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EARLY IDENTIFICATION AND PREVENTION OF BULLYING IN A SCHOOL SETTING
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Bullying at School: What Do Children Have to Say about It?

Research on Children's Perspectives on Bullying
in Seven EU Member States

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Contents

Introduction 2

Methodology..... 2

 Research questions 2

 Scope and limitations 3

Findings 4

 Do children experience bullying in school? When does bullying start? 5

 How do children define bullying? What does bullying do to the victim? 6

 Does bullying affect only the victims? 7

 Perpetrators..... 7

 Witnesses..... 8

 Do children learn something from bullying? 10

 Do adults take into account what children think about and how they cope with bullying?.... 11

 Common issues and notable differences 12

What do children recommend? 13

Concluding remarks 16

Annex: List of questions for the FGD and interviews 17

INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings and recommendations that resulted from research activities that took place within seven European Union Member States. The report is an integral part of a Daphne project¹ on the children's perspective on bullying at school and its prevention. The objective of the report is to support the project partners to understand better the children's views on bullying and to develop successful lobbying campaigns.² The project partners also believe that the project, in general, and this report in particular will contribute to the debate on bullying at school beyond the scope and duration of the project.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions addressed by this study are:

How do children experience and perceive bullying? What are their perceptions as victims, as perpetrators and as witnesses? How do they act in each of these roles? What do they recognise as child-friendly anti-bullying strategies and what do they advise in terms of intervention approaches?

These research questions reflect the objectives of the study and are their natural operationalization. They were further developed in a list of questions for semi-structured focus groups and interviews. Given the international scope of the study the questions were

¹ The project Introducing Participatory and Child-Centred Approach for Early Identification and Prevention of Bullying in School Setting in seven EU Countries is funded by the Daphne Program of the EU. The project is implemented by Barnardo's (UK), City of Goteborg (SW), ICDI (NL), LDI (SK), Safe the Children (RO), SPI (DE) under the lead of Animus (BG).

² The design of the report and the incorporation of the pictures and the other visual elements have been done by the lead partner, Animus (BG). The pictures have been taken by the projects partners during interactive workshops and focus groups with children.

translated, and when necessary adapted to the age, cultural contexts and setting by each of the project partners. The list of questions is provided in an annex below.

In addition, to provide a suitable background, preliminary desk reviews were conducted by the project partners.³ The objective was to understand what were the current child-centred anti-bullying programs and measures that might have already been experienced by children, and more generally, if children's perspectives were taken into account by existing anti-bullying policies and measures.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The project partners conducted research activities in all seven countries participating in the project: Animus - in Bulgaria, Barnardo's – in the UK, City of Goteborg in Sweden, ICDI in the Netherlands, LDI in Slovakia, Safe the Children in Romania, and SPI Forschung – in Germany. All together more than 100 children, aged 8-16, expressed their views and opinions in interviews and focus group discussions (FGD). The large number of respondents and the diverse geographical scope are among the advantages of this study, but we have to be honest about its limitations too. The resources available for data collection were quite limited and usually the FGD and interviews took place adjacent to other activities. This report is a product of typical action research and as such it does not claim scientific vigour nor complete representation of the participating countries. It reflects the narratives of the boys and girls who took part in the FGD and interviews as interpreted by the colleagues who participated in the data collection phase. A conscious effort has been made to keep this report concise and to use the collected data in a focused way. To this end it is possible that there were issues, otherwise relevant, that remained under-reported. Recognising all this, the report is written with the conviction that it properly represents the perspectives of the children who spoke to us and to whom we are truly grateful.

³ The author expresses his gratitude to everyone involved in the review and the data collection processes for their effort to provide better understanding of the children's perspective on bullying and the contexts in the respective countries.

FINDINGS

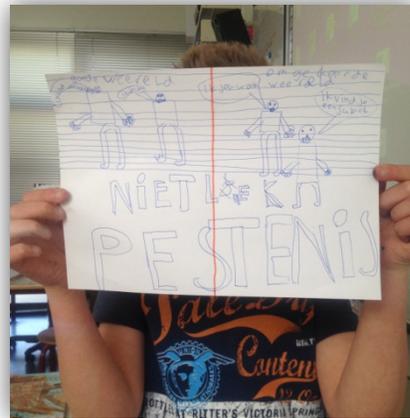
This section collates how our respondents - the children - think, feel and react to bullying. In other words it helps the adult readers to see the bullying through the eyes of the children. Of course, not everything that the children told us or we observed is shared here. An effort has been made to focus on these thoughts, opinions and insights that enable us, the adults, to understand the children's point of view on bullying. A lot has been written about bullying. The humble contribution of this paper is to present to the interested audience the children's voices as we heard them and hopefully to provide a learning opportunity for some adults who are interested in the theme of bullying.



DO CHILDREN EXPERIENCE BULLYING IN SCHOOL? WHEN DOES BULLYING START?

Yes, they do. Basically everywhere. They do not always admit that they do, but usually every child knows *someone* who has been a victim, perpetrator or a witness of bullying. Many children point out that most, if not all, children have been exposed to bullying. This recognition is not surprising and it is confirmed by all project partners.

Bullying in schools starts quite early. In Germany, children in 3rd grade have *reported to have told to their parents and educators about experiencing bullying in the school*. Also children in the Netherlands reported that their first experience with bullying is quite early: *it starts in group 2 or in group 3 (age 6-7); in group 5 (age 9) or in group 6 (age 10-11) the bullying is already established, it is kind of 'official'*. When referring to their early experiences the children did not always use the word 'bullying'; sometimes they just referred to incidents that were still vivid in their memories.



HOW DO CHILDREN DEFINE BULLYING? WHAT DOES BULLYING DO TO THE VICTIM?

Children define and describe bullying in a variety of ways. Many of them are familiar with the term and are able to describe the process of bullying and - as our German colleagues report - the different *attributes of the roles* that children play in it. For the researchers it was clear that the children *were aware and quite knowledgeable about the topic, experiencing various situations of bullying, having touched upon some, and often taking different sides in them (bullied, witness)*.

Another observation from Germany is that *the group has experience of a classic bullying case, without naming it directly*. And indeed: often children define bullying by describing how it affects the victim. They give examples or list experiences when they are asked about bullying. According to the British children-respondents *being bullied is not a nice feeling and you can get depressed. It can be physical damage and emotional hurt, whereas* children from the Netherlands shared that:

Bullying is when children do not want to go to school anymore (at least for a period of time)... have the feeling that no one helps them ... are sad ... feel excluded ... feel pain in their stomach if they have to go to school.

That bullying has a detrimental effect on the children's willingness to go to school is reported in different countries, as the following reference from the UK demonstrates:

Yes, I have been bullied. It's not nice and feels like a maze that you can't get out. Bullies can make people gang up on you. ... And bullying can be when your friends turn against you and you don't want to go to school anymore. ... Actually the bully mobilises others in order to harm.

This quotation also points to one of bullying's core characteristics: usually the victim is facing a group, 'gang', 'the others' and this is what makes it so unequal, unfair and awful. The misbalance -of one confronted by many- adds a lot of harm to the specific act of bullying and it is this component that turns bullying into a real nightmare for a large number of children.

The role of the bullying on the other participants in the practice and its detrimental effects on them are also well recognised by the children.

DOES BULLYING AFFECT ONLY THE VICTIMS?

Children think that although the bullied children are the most obvious, the direct victims, **bullying affects all children negatively** including the witnesses and – definitely – the perpetrators. It does not take them much time to point to the negative effects and the suffering that bullying causes to witnesses and perpetrators.

Perpetrators

One of the intentions of this study was to cast light on the point of view of the perpetrators and the witnesses. Naturally, children do not identify themselves loudly and clearly as perpetrators but they speak openly about what motivates the bullies. First and foremost, children's answers indicate that the bullies are actually looking for attention: According to our young Romanian respondents, the bullies *want to impress others, to show-off and to prove how tough they are, and sometimes they even manage (to get feared and well-known), other times they don't get the desired attention.* Children in the Netherlands confirm that: *they [the perpetrators] look for a fight ... want to be cool, brave (though they are actually not!) ... try to be funny, but they are not ... like bullying (find it entertaining);* bullies are also seen as arrogant: *They think they are better than the rest; they think they are better/superior than their victims.* According to other Dutch children *sometimes you bully because you are angry.* Another view is that bullying might be a way to face your own insecurity and challenges: *they feel better because they push the others down, but at the end this does not help: but maybe indeed they feel guilty.* Similarly, according to our German colleagues causing anger is considered to *heighten one's status among their peers, making one look more mature.* For some German children those who bully feel *honoured, king-like* and think that *they could do all that they want.* Sometimes explanations go a step further, for some Romanian children: *bullying is like the 'survival of the fittest' and thus, it makes the bully stronger.*

Children also reflected on what bullying does to the perpetrator. There are opinions that bullying makes the perpetrators feel good. At the same time many children believe that in the long term bullying does not bring anything good to any perpetrator. Widely expressed interpretation in the Netherlands is that in the end the bullies have got it wrong. Children who bully; *feel guilty; they sometimes think: oh, what have I done! ... they make other people angry or afraid... they are going to cry if they lose a fight.*

Many children also try to understand the difficulties a bully faces; according to the Bulgarian colleagues during one of the FGD *the participants managed to put themselves in the shoes of a perpetrator, to express compassion with the situation of a perpetrator and to consider the reasons for her or his action.* Children in the Netherlands had similar insights; they were more specific in their comments: *they [the perpetrators] bully because maybe something worse happens at home as well as that the bullies want to be part of a group: or they are afraid not to be.* Also in Sweden children believe that: *they probably do not feel so good themselves. ... Something might have happened that makes them to take it out on others. ... They might have been bullied themselves or they do not have a good atmosphere at home.* Also according to the Slovak report *the wrongdoers usually have behavioural problems, disrespect all school authority and/or have no easy family background, thus missing real support at home.* All these reflections come to show that children are able to reason about the causes and the roots of bullying and to understand that perpetrators themselves might, in their own way, be victims too.

Witnesses

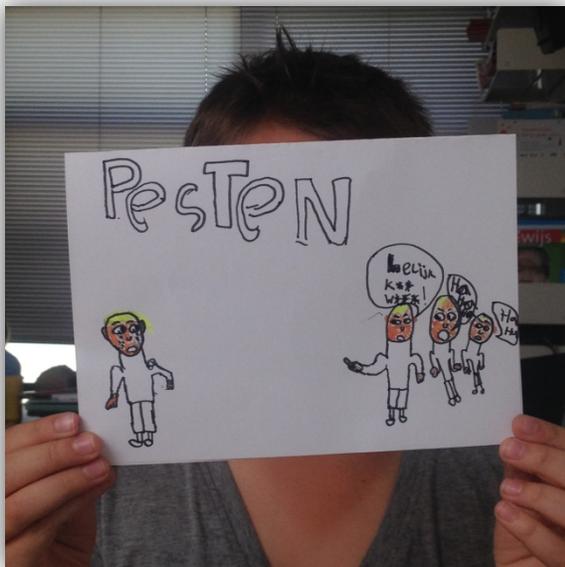
Bullying involves not only the perpetrators and the victims but also the witnesses; their role is very important in the whole process and children feel that witnesses might have the power to stop or even prevent bullying.

In contrast to the situation of the bully, many children talk openly about their experience of being **witnesses** to bullying. Apparently this is not a comfortable position. Children prefer to talk about *what children feel when they witness bullying* instead of *how I feel if I see that someone is being bullied.* This is a clear indication of their discomfort in the role of the witness; in any case bullying makes children feel unhappy: *all in all they feel sad, weak.* Children regularly report that witnesses are faced with feelings of helplessness, and fear that they might become a victim too: *they really want to help, or at least some of them do but they are afraid they will be bullied themselves.* This quote from the UK report illustrates the point: *I was bullied by a boy for two years. A friend tried to help me then he got bullied. It's still going on!* It could be even worse. Our Romanian colleagues reported that *the most common reaction of children witnessing bullying is not to intervene, but to watch. The aggression is treated as a show that can sometimes even be entertaining. When others intervene, they rarely support the victim.* Assisting the perpetrator, not the victim, is seen as the safest strategy to stay out of trouble by the children across the countries where this research took place. Sometimes there could be really unpleasant twists, as this reflection from Germany illustrates: *it is not improbable, that*

previously quarrelling/struggling children align against the mediator and start attacking her/him.

At the same time, the witnesses have the potential to break down the process of bullying. If there is decisive negative reaction to the bullying there are good chances that the bully will be discouraged. Children realise that the *role of the witness is very important in the process of bullying*. Swedish children believe that bullying stops *if those around who see the bullying tell someone that it happens*. Not all girls and boys are afraid, or as one of them in the Netherlands put it: *And there are also children who help; they stand up for the victims and are not afraid to defend them*. Also in Sweden: *you can tell the bully to stop; if you dare you can tell the bully to stop*.

In any case one of the children's most important messages is that encouraging and supporting a negative attitude towards bullying might be a very successful preventative strategy. Children who experience bullying as witnesses suffer too. If enough of them dare to confront the perpetrator(s) the specific act of bullying might be over very quickly. If this happens regularly, it is realistic to expect a (quick) decline of the bullying practices in the respective school.



DO CHILDREN LEARN SOMETHING FROM BULLYING?

The project partners asked this question too. The intention was to try to look at bullying from an unusual, maybe even provocative point of view. Do children actually learn something from bullying? Many boys and girls gave an answer which most people consider obvious, intuitive and straightforward: *you learn nothing from bullying*. But there were also young respondents who took the challenge and reflected critically on the question. Such answers usually start with statements like *there is nothing to be learnt from bullying: there is no added value in it. Actually yes – one should learn to help other people*. And then come some true discoveries, as well as for the children themselves: *Do not do it yourself! If you realised what bullying does to others you would never do it. Actually you have to be aware that you do it – if indeed you do. Many children are not aware that what they do is bullying: they might realise it only afterwards and only if it is discussed*.

The statement that children are not always aware of the impact and severity of their actions should be taken seriously. It builds up the argument that suitable support and guidance to perpetrators is a preventive strategy with a lot of potential. Without saying this directly, children indicate that work with perpetrators should go far beyond restrictive and punitive measures.

Another good preventive measure is speaking about bullying in general, and not only after a specific incident took place. When a discussion about bullying is done as a follow up to a particular incident, children might focus too much on the concrete situation. Talking about bullying in a more open format allows children to reflect on what bullying does to them and to others. Children sincerely state that if they are aware of what their words and action cause to the others they will be much more considerate and thoughtful as this quote from the Swedish report illustrates:

You may see how the person is feeling and that you do not want to feel so yourself and then you want to prevent it.

The discussions about if something can be learnt from bullying also brought forth the following observation in Romania: *bullying is more frequent when children have to deal with new social circumstances (such as in their first year of high-school, when a new student is transferred to their class etc.) and that's because "some children want to prove they are tough". In other words, it is children's entrance into a new group that brings extra vulnerability*. This is not

surprising, but the validation given to it by the children suggests that children, too, reflect on the need of more intensive interventions and preventive measures in transitional situations.

Trying to learn something from children about bullying should be a natural, instinctive initiative if one intends to address bullying at school. Or is it?

DO ADULTS TAKE INTO ACCOUNT WHAT CHILDREN THINK ABOUT AND HOW THEY COPE WITH BULLYING?

There are a lot of materials and programs on bullying throughout Europe. The attention given to the issue varies per country, but all-in-all on a European level there is no scarcity of interventions and policy documents addressing bullying. At the same time the project partners did not identify in their countries categorically convincing cases of incorporating children's perspectives on bullying into the numerous interventions, programs and strategies that are available.

Another lesson that can be learnt from the reviews conducted by the partners is that bullying at school cannot be addressed by a single remedy or intervention package; different interventions will incorporate to a different extent the children's perspective on bullying; having such a variety is not per se a bad thing and we should accept that some interventions take more of the children's perspective into account than others.

But with all these qualifications in mind we also have to admit that none of the anti-bullying interventions that were reviewed were entirely, or predominantly, based on the children's perspective on bullying. In many of them children were meant to have played an important role in addressing the issue, but de facto we could not discover an intervention⁴ which is entirely based on how children cope with bullying or how they think bullying needs to be tackled.

⁴ The project partners' sincere efforts to discover such an intervention did not lead to a convincing find. This is not to say that such an intervention might not exist. Once again: we realise the limitations of this study, as already outlined in the section on *Methodology*.

COMMON ISSUES AND NOTABLE DIFFERENCES

The variety of anti-bullying approaches refers not only to developed interventions but also to the policies and practices in the different countries; practice in schools in the same country also might vary widely.

The variations are greatest on the level of policy response.⁵ Some countries tend to address the issue of bullying on a national level and naturally have a more centralised approach. For example the Bulgarian Ministry of Education in collaborations with other institutions and NGOs developed guidelines under the title *Mechanism for Combating School Bullying*.⁶ This document de facto sets up guidelines for schools to create their own anti-bullying mechanisms. Similarly, the Slovak Ministry of Education issued *Guide (Nu.7/2006-R) on Prevention and Solving Bullying in Schools and School Establishments*. In other countries the anti-bullying policies are introduced on regional rather than on national level. For example, in Germany an anti-bullying policy was pioneered in the Federal Province of Nordrhein Westfalen already in 1994; later other federal units followed suit. There are also programs developed by non-public stakeholders like NGOs and private agencies and some of them are commercially available whereas other intervention packages are for free. A variety of programs, offered under different conditions and modalities is an approach seen in West European countries like the Netherlands and Sweden. The state administration has more of a guiding and supervising role and the schools have to develop their anti-bullying plans. They have to do this autonomously but their plans need to meet certain criteria. This is the case with annual action plans in the Swedish schools. In the UK the Department of Education guides schools to prevent and respond to bullying as part of their overall behaviour policy.⁷ According to recent (2015) amendments in the legislation of the Netherlands, from the start of the 2015-2016 school year, Dutch schools are obliged to introduce special policies that safeguard a secure social environment and anti-bullying protocols.⁸ Also other measures have quite an important place in these policies. Schools themselves are responsible for developing their policies, including choosing anti-

⁵ Here the idea is not to provide a review of the policies in the participating countries but rather to illustrate the differences in the approaches.

⁶ *Механизъм за противодействие на училищния тормоз между децата и учениците в училище*, МОИ, 2015

⁷ As our UK partner explained, the Department of Education outlined in Oct. 2014 *the government's approach to bullying, legal obligations and the power schools have to tackle bullying, and the principles which underpin the most effective anti-bullying strategies in schools. It also lists further resources through which staff can access specialist information on the specific issues that they face.*

⁸ Source: the Netherlands Youth Institute retrieved from: <http://www.nji.nl/nl/Actueel/Nieuws-over-de-jeugdsector/2015/Sociale-veiligheid-wettelijk-verplicht-op-scholen>

bullying programs if they need to.⁹ It is too early to have any reflections or evaluations by children but there are also no indications that this has been done before.¹⁰ But there are also countries where anti-bullying policies are in its infancy, as our Romanian colleagues report; to this end the present project has the potential to contribute a lot to the debate in these countries.

To what extent are the policies based on the children's perspective on bullying? The variety of policies reflects diverse ideas on how bullying should be tackled or prevented but it is difficult to argue that the children's perspective plays a central role. One commonality in this diverse picture is that there is a lot of opportunity - and need - for the children's perspective on bullying to be heard.

The experiences on the ground come to the same conclusion. At the specific settings where the interviews and FGD took place different programs, with various approaches and effects took place but nowhere there was an intervention for which one can testify that it was truly and unconditionally based on the children's perspectives on bullying. This quote from the review of our Slovak colleagues sums it up: *There is no explicit evidence that children as the main actors and policy target were asked to evaluate or to reflect upon these [anti-bullying] measures.*

WHAT DO CHILDREN RECOMMEND?

This section outlines recommendations given by the children that might be useful for the project partners in their further work on anti-bullying interventions and most of all - in the developing of their lobbying campaigns.

The text in this section follows the pattern of the previous one: the suggestions, ideas and observations are drawn from what children shared during the focus group discussions and interviews. Also a lot of quotations are used to replicate as much as possible the children's voices when it comes to their advice and suggestions on what works and what does not in anti-bullying interventions.

One of the recommendations that stands out is that children ***need to talk about bullying, preferably with external agencies***; they need to talk about it not only when there is a specific

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ NJI has evaluated a number of anti-bullying program and categorised them; see: 2015, Nederlands Jeugdinstituut Van plagen tot pesten, infosheet.

occasion such as an incident in the classroom or in the school but also in more general terms; As our German colleagues reported: *The children's need to talk, to be listened to, the motivation to share their experience, stories, voices, and views was striking.*¹¹ Children might benefit most from semi-structured discussions when they can hear more from their peers than from an adult. Talking about bullying, beyond discussing concrete incidents, allows the children to address some of their fears: *the discussion on school bullying helped to transform scary experiences and the feeling of helplessness into a problem that is discussible and solvable*, according to the Bulgarian colleagues. A discussion led by someone who is an outsider to the school allows the children to open up and reflect on their own behaviour and contribution to bullying practices.

It is also important that the **children's** experiences, feedback and contributions **are taken seriously**. This is what the children in Sweden advise: *Follow-up. It is important to follow-up the situation. The victim needs to know that it is taken seriously and the perpetrator needs to know and understand the school does not take situations like this lightly.* If the teachers, parents and adults in general create a good atmosphere and have the proper attitude the chances are greater that any anti-bullying measure will be successful. The bully needs to understand how the victim feels and what the consequences are of bullying behaviour.

Another very important recommendation is suggested by our Slovak colleagues: ***one of the best strategies, which, it seems, works to combat bullying, is peer mediation.*** It might be defined also as 'peer involvement'. It is important to have as large a group as possible on the side of the victim. Similarly German children suggest that all other children *align against them [the perpetrators]* in order to outnumber them. Peer intervention should be used also as a preventive strategy. This is not easy but as the Slovak colleagues note: *children consider stopping bullying as difficult as its prevention.* Children themselves point to possible preventive approaches. Bulgarian and German respondents outlined *talking with each other* and *playing with each other* as suitable support strategies.

The reports from the different countries made it clear that a single anti-bullying intervention would not be able to prevent all possible bullying incidents. Children do not express it explicitly but from their opinions and suggestions could be derived the following recommendation: **each school should have its own anti-bullying plan or policy and optimally they should include more than one anti-bullying program or approach.** This will require a proactive approach by each school leadership team to review the available anti-bullying programs and resources in the respective country and evaluate which one, or rather, what combination of approaches best

¹¹ See the section above titled: *Do children learn something from bullying?*

serves the school. Sometimes children's recommendations are controversial. One of the most common intervention strategies, namely *talking to a teacher/educator was not considered a helpful strategy* by some of the German respondents. They explained that *afterwards the affected child could be accused of sneaking to the teacher and get in even more trouble*. At the same time other German respondents *referred to the trusted teacher/mentor with the regret that there was only one. All teachers should acts as mentors/guidance counsellors in order to allow to the children more choices to decide whom to talk to in case of a problem/need*. This example illustrates the **need for an individualised school anti-bullying approach** and that school leadership teams should consider developing their own individualised anti-bullying interventions. **It also illustrates the need to take into account the students' opinions and to involve the children in the process**. Bulgarian children emphasise this with their statement that it is necessary to establish strict rules and clear attitudes towards bullying in school and they are unanimous that this should be achieved in discussion between the adults (security guards, teachers, school principal) and the students themselves.

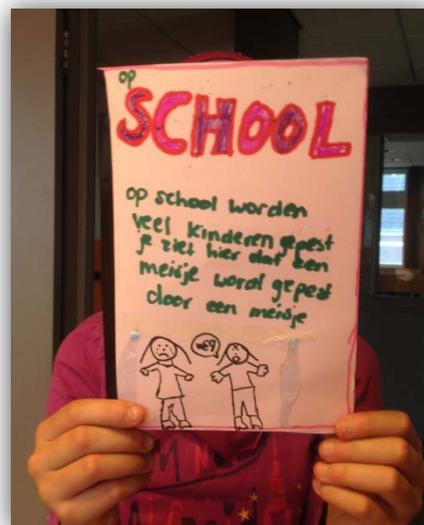
Despite the mentioned above different opinions, the classic approach of involving the teacher is still widely mentioned as a way to deal with bullying. The shortest recommendation, given by one of the Dutch children, was ***talk to the teacher***. This is not always easy as her Romanian counterparts explain: *Sometimes you don't dare to talk to the teachers so it is good if the teachers take the first step*. Next to advocating the proactive role of the educators, Dutch children also shared good practices that they benefited from: *In our school there is one pupil/student who is assigned the task to pay extra attention to all kinds of incidents in and outside the school. And it works!*

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Bullying at school has been getting progressively more attention from professionals in the fields of child protection and education in the last decade with adults increasingly intervening with prevention and intervention programs and measures. Yet, in designing and implementing measures they do not tap sufficiently into the perspectives of children, regardless of the fact that it is the children who are entirely the focus of *bullying at school*. The children are the perpetrators, the victims and the witnesses. They instigate the process and they suffer from it. They initiate it but they are also the ones who benefit most when bullying at school is minimised. With this in mind it is clear that their expertise on the subject cannot be ignored. This study tried to focus exactly on the children's expertise and perspective on bullying. The value of the insights given by the children, we talked to, is beyond doubt.

Involving children in the discussion on how to tackle bullying at school has also another, very important, aspect: it is important to safeguard the right of children to participate in the policies and practices that directly concern them. This is a direct operationalisation of the children's right to participation.

The main lessons from this research are outlined in the recommendation section. Hopefully these find their way into the future intervention and prevention initiatives by the project partners and other stakeholders. The two main lessons that must be kept in mind are: always include the children in designing and implementing measures tackling bullying at school and always take their inputs seriously.



Annex: List of questions for the FGD and interviews

1. How do you feel at school? Do you like it? Is there something you do not like?
2. Is there bullying in your school?
3. What do you think about bullying? What happens to children who are bullied?
4. What does bullying do to the perpetrators?
5. How do witnesses of bullying feel? What can they do?
6. Can something be learnt from bullying? What?
7. What should be done about bullying? What should be done for children when bullying occurs?
8. Can you think of any examples when bullying occurred and measures were taken and it worked?
9. When it comes to bullying what would you advice the adults who have to deal with it?

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