



26<sup>th</sup> May 2021

## **Our Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on the Impact of Bullying on Autistic Pupil's Mental Health**

### **Introduction**

ASIAM would like to take the opportunity to thank the Committee for inviting us to make a submission on this important topic. Autistic young people are disproportionately affected by both bullying and mental health challenges. Research suggests that autistic people are significantly more likely to experience bullying than their neurotypical peers with at least 40% of autistic students experiencing bullying during their time in education<sup>1</sup>. Bullying is strongly linked in literature to mental health challenges, suicide and suicidal ideation, self-harm and challenges into adulthood. This is concerning when we consider that autistic children are 4 times likelier to develop a mental health condition like clinical depression than their neurotypical peers<sup>2</sup>, are 28 times more likely to attempt suicide<sup>3</sup>, and those individuals on the spectrum without an intellectual disability being 9 times more likely to die by suicide<sup>4</sup>.

In recent years, there have been significant efforts to create a more inclusive education system. 1 in 65 Irish schoolchildren today has a diagnosis of autism and 86% of those children attend mainstream school<sup>5</sup>, either in the mainstream classroom or in a special class within a mainstream school. It is important that inclusion is not solely equated with participation in a particular school setting. It must be so that autistic young people are fully included in school communities which understand, accept, and affirm their differences. In addition, to support true community inclusion, we must make sure that *all* young people leaving our education

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<sup>1</sup> Maïano, Christophe, *et al.* (2015). 'Prevalence of School Bullying Among Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis', *Autism Research*, 9(6), pgs.601-615. Online. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.1568>

<sup>2</sup> Hudson CC, Hall L, Harkness KL. (2019). 'Prevalence of Depressive Disorders in Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder: a Meta-Analysis', *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 47(1), pgs.65-175. Online. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-018-3542-9>

<sup>3</sup> Autistica. (2019). *Personal Tragedies, Public Crisis: The Urgent Need for a National Response to Early Death in Autism*. Pg.3

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* Pg.3.

<sup>5</sup> National Council for Special Education. (2016). *NCSE Policy Advice: Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Schools*. Pg.5.

system are equipped to live, work, and play with people who are different this is the only way we will create truly inclusive communities, prepare young people for the modern world, and end the scourge of bullying.

It is vital to recognise at this stage that many young people are amongst the most progressive in efforts to bring about an inclusive Ireland. In an Attitudes to Autism Poll published by our organisation on World Autism Day 2019, 1 in 3 people between the ages of 18 and 25 reported having an autistic person in their friends' circles. We should take encouragement from this that inclusive education benefits both autistic pupils *and* their neurotypical peers. In schools across the country there are young people who actively reach out and include their autistic classmates, and numerous schools are doing hugely innovative work in building the self-advocacy skills of their autistic pupils; we must nevertheless ensure that such initiatives are universal and systemic. To achieve this goal, significant effort and investment is required. Autistic pupils must not be passive participants in their educational and support journey, but actively empowered to understand their rights and how they should expect to be treated by other people, be taught skills in how to self-advocate and, critically, be given self-confidence and belief. It is vital that their neurotypical peers are asked to learn about autism, to adapt to meet autistic young people in the middle and receive clear instruction from home and school that it is never acceptable to treat people badly because of difference.

Finally, investment is required to ensure schools have the skills and support systems to address bullying as it arises and that young autistic people, who experience bullying, are able to gain timely access to mental health supports. Autistic people do not enjoy parity of access to mental health services in Ireland from public or private providers. This potentially prevents bullying being identified at an earlier stage and does not provide young people with the crucial support they need to process their experiences and address them prior to reaching crisis point.

Below we outline key challenges which can lead to the bullying of autistic people within our education system and outline a number of recommendations for the Committee's consideration.

## Key Challenges

### Public attitudes and role of the family

At the outset, it is crucial to recognise that the bullying of autistic students in a school context cannot be separated from broader prejudice, discrimination or dated attitudes within our society.

Autism is an invisible disability which is still surrounded by a significant degree of stigma. Many autistic people do not feel confident to share their experiences with other people for fear of being treated differently, patronised or misjudged. Autistic people often communicate, think and experience the environment in a very different way to the vast majority of people however a lack of public education can often mean that instead of receiving support when overwhelmed or struggling to access a public setting, our community members can be misjudged as being challenging or the subject of ridicule.

We also have within our society a deeply ingrained ableism, which many people are simply unaware exists. A key example of this is how historic language linked to disability such as “*the r-word*” and “*the s-word*” continue to be used to describe people in a negative way, despite living in a generation which is perhaps more sensitive to the power of language than any before it.

This context is important because whilst schools must play an important role in educating young people about diversity and challenging discrimination or bullying when it occurs, we cannot underestimate the influence of the home and family in this issue. It is vital that parents lead by example in showing their children to respect difference, by practising inclusion in their own work and recreational lives and in communicating the expectation that all people should be treated with respect. It should be noted that a significant minority of parents continue to hold the view that schools should not be obliged to include those with additional needs. These attitudes must change and be challenged in order for real inclusion to occur. One example of how this could take place is a greater use of the Section 38A power in Education (School Admissions) Act 2018 to compel school communities to open autism classes where there has been an historic reluctance.

### **Lack of understanding and acceptance amongst peers**

Stigma is allowed to flourish when we don't talk about issues, equip young people to engage with difference or recognise that diversity is present. Ireland's social history teaches us this truth on a whole range of issues.

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 provides for the education of all students to better understand disability and their peers. The reality remains that in many school communities there continues to be a lack of confidence in leading this discussion, often out of a genuine fear of getting it wrong or causing offence. The reality is though that this reluctance, in and of itself, creates stigma and fails to trust our young people's maturity and openness to inclusion – whilst not giving them the language or knowledge to understand why people may need to do things differently in classroom or social settings.

It is vital that young people are taught about disability from a young age, as a mainstream diversity issue within society.

### **Approach to difference**

It is important that we approach difference in an equitable, inclusive way. This means that just as we educate young autistic people to understand how neurotypical people communicate, think and interact, it is important that neurotypical students are taught the reverse.

Schools must demonstrate to young people that autism is not a deficit but a difference and emphasise the need to learn to understand and respect each other. Autistic people should not be asked to change to conform to a neurotypical world and this approach should be taken through every aspect of school life.

### **Insufficient teacher training**

If teachers do not feel that they have had adequate training in autism for their own practice, they are not well placed to teach students about autism or to be able to identify where an autistic student may be experiencing bullying or mental health challenges.

## **Recognition of bullying**

Many autistic young people may not always recognise when they are being bullied or mistreated. A pupil who genuinely wants to make friends may find themselves being taken advantage of, being encouraged to engage in behaviour which might lead to them getting in trouble or being used or taken advantage of. In addition, understanding the subtleties of social media, instant messaging and indeed complex areas of life such as sexuality or relationships can leave autistic students particularly exposed.

It is important that we recognise that not all bullying will be obvious to see and provide evidence-based support to young people to understand when they may be the victim of bullying

## **Self-advocacy and confidence**

It is important to do all we can to prevent bullying and equip young people to understand when they are experiencing it, but it is as important to give autistic pupils resilience tools to limit the impact on mental health and ensure a person knows their intrinsic value and their rights when they are being treated badly.

Too often autistic young people are not taught explicit self-advocacy skills, which are so important in a wide range of areas but are of particular value in helping an autistic person ask for help if they have been bullied, to understand why they do things differently and have self-respect and confidence for who they are.

## **Intersectionality**

Autistic students are not one-dimensional. Many young people within our community have co-occurring disability diagnosis, are members of the LGBTQIA+ community, are Travellers or members of another racial or ethnic minority to name just some forms of intersectionality. When a person is a member of more than one minority group they are perhaps even more exposed to experiencing bullying or mental health challenges or indeed to experiencing rejection even within both minority communities.

Our approaches to addressing bullying and the impact on mental health must provide for intersectionality

## **Lack of support**

It must be acknowledged that a lack of appropriate support from the State can in turn lead to an autistic student being more likely to experience bullying or not receive the support required when bullying occurs.

Our *Invisible Children* report (2019) captured the experiences of over 300 young people who were either out of school or not in an appropriate school place, 27% of respondents reported that a reason for their absence from school was the experience of bullying or isolation<sup>6</sup>. This is concerning as it suggests both a lack of addressing bullying in a timely manner, to the detriment of the victim, and the onwards implication of a lack of appropriate supports and resources when this occurs.

Many autistic people continue to experience lengthy delays for assessment and appropriate supports. A young person who have not received appropriate speech and language and occupational therapy or psychological support may be more likely to be subjected to bullying or indeed less likely to have the skills to effectively address the experience. In addition, autistic girls and others who mask their experiences of autism can often be the last to receive either supports or diagnosis and so very susceptible to the impact of bullying.

A lack of appropriate SNA support, inappropriate school placement or insufficient support from NEPs can also leave young people with additional needs exposed to bullying and its impacts on mental health.

## **Appropriate mental health care**

There is an entirely unacceptable lack of supports for autistic children and adolescents requiring mental health care. Whilst waiting times for assessment and support can be enormous, it is also the reality that for many young people an appropriate service simply does not exist.

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<sup>6</sup>AsIAM. (2019). *Invisible Children. A Survey on School Exclusion and Withdrawal in Ireland's Autism Community*. Pg.18.

This is a breach of the fundamental rights of the child and persons with disabilities. There is a need to urgently clarify the clinical pathway for mental health support for autistic young people and to appropriately resource it.

There is also a need for a culture shift within mental health services, public and private, to ensure that the needs of autistic young people are understood, respected and met and that clinicians have the knowledge and confidence to treat autistic young people, who may have been the victim of bullying, who are experiencing mental health challenges.

## **Recommendations**

In conclusion, we would ask the Committee to consider the following recommendations:

### **1) Public Engagement and Student Education**

We would ask the Committee to support the development of a public engagement campaign to educate whole school communities, including parents, on the benefits of inclusive education, the value of difference and impact of bullying. Specifically, we believe a national programme should be developed to educate all students about autism, neurodiversity and disability. The Department of Education should also establish a National Disability Inclusion Week and encourage all schools to engage with it.

### **2) Self-Advocacy Supports**

We believe an evidence-based programme should be developed and rolled out to support autistic young people to better understand and accept themselves, their needs and abilities and how to effectively self-advocate. This programme could be developed by the relevant Departmental agencies and should place the lived experience of autism and a rights-based approach at its core.

### **3) Investment in appropriate in-school supports**

To truly create an inclusive education system, it is vital that further investment is provided to upskill teachers, provide much-needed SNA support, create the required number of appropriate school placements in all localities and ensure schools have access to in-school therapy supports and NEPS.

#### **4) Engagement with mental health services**

We would ask the Committee to interact with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health and the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and to consider calling relevant witnesses to highlight the link between the challenges young people are facing in school, including bullying, and the present discriminatory approach to the provision of mental health services which means that young people with additional needs do not have parity of access to such support.