

ASAP– Against School Aggression Partnership

Tackling bullying, aggression and violence in Maltese State schools

1. Introduction

As part of the project ‘Against School Aggression Partnership’ which is implemented by Partners Hungary Foundation, SOS Malta, Partners Bulgaria Foundation and Szolnoki Szolgáltatási Szakképzési Centrum, funded through the Erasmus + programme, we undertook a survey in Malta focusing on bullying, aggression and violence in State schools, with the aim of understanding the current status with regards to policies and practices.

This survey consisted of 17 questions which were disseminated to all Heads of State Schools (HOS) in Malta. From the total of 83 schools which were contacted, 30 questionnaires were returned from: 10 Heads of Secondary Schools, 19 Heads of Primary Schools and the manager of a Learning Support Centre for boys, in total, representing a third of the targeted group. The survey was also disseminated to Church Schools in Malta, through the Church School Association, however no questionnaire was returned.

The survey followed the level of implementation of the ‘Against Bullying Behaviour in Schools Policy’, the perception of bullying behaviour in the school environment by the school staff and the methods used by the staff to ensure a safe school environment, good collaboration with students and parents, the issue of cyber bullying and collaboration with external services or projects.

2. Main findings

Prevalence of bullying from the Senior Management Team perspective

Question: Do you consider bullying to be an issue in your school? (Figure 1)

Out of 30 respondents, 20 considered that bullying was not an issue in their school, 6 considered that it actually was an issue for them, while the other 4 said that they were not sure.

Thus, 66,64 % of respondents said that bullying is not really a problem, as it does not occur very often and the cases that are brought to their attention are dealt with effectively. More than one respondent stressed the importance of differentiating between negative behaviour and bullying, as the two are not always interchangeable. This confusion also seems to be an issue for parents, who believe that any quarrel or conflict is equivalent to bullying.

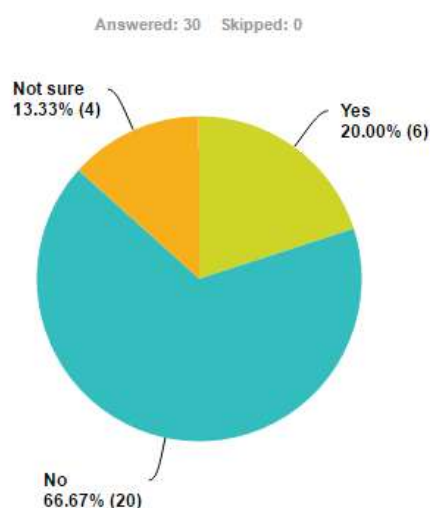


Figure 1

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Question: Which of the following do you think are the most common targets for aggression, bullying or harassment in your school? (Figure 2)

Bullying and aggression occur between students is thought to be mainly due to physical characteristics, while social status, race, gender, sexual orientation or religion are seen to be less frequent triggers.

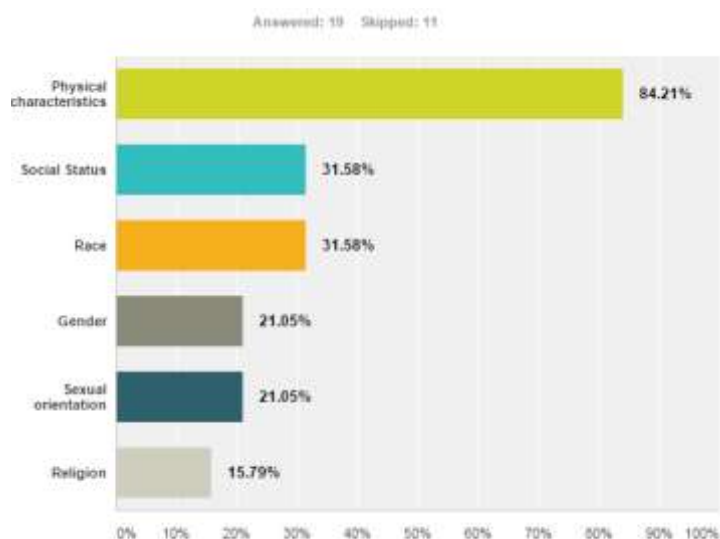


Figure 2

Other differences mentioned were the fact that some students were not good at sports or in some academic areas, or being more sensitive than other children making them easy targets. On the other hand, some respondents stressed that some students are aggressive or bully other students because they copy negative behaviour seen at home or outside the school; they can also be victims of parental disharmony.

Policy and guidelines against bullying behaviour and aggression

Questions:

- *How do you make sure that the school environment is safe and secure, for both learners and staff?*
- *Is bullying addressed in the school development plan or as a separate policy that follows the 'Addressing Bullying Behaviour in Schools' policy?*

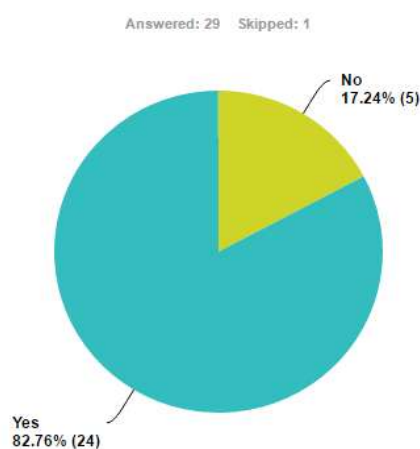


Figure 3

- *Are teachers, learners and the whole school community, made aware of it?*
- *How are the learners involved in developing guidelines and action aimed at addressing bullying and aggression in schools?*

According to the answers received, 24 out of 29 representative schools, have adopted an anti-bullying policy or have included it in the school development plan, thereby implementing the first measure in the strategy document of the 'Addressing bullying behaviour in Schools' policy (see Figure 3). In most cases the school's policy was designed during staff development sessions with the contribution of all school staff and members of the Psycho-Social Team, including the Anti-Bullying Service

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representative. Students were not directly involved in the drafting of the guidelines, however, two cases were mentioned where Student Council representatives took part in the drafting phase.

In some cases, a policy was not drafted at school level as the school simply adopted the national policy, without any adaptations to the local context. In this cases, the respondents stressed that students, teachers and other stakeholders could not be involved in this process, since there were already guidelines given through national policy.

However, students are involved when it comes to classroom rules; most respondents stated that at the beginning of every school year, drafting of the rules of behaviour in the classroom involved the teachers and pupils.

The policy at school level represents one of the strategies aimed towards maintaining a safe school environment. According to the respondents, the relevant documents are made available to parents, students and school staff, either online or included in staff handbooks, the school diary, handouts or discussed during assembly and meetings with parents.

Other factors mentioned by respondents were:

Strict Supervision:

‘We do a very strict supervision during breaks and teachers are very much attentive in class to what is going on’

‘Supervision of school premises and awareness of staff about possible bullies and victims. Help from agencies outside the school sought when needed’

Education programmes, awareness raising:

‘Continuous awareness and education on bullying’

‘Every year we hold talks for students and parents on bullying and especially cyber bullying’

Well defined role of Senior Management Team (SMT), as one of the respondents has described:

- a. *‘The SMT repeatedly reminds the students of positive values of friendship, love and respect at school – the SMT often repeats that we are one big family.*
- b. *The SMT walks around the school/ visits classrooms informally, many times throughout the day.*
- c. *If any student looks unwell, we ask if all is fine and if anything is on his mind. We then invite him to share his thoughts with us, if he wishes to.*
- d. *During informal class-visits, the SMT reminds all pupils to share anything, even the slightest issue, with an adult. And we remind them who these adults are so that the students will then open up with whom they feel most comfortable with.*
- e. *Situations of bullying are dealt with immediately by the SMT. These are then monitored to check if bullying is controlled.*

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- f. *The SMT's rapport with teachers is very open so we open up with each other rather easily.*
- g. *It is clear with teachers and parents alike that no teacher is to speak to a parent in the absence of a member of the SMT.'*

Interventions by the Psycho-social team and Anti-bullying unit: *'counselling and guidance services; consequences applied; behavioural contracts made; case reviews held; learning support zone where lessons are held, particularly for the students involved in cases on bullying.'*

Fostering a positive school climate: *'create a familiar atmosphere where everyone is made at ease to speak up whenever something is troubling them; the values of respect and friendship are promoted as much as it is possible; by continuously promoting and fostering such values as love, sharing, participation and co-operation.'*

'Creating intervention days or lessons delivered to students on specific topics, such as anti-bullying day, cyber bullying, diversity events, etc.'

Curricular approach and staff trainings

Question: Does the school curriculum of your school ensure equity through enabling a more just, respectful, knowledgeable, inclusive and emphatic attitude towards others and challenge students' beliefs about what is and what is not acceptable behaviour?

Almost all of respondents (96.55 %) confirmed that the school makes efforts through the curriculum and all activities designed for students to incorporate the development of a value system, skills and attitudes to function properly both at school and in the community. The subjects, included in the National Curriculum, that were mentioned by most of the Heads of School were: Personal Social and Career Development lessons (PSCD), Religious Education and Social Studies.

'The students are made aware of what is expected of them, how should they respect others, positive behaviour, anger-management, and team work skills, also through different activities that they organise together with teachers or LSAs. Many of these events are multicultural and parents are invited to attend.'

Two HOSs mentioned the existence of the Circle Time practice, 'an approach to help children, young people and adults learn, work and grow together collaboratively and harmoniously'.¹ This practice includes sessions with children and teachers, who come together in a circle, creating a positive atmosphere where everyone can feel comfortable to speak and share experiences on different topics. Such sessions are held periodically.

One of the participating schools organises a unique activity which is considered to be very effective: every month a student from each class receives a 'Certificate of Good Behaviour',

¹ What is COBS?', [https://www.um.edu.mt/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/62790/COBS_INFO.pdf]

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which encourages all children to improve their behaviour and show respect towards peers and adults.

Question: Does your school provide courses or trainings for students, teachers, LSA's, parents, on what bullying is, how it can be prevented and tackled? What type of training? (Figure 4)

Teacher and staff training is carried out through Professional Development sessions; they are trained to understand what bullying is and equipped with the necessary skills to detect and prevent any bullying behaviour that may occur. Parents are usually invited to participate in thematic talks which also cover bullying and cyber bullying.

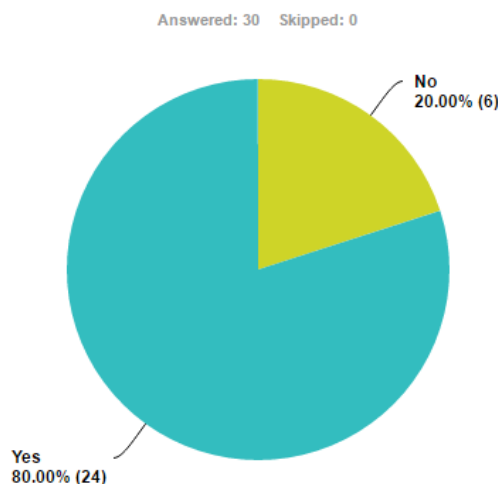


Figure 4

The speakers and facilitators of these sessions are either members of the Anti-Bullying Service, or other professionals such as members of the BeSmartOnline! project or the Cybercrime unit.

Methods and practices for tackling or preventing bullying

This section of the questionnaire was aimed to gather information regarding the practices and methods that are used in order to deal with cases of bullying, resolve bullying situations and prevent the repetition of such behaviour.

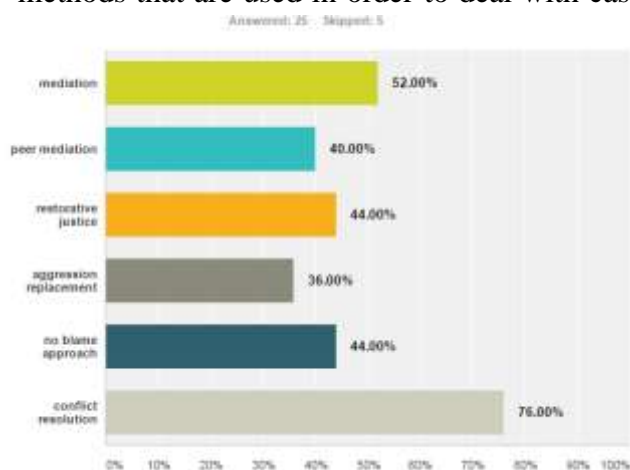


Figure 5

Question: Are you familiar with any of the following methods? (See Figure 5)

Most of the respondents were familiar with conflict resolution, followed by mediation, restorative justice and the 'no blame' approach.

Most of the HOS were familiar with at least two methods, but admitted that not enough training on how and when to use them had been provided, to them or to the school staff.

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The importance of conflict resolution skills to be taught to children and restorative justice introduced through implementation of the ‘Addressing Bullying Behaviour Policy’, mediation and aggression replacement were emphasised. However, a very important point emerged from the responses, namely that there is no one appropriate solution for all types of bullying behaviour, conflicts or aggression.

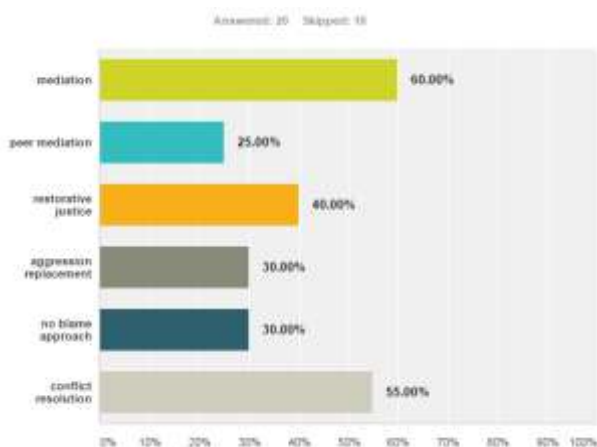


Figure 6

Question: Which of the above methods (or others) are used in your school? (See Figure 6)

Each case, depending on particular characteristics and dynamics, may require different interventions. Different methods may be used in different schools, but mediation and conflict resolution emerged as the main approaches taken.

Question: Is there a prevention programme developed at school level in order to ensure that vulnerable categories of students are provided with a safe and secure environment and are respected as all other students? (See Figure 7)

The majority of the respondents said that there is no specific programme in place related to vulnerable categories of students, however, the ones that replied positively and elaborated on their answers, linked this question to Nurture Groups classes in primary schools and the Learning Support Zones in secondary schools. These two types of programmes offer support for students experiencing Social-Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD) – ‘those students who present with disturbing and/or disruptive behaviour that interferes with their own and others’ social functioning and academic engagement’.²

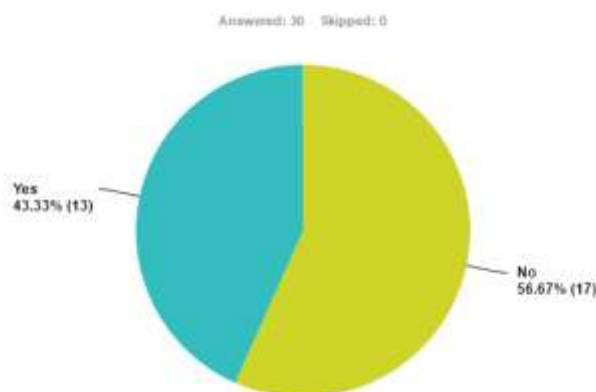


Figure 7

Another programme mentioned by one HOS was the CCP Programme – a competence based approach for low achievers in secondary schools which are provided with mentors to help them develop different skills and competences during specially designed

² ‘Understanding and Supporting Students with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, A Practical Guide for Staff in Schools’, Paul Cooper, Carmel Cefai, p.8.

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classes. This programme aims to help and support students with difficulties in integrating in mainstream education and who otherwise may feel marginalised in the school community.

Parents and community involvement

Question: Does the school develop effective school partnerships with the parents and the community in order enable representation and active participation from diverse communities especially of minority groups to enhance educational opportunities for all?

21 HOS had an affirmative answer, and many of them stressed the importance of having parents as involved as possible in the school life of their children. The parents are involved through different extracurricular activities, training and talks provided to them at school either by school staff or by other professionals.

Few respondents said that their school organises intercultural activities with the families of the students as a means to overcome cultural barriers that often stand between Maltese and foreign students and their families.

One respondent stressed the efforts that the school is making to overcome the language barriers in the cases of foreign students and their families, as academic achievement is very much subject to the level of understanding first and foremost of the language used in teaching. Translations are provided during meetings and the written information is sent to parents in English.

Some of the respondents said that there is no such partnership with the parents of students in their school and that the relationship that exists is based on information given by the school on the academic progress of their children.

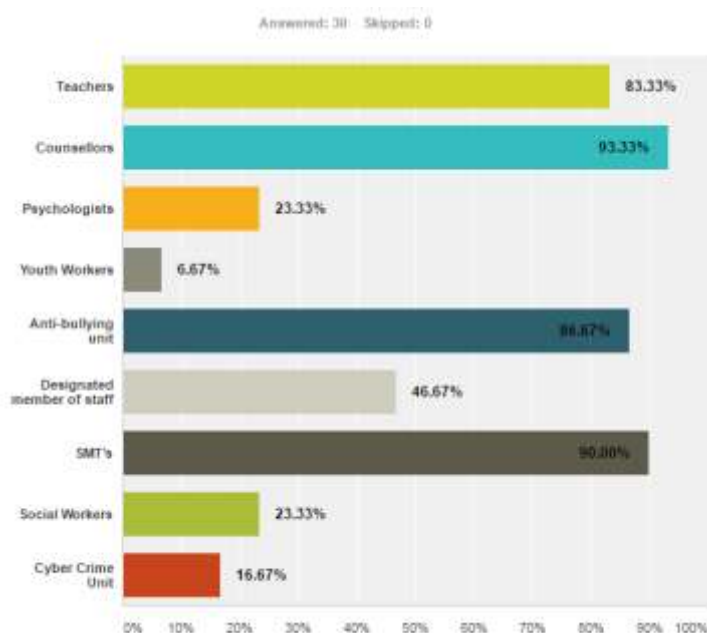


Figure 8

Dealing with cases of bullying and cyber bullying

Questions:

- *How does your school respond to cases of cyber bullying that are brought to the teachers/staff attention? Please give an example of methods used.*

- *Who is involved in dealing with bullying cases at the school level? (See Figure 8)*

- *To what extent are parents of both victim and perpetrator, involved in cases of cyber bullying?*

- *Do you or your school*

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collaborate with the Anti-Bullying Service, BeSmartOnline! project, Kellimni.com, Victim Support Malta or any other local or international organisation/project regarding prevention and treatment of cases of bullying?

According to the answers provided by HOS, when dealing with cases of bullying or cyber bullying, the actors involved are the teacher, SMT's, school counsellors and the representatives of the Anti-Bullying Service at College level. However, respondents stressed that the actors involved may differ according to each case:

'We speak with the students in question and also to the teacher and then seek the help of the Guidance teacher. If there is the need to refer further, we speak to the Prefect of Discipline or Anti-Bullying teacher. If the need arises we involve the Counsellors and/or Psychologist'

One respondent explained the step-by-step procedures which are followed by the school staff –these are in accordance with 'Addressing Bullying Behaviour in Schools' policy:

1. *The reporting student is carefully listened to.*
2. *The perpetrator is spoken to (separately from the reporting student).*
3. *Any witnesses are referred to for further clarification.*
4. *The Head of School is informed about incident.*
5. *The teacher discusses with the Head of School.*
6. *In some cases, the Head of School may feel that specialised intervention is required, so the case is referred to the guidance teacher.*
7. *Guidance teacher investigates and clarifies whether it is conflict or bullying, and proceeds accordingly.*
8. *If the case is still unresolved, guidance teacher reports back to the Head of School, and reports the case to the Anti-Bullying Service.*

When cyber bullying needs to be tackled, the parents are involved from the initial phase and encouraged to contact, and report the case to the Cyber Crime Unit, a specialised section within the Malta Police Force. In some schools, the teacher or SMTs record the data that can be retrieved from the respective social network or platform where cyber bullying occurred, while asking for advice how to proceed from the Psycho-Social Team of the school. Otherwise, parents are requested to provide a hard copy as proof of the incident and a copy of the police report where applicable.

Other actors involved are the PSCD teachers, who either themselves or external professionals organise talks about the safe use of the internet and the dangers and consequences of cyber bullying. The professionals would either be members of the Cyber Crime Unit or the BeSmartOnline! project, who deliver talks both to teachers and parents.

3. Conclusions

The fact that bullying was not considered to be an issue in more than a half of the responding schools, indicates a positive view of the overall experience that the schools have with such behaviour. However, one of the limitations of this research was the fact that 29 out of 30 respondents to the questionnaire were Heads of School, teachers and other school staff might have shared opinions of the situation. Another limitation is given by the fact that only thirty of

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the 83 Heads of State schools have participated to the survey, and no church or private school was represented.

Overall the respondents gave positive answers regarding implementation of the ‘Addressing Bullying Behaviour in Schools’ policy, especially when it came to the inclusion of specific guidelines in school regulations.

However, when considering other measures included in the strategy document for the above-mentioned policy, such as providing appropriate training opportunities (measure 1.6), most respondents admitted that not enough training is provided on methods and strategies for addressing cases of bullying, aggression or violence.

In tackling such cases there seems to be a variety of methods used, according to what is needed in each situation. However, there is no clear distinction between bullying, aggression and violence, by the children. This can lead to confusion and misunderstanding regarding the types of approaches to be adopted, the involvement of appropriate actors and can result in neglecting aspects that are not obvious unless further investigations are carried on. Such confusion and misunderstanding can even be more damaging by the lack of appropriate training of all school staff, especially the teachers. According to the respondents, most of the training offered is done throughout the Professional Development sessions, which may or may not be mandatory.

However, more training on all of the methods enumerate in the survey, namely: mediation, peer mediation, restorative justice, aggression replacement, no blame approach, conflict resolution was stated to be a requirement, especially when it comes to the restorative justice, which is the underlying methodology adopted through the ‘Addressing Bullying behaviour in school policy’.

Dealing with cyber bullying seems to be the most challenging issue for schools. Even if there are procedures for such situations, the fact that the location where such bullying behaviour occurs can’t always be well defined, it leads confusion regarding who should take action. Another aspect which may need to be taken into consideration is the fact that existing reporting systems cannot guarantee that the students involved in such cases would actually report their occurrence.

While there are many school activities that may involve parents, the level of parental involvement seems to be insufficient to create a meaningful partnership with the school (measure 2.1) and with the whole community (measure 1.10). If parents are only provided information and only invited to participate in cultural and sports activities, they may well be missing out on important aspects related to the psycho-social development of their children.