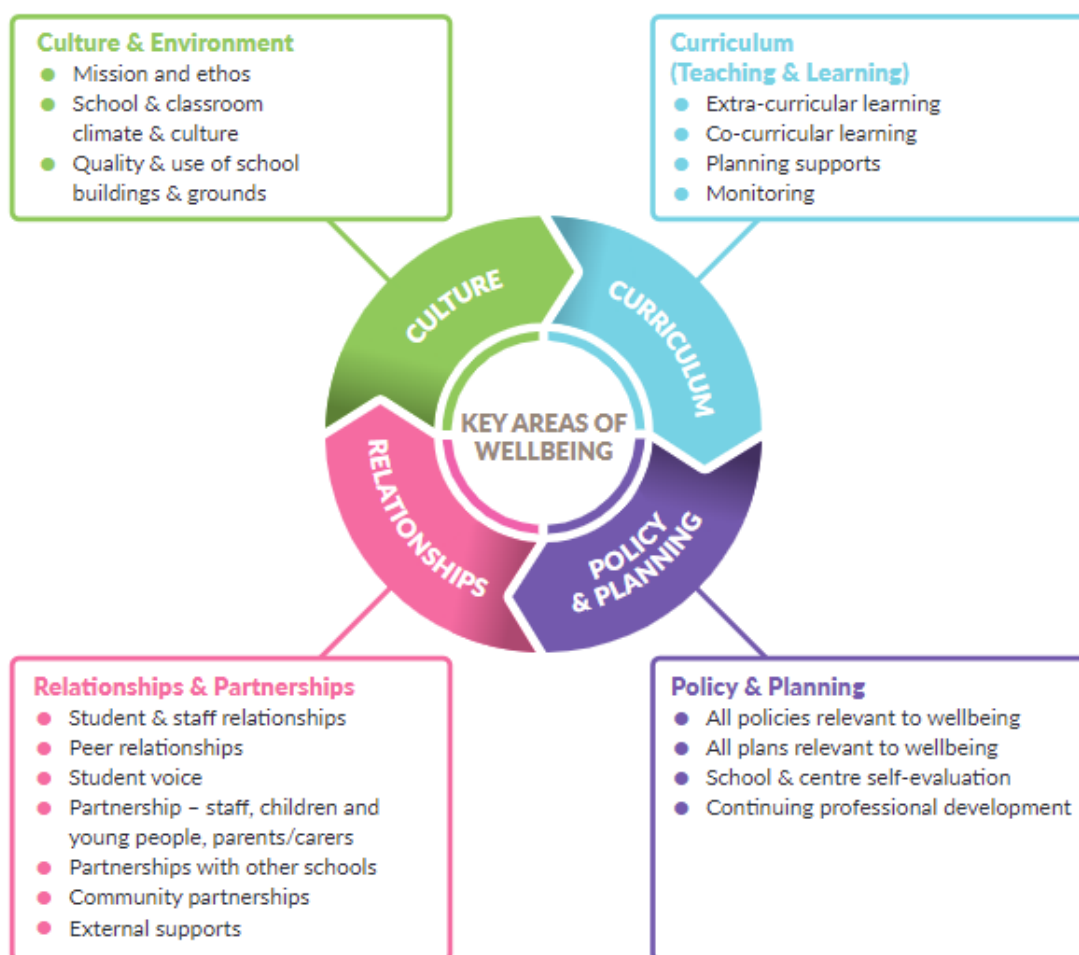|		
What are the views of children and young people, parents, teachers and principals on the work undertaken by their schools to prevent and address bullying behaviour?	What actions are identified by principals and teachers as particularly effective in their work to prevent and address bullying behaviour?	Are there areas relating to preventing and addressing bullying behaviour in schools where improvements are required?

Research methodology and data analysis

Survey design

The Department's *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice,* provides an overarching framework to support the wellbeing of all members of the school community and to prevent and address bullying behaviour.

Figure 1: Four key areas of wellbeing promotion

Culture & Environment
- Mission and ethos
- School & classroom climate & culture
- Quality & use of school buildings & grounds

Curriculum (Teaching & Learning)
- Extra-curricular learning
- Co-curricular learning
- Planning supports
- Monitoring

CULTURE

CURRICULUM

RELATIONSHIPS

POLICY & PLANNING

KEY AREAS OF WELLBEING

Relationships & Partnerships
- Student & staff relationships
- Peer relationships
- Student voice
- Partnership – staff, children and young people, parents/carers
- Partnerships with other schools
- Community partnerships
- External supports

Policy & Planning
- All policies relevant to wellbeing
- All plans relevant to wellbeing
- School & centre self-evaluation
- Continuing professional development

As shown in Figure 1 above, the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice* identifies four key areas for wellbeing promotion: Culture and Environment; Curriculum (Teaching and Learning); Policy and Planning; and Relationships and Partnerships. The survey which is the focus of this report was structured using these four areas; the questions in each sub-section related directly to the relevant key area. The structure of the *Framework*

for Practice informed the design of the May 2023 surveys of school principals, teachers, children and young people.

The surveys also included a range of items designed to provide an insight into children and young people's experiences of bullying behaviour, as well as those of their parents. Additional items designed for principals and teachers provided an opportunity for them to highlight any noticeable changes that they perceived to be present in their schools as a result of their work to prevent and address bullying behaviour.

Two focus groups with children and young people were conducted in advance of the survey launch. The purpose of the focus groups was to highlight any potential omissions or ambiguities in the student survey. It also sought to ensure that the survey was sufficiently clear for children and young people to enable them to properly interpret and respond to each item. That initial review resulted in a number of amendments to the student survey.

The surveys included a range of question formats, such as multiple-choice questions, rating scales and open-ended questions. Closed questions were used in areas where factual, quantitative information was required. The length and complexity of each survey were kept to a minimum, to ensure accessibility and to maximise respondents' participation.

A software package, *Checkbox Survey* (Version 7), was used to administer the surveys. Using this software, the surveys could be viewed and completed using a range of devices, including mobile phones.

Guide to quantitative terminology
Table 1 outlines the quantitative terms used in the discussion of findings in this report:

Table 1: Guide to quantitative terminology used in the report	
Percentage range[2]	Quantitative term
More than 90%	Almost all
75%-90%	Most
51%-74%	Majority/more than half
50%	Half
25%-49%	Less than half/a significant minority
16%-24%	A small number/less than a quarter
Less than 15%	A few

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[2] Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number in the body of this report.

Scope of this report

The survey analysis is focused primarily on the lived experience of children and young people in schools. It provides an indication of how schools are working to prevent and address bullying behaviour and includes a range of recommendations for how this work can be strengthened. However, as recognised in *Cineáltas*, bullying of children and young people is also a broader societal issue; it occurs within a network of structures and relationships that exist both within and outside of the school. As such, there is a need to acknowledge that bullying behaviour is a 'whole-education issue' (UNESCO, 2020). It is not a problem that individual schools can solve on their own. This requires a collective endeavour on the part of everyone involved in the education and care of young people.

This report represents the partial fulfilment of one of the actions in *Cineáltas*. While it highlights specific actions that schools need to address, a successful whole-education approach to preventing and addressing bullying behaviour must recognise that this is a system problem with several components - individual, contextual and societal (UNESCO, 2023). The implementation of the remaining actions in *Cineáltas*, which emphasise prevention, support, oversight and community, will greatly enhance the work already underway in schools to keep children and young people safe from harm and promote their wellbeing.

It is not a problem that individual schools can solve on their own. This requires a collective endeavour on the part of everyone involved in the education and care of young people.

Limitations of this report

A number of limitations should be considered in the interpretation of the findings of this report. Firstly, like any research, the report confines itself to the responses that were collected to answer the specific research questions. The findings of a study based on purposive sampling can only be generalised to the population from which the sample is drawn, not to the entire population. In a few instances, the survey data included some contrasting perspectives; these are discussed in the relevant sections of the report.

This report presents the survey responses from children and young people, their parents, teachers and principals at a particular point in time. It relies on first-hand reports of experiences of bullying behaviour. Participants used their own interpretations and conceptions of bullying behaviour to inform their responses. In another context, these situations may not necessarily be perceived as bullying behaviour.

2. Culture and environment

Perceptions regarding Culture and Environment

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Primary and Special Schools

87% My school is a positive place to be all or most of the time.

89% My school does not permit the use of disrespectful words and phrases.

26% I am not confident that my teacher watches out for signs of bullying behaviour.

Post-Primary Schools

68% I have a sense of belonging to my school all or most of the time.

71% I believe that it is safe to be myself in school all or most of the time

47% I am not confident that school staff watch out for signs of bullying behaviour.

PARENTS

Primary/Special School — Post-Primary

96% School is welcoming of all students **90%**

78% Supported to report bullying concerns **69%**

92% My child is safe in school **87%**

SCHOOL LEADERS

100% All school principals believed that...
- there were good pupil/student support systems in place in their school
- an important goal of their school community was to support students to have a sense of belonging and connection

TEACHERS

The creation of a safe environment for students is a school priority — 92% Primary/Special School — 98% Post-Primary

An important goal of our school community is to support pupils/students to have a sense of belonging and connection — Primary/Special School 96% — Post-Primary 92%

Perceptions of school as a positive and welcoming place

Most children and young people attending primary and special schools (87%) and the majority of young people in post-primary settings (71%), indicated that school was a positive place to be. This finding may reflect the different learning environments of primary and post-primary schools; in particular, the fact that the culture of many post-primary schools tends to be more formal, academic and exam-oriented (Smyth et al., 2004; OECD, 2023).

Almost all children and young people in primary and special schools (93%) and most students in post-primary schools (79%), perceived their school as a welcoming place, irrespective of their abilities, appearance, background, interests, or lifestyle.

Almost all parents of children and young people in primary and special schools (93%) and most parents of post-primary students (82%) indicated that there was a positive atmosphere in their child's school. Furthermore, almost all parents of children and young people in primary and special schools (96%) and post-primary schools (90%), indicated that their child's school was welcoming of all students. Responses from principals and teachers across all sectors demonstrated consistently high levels of agreement that the school had a positive and welcoming atmosphere.

There was significant consistency evident in the perspectives of all parents, principals and teachers, across school sectors, on the factors that helped to promote a positive atmosphere in schools.

Respondents identified the following as important and beneficial:	Responses of **principals and teachers** also identified these valuable practices:
➢ *the understanding that everyone, including parents, principals and teachers, have a role to play in preventing and addressing bullying* ➢ *the presence of clear rules about hurting other students by actions or words, together with guidelines for the appropriate use of technology, including phones* ➢ *the appropriate supervision of children and young people* ➢ *the efforts to support and encourage children and young people to take part in activities with others, both inside and outside the classroom*	➢ *staff actively watching out for signs of bullying behaviour* ➢ *organising events designed to make school a more welcoming place for all children and young people* ➢ *teachers supporting students through the transition from primary to post-primary school* ➢ *promoting respect for all through school communications* ➢ *teachers understanding and respecting the uniqueness of every child and young person*

A sense of belonging

Responses from principals and teachers across all sectors indicated high levels of belief in their school's efforts to promote a sense of belonging for children and young people. However, 4% of students in primary and special schools indicated that they rarely or never felt that they had a sense of belonging to their school. A tenth (10%) indicated that this was sometimes true in their case. Over a tenth of post-primary students (12%) indicated that they rarely or never felt they had a sense of belonging to their school. A fifth (20%) indicated that they sometimes felt this sense of belonging. These findings broadly reflect the results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (2022), which assesses the knowledge and skills of 15-year-old students in mathematics, reading and science. In that study, 19% of students in Ireland reported that they were not satisfied with their lives.

Almost all parents of children and young people in primary and special schools (92%) and most parents of students in post-primary schools (77%) indicated that their child had a sense of belonging and connectedness to their school. This does highlight, however, that almost one-in-ten parents of primary and special school children and young people and approximately one-in-four parents of post-primary students, were of the view that their young people sometimes, rarely, or never felt a sense of belonging.

Being myself in school

4% of children and young people in primary and special schools indicated that it was rarely or never safe to be themselves in their school. 9% of children and young people felt that it was sometimes safe to be themselves in their school. While the majority of young people in post-primary school (71%) indicated that it was safe to be themselves in school all or most of the time, over one tenth (12%) indicated that it was never or rarely safe to be themselves. 17% of students indicated that this was sometimes true in their case.

Activities that make school more welcoming

Most children and young people in primary and special schools (76%) and the majority of young people in post-primary settings (74%), agreed that events were organised during the school year to make their school a more welcoming place. Most children and young people in primary and special school settings (83%) and most students in post-primary settings (81%) agreed that they were supported and encouraged to take part in activities at lunchtime and after school.

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Respondents were invited to share examples of school life or activities that supported them to feel welcome. Examples of responses received from primary and special school children and young people included:

> *Teachers listen to me. We are given responsibilities daily.*

> *Everyone is kind and we have wellbeing week and active week.*

Sporting activities were frequently referenced. Overall, the most commonly cited activities by post-primary respondents included:

> *team sports*
> *class activities and trips*
> *awareness raising days/week*
> *whole-school fun days*
> *extra-curricular activities*

Showing respect

Responses from children and young people indicated that they were largely satisfied that their primary or special school did not permit the use of disrespectful words and phrases, with most (89%) reporting that this was true in respect of their school. The majority of post-primary school students (74%) agreed that the use of disrespectful language was not allowed. Most children and young people in primary and special schools (83%) and post-primary settings (78%) indicated that words and images encouraging respect for all were displayed throughout their school.

Feeling safe and cared for

Almost all children and young people in primary and special schools (92%) and almost all young people in post-primary schools (90%) confirmed that their teachers supervised them during break times and lunchtime. However, the majority of primary and special school respondents (73%) and the majority of post-primary respondents (72%) were either unsure or disagreed that children and young people were asked for their views on areas and times where increased supervision could be necessary. In response to a survey question on whether their teacher watched out for signs of bullying behaviour, approximately 5% of children and young people in primary and special schools selected 'no' as their response. The equivalent figure at post-primary was almost 16%.

Almost all parents of children and young people in primary and special schools (92%) and most parents of young people in post-primary settings (87%) indicated that their child was safe in school.

Responses from principals and teachers across all sectors strongly confirmed that the creation of a safe environment for children and young people was a key priority for them as a staff.

Principals and teachers from all three school types also indicated that there were good student support systems in place in their schools.

A high percentage of teachers across all school sectors were of the view that students could talk to an adult in the school if they were worried or upset about friendships.

Thinking about bullying behaviour – acceptance and reporting

Almost all children and young people who responded in primary and special schools (92%) (653 pupils) indicated that bullying behaviour was not accepted in their school all or most of the time. The equivalent figure in post-primary settings was 84%. A high proportion of parents of children and young people in primary and special schools (78%) indicated that they were encouraged to report concerns about bullying behaviour. The proportion of post-primary parents was 69%.

In their survey responses, most parents of children and young people in primary and special schools (85%) and young people in post-primary schools (79%) agreed or strongly agreed that bullying behaviour was not accepted in their child's school. Most parents associated with primary and special schools (80%) indicated that in the event of their child experiencing bullying behaviour, the school would act promptly and effectively. At post-primary level, 72% of parents indicated that the school would act promptly and efficiently.

A minority of parents of children and young people in primary and special schools (29%) indicated that their child had encountered a bullying incident at school. Of these parents, 61% agreed or strongly agreed that the school's handling of the incident was effective, while a significant 27% either disagreed or strongly disagreed. At post-primary level, 30% of the parents who responded to the survey indicated that their child had been involved in a bullying incident at school. Of those parents, 54% agreed or strongly agreed that the school's handling of the incident was effective. A significant 31% disagreed or strongly disagreed that the school's management of bullying incidents was effective.

In their survey responses, most parents of children and young people attending primary or special schools (78%) indicated that they felt supported to report bullying concerns. At post-primary level, 69% of parents agreed that they felt supported to report bullying concerns. In their responses to each of these survey items, a sizeable proportion of parents indicated that they did not have a strong opinion. This may be because they had no direct experience of

bullying in the school, or it could also suggest that they were insufficiently familiar with the school's procedures in relation to bullying behaviour.

In their survey responses, principals and teachers across all three school types consistently indicated that bullying behaviour was not accepted in their school.

In primary and special schools, principals and teachers agreed that bullying behaviour was addressed promptly and effectively and that teachers were supported to appropriately respond to and manage reports of bullying behaviour. Teachers in post-primary schools were less positive, with 79% agreeing that the school dealt with bullying behaviour promptly and effectively and 80% agreeing that teachers were supported to appropriately respond to and manage reports of bullying behaviour. A disparity is evident between the views of children and young people and those of school staff about the extent to which teachers are alert to bullying behaviour in schools.

A disparity is evident between the views of children and young people and those of school staff about the extent to which teachers are alert to bullying behaviour in schools.

3. Curriculum: teaching and learning
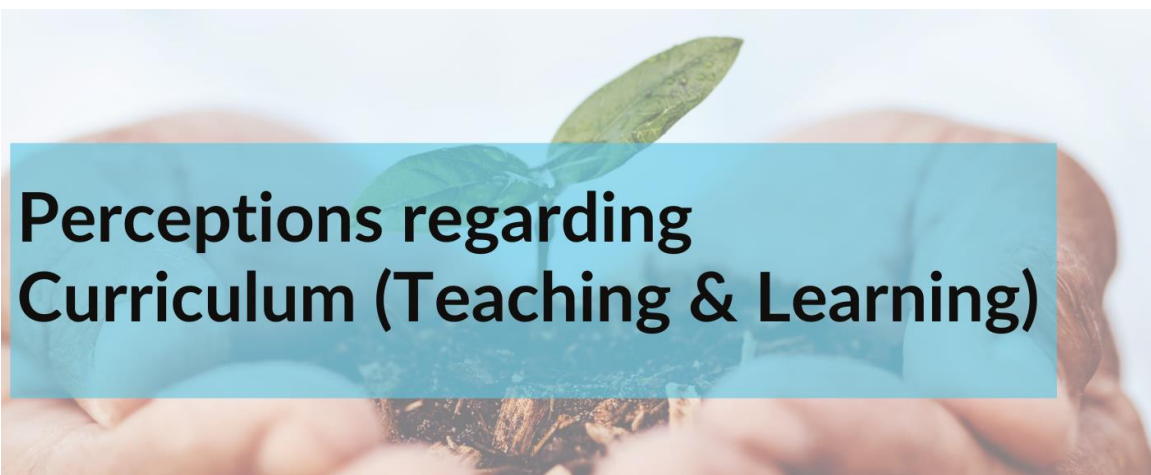
Perceptions regarding Curriculum (Teaching & Learning)

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Primary and Special Schools

84% Classroom-based learning about bullying was helpful

84% We learned in some curricular areas how to interact respectfully online

86% I learned in school how to recognise if someone was trying to bully me or someone else

Post-Primary Schools

39% I am not confident that classroom-based learning about bullying was helpful

80% I learned in some subjects how to interact respectfully online

27% I'm not confident that I was given opportunities in lessons to discuss what to do if I was being bullied

PARENTS

Primary/Special School — Post-Primary

88% My child had opportunities in school to learn about bullying **82%**

72% My child has learned how to respond to bullying **67%**

74% My child learned in school about different types of bullying **77%**

SCHOOL LEADERS

100% All school principals believed that students learned in school how to communicate and behave respectfully

98% of primary and special school principals believe that pupils in their school learn about how to respond to bullying

95% of post-primary principals agreed that students learned how to behave respectfully online

TEACHERS

The creation of a safe environment for students is a school priority — **92%** Primary/Special School — **98%** Post-Primary

Primary/Special School **96%** — An important goal of our school community is to support pupils/students to have a sense of belonging and connection — Post-Primary **92%**

Learning to recognise bullying behaviour
Responses from most children and young people in primary and special schools (86%) and from most students in post-primary settings (76%) indicated that they had learned in school how to recognise bullying behaviour. Similarly, high percentages of parents associated with primary and special schools (83%) and post-primary schools (78%) confirmed that their child had learned how to recognise if someone was trying to bully them or someone else. In addition, in their survey responses, 92% of children and young people attending primary and special schools and 86% of those attending post-primary schools indicated that they had learned about different forms of bullying behaviour. The parents of children and young people in primary and special schools (74%) and in post-primary settings (77%) agreed that their child had learned in school about different forms of bullying behaviour.

Learning about online bullying
In their survey responses, most children and young people in primary and special schools (84%) and post-primary schools (80%) indicated that they had learned in school how to interact respectfully online. Parents associated with primary and special schools (68%) and post-primary schools (78%) indicated that their child had learned in school how to behave respectfully online.

In their qualitative commentary, many principals and teachers highlighted their concerns about children and young people's safety online:

> *What I do notice, which is rather worrying, is that children know what bullying is, they are very clear on what cyber-bullying is, but they do still engage in it.*

Principals and teachers also described how, although cyberbullying often occurred outside of the school environment, the fallout and consequences from this impacted negatively on children and young people's day-to-day experience of school:

> *While great effort has been made to deal with issues of bullying in the school setting, online bullying continues to pose a challenge for schools. We are often dealing with the consequences of online bullying that has taken place outside school hours, in the home/community setting and has spilled over into the school day.*

Collaboration between parents and school staff is an essential element of preventing and addressing online bullying. It is important that parents are mindful of their children's use of technology, including smartphones and gaming consoles. Where online bullying behaviour has an impact in schools, schools should respond in accordance with the procedures outlined in their anti-bullying policy.

Collaboration between parents and school staff is an essential element of preventing and addressing online bullying.

Learning about responding to bullying behaviour

Almost all children and young people in primary and special schools (92%) confirmed that they had learned about the actions to take if they were being bullied. By contrast, a significant minority of young people in post-primary settings (27%) were not confident that they had been given the opportunity in lessons to discuss this topic. Parents of students in primary and special schools (72%) and post-primary schools (67%) indicated that their child had learned in school how to respond to bullying behaviour.

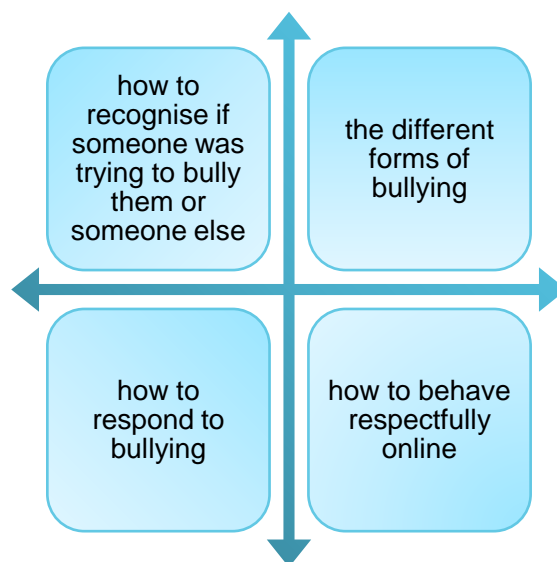### *Perceived value of learning about bullying behaviour*

Most children and young people (84%) in primary or special schools agreed that classroom-based learning about bullying behaviour was helpful. This contrasts with the responses from students at post-primary level, where a significant minority of young people (39%) were either unsure or disagreed that what they had learned about bullying behaviour in class was helpful.

Opportunities to work with others

Almost all children and young people in primary and special settings (90%) indicated that teachers gave them regular opportunities to work with their classmates in pairs or small groups. In post-primary schools, by contrast, a significantly smaller proportion (77%) of students indicated that they had regular opportunities to work collaboratively with other students. Almost all children and young people in primary and special settings (93%) agreed that they had discussed in class about interacting with others in a friendly and respectful way. A significant minority of young people (24%) in post-primary schools indicated that they were either unsure or they disagreed that they had been provided with such opportunities.

Provision in schools for learning about bullying behaviour
A high percentage, more than 80% of principals and teachers in all three school types agreed or strongly agreed that children and young people learned about the following aspects of bullying behaviour:

how to recognise if someone was trying to bully them or someone else

the different forms of bullying

how to respond to bullying

how to behave respectfully online

Given that bullying is included in the *Stay Safe* programme in primary schools and in SPHE at junior cycle, it is surprising that approximately one-fifth of principals and teachers were either unsure or did not agree that children and young people in their school had learned about these important aspects of bullying behaviour.

Qualitative commentary from some teachers suggested that children and young people's ability to describe bullying behaviour had improved. For example, one teacher observed that:

Children have the correct language to talk about bullying.

4. Policy and Planning

Perceptions regarding Policy and Planning

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Primary and Special Schools

93% There are clear school rules about hurting others by what someone said or did

55% Pupils who bullied others were not always treated in the same way by the school

76% I understand the importance of reporting bullying in my class

Post-Primary Schools

83% There are clear school rules about hurting others by what someone says or does

35% I am not confident that the school rules help to prevent bullying

34% I am not confident that the importance of reporting bullying is understood by all

PARENTS

Primary/Special School — Post-Primary

88% | The school has shared policies with me | **90%**

60% | The school did not seek my views when developing policies | **58%**

25% | I was asked to provide my views on the Anti-Bullying Policy | **25%**

SCHOOL LEADERS

100% All school principals agreed that the anti-bullying policy fully informed their school's work to prevent and address bullying

77% of primary/special school principals said that parents were given an opportunity to contribute to the anti-bullying policy

100% All post-primary principals agreed that the school had an anti-bullying policy

TEACHERS

The school has an anti-bullying policy
98% Primary/Special School
99% Post-Primary

The school's anti-bullying policy is effective in addressing bullying concerns
Primary/Special School **86%**
Post-Primary **69%**

Familiarity with policies

In both post-primary and primary schools, a significant proportion of children and young people (82% and 88% respectively) indicated that they were familiar with their school's anti-bullying policy. While this is broadly positive and shows that the communication strategies implemented at school level are generally effective, it also suggests that a sizeable number of children and young people are not sufficiently familiar with their school's policy. Schools should review the effectiveness of their procedures for disseminating their anti-bullying policy amongst their student population. This is particularly important given the crucial role that communication processes play within schools in the overall support structures of inclusive educational environments.

Schools should review the effectiveness of their procedures for disseminating their anti-bullying policy amongst their student population.

In their qualitative responses to the survey, a few teachers highlighted the extent to which a consistent understanding of bullying behaviour was important, citing concern about the way that attitudes to bullying behaviour could vary depending on the age of the individual student:

> *Too much is put down to 'messing' and the behaviour policy is not implemented consistently to address this.*

Policy sharing with parents

Almost all parents across all school types (88% in primary and special schools and 90% in post-primary) agreed that they received school policies.

Parents' perceptions of policy effectiveness

Of the parents in primary and special schools who indicated that their child had been involved in a bullying incident at school, more than half (57%) were of the view that the school had adhered to its anti-bullying policy. 29% did not indicate a strong opinion and the remaining 13% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Of the parents of post-primary students who indicated that their child had been involved in a bullying incident at school, a majority (52%) were of the view that the school had adhered to the procedures outlined in the anti-bullying policy. Less than a quarter (18%) indicated that this had not been the case. Approximately 31% of parents did not hold a strong opinion in relation to this survey item.

Principals' perceptions of policy effectiveness

Principals in primary, special and post-primary schools overwhelmingly agreed (100%) that their school's anti-bullying policy fully informed their work, and that this policy was effective in addressing bullying concerns. In their qualitative commentary, a few principals described the positive impact of this consistent implementation:

66

> *Preventative measures and efficient and timely responses to low level issues have proven to be very effective in reducing the instances of [bullying] behaviour.*

Annual policy review

The majority of primary, post-primary and special school principals indicated that they conducted annual reviews of their anti-bullying policies. This suggests a shared commitment to ongoing evaluation, improvement and review of their work in preventing and addressing bullying.

Confidence in school rules

A majority of children and young people in primary and special schools (76%) agreed that most of their peers followed school rules related to bullying behaviour. A significant minority (36%) of post-primary students did not agree that their school rules were effective in preventing and addressing bullying behaviour.

Parental involvement in policy development

While a majority of parents agreed that they received policies, a substantial percentage (60% and 58%) indicated that schools did not seek their views during policy development. This inconsistency demonstrates a need for more systematic approaches to involving parents in policy formation.

Involvement of children and young people in policy development

Just 63% of principals in primary and special schools confirmed that children and young people had opportunities to contribute to relevant policy development, while in post-primary schools the involvement of young people was confirmed by almost all principals (90%). This variation highlights a potential inconsistency in student participation across the three different school types.

5. Relationships and Partnerships

Perceptions regarding Relationships and Partnerships

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Primary and Special Schools

89% My teacher is helpful and would guide and support me if I was worried or upset

23% I do not feel that every pupil in my class is treated with respect by my classmates

64% I am asked for ideas on how to prevent and address bullying

Post-Primary Schools

81% My teachers respect me all or most of the time

51% I was asked for ideas on how to prevent and address bullying

47% I am not convinced that the school made changes based on students' ideas.

PARENTS

Primary/Special School | Post-Primary

91% / **79%** Students in my child's school are treated fairly and respectfully

35% / **33%** I was asked for my thoughts on the school's work to prevent and address bullying

23% / **20%** The school made changes based on what parents said about bullying

SCHOOL LEADERS

100% All principals agreed that all pupils/students were treated fairly and respectfully

98% of primary/special school principals perceived that pupils could talk to an adult in the school if they were worried or upset about friendships

95% of post-primary principals agreed that the board was supportive of the school's work to prevent and address bullying

TEACHERS

School staff model openness, respect and listening in their interactions within the school

92% Special/Primary School
87% Post-Primary

100% Special/Primary School
97% Post-Primary

There are opportunities for students to participate and become involved in classroom and school life

Children and young people's relationships with peers

The quality of relationships has a significant impact on a person's sense of wellbeing (Seligman, 2002). Children and young people's sense of engagement with and enjoyment of school is significantly influenced by the quality of their social relationships. In the survey, a significant minority of children and young people in primary and special schools (23%) and post-primary schools (37%) did not agree that every student in their class was consistently treated with respect by their classmates. A high proportion in primary and special schools (11%) and in post-primary schools (23%) indicated that they were, on occasion, excluded by their peers.

Children and young people's relationships with adults in the school

The development of positive, caring and supportive relationships with students is an important dimension of everyday bullying prevention in schools (Thornberg et al., 2022). In both primary and special schools (94%) and post-primary schools (81%) children and young people indicated that they felt respected by teachers in their school most or all of the time and agreed that staff in their school would guide and support them if they were worried or upset (75% and 76%). Almost all parents of children in primary and special schools agreed that children and young people in their child's school were treated fairly and respectfully (91%). At post-primary level, most parents (79%) felt that young people in their child's school were treated fairly and respectfully.

The development of positive, caring and supportive relationships with students is an important dimension of everyday bullying prevention in schools.
(Thornberg et al., 2022)

One good adult

The presence of a dependable adult is one of the key indicators of how well a child or young person can cope with problems (Department of Education, 2019). Principals and teachers were confident that, in their school, there was an adult to whom the children and young people could talk if they were worried or upset about friendships (97% in primary and special schools and 100% at post-primary). However, findings from children and young people were less positive. A significant minority of respondents in primary and special schools (23%) indicated that they would not always feel comfortable talking to their teacher if they were being bullied, or if they thought they were being bullied. At post-primary level, approximately two-fifths (41%) of young people indicated that they would not always feel comfortable talking to an adult in their school if they were or thought they were being bullied. These findings point to a need, particularly at post-primary level, for further work to be done at school level to enhance procedures for reporting concerns about bullying behaviour and to promote a culture of engagement and belonging among all members of the school community.

The presence of a dependable adult is one of the key indicators of how well a child or young person can cope with problems.
(Department of Education, 2019)

Child/young person involvement in bullying prevention

Effective responses to bullying behaviour recognise the importance of student participation. Anti-bullying initiatives have been proven to be more impactful and successful when they are designed and evaluated with children and young people (O'Higgins Norman et al., 2022). A considerable number of children and young people (64% in primary and special schools and 51% at post-primary) confirmed that they had been asked for their ideas on how to prevent and address bullying behaviour. Of this group, a substantial percentage (46%-56%) did not agree that their ideas had resulted in any meaningful change. Survey responses from parents indicated a similar level of ambivalence about the extent to which their views had informed and shaped the school's work to prevent and address bullying behaviour. In seeking to address bullying behaviour, schools must promote open dialogue amongst all students, while also seeking to meaningfully involve parents.

In seeking to address bullying behaviour, schools must promote open dialogue amongst all students, while also seeking to meaningfully involve parents.

Principals' and teachers' perceptions of relationships and partnerships

All principals in primary, special and post-primary schools were positive (100%) about the extent to which school staff modelled openness and respect in all interactions. These views were shared by almost all primary and special school teachers (92%) and most post-primary teachers (87%). The remaining teachers indicated that they either disagreed, strongly disagreed, or had no strong opinion on this survey item.

6. Schools' work to prevent and address bullying behaviour

Impact at school level

Principals and teachers were asked if they could describe any noticeable changes that were present in their school as a result of their work to prevent and address bullying behaviour. The changes they described were analysed and categorised into broad themes. These key themes are presented below and are listed in descending order according to frequency of reference. Examples of the commentary received by principals and teachers have been listed under each theme.

Implementation and review of the anti-bullying policy
- Regular review and contribution from teachers and students.
- New emphasis on policy updates and widespread accessibility.

Development of friendship, kindness and respect
- Introduction of teaching friendship skills and fostering general respect.
- Greater awareness of small behaviours contributing to a positive environment.

Reform-focused approach
- Emphasis on utilisation of restorative practices for issue resolution.
- Greater involvement of all parties in incident resolution.

Adaptation of physical environment
- Introduction of a wellbeing wall with positive comments.
- New emphasis on the promotion of positive behaviour through posters and displays.

Effective supervision systems
- Emphasis on constant supervision throughout the school day.
- Minimisation of opportunities for bullying through strong supervision.

Implementation and review of the anti-bullying policy

"

> *Our anti-bullying policy is reviewed annually, and each teacher is given an opportunity to contribute to it as well as the children. The policy has been updated and is readily available to all.*

[Survey response - Post-primary teacher]

Every stakeholder in the school community should have a role to play in addressing bullying behaviour. The aim of building a bullying-free school should be understood as a shared responsibility (O'Higgins Norman, 2022). The implementation of an annual review of the anti-bullying policy and the meaningful involvement of teachers, children and young people and their parents in this process is a proactive strategy, which can significantly strengthen a school's approach to promoting a caring and inclusive school culture. Such an approach ensures that the school's anti-bullying policy remains relevant and responsive to the needs of the school community. The involvement of teachers in the review process acknowledges and takes account of their insights and experiences, while also allowing for a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced at individual school level.

The implementation of an annual review of the anti-bullying policy and the meaningful involvement of teachers, children and young people and their parents in this process is a proactive strategy which can significantly strengthen a school's approach to promoting a caring and inclusive school culture.

Findings from the research emphasise that bullying prevention programmes should be participatory in nature so that children and young people can learn to take appropriate responsibility for their own safety and that of their peers (O' Higgins Norman et al., 2022; Menesini et al., 2021). Involving children and young people in the implementation and review of their school's anti-bullying policy empowers them as active participants in creating a positive, safe and supportive school community. This collaborative approach fosters a sense of ownership and shared responsibility. Making the updated policy readily available to all stakeholders ensures transparency and accessibility, allowing all members of the school community to be informed about the strategies in place. It also empowers them to identify priority areas for development in future iterations of the policy. This not only facilitates a more consistent implementation of the policy, but also promotes open communication, which is essential in addressing concerns and incidents promptly. The promotion of the active involvement of teachers, parents, children and young people contributes to a dynamic and adaptable anti-bullying school policy. This, in turn, helps to ensure greater alignment with the *Cineáltas* commitment to fostering inclusive and respectful learning environments.

The development of tools to foster friendship, kindness and respect

"

> *Our school now places a lot of emphasis on the teaching and development of friendship skills in our pupils. From the awareness of very small behaviours to more general respect and kindness.*
>
> [Survey response - Primary teacher]

The explicit teaching of social skills provides children and young people with the practical skills necessary to assist with scenarios relating to bullying and friendship. The importance of ensuring that children and young people have the necessary skills to navigate friendships is central to both the existing and updated SPHE/RSE curriculum across primary and special schools and post-primary schools. The promotion of acts of kindness can be a powerful antidote to bullying behaviour. Supporting children and young people to develop the skill of treating others with respect is also key; they need to learn that while they are not obliged to like everyone or be friends with everyone in their school community, they are required, at all times, to treat others with respect.

The explicit teaching of social skills provides children and young people with the practical skills necessary to assist with scenarios relating to bullying and friendship.

As highlighted in *Cineáltas*, school communities that are connected build positive relationships and partnerships. Supporting children and young people to develop and practise the skills they need to form healthy friendships will help to create and sustain school communities that are positive, respectful and inclusive.

Focusing on reform rather than blame

"

> *We use restorative practices to help children solve issues that may occur. This allows all parties that may be involved in an incident to tell their side of the story. Depending on the nature of the issue/concern, teachers, in-school management team members or parents may also need to be involved in the solving circle stage.*
>
> [Survey response - Primary teacher]

Restorative practices focus on the need to restore relationships where there has been harm or conflict. The proactive component of such approaches centres on the nurturing of healthy relationships within a positive and inclusive learning environment. The responsive component centres on repairing harm.

Restorative rather than retributive approaches, which involve all stakeholders such as school leaders, teachers, parents, children and young people, can support the maintenance of relationships, while also promoting accountability. They are child-centred interventions that are designed to strengthen an individual's sense of personal and social responsibility. Explicitly emphasising reform rather than blame can help to promote and enhance important skills such as the ability to empathise and to work collaboratively to find solutions to specific problems. When employed successfully by a school, they can reduce the use of more punitive measures such as suspensions and expulsions, thereby contributing to a more positive and child-centred environment (Huang et al., 2023). It is also important to acknowledge that there is some ambiguity regarding the understanding, practice and implementation of restorative practices in schools (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020); and that teachers should ensure that agreed approaches and strategies are measured and evidence-based. Importantly, restorative practices should be implemented by teachers who have received the appropriate training in the use of such approaches. As highlighted in *Cineáltas,* training and support should be provided to strengthen teachers' capacity in using classroom management strategies that are both child-centred and caring.

> **Restorative rather than retributive approaches, which involve all stakeholders such as school leaders, teachers, parents, children and young people, can support the maintenance of relationships, while also promoting accountability.**

Adaptation of physical environment

"

The school has created a wellbeing wall with post-its of positive comments and this is talked about at all assemblies.

[Survey response - Primary teacher]

There is a range of ways in which the design of the school environment can impact on bullying behaviour. While it is critical that school buildings be appropriately designed and maintained, the organisation and presentation of the internal school environment are also important. Adapted physical environments support students' wellbeing, thereby promoting a positive school culture and environment. While this is of relevance for all children and young people, it is particularly important for those who have been exposed to trauma, stress and those with specified sensory needs.

Schools can take practical, cost-effective steps to provide a safe environment where children and young people are supported to become calmer and more regulated. For example, sensory spaces can be created in collaboration with children and young people and utilised throughout the school day. Adults who are supervising yard times could wear high visibility jackets to ensure that they are clearly visible and easily identified. Mirrors could be placed on corridors to increase visibility; this will reduce blind spots, making it easier to monitor bullying behaviour. Teachers should monitor the movement of children and young people around the school and take steps to reduce areas of social congestion. Soft barriers (plants, seating, furniture) can help the circulation and flow of people, thereby reducing build up and the likelihood of incidents.

Displays of children and young people's work, posters and murals offer schools another practical way to highlight their ethos, values and support structures.

The aesthetic features of a school can help to foster a strong sense of connectedness, making children and young people feel cared about, safe and supported. A warm and welcoming entrance area can help to establish a positive tone for each day, thereby optimising learning and participation. These adaptations help to create a sense of belonging, which can have an immediate impact on bullying behaviours. Displays of children and young people's work, posters and murals offer schools another practical way to highlight their ethos, values and support structures.

Effective supervision systems

"

Supervision is strong in the school – children are supervised constantly throughout the school day to minimise any opportunities for bullying.

[Survey response - Primary teacher]

Teachers are obliged to take all reasonable precautions to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the children and young people for whom they are responsible. They have an individual and collective responsibility to provide a duty of care at all times towards the children and young people they teach.

Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying outlines how schools will be required to engage with their students to support and promote student-led anti-bullying and wellbeing initiatives. The Department is currently progressing the Charter Bill, which will provide for the development of Charter Guidelines that will strengthen the voice and participation of children, young people, their parents and school staff in the development and implementation of school policies, such as the supervision policy.

Schools should consult with all relevant stakeholders, including children, young people and their parents, to ensure that appropriate supervision and monitoring policies and practices are in place.

Schools should consult with all relevant stakeholders, including children, young people and their parents, to ensure that appropriate supervision and monitoring policies and practices are in place to both prevent and deal with bullying behaviour and to facilitate early intervention where possible.

Examples of effective practice shared by principals

Principals were invited to describe aspects of their school's work in the area of anti-bullying which had, in their experience, proven particularly effective. The following are direct quotes taken from the principals' responses.

" Primary-school principals described …

A school climate that nurtures positive behaviour, inclusivity, equality, difference, respect and dignity is created welcomed and celebrated.

Catching children being nice to other children.

'Nice One' and 'Principal's Awards'.

Student council elections where the children put forward their own manifesto.

Suggestion box where students suggest changes that could be made around the school.

Our SNAs organise Neurodiversity Week activities for the classes and give talks to the year groups.

Reverse integration is a major focus for us as a school and we have seen pupils develop a strong sense of empathy and understanding towards peers with additional needs.

Prevention. Prevention. Prevention. My mantra is that the best way to prevent bullying in schools is supervision and vigilance.

We believe that the restoration of relationships is key when dealing with issues.

'Anti-Bullying Campaign' is an excellent resource.

Equipment on the playground that regularly changes is very successful.

Anti-bullying posters are displayed in prominent positions and posters promoting positive behaviour are also displayed in prime positions.

I ask the staff to link into Webwise lessons on online safety.

Empowering the children to stand up to bullying is very important to teach in SPHE and informally throughout the day.

The teaching of the Stay Safe programme is non-negotiable.

We value Friendship Café where classes mix to enjoy lunch together.

We show the children respect and empathy and by example they practice these qualities and therefore treat everyone fairly and kindly.

Our response to bullying is always measured but immediate. Being even-handed to see the needs of the child who is bullying has really helped to lower our rates of bullying over the years.

Student voice was very important when we were re-drafting our policy.

We use Rate your Day where children privately let teacher know how they are feeling with a simple show of fingers over their heads while all eyes are closed. Issues are identified quickly and can also help identify the time of day that causes most stress for children, break time, lunchtime etc.

"

Post-primary school principals described …

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Developing a culture where students feel safe in speaking to a member of staff in a confidential fashion to share a concerning issue that they are experiencing. Speaking about it to class/year groups/guest speakers involved to convey the manner in which it will not be tolerated.

Consistent messages around zero tolerance at class level.

All students encouraged to integrate fully in the life of the school community by partaking in the wide range of extra-curricular activities.

The FUSE Programme and Shield are effective tools enabling schools to prevent and address bullying.

Documenting occasional aggressive/ intimidating behaviour has proven effective.

We have the class rep sign the anti-bullying charter on behalf of their class at the beginning of each year and this is put in multiple, visual spots around the school.

Constant observation really helps.

Use of mentor system – big brother, little brother system.

We have themed weeks throughout the year. Friendship week and Wellbeing week focus on bullying directly and indirectly. Having a themed week helps to inform students of supports in place and speakers and events provide supports to staff and students.

We have a good communication system in the school where individuals have numerous ways to link in with whoever they are comfortable with. This seems to work very well.

Global Citizenship Education: Embedded as a full TY module.

"

7. The views of children and young people who have been bullied

This report is positioned within the broader context of a child-centred, rights-based approach, ensuring that the perspectives of the children and young people who are directly impacted by policy decisions are considered, heard and acted upon (Lundy, 2007). The survey findings in relation to the perspectives of children and young people on their experience of bullying behaviour are presented in the following sections.

Experience of bullying behaviour in primary and special schools

In their survey responses, one-in-four of the children and young people attending primary and special schools indicated they had been bullied by students in their school.

For those children and young people who identified as having experienced bullying behaviour, their views on a range of issues were further explored. The issues included the reasons why they perceived that they had been a target for bullying behaviour, the actions they took in response to this behaviour and their assessment of the measures put in place by the school to resolve the situation.

The survey asked students to recall whether or not they had been bullied and if so, to identify the nature of the interaction or disrespectful commentary by other students. The range of options included:

abilities	appearance	background
interests	lifestyle	other
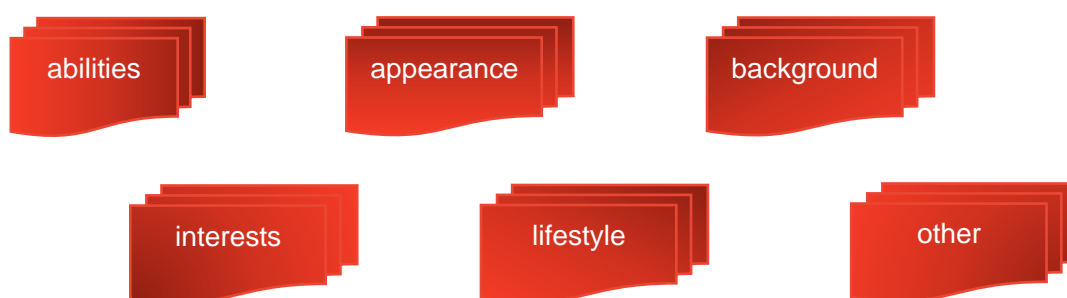
This survey item did not allow for the selection of multiple categories. A significant minority (35%) identified discriminatory attitudes towards their appearance as the main reason for negative commentary from other students. They also identified, albeit to a lesser extent, negative perceptions of their claimed or perceived interests (11%), ability (10%), lifestyle (9%) and background (3%) as probable reasons for such commentary. A significant minority of children and young people (32%) cited 'other' as the reason for negative commentary.

This response may indicate that respondents perceived that the targeting of them by their peers, with unwanted and hostile commentary, was driven by more than one factor, including those previously indicated. This aligns with research findings highlighting how various

attributes such as race, ethnicity and gender can intersect to attract both discrimination and bullying behaviour (Garnett, 2014). In their survey responses, the majority of children and young people (63%) indicated that they had told an adult in the school that they were being bullied, with a significant minority (37%) indicating that they had not told an adult.

According to the children and young people, the majority of schools (63%) dealt with the bullying quickly once they learned about it. A significant minority of students (37%) indicated that the school had not acted quickly. The majority of children and young people (70%) agreed that the school had helped them when they were bullied, with a significant minority (30%) indicating that they had not been helped by the school.

The majority of children and young people (59%) who had been bullied and who had told an adult in the primary or special school about the bullying, indicated that the bullying had not stopped as a result of the actions taken by the school. Children and young people were not asked to elaborate on their responses to this survey item; the survey did not ask them to provide additional information on why they perceived that the actions taken by the school had not impacted on the bullying behaviour. Notwithstanding the lack of contextual information, this finding that bullying had not ceased following actions by the school is very significant.

This finding that bullying had not ceased following actions by the school is very significant.

Experience of bullying behaviour in post-primary schools

Approximately one in five (21%) of the young people in post-primary schools who responded to this survey indicated that they had been bullied by fellow students in their school.

For those children and young people who identified as having experienced bullying behaviour, approximately a third (34%) indicated that they had been bullied because of their appearance. Approximately one-tenth of these young people indicated that the bullying behaviour arose from factors such as their identified background (13%), lifestyle (12%) and interests (10%). Just under one-tenth (7%) indicated their perception that they had been bullied because of their ability. In their responses, young people were not asked to provide any additional information in relation to this survey item. As a result, it was not possible to distinguish between those who perceived that they had been bullied because they had an additional learning need, or those young people who perceived that they had been bullied because they were exceptionally able. In any case, a consistent finding from the research is that children and young people in each of these groups may be more at risk of bullying behaviour (Espelage et al., 2018; O'Moore et al., 2021). In their survey responses, a significant minority (23%) referenced 'other' reasons as the probable cause of negative commentary. More than half of the post-primary students surveyed (51%) who indicated that they had experienced bullying behaviour confirmed that they had reported it to an adult in

their school, while slightly less than half (49%) indicated that they did not disclose the incidents.

A majority of young people (76%) agreed the school staff were helpful and would provide guidance and support if they were worried or upset. According to those who experienced bullying, the majority (62%) were of the view that the school had addressed the issue promptly upon learning about it, although a significant minority (38%) indicated that the school had not acted sufficiently quickly. Similarly, most young people (66%) indicated that the school assisted them when they were bullied, while a significant minority (34%) did not agree that they had been helped by the school. Among those who had been bullied, the majority (61%) indicated that the bullying behaviour did not cease because of interventions by the school. This finding mirrors the finding from the primary and special schools and should become a priority for action across all levels of the education system.

8. Key findings and recommendations

Culture and environment

The overall perception of schools as welcoming and positive environments for children and young people was consistent among many respondents. Responses from school staff, parents, and most children and young people were broadly positive in relation to this survey item. However, a considerable proportion of children and young people, particularly at post-primary level, did not agree that their school provided a welcoming and positive environment most or all of the time. Principals unanimously confirmed that a crucial goal for their school community was to support children and young people in developing a sense of belonging and connection. This sentiment was echoed in almost all of the responses from teachers.

However, approximately a tenth of primary and special school students occasionally, rarely, or never felt either a sense of belonging, or that it was safe to express themselves authentically in school. Similar sentiments were indicated by approximately one-third of young people in post-primary schools.

For most children and young people, the availability of lunchtime and after-school activities contributed to their view of their school as a welcoming and positive place. Parents, principals and teachers also identified these activities as valuable contributors to the creation of a positive atmosphere. In their qualitative responses, children and young people identified the many benefits of activities such as football, debating and chess clubs. Providing such activities is an evidence-based method for promoting engagement and social skills and can ensure the inclusion of all children and young people, particularly those who struggle with the lack of structure during recreational periods.

While there was a consensus that bullying behaviour was not tolerated in schools, children and young people indicated a lack of confidence in teachers' ability to consistently identify signs of bullying behaviour. This perception was more prevalent among young people in post-primary schools. Therefore, it is vital for teachers to possess a nuanced understanding of bullying and the ability to distinguish between different forms of bullying behaviour. Through their interactions with children, they should clearly communicate that they understand how to deal with bullying behaviour and demonstrate their competence to address it. They should be proactive in reassuring children of their ability to respond appropriately to bullying behaviour.

Although almost all children and young people confirmed that teachers supervised them during recreation periods, the majority considered that students were not consulted about areas and times when additional supervision might be necessary. The importance of supervision and the creation of a safe space for children and young people to interact, play and socialise at school cannot be overstated. The school environment and grounds can significantly impact on the incidence of bullying behaviour, with hallways, classrooms, canteens, playgrounds and locker areas being potential "hot spots" where bullying behaviour can occur. Research also indicates that bullying behaviour is more likely during "hot times"

when teachers are not present; children and young people are keenly aware of these times and locations where they or their peers might feel more at risk (Francis et al., 2022).

Key areas for improvement

- School leaders and teachers should actively identify individual children and young people who may be in need of targeted support and recognise the vital role played by parents in this identification process.

- Schools should continue efforts to provide a variety of relevant activities during recreational periods, whilst also emphasising the need to accommodate a range of preferences and interests and to include an element of choice for students.

- Schools should provide genuine opportunities for children and young people to exercise their agency in relation to bullying behaviour. Children and young people should be consulted and meaningfully involved in discussions about preventing and addressing bullying behaviour and in particular, supervision arrangements.

- School leaders should, following consultation with children and young people, organise an audit of the physical environment of the school. In areas where bullying behaviour is most prevalent, they should adapt the physical environment. Practical steps such as the addition of mirrors and soft barriers such as furniture or plants, help to reduce incidents of bullying behaviour. Adults who supervise during yard times should be visible and vigilant.

- School leaders must ensure that teachers are adequately supported to recognise and address bullying effectively. The school-wide implementation of SPHE should be considered regularly at staff meetings; teachers should discuss and share examples of best practice in order to develop their capacity to intervene appropriately and to contribute to successful outcomes in bullying situations.

The Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying (2023-2027) outlines several initiatives aimed at fostering a positive and inclusive school culture and environment. These initiatives include implementing a recognition process, supported by the provision of a Cineáltas flag to all schools, to acknowledge schools' efforts in preventing bullying behaviour and promoting equality, inclusion, diversity and wellbeing. Additionally, the plan involves developing guidelines for establishing student support teams in larger primary schools and to ensure the active participation of children, young people and their parents/guardians. An evaluation will also be developed by the Inspectorate to assess schools' strategies for promoting and supporting wellbeing and preventing bullying behaviour. Furthermore, the plan calls for revising school design guidelines to ensure educational environments are safe, flexible,

inclusive and adaptable to evolving needs. These actions are designed to support a sense of belonging and safety among students and staff, contributing to a supportive and connected school community.

Curriculum: teaching and learning

Parents, principals and teachers across all school types were generally in agreement that children and young people had opportunities in school to learn about bullying behaviour. Within this, principals and teachers also confirmed that children and young people had opportunities to learn about many different forms of bullying behaviour. It was clear from their survey responses that children and young people generally agreed that they had learned how to recognise bullying behaviour. Most also agreed that they had learned in school about how to interact respectfully online.

While almost all children and young people in primary and special schools confirmed that they had learned how to interact positively with others and how to respond to bullying behaviour, findings from young people in post-primary schools were less positive. A significant minority felt that they had not been given adequate opportunities to discuss how to interact in a friendly and respectful way and the steps to take if they were being bullied. Most children and young people in primary and special schools found their classroom-based learning about bullying behaviour to be helpful, while a considerable proportion of young people in post-primary schools did not consider this to be the case for them. This finding in respect of young people in post-primary schools merits further exploration at school level.

The significant role of collaborative learning in preventing bullying behaviour is a recurring theme in the research; well-organised collaborative learning is acknowledged as an effective strategy for preventing and addressing bullying behaviour in school. Collaborative approaches to teaching and learning have been seen to increase a sense of connection and belonging amongst children and young people, resulting in better decision-making and empathy (Keating et al., 2021). In the survey, almost all children and young people in primary and special schools agreed that they were provided with regular opportunities to work with their classmates in pairs and small groups. However, in post-primary schools, almost a quarter of young people did not agree that their teachers gave them regular opportunities to work with other students in pairs or small groups. This points to a need for teachers in post-primary schools to review their current approaches to curriculum delivery, to ensure that collaborative methodologies are an integral part of their approach to teaching and learning.

Key areas for improvement

- Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is a mandatory curriculum subject in all primary schools and in post-primary junior cycle. Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is required at all levels, from primary through to senior cycle. School leaders and teachers should ensure that the SPHE curriculum is implemented in its entirety, so that children and young people are appropriately supported to develop the life skills needed as they grow up in an increasingly complex society.

- Post-primary teachers should ensure that students learn about bullying behaviour in a way that meets their needs and prepares them for the future. In this regard and as recognised in *Cineáltas,* the implementation of an evidence-based, culturally responsive and age-appropriate programme such as *FUSE* is advised. Teachers are also advised to use the resources developed by Webwise to support them in integrating digital citizenship and online safety into their approaches to teaching and learning.

- Post-primary teachers should ensure that students receive regular opportunities to work collaboratively with their peers.

The Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying (2023-2027) emphasises the importance of Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning in fostering an inclusive and supportive educational environment. Key initiatives outlined in the action plan include training for student teachers, newly qualified teachers, school leaders and all school staff on preventing and addressing bullying, racism, sexism and sexual harassment, as well as promoting equality, diversity, inclusion and wellbeing. The plan ensures that all schools have access to the FUSE anti-bullying and online safety program, with additional modules being developed. It also includes reviewing the SPHE, RSE and Primary curriculum frameworks, as well as the Intercultural Guidelines for primary and post-primary schools. Furthermore, it ensures that the literature and textbooks used in teaching the wider school curriculum positively represent the diversity of society and promote equality and inclusion. These actions are designed to create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for all students and staff.

Policy and planning

Most children and young people across all school settings indicated that they were familiar with their school's anti-bullying policy. Most also confirmed that, in their school, guidelines were in place about the safe and respectful use of technology.

The opinions of young people in post-primary schools, in relation to school rules and bullying behaviour, contrasted with those of children and young people in primary and special schools. In primary and special schools, children and young people agreed that school rules helped to prevent bullying and that most of their peers followed the rules in relation to bullying behaviour; however, over a third of young people in post-primary school were less confident in relation to these two matters.

Overall, principals and teachers agreed that the school's work to prevent and address bullying behaviour was fully informed by the school policy and that this policy was implemented consistently. While teachers in primary and special schools generally agreed that this policy was effective in addressing bullying behaviour, almost a third of post-primary teachers were less confident in this regard.

While parents generally agreed that their child's school shared policies with them, approximately two-thirds indicated that their views were not sought in the development of these policies. Teachers largely agreed that they had been involved in policy development and review but indicated that they were less sure of the extent to which parents, children and young people contributed to this process. Principals, however, indicated that parents, children and young people were given opportunities to contribute to policy review and development.

A school's anti-bullying policy provides clear expectations, direction and consistency to the school community. An effective policy informs and directs the school's approach to preventing and addressing bullying behaviour. In the surveys, the effectiveness of the policy was questioned by some teachers, as was the extent to which the broader school community was involved in policy development and review. The survey responses from young people in post-primary schools also indicated some doubt about the extent to which school rules were effective in preventing and addressing bullying behaviour.

As part of the annual review of the anti-bullying policy, school leaders should assess the perceived value and overall impact of the anti-bullying policy and the code of behaviour, whilst ensuring that the broader school community has meaningful opportunities to contribute to this process. While preventing and addressing bullying behaviour in schools are a shared community responsibility, schools should regularly review and evaluate the impact of the measures they have in place. Consistent implementation of the reporting and oversight mechanisms set out in *Cineáltas* will be critical in supporting school communities to address allegations of bullying behaviour satisfactorily.

Findings from national and international research on bullying behaviour generally indicate that while teachers have a general understanding of bullying behaviour, more specific

knowledge is needed (Mahon et al., 2020). This is reflected in the data from the teacher survey, where a significant minority did not perceive that they had received adequate advice or training in relation to preventing and addressing bullying behaviour. In contrast, most principals indicated that this advice and training had been provided. There is a clear need for ongoing discussion and engagement at school level around recognition of bullying behaviour and appropriate strategies to prevent and address bullying; and to maintain longer-term consistent oversight in the development in schools of strong cultures of responsiveness to the issue of bullying in all its forms. School leaders and teachers should also regularly discuss and review whole-school approaches to bullying behaviour to ensure consistent understanding of relevant policies.

The survey findings have demonstrated that there is a significant gap between the perceptions of principals regarding the advice and training provided to teachers to support them in their work to prevent and address bullying and views of the teachers themselves.

Teachers have a professional responsibility to communicate their education and training needs so that they, with the support of school management, can ensure that the professional learning opportunities provided to them are appropriately aligned to their current needs. This needs to happen on a systematic and ongoing basis. Irrespective of their training needs, teachers have a professional responsibility to provide a safe and affirming learning environment for the students in their school.

Three-quarters of children and young people in primary and special schools indicated that they recognised the role they had to play in preventing bullying behaviour and indicated that they were aware of the importance of reporting bullying behaviour. However, just over a third of young people in post-primary schools were not convinced that students in their school understood that they had a role to play in preventing bullying behaviour and they were not confident that the importance of reporting bullying behaviour was understood by all students in their school. The survey outcomes demonstrate that young people in post-primary schools require further support in recognising and fulfilling their role in preventing and addressing bullying behaviour. This could be addressed as part of classroom-based learning about bullying behaviour and through the promotion of the role of children and young people in policy development and review.

Key areas for improvement

- School leaders should ensure that a whole-school approach is taken to the annual review of the anti-bullying policy; the broader school community should have meaningful opportunities to contribute to this process.

- Teachers should ensure that they act both deliberately and proactively to create and sustain school environments that are inclusive, positive and safe for all children and young people. They should work with school management to identify their education and training needs in order to ensure that the learning opportunities offered to them are in line with their needs. Irrespective of their training needs, teachers should remain aware of their core professional responsibility to provide a safe and positive environment for children and young people.

- School leaders and teachers should ensure that children and young people are empowered to recognise bullying behaviour and to be confident in knowing how to report and seek support when they need it. At post-primary level, the student support team should play a central role within the school; it should be the over-arching mechanism through which actions for the welfare and wellbeing of all young people are progressed. Through their referral system, the student support team can ensure a forum is in place for receiving concerns from staff members about bullying behaviour. They can also help in reviewing the school-specific needs and plan for whole-school initiatives in response to those needs.

It is worth mentioning that the *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying (2023-2027)* includes significant actions designed to develop adaptive and responsive policies for preventing and addressing bullying behaviour in schools. Key initiatives include updating the anti-bullying procedures for primary and post-primary schools, providing support and guidance on preventing and addressing bullying and enhancing reporting, oversight and review mechanisms. These procedures, due to be published in 2024, will be developed with input from all members of the school community. Training will be made available for all school staff, parents/guardians and board of management members. Additionally, a national database will be developed to collect anonymised data for an annual national report on bullying in schools. The plan also involves updating the *Developing a Code of Behaviour Guidelines for Schools 2008*. These measures, among others, aim to create a collaborative environment where everyone can work together to prevent and address bullying effectively.

Relationships and partnerships

In general, children and young people across all three types of school agreed that their teachers respected them. This positive finding was also confirmed by responses from parents. However, somewhat worryingly, a substantial proportion of children and young people did not agree that all members in their class were treated with respect by their classmates. Moreover, one in ten children and young people in primary and special schools indicated that they were excluded by their peers during the school day. The corresponding figure at post-primary level was approximately one in four students. The proportion of children and young people who indicated that they were disrespected or excluded by their peers requires an effective system-wide response at all levels.

Some contrasting perceptions were evident in respect of a number of survey items relating to children and young people's views of how they would interact with their teacher if they needed help. While the children and young people indicated that they were generally confident that their teacher would assist them if they were upset or worried, survey responses from approximately one in four children and young people in primary and special schools indicated some reservation in relation to confiding in their teacher about bullying behaviour. The corresponding figure at post-primary level was four out of every ten students. This finding contrasts sharply with the views of principals and teachers, who were almost unanimous in their perception that children and young people could talk to an adult in the school if they were worried or upset.

While almost all children and young people indicated that they could identify "one good adult" who they could approach if they needed help, it is evident from the survey findings that there is a clear reticence on the part of children and young people around the reporting of bullying behaviour. It is important that the reasons for this reticence be carefully considered at individual school level. Together with the forthcoming updated *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools*, this information should guide the actions that a school needs to take to enhance their procedures for reporting bullying concerns and to foster a culture of empathy and belonging among all members of the school community.

O'Higgins Norman (2020) notes that anti-bullying initiatives are more effective if they are commissioned, designed and evaluated with children and young people. While survey responses from children and young people across primary, special and post-primary schools indicated that they were broadly in agreement that their views had been sought on how their school could prevent and address bullying behaviour, approximately half were either unsure or disagreed that these views had significant impact on the school's work. A key challenge when implementing a child's right to participate is to ensure that adults do more than just listen to children and young people. In the context of preventing and addressing bullying behaviour, schools should ensure that children and young people's views are taken seriously by demonstrating a willingness to be influenced by those views (Lundy, 2007).

In their survey responses, a significant proportion of parents indicated that they were either unsure or disagreed that their views had informed and shaped the school's work to prevent and address bullying behaviour.

Key areas for improvement

- Teachers should work proactively to ensure that every child and young person for whom they have responsibility is fully included in the culture, curriculum and community of their school.

- Children and young people who are experiencing bullying behaviour can be reluctant to report their negative experiences and the nature of this reporting can be off-putting for some. One of the key themes that emerged from the *Cineáltas* consultation process was the need to develop a range of effective approaches within schools to enable the safe reporting of bullying behaviour. Schools should work to enhance their procedures for reporting concerns about bullying behaviour in order to ensure that children and young people feel able to report and that schools respond effectively to these reports.

- School leaders need to work collaboratively to ensure that the diverse range of experiences, insights and needs of the broader school community are reflected in the school's work to create an environment where all children and young people feel welcomed, safe, secure and supported.

It is important to acknowledge that the *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying (2023-2027)* emphasises the importance of Relationships and Partnerships to enhance mutual understanding and collaboration among children, young people, their families and the school community. It is worth noting a number of actions geared towards developing and embedding positive relationships and partnerships including the piloting of a model of counselling support in primary schools and supporting the work of the Anti-Bullying Centre, Webwise, and BeLongTo Stand Up Awareness Week. These actions aim to foster stronger relationships and partnerships, providing opportunities for everyone involved to better understand and support each other.

Appendix I Tables – Participating Schools

Participating schools

The sample of schools contacted for the survey included a range of school types and contexts. While the schools were initially selected using purposeful random sampling, any schools that had been scheduled for a notified evaluation, as part of the Inspectorate's planned programme of evaluations, were excluded from the final sample. The rationale for this was to minimise the burden on participating schools.

Of the 110 school principals contacted, 106 principals agreed to participate. Table A illustrates the sectoral breakdown within this overall figure.

Table A: Participating schools				
	Primary	Special	Post-primary	Total
School type	51	7	48	106

Initial contact with schools

Principals of the 106 participating schools received a phone call from the Inspectorate during the week of 1 May 2023. Following this initial contact, the Inspectorate forwarded the links for the various surveys via email and requested that the school distribute the links to the participants. The surveys remained open until close of business on 9 May 2023.

Numbers of respondents

Table B shows the number of respondents for each survey type. Children and young people in primary and special schools were not required to identify their school type so the figure provided represents the aggregated figure for this group.

Table B: Categories of respondent for each school type				
	Primary	Special	Post-primary	Total
Children and young people	653		1,693	2,346
Parents	1,443	22	1,913	3,378
Teachers	271	11	530	812
Principals	41	2	21	64

Analysis of the quantitative data was conducted; numerical data relating to survey items was downloaded from the survey platform and presented in tabular format. The tables were arranged thematically, in line with the key areas from the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice.* Qualitative data was coded using thematic analysis. This data was examined to identify common themes and a coding system was developed to organise the findings.

Additional information relating to survey distribution
- An e-mail circulated to principals outlined the purpose of the survey.
- An information note was included for each respondent group. This note provided details relating to confidentiality and the right to withdraw.
- The principal was requested to forward an email to teachers and parents. The email to teachers included the link to the teacher survey. The email for parents included the links to both the parent and child/young person survey.

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