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Experiences of Bullying and Exclusion among Autistic Students in Ireland: Neuro-Affirming Recommendations for Bullying Prevention

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Background

School bullying is a damaging social process that is characterised by an imbalance of power driven by societal and institutional norms. It is often repeated and manifests as unwanted interpersonal behaviour among students or school personnel that causes physical, social, and emotional harm to the targeted individuals or groups, and the wider school community (UNESCO Chair on Bullying and Cyberbullying, 2024). This can include less visible forms of bullying such as social exclusion.

Autistic students are disproportionately affected by bullying¹ in post-primary education, which is likely due to a more complex social context and increased peer scrutiny (Cappadocia et al., 2012; Sterzing et al., 2012). Autism is a lifelong developmental disability or difference which relates to how a person communicates and interacts with others, and how they experience the world around them (As/Am, 2025). Research suggests that autistic students frequently experience bullying in forms such as social exclusion, emotional bullying, and verbal harassment (Park et al., 2020). Recent studies have reported that autistic students are over twice as likely to experience bullying as their neurotypical peers, and more likely to be bullied than students with other disabilities (Park et al., 2020; Badger et al., 2024). Autistic students in mainstream settings also experience higher rates of peer bullying than autistic students in special education settings (Zablotsky et al., 2014).



¹ Rigby (2017) has suggested that terms such as victim or victimisation can enable further marginalisation of autistic individuals who have experienced social exclusion. Therefore, throughout our report we refer to experiences of bullying rather than bullying 'victimisation'.

Current Study

Empirical studies of the experiences of bullying among autistic students in Ireland are rare. To advance our understanding of autistic students' experiences and to identify neuro-affirming recommendations for bullying prevention in schools, this report shares the experiences of nine autistic students and their parents who took part in a wider study on the school experiences of autistic students in Ireland. This project was called the Autism-Friendly Schools research study (McNally et al., 2025b), and more information is available at www.dcu.ie/autismfriendlyschools.

This study adopts a neurodiversity framework to understand the experiences of autistic students. In this framework, no one type of brain or mind is privileged. Identity-first language is used throughout the report (e.g. autistic student rather than student with autism) while recognising that there is no consensus from autistic people on the most preferred language (Botha et al., 2023).

It is important to note that in this study autistic students were not asked specifically about experiences of bullying or exclusion. However, nine of the 18 post-primary students who took part in interviews reported being bullied or socially excluded across a range of school contexts. Their experiences are the focus of this report.





Methodology

Community Involvement Statement

The research team included two autistic researchers and three non-autistic researchers, and the study was informed at all stages by two advisory groups, which included autistic students, autistic researchers and educational specialists, academics, and parents of autistic children.

Participants

Eighteen autistic post-primary school students were interviewed as part of a wider study of the school experiences of autistic students in Ireland (McNally et al., 2025b). Of this sample, 16 students took part directly through interview, and two students took part indirectly through their parents. Nine of the 18 students who took part directly or indirectly described experiences of bullying and social exclusion in school. The experiences of these students form the basis of our analysis in this study.

Seven students attended a mainstream post-primary school, and two students were learning from home at the time of interview, having previously attended a mainstream post-primary school (see table 1 for participant characteristics).

Adapted interviews

Participating students were invited to share their experiences about school through semi-structured interviews. Students were asked about their school experiences generally. Interview protocols were adapted to each participant's communication needs and preferences, and students could choose to be interviewed online (at home) or in-person (on the university campus). Parents were present during the interview or nearby if, and when, students needed support to answer questions.

More detail on procedures is available at www.dcu.ie/autismfriendlyschools (and in an open access preprint manuscript Keenan et al., 2024 at the [Open Science Framework](#)). Full ethical approval for the study was obtained from the DCU Research Ethics Committee.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Two research questions underpin this report. Firstly, we wanted to know if autistic students in post-primary schools reported experiences of bullying and exclusion when discussing their wider school experiences. And, secondly, we wanted to know how autistic students described these experiences.

Age	Gender	School Context	Interview Format	Informant(s)
13	Girl	1 st year, home learning – Previously attended mainstream	In-person	Student & father
13	Boy	1 st year, mainstream	Online	Student & mother
14	Boy	2 nd year, mainstream	In-person	Student & mother
14	Boy	3 rd year, mainstream	In-person	Student & mother
16	Girl	3 rd year, mainstream	In-person	Student & mother
16	Boy	4 th year, mainstream	In-person	Student & mother
17	Girl	4 th year, home learning – Previously attended mainstream	Online	Student & mother
17	Boy	5 th year, mainstream	Online	Student & father
19	Woman	6 th year, mainstream	Online	Student

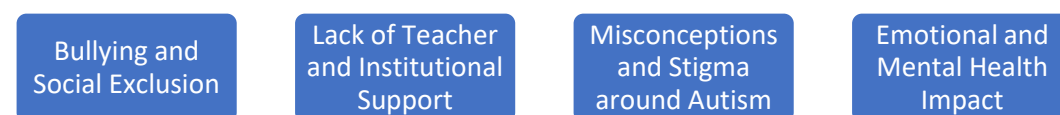
Table 1 Characteristics of Participants who Spoke of Bullying or Exclusion Experiences

Results

Four themes were constructed from the data. Students and their parents described (1) experiences of overt bullying and social exclusion, (2) a lack of teacher and institutional support during and after these experiences, (3) misconceptions among peers and teachers regarding autism and feeling stigmatised, and (4) a negative impact of bullying and exclusion on students' emotional and mental health.

Figure 1

Major Themes around Bullying Experiences



1. Bullying and Social Exclusion

Autistic students described instances of bullying and exclusion in school contexts. Name-calling and derogatory remarks were reported, with one boy highlighting the destructive nature of the behaviour: “Children can be vicious creatures, especially to each other which I knew existed but was not expecting it to that degree” (17-year-old boy in a mainstream school).

Experiences of social isolation involving deliberate exclusion by peers were also spoken of and were linked by some autistic students to feelings of worthlessness both in and outside of the classroom:

The girl that I was friends with, she’s pretending that everything is OK and sitting beside me in classes when her friends are not in. And then she’s just treating me like I’m nothing and making me feel like I’m nothing. [...] Because she dropped me and then she went to hang out with a new friend. (16-year-old girl in a mainstream school)

It’s just, the amount of stuff that went on outside of the classroom was just - that’s where most of it was happening. For girls, it’s the social stuff, it really is the social stuff that the teachers just don’t see. (Mother of a 17-year-old girl learning at home after previously attending a mainstream school).

2. Lack of Teacher and Institutional Support

Parents expressed concern about teachers' lack of understanding and inadequate responses to bullying, including the dismissal or mishandling of incidents.

Students' experiences illustrated scenarios in which they felt that bullying was mishandled due to factors such as a lack of understanding surrounding autism, lack of institutional support (i.e. supportive protective layers from the top down) or mistreatment from teachers.

Parents highlighted the importance of teachers being able to identify where adolescents may be masking in social interactions in school:

[...] I think, if, in terms of the educational system as a whole, I think there could be some supports to make sure that children who are vulnerable in that way, you know with autism, with undiagnosed autism particularly in girls who are masking so much, if some kind of support could be put in place, particularly for educators to be able to identify what's going on. [...] You know, they either don't see it or they don't acknowledge it. And I think there just needs to be so much more awareness of the fact that this is going on, that this relational bullying is going on. And the educators need to be consciously and intentionally looking out for it. (Mother of a 17-year-old girl learning from home after previously attending a mainstream school)

3. Misconceptions about Autism and Stigma

Misconceptions about autism reported by autistic students and their parents included stereotyping and an oversimplified or inaccurate portrayal of autism. Students and parents discussed peers' ideas or conceptualization of what autism is and others noted how negative stereotypes surrounding autism can be harmful and hurtful.

Some of the students discussed how other people such as fellow classmates or teachers had rationalized exclusion or mistreatment of autistic individuals by relying on negative stereotypes: "They justify like saying bad things about the student because they're autistic." (14-year-old girl in a mainstream school).

Students reported that being autistic was associated with stigma:

People, not just in my year but actually in the whole school, using the word like, you're so autistic, as a really negative term. I don't think it's ever been used, or, it has actually been used towards me a couple of times, but not in the knowledge that I am autistic. But I think the



perception of what autism is, is incorrect enough to the point where it's being used as an insult. (13-year-old boy in a mainstream school)

These deficit-based views of autism contributed to students masking or changing aspects of themselves to secure a sense of belonging. For example, one student described feeling the need to adapt to fit in, particularly by being nice to everyone:

I think teaching empathy is very difficult to do, because it's just going to make people laugh at you. You know, you have to be nice to these people because they're going to end up seeing autistic people as disabled... (16-year-old boy in a mainstream school)

4. Negative Impact on Emotional and Mental Health

Where autistic students described having experienced bullying and exclusion, there was a clear link with negative emotional and mental health outcomes:

At the end when it was okay but it was a bit bad, I started to get these episodes where I felt like I was going to faint or something. Like I was literally about to faint but I wasn't. And my anxiety was like, up the roof. I was scared to go into school. Like, I was crying and I didn't want to go into school. Like, I was crying every morning. (16-year-old girl in a mainstream school)

Anxiety and not feeling safe in school was also highlighted by parents. For example, one mother noted that:

The most difficult parts over the past couple of years have been the social stuff, which has been really really difficult. [...] It's difficult to get across how hard that was at times and how much that contributed to her anxiety. It just made life so difficult for her, you know? (Mother of a 17-year-old girl learning from home after previously attending a mainstream school)

Despite the harm of bullying, some students spoke about the bully's struggles and why they might have engaged in bullying, revealing empathy for the person bullying them: "I had one guy who bullied me, but I know he has mental health issues and he's had a very difficult life." (19-year-old woman in 6th year in a mainstream school).

Autistic Students' Experiences of Bullying in the Context of the Wider Research Literature on Bullying

It is noteworthy that although autistic students in post-primary school in our study were not asked about bullying experiences specifically, this emerged as a key theme in the reports of school experiences among half of the students interviewed. Our findings highlight experiences of social exclusion as particularly relevant for autistic students and with associated adverse outcomes in terms of students' self-reported mental health and wellbeing. This aligns with national longitudinal data in Ireland which indicates that those with a disability appeared to be the focus of more social kinds of bullying, including exclusion and name-calling, and that this type of bullying was linked to both poorer wellbeing and greater depression² (Smyth & Darmody, 2025).

The international research evidence also clearly shows that school-based bullying can be harmful with links to adverse mental health outcomes for children and young people (Ferrigno et al., 2022; Holden et al., 2020). In-depth interviews with autistic adults suggest that the pervasiveness of a deficit-view of autism, and experiences of stigma associated with being autistic, may play a significant role in the adverse mental health and wellbeing experiences of many autistic people (Botha et al., 2023). Our findings support this view: several autistic students felt that misconceptions and stereotypes about autism had a direct impact on how peers and teachers interacted and communicated with them and that this at times was linked to their experiences of exclusion and bullying.

Participatory research with students which captures their perspectives and understanding of school-based bullying is rare, and even rarer with autistic students. However, there is evidence from detailed interviews with students in Sweden that children and young people may view bullying as part of a wider process of *social ordering of belonging* (Försberg & Thornberg, 2016). In this process, children and young people may position themselves and others in terms of social inclusion or exclusion and in terms of social dominance or subordination, and view peers who experience bullying as different or deviating from group norms. Our interview data with autistic students align with these findings: autistic students were aware of being perceived as different and that those differences were largely viewed in a negative light, with one student naming the importance of fitting in and to 'be nice' to avoid further negativity. Concerns about fitting in are also evident in findings from previous consultation with students in Ireland on school-based bullying where just over one in ten post-primary school children in Ireland reported that it was never or rarely safe to be themselves in school (Department of Education, 2023).

² Caution is needed in inferring causal links between experiences of bullying and adverse outcomes in the data cited given that bullying and outcome measures were collected at the same time point (Smyth & Darmody, 2025, page ix).

Implications for Policy, Practice and Research

Our findings align with the growing research literature on the school experiences of autistic students, and suggest a three-pronged approach to preventing bullying and the social exclusion of autistic students: firstly, school policies and practices should emphasise the importance of safe school cultures where diversity is valued; secondly, schools should actively challenge deficit-based narratives of autism; and lastly, schools should ensure all students, especially those more likely to be marginalised such as autistic students, are consulted with in the development of anti-bullying policies.

Developing **fully inclusive environments** and placing an emphasis on a **safe school culture and climate** for all students is crucial to valuing diversity and supporting friendships and belonging in school contexts (see McNally et al., 2025a for a framework for Autism-Friendly schools, available for download at www.dcu.ie/autismfriendlyschools). In Ireland, students themselves have highlighted that an intolerance of difference is often linked to bullying. For example, at a world café on addressing bullying behaviour, students highlighted the importance of valuing difference as a strategy for preventing bullying (Heaney et al., 2025). For bullying prevention, a whole-school approach that includes the active development of caring classrooms and other school spaces such as libraries and cafeterias, and a downplaying of social hierarchies in favour of solidarity and equality (Försberg & Thornberg, 2016), may be especially important in supporting autistic students.

Actively challenging a deficit-based narrative of autism is also crucial in policies and practices to prevent the social exclusion of autistic students in school contexts. A deficit view of autism has been linked to the stigma that autistic people, including the autistic students in our study, have highlighted as playing a key role in adverse experiences such as bullying and exclusion.

Lastly, **including the voices of autistic students in the development of anti-bullying policies and wider school policies for inclusion** is an important and necessary step in developing fully inclusive schools (Ainscow, 2020) and preventing the types of bullying and exclusion identified by students in our study and the wider literature.

Overall, our findings highlight the importance of student voice and participation in bullying prevention and the importance of developing inclusive school cultures, both of which are outlined in the *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying*, developed for primary and post-primary schools (Department of Education, 2022). In addition, our findings place a spotlight on social exclusion as a form of bullying that is especially relevant to the school experiences of autistic students, highlighting the importance of the prevention of social exclusion as a key goal in bullying prevention policies.



Lastly, our study highlights an important gap in the evidence base for bullying prevention in schools. More in-depth research is urgently needed on autistic students' understanding and experiences of bullying. While common themes are evident in the emerging literature (e.g. the role of stigma and deficit-views of autism in autistic people's lived experiences of social exclusion) and while our findings support calls for a neuro-affirming approach to school policies and practices, more research is required to develop and evaluate bullying prevention policies that are informed by autistic students' own experiences and perspectives on bullying.

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