ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Teachers Using Role-play to Prevent Bullying

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Abstract

Ascertaining if non-drama specialist teachers would be able to use role-play to help reduce bullying in their classrooms was the key aim of a longitudinal two-year pilot study conducted in an inner-city school in Ireland. The study combined qualitative and quantitative elements, including ongoing teacher feedback (oral and written), student focus groups and teacher interviews and the Olweus Bully Victim Questionnaire. Role-play has been offered as a resource in other anti-bullying interventions, but its efficacy is not often evaluated as usage is optional and left to the discretion of teachers who can eschew role-play activities due to time constraints, curriculum overload and unfamiliarity with drama activities. At the end of the two-year intervention, students indicated that there was a 53% drop in victimisation. Most teachers reported that role-play was a very effective resource for opening the discussion and creating awareness about bullying while aiding its prevention. Students, who participated in focus groups, reported that they found their teachers more effective in dealing with bullying incidents. Thus, this study provides evidence that role-play can be a powerful resource for teachers to utilise in creating awareness about bullying and give teachers and students the skills the aid its prevention.

Keywords Bullying · Anti-bullying · Role-play · Drama · Resource

The Bullying Prevention Pack (BPP) piloted in this study is a teacher resource created by the author that employs role-play as the central learning tool to facilitate discussions on what bullying is, how it affects fellow classmates and what can be done to prevent it in the school environment. The BPP comprises five lessons that can be facilitated over five weeks. Each week the teacher aims to build on knowledge about bullying, its effects and how to prevent it through role-plays and discussions. The role-plays include bystander role-plays where students learn about participants thoughts, feelings and motivations regarding bullying incidents and defending role-plays that encourage students to do something to prevent bullying (e.g. directly preventing bullying amongst peers, enlisting the aid of a teacher, using a method to report bullying, such as a log book or report box). The final lesson is a brain storming session where the class discusses what they have learned about bullying and devise strategies to prevent it in the future.

The learning and strategies are summarised on a poster-sized contract on which all students put their name. The contract is then posted in a central area in the classroom as a constant reminder of what the class has agreed to. Thereafter, the teacher reviews the contract once a month with learners, reviewing how strategies are working and making changes or additions if needed. The contract, along with the monthly review strategy, were incorporated in the BPP as often the positive effects of a bullying prevention intervention can fade over time (Ertesvåg et al. 2010).

The BPP was initially trialled by the researcher in 2004 at a mixed primary school of 126 students (ages 4–12) in rural Ireland. The researcher was a Drama teacher at the school at the time and, coincidentally, was pursuing a MEd at University College Cork at the time. In spring 2004, he was approached by a third-class teacher to help with the bullying in her class of 37 students as 'the bullying was getting out of hand'. He used role-play with the learners to explore the issue of bullying and how it made them feel. The day following, he received a call from the principal asking if he would extend the role-play lessons to the whole school as she had received several positive calls from parents about it. The researcher agreed and discussed the request with his MEd lecturer as it was an opportunity to fulfil a research requirement of the

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Masters. The results of which were published in An Leanbh Og (Donohoe 2007), an Irish research journal.

In a question and answer session at a research conference for early years education at University College Cork, it was put to the researcher that, since he was a Drama teacher, it was relatively easy for him to facilitate role-play activities as he had considerable experience, whereas, it might be difficult for teachers to organise role-plays who had little or no experience in the subject. This was a valid point that led the researcher to formulate the research question for the current study: Would non-drama specialist teachers be able to use role-play to help reduce bullying in their classrooms? This was a significant question as studies on teacher usage of role-play to prevent bullying are rare.

Dilemma for Role-Play Usage

Teachers often omit role-play activities when conducting bullying prevention interventions in favour of more didactic methods (Bradshaw 2015; Kallestad and Olweus 2003). A key reason for this is that resource intensive bullying interventions, that have a plethora of resource elements to consider, can be difficult to enact in their entirety (Goodwin et al. 2019). A significant element, which needs further research, is the use of interventions that do not put a high demand on teacher time with multiple resources that require many meetings, dissemination and personal time to come to grips with the prescribed materials (Horner 2009; Stiller et al. 2013). Not exacerbating overload was a key consideration in the development of the BPP, especially given the Irish context.

The Republic of Ireland has some of the largest class sizes in Europe (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2018). Teachers and principals have the wide held view that there is curriculum over-crowding, lack of time to implement the full curriculum, ineffective school policies, lack of administrative support, inadequate school-based resources and the support of educators (Marshall 2012; McCabe 2017; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment 2010). Lack of time can mitigate against the success of new initiatives such as an anti-bullying intervention. Additionally, it has been reported that there is not enough support given to professional development programmes that encourage the use of initiatives such as anti-bullying strategies (OECD 2015). This lack of support means that teachers often fall back on didactic teaching methods as the key element of their pedagogical craft as there is pressure to have students perform well in exams, which require rote learning (McCabe 2017). This desire for product versus process (Heathcote 1980) can blunt the pedagogical creativity of teachers (McCabe 2017). Rigid learning environments are not fertile ground for teachers to explore using drama activities as a learning aid. Even though in the primary

school setting there is less of an emphasis on exams, use of drama activities is lacking (O'Sullivan 2011). One problem may be that teacher knowledge and/or experience of how to use role-play has had mixed success. Since working in a system where there is little emphasis on group learning (Gilleece et al. 2009), desire for product over process (Anderson 2002) and the lack of substantial financial support for bullying prevention initiatives from the government (Donohoe 2016), can make the effort needed to learn how to use drama constructively for learning risky.

It is against these harsh realities that the researcher created The Bullying Prevention Pack (BPP) to aid the fulfilling of two curriculum requirements for Irish teachers. Firstly, it can be used as part of the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) remit. SPHE is part of the Irish curriculum. Its overarching aim is to support the personal development, health and well-being of young people with tackling bullying as one of its objectives. Secondly, role-play that allows children to explore conflicts, attitudes, emotions and concerns is a key requirement of the Drama curriculum (Department of Education and Skills 1999). Engineering the BPP to be a user-friendly, curriculum complimentary intervention was necessary to answer the research question: would non-drama specialist teachers be able to use role-play to help reduce bullying in their classrooms?

Defining Bullying Behaviour

There are variations in the definition on what bullying is from country to country and these tend to focus on the behaviours that constitute bullying behaviour (Action Plan on Bullying 2013). However, there tends to be agreement on the following parameters, which have been put forth by Olweus (2013), a pioneer in bullying prevention methodology: (1) it is intentional negative behaviour that (2) typically occurs with some repetitiveness and is (3) directed against a person (or persons) who has difficulty defending himself or herself. Bullying is further divided into the subtypes of direct and indirect. Direct bullying can include aggressive acts, such as name calling, hitting, extortion, damage to property, making nasty comments or gestures to the individual, whereas indirect bullying refers to the harming of others through the manipulation of peer relationships by acts, such as spreading negative rumours to damage a person's reputation, excluding someone from a social group or using cyber technology to harass a person.

Sercombe and Donnelly (2012) have suggested a reworking of the Olweus definition with regard to the person having difficulty defending themselves. Sercombe and Donnelly argue that this is too broad a statement and needs clarification. They recommend describing bullying as a relationship rather than behaviour: "Bullying is a relationship of violence involving practices of domination that strip another

person of the capacity for agency, using interventions carrying the sustained threat of harm" (Sercombe and Donnelly 2012, p. 10). A key supposition of this refinement of the definition is that there is a relationship where the target person is subordinated to the bully within the social milieu that includes the peer group, classroom, the school, family and the larger community. This loss of agency can engender long term helplessness with an inability to act. Crucially, actual bullying may not be repeated, but the threat of it can be sustained over time. For example, a once-off isolated act of aggression can cause a child to live in daily fear (O'Moore 2010). Hence, there can be striking differences between what teachers and students report as bullying. For example, Cheng et al. (2011) conducted a study with 1558 respondents which demonstrated a signficant difference between teacher and student views of bullying. Sometimes students might view a single aggressive act as a demonstration of bullying, whereas the teachers emphasized the repetitive nature of the act. Hence, the complexities in determining whether an incident is considered bullying or not needs to be acknowledged (Mishna et al. 2005). Such complexity was reflected in this study and will be discussed.

Role-Play Usage in the Classroom

Unfortunately, while role-play is often cited as a component to aid bullying preventions, there is little direct evidence of teachers using it effectively to reduce bullying (Donohoe and O'Sullivan 2015). Well-known anti-bullying interventions, such as The Olweus Bullying Prevention Programme, The Sheffield Anti-Bullying Programme, Friendly Schools, Expect Respect, KiVa and Dare to Care recommend the use of role-play as a component in their prevention programmes (via scripts, plays, videos or structured improvisations). However, the respective published research of these interventions lack direct evidence of teachers using proscribed resources to reduce bullying in their evaluations (Bradshaw 2015; Olweus and Kallestad 2010, Pearce et al. 2011; Polanin et al. 2012; Rosenbluth et al. 2004; Salmivalli et al. 2004; Smith et al. 2004). This may be because role-play activities are often given as an optional element for inclusion in anti-bullying interventions, but usage is left to the discretion of teachers (Kärna et al. 2009; Pearce et al. 2011) who may have a gap between understanding Drama in Education's (DIE) value and actually applying it to generate knowledge and understanding (Donohoe and O'Sullivan 2015). This research gap may be exacerbating ambiguous attitudes to the inclusion of role-play activities in interventions. It also may be that Drama as a subject is relatively new in the Irish curriculum and teachers' experience with it as a resource to promote skills for dealing with difficult social situations is only recent (Donohoe 2016). However, using Drama as a resource

to deconstruct how the individual and others operate in the world has a history that is approximately 100 years old.

In the past century, role-play activities have grown in use and variety in the classroom. In the early twentieth century Harriet Finlay-Johnson (1912) felt that too much attention was given to the adult view of how a performance should be staged. For example, children being given a script to memorise by rote for performance, being told where to stand and how to act. Instead of rote learning Finlay-Johnson valued cooperative learning, reliance on the strength of the imagination, self-paced learning with teachers as facilitators and co-learners (Anderson 2002). She prefigured Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development when she observed that, "Children have a wonderful faculty for teaching other children and learning from them" (Bolton 1998, p.11). A contemporary of Finlay-Johnson, Henry Caldwell-Cook (1917), advocated "the play way". Caldwell-Cook argued that, as a form of learning, play was not only important for junior and senior infants but to all primary school children as he argued that play was a form of practice and preparation for adult life. Caldwell-Cook encouraged free play, followed by structured playing that included use of classical works. What is most significant in his practice was that Caldwell-Cook was the first to embrace process rather than product: "the claim here put forward is not for the destination but chiefly for the journey" (Caldwell-Cook 1917, p. 6). Marjorie Hourd (1949) took Cook's observations a step further by arguing that the child should not be encumbered with overloaded rehearsals that focus on character attributes but rather allow the child freedom to play at being themselves. This view was central to the work of Peter Slade and Brian Way who saw no need for an audience or having to meet the stressful objective of rehearsals for public performance (Slade and Way 1954). In 1954, Slade and Way wrote the influential text *Child Drama*, which was a landmark work for Drama in Education because it contained the view that, rather than thinking of a child as a tabula rasa, who needs training and indoctrination, the child should be thought of as an individual who has their own creative impulses which can be nurtured and who, with the aid of drama activities, can be directed and guided to tap into these impulses. Such a view of the child in the educational milieu has its foundation in the thoughts of Rousseau (1979) who conceived of the child as an active learner. This was further developed by Dewey (1897) who was strongly critical of the didactic method with its emphasis on the mere transmission of facts. Disliking the stilted, unnatural imposed styles of speech and movement frequently bred by formal Speech and Drama training, Slade and Way were more interested in spontaneous and sustained dramatic play, requiring minimal teacher guidance (Slade and Way 1954). The methods of Slade and Way were crystallised by Richard Courtney (1968) in his influential work, 'Play, Drama and Thought'. Courtney put forth that theatre work in schools be downplayed in favour of children exploring drama in the private context of the classroom itself, with no external audience.

This classroom exploration of drama was taken further by Dorothy Heathcote who advocated less of Way's emphasis on individual development (Way 1967) and more of an emphasis on the 'we', what it means to be a social being (Anderson 2002). Heathcote encouraged a systematised use of drama as a way to humanise the school curriculum so that knowledge creation "is not an abstract, isolated subject-based discipline, but is based in human action, interaction, commitment and responsibility" (Bolton 1998, p. 177) with the teacher in the role of facilitator and/or participant. In this social context, the teacher's mission is to find techniques that utilise the power of drama to open up, explore and influence attitudes, to create an environment where "a dynamic means of gaining new understanding" (Bolton 1979, p. 112) can take place and that could potentially change the learner's attitudes with regard to socio-political issues and the personal (Bolton 1979). In this way, Heathcote saw drama as a scientific mode of enquiry where each session was a laboratory with reflection in stages as a key element (Bolton 1998).

The fragmenting and examination of experiences in Heathcote's work was profoundly influenced by the theatre of Bertolt Brecht (Bolton 1998; O'Neill 1985). Brecht wanted his audiences to adopt a critical mind-set so that they recognised injustice and exploitation (Hayman 1983). Brecht employed the use of techniques that reminded the spectator that the play was a representation of reality and not reality itself (Willet 1978). By highlighting the constructed nature of the theatrical event, Brecht hoped to communicate that the audience's reality was equally constructed and, as such, was changeable (Hayman 1983). Brecht's fragmentation of experiences to foster the critical mindset influenced Augusto Boal who wrote *The Theatre of the Oppressed*, which used drama activities as a way to encourage participants to challenge the oppression faced in everyday life (Boal 1985). This potential for issue-based drama to encourage change lies in its ability to connect individual experience to the role as well as seeing oneself in the role thereby (Bolton 1984). By seeing and perceiving the world from different role perspectives and at the same time being able to relate the role to one's own outlook, the potential for empathy and the understanding of complex situations is developed (Bagshaw et al. 2005).

Role-play's Potential as a Bullying Prevention Aid

Exploring differing points of view through role-play with discussion can help participants gain skills in social and emotional learning (SEL) (Bolton 1979). By seeing and perceiving the world from different role perspectives and at the same time being able to relate the role to one's own outlook, the potential for empathy and the understanding of complex situations is developed (Bagshaw et al. 2005). This potential generation of

empathy is significant because the empathetic response has been shown to be stunted or lacking in those who regularly engage in bullying behaviour (Gini et al. 2007). Bolton (1979) argues that emotions must be involved for drama teaching to be effective as emotional responses are complemented by intellectual responses (O'Toole and Dunn 2015). The participants must be "touched emotionally enough to bring about a change of attitude, a change in the value" (Bolton 1979, p. 32). Raising levels of empathy is key to encourage bystanders to conceive of responses to bullying problems (Salmivalli et al. 2005).

A key strategy of the prescribed BPP role-play activities is that bullying scenarios presented for discussion do not have to be based on made up events but can be based on student experiences of bullying as long as no one is named or blamed. The emphasis in the ensuing discussions is the behaviour and attitudes of those involved and what can be done to make things better. An argument could be made that since the BPP does not rely on fictional scenarios but simulates real life that its validity as a role-play method might be questioned. However, such use of role-play is not uncommon. For example, Bolton and Heathcote (1999) recommend numerous ways to use role-play, including students being asked to prepare bullying incident scenes based on what could happen at school. Clapper (2010) proposed that "Simulating real life experiences can be quite useful in the classroom as role-play in this way allows learners to become deeply immersed in the learning". The BPP role-play activities correspond well with successful role-play strategies employed by O'Toole and Dunn, where role-play was used to create realistic models of human behaviour that were within the children's real-life experiences (O'Toole and Dunn 2015).

The role-play activities in the BPP lessons require teachers to be creative facilitators in its application. Teachers coaching students to simulate bullying behaviours with the aid of role-play can be quite useful as the bullying scenario is a context learners are familiar with and can readily enact (Donohoe 2016). Realism in bullying intervention strategies has been noted to enhance engagement and to facilitate students in developing deeper insights about bullying (Ortiz-Bush & Schultz 2016) as its relevance is immediate and understood (Clapper 2010). Role-play can help participants access a more meaningful experience of bullying incidents via body, feeling and thought experiences (Bagshaw et al. 2005) and, coupled with discussions for meaning making, it can help to generate empathy, which often can be distinctly lacking in bullying situations (Donohoe 2018). Additionally, role-play can be an effective learning resource as it gives learners an opportunity to deal with the disorientation of modern life (Blatner 1995). It can give them an opportunity to explore their unfolding identities and feelings while exploring problems imaginatively within a social learning context, where there can be, "interaction rather than position, and the shifting among several points

of view, rather than a reliance on linear reasoning" (Kottler 1994, p. 273). Thus, teacher facilitated role-play to prevent bullying has the potential to be a powerful learning tool. To aid the assessment of this, several qualitative and quantitative instruments were employed in the study.

Methods

Using a mixed methodological approach incorporating both qualitative and quantitative instruments, the main aim of the pilot study was to ascertain the ability of the teachers to use the Bullying Prevention Pack (BPP) to reduce bullying in their school. As the researcher has a background in Theatre Arts, the thought of using quantitative methods was daunting. In previous research, he had only gathered qualitative data. However, he was encouraged by his PhD co-mentor, Mona O'Moore, whose area of research was bullying, to use a quantitative method as it would strengthen the study. Carmel O'Sullivan, the other mentor, whose area of research was Drama in Education, recommended including dichotomous responses for the end of intervention teacher interviews as another means of garnering data to aid correlation. These recommendations are in line with Creswell and Clark's (2007) argument that qualitative researchers should not shun or shy away from such quantitative data but regard it as an available source of information with which to support or contest qualitative observations.

Measures

The qualitative data was collected from teacher feedback (oral and written) during the study, semi-structured one-to-one interviews with teachers at the end of the intervention and focus groups of six students each from fourth to sixth class (ages 9–12) in the first year and extended to third to sixth class in the second year (ages 8–12).[1] Each focus group comprised three subsets of two learners each, which were identified by their homeroom teacher as having attributes from the following participant roles: bullying, targeted or defending. The aspiration for this selection criteria was that the focus group participants might be able to contribute different perspectives of using role-play to learn about bullying. Quantitative data was collected from dichotomous responses to the closed questions at the teacher interviews and from the Olweus Bullying Victim Questionnaire (OBVQ) (Olweus 2006), which was administered to students. The OBVQ was administered by

the researcher with teachers present in the classroom. The OBVQ was chosen for several reasons: anonymous self-report student surveys encourage more truthfulness about student experiences of bullying behaviour as they have less of a fear of reprisal (Pellegrini and Bartini 2000), the OBVQ is internationally recognised, the most widely used survey of its type and is considered the 'Gold Standard' in self-report surveys (Glew et al. 2005, p. 1030). Furthermore, the use of a recognised quantitative survey to assess if bullying is reduced in a study that uses role-play as its key anti-bullying instrument has, as far as this author is aware, not been conducted before (Donohoe 2016). Answers to the OBVQ were coded using SPSS software. The survey was conducted at the research and control schools three times. First with the fourth, fifth and sixth class learners prior to the commencement of the BPP intervention in 2010. Secondly, at the end of the school year in 2011. Then at the end of the school year 2012. In 2012, only two classes from the research and control schools participated: learners of the fourth and fifth classes, who had graduated to fifth and sixth classes, respectively. The use of the survey instrument over this extended time allowed the researcher to assess if learners at the research school were perceiving bullying as being reduced at their school longitudinally. The key difference between the schools was that the research school was provided the BPP resource, while the control school was not.

Participants

The study was inaugurated at a research and a control school that had similar demographics in an urban Irish city and was conducted over two school years from 2010 to 2012. Both schools were all boys, designated disadvantaged, availing of Delivering Equal Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programmes and following the Stay Safe programme (Flattery and Lawlor 2012). The Stay Safe programme is a resource that seeks to enhance children's self-protective skills and includes lessons that focus on dealing with bullying behaviour. The research school had a total school population of 176 learners, 19 teachers (including six Special Needs Assistants (SNA's)), with 55 potential learners in the fourth, fifth and sixth classes that could participate in the OBVQ survey. The control school had a total school population of 150 learners, 14 teachers (including 3 SNA's) with 61 learners in the fourth, fifth and sixth classes that could participate in the OBVQ survey.

Procedures

The key elements of the BPP are synopsised below. For a more in-depth description of the BPP role-plays and activities, please refer to the papers: 'Using Role-play to Prevent Bullying in the Primary Classroom with the Bullying Prevention Pack: A Classroom Resource for Primary School

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[1] The research was originally intended to track the fourth, fifth and sixth class teacher usage over two years. However, the intervention was received wholeheartedly by the school staff after the first year, the researcher was invited to extend the BPP to the whole school in the second year. As it was an opportunity to gather more data on a whole school basis, the researcher accepted the offer.

SPHE Teachers' (Donohoe 2018) and 'The Bullying Prevention Pack: Fostering Vocabulary and Knowledge on the Topic of Bullying and Prevention using Role-Play and Discussion to Reduce Primary School Bullying' (Donohoe and O'Sullivan 2015). Each of the five lessons of the BPP were distributed at meetings in handout form each week prior to lesson delivery. Included in the handouts were references to the literature so that the teachers had background information on what bullying was and reasons for using certain tactics, such as having popular students modelling defending behaviour (see Lesson 3 synopsis below). The review and feedback meetings were very helpful to aid the researcher to develop the BPP resource in terms of instructionality and comprehensibility for the layman. The researcher also made himself available over the course of the two school years if the teachers had any questions about bullying or difficulties with role-play.

Lesson 1: Bullying in our school. The first drama activity, Class Pictures, focuses on feelings in general and then how students might feel in bullying situations. This is followed by the first discussion which focuses on what learners' conceptions are about bullying. Thereafter, the literature is referred to in the handout for the definition and review of bullying sub-types. In the study Mona O'Moore's 'Understanding School Bullying' (2010) was used as the key reference and teachers were given copies as a resource. The definition from O'Moore's book drew on The Irish Department of Education and Skills Definition that stated:

Bullying is repeated aggression, verbal, psychological or physical, conducted by individual or group against others. Isolated incidents of aggressive behaviour, which should not be condoned, can scarcely be described as bullying. However, when behaviour is systematic and ongoing it is bullying.

O'Moore adds that once-off incidents/threats can cause a person to feel harassed on a continual basis and may count as bullying. The lesson then focusses on students discussing their experiences of school bullying and labelling their associated feelings. Learners are advised at the start of this exercise that there is to be a 'No Name, No Blame' approach. The intention here is to allow everyone to discuss the topic of bullying and how it affects classmates without getting into arguments.

Lesson 2: The Bullying Circle. This lesson is an introduction to participant roles of The Bullying Circle (Olweus 2001). The Bullying Circle illustrates the potential players in a bullying incident. Learners are asked to improvise role-plays based on the Bullying Circle players. Improvisations are followed by a question and discussion session to foster learning about how participant players can foster or prevent bullying.

Lesson 3: Bystander Role-plays: The role of the bystander and what they could possibly do to defend targeted students from being bullied is discussed. First, learners present an improvised role-play of a bullying incident that they witnessed or were part of. Then they are asked to re-play this scene defending the person(s) targeted by reporting bullying or directly intervening. Importantly, teachers are advised that when assigning roles, the defender should be played by a popular child. This strategy of using a child who enjoys high social status is proposed because research shows that popular children can be an influential resource in changing classroom attitudes to bullying and potentially aid its prevention (Caravita et al. 2009; Goossens et al. 2006; Pöyhönen et al. 2010).

Lesson 4: Defending with Confidence: In this role-play the learners are asked to display confident behaviour when defending. Children who bully tend to pick on children who have low social status in the group (Matthews and Kesner 2003). Children of low social status often display low confidence behaviours (i.e. poor eye contact, fidgety gestures, poor posture) which can send a message to potential bullies that they will not stick up for themselves (Donohoe and O'Sullivan 2015). To aid pupils' awareness of this, the 'Confident Behaviours Exercise', was created by the researcher. The exercise helps learners become more conscious of how one can display high and low confidence behaviours and is based on the status role-play activities of Keith Johnstone (2012).

Lesson 5: The Contract: Learners sign a contract to prevent bullying in their school. The learners' knowledge about what bullying is, its effects and what will be done to prevent it is written into a poster-sized contract. The contract is then placed in a central place in the classroom as a reminder to everyone of their agreement to prevent bullying.

After the initial five lessons of the BPP, there were monthly check-up sessions. The main aim of these follow-up sessions was to keep the contract fluid and responsive to learner needs and to reinforce the message that the school authorities were continually supportive in preventing bullying in the long term. This is a very important recommendation, as the literature suggests that schools, which have high levels of bullying

prevalence, often do not have a culture that supports interventions over time (Ttofi and Farrington 2011).

Results

As this paper focuses on teacher experiences of using the BPP, the data that will be presented will focus on their experiences. However, learner feedback will be presented where it correlates with teacher experiences and/or aids elaboration of items under discussion. In the planning stages it had been anticipated that there would be two streams of data: teachers of the fourth to sixth classes and their learners. However, as mentioned earlier, the study was opened to the whole school in the second year, and thus there was a larger amount of data. In analysing the qualitative data from the second year, there were three distinct groups emerging: teachers of learners from junior infants to first class (ages four to seven), teachers of learners from second to sixth class (ages seven to 12), and the learner focus groups (third to sixth class participants). The justification for the sub-division of streams was that some of the teachers of early year's learners encountered difficulties in their utilisation and implementation of the BPP, whereas teachers of second to sixth class did not. Hence, to aid the discussion, data from teachers are split into two streams. Also, to reduce elaborate referencing the teachers have been given acronyms as listed below:

- **Stream 1:**
- J1 = Junior infants teacher one, female
- J2 = Junior infants teacher two, male
- Sr1 = Senior infants teacher one, female
- Sr2 = Senior infants teacher two, maternity substitute,[2] female
- F1 = First class teacher one, male
- F2 = First class teacher two, female
- **Stream 2:**
- Se1 = Second class teacher one, female
- Se2 = Second class teacher two, male
- Th = Third class teacher, female
- Fo = Fourth class teacher, male
- Fi1 = Fifth class teacher, year 1,[3] male
- *Fi2 = Fifth class teacher, year 2, female
- Si = Sixth class teacher, male

To aid the discussion of the results a helpful starting point would be to review teacher responses to the open and closed questions from the end of intervention interviews. A review of these responses will aid linking to the other forms of data

emanating from the study, including ongoing teacher feedback collected during the intervention, teacher responses to open questions from the interviews, student perceptions from the focus groups and student responses to the survey. The first interview question was an open question that inquired on the teacher's response to their usage of the BPP. Then the focus moved to the dichotomous questions, which were a source of quantitative data (see Tables 1 and 2 below). Following this, the interview questions focused on how much assistance they needed to implement the BPP (if any), recommendations for improvements to the BPP and an opportunity for them to finish the interview with anything they would like to add. As mentioned previously, teachers in the two data streams had different experiences and so their dichotomous responses have been separated into Tables 1 and 2 to aid the discussion.

Table 1 shows that overall teachers found the BPP helpful, but there were areas of concern. For example, the lexicon of the BPP, which includes the bullying definition, the bullying types and the players of the Bullying Circle, was an area that some teachers in this stream had problems with. For example, the F2 teacher reported a concern that the word bully could 'stigmatise' and could be misused for once-off incidents of aggression. There was a fear that this could lead to a significant number of learners to "tell tales" (F2 teacher). This view is summarised by this response from the J1 teacher: "They'd be going home telling their moms they were being bullied even though it wouldn't be a bullying offence." Out of concern for this, the J1 teacher reported that "We took it on ourselves (referring to the J2 teacher as well) that we wouldn't use the word bullying in the infant classes" and made the decision to use the phrase "hurting others" when talking to the learners about bullying. With regard to learner understanding of the definition of bullying the F1 and F2 teachers noted that the children understood bullying as "Something bad that keeps happening".

An area of mixed response for the Stream 1 was the Confident Behaviours exercise. The J1 teacher felt that this drama activity was over the young learners' heads and reported that it was "heavy going" while the Sr1 teacher did not attempt the exercise. The F1 teacher reported that it was "easy to set up and coach but a bit of giddiness occurred when practicing handshakes". The F2 teacher was the only teacher of this stream who thought the exercise had a beneficial effect. Overall, the majority of responses from this group indicate that the teachers felt that this exercise was not appropriate for younger learners.

Role-play was reported as being problematic by the Sr1. She did not attempt the role-plays for this age range as she found them "unsuitable". Additional negative comments on role-play came from the first-class teachers. The F1 teacher

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[2] Sr1 left for maternity leave on the fourth week of the second year of the intervention. Another teacher filled in for her on the last week of the intervention but did not give feedback or participate in the study.

[3] Fi1 went on sabbatical after the first year of the study and was replaced by Fi2.

Table 1 Stream 1 dichotomous responses to closed questions

Questions:	Yes	No	Don't know
2. Can learners define bullying now?	4	1	
3. Can learners list the bullying types?	5		
4. Are learners knowledgeable of players in the bullying circle?	3	2	
5. Can learners discuss players in the bullying circle?	3	2	
6. Can learners relate bullying circle players to their own school experiences?	4	1	
7. Do learners have more empathy towards others after having done the BPP?	4		1
8. Do learners know what steps to take if they were a target of bullying?	5		
9. Do learners know what to do if they saw a peer being bullied?	4		1
10. Can learners demonstrate confident behaviours when defending?	1	2	2
11. Has peer influence had a positive effect on learner knowledge of bullying?	5		
12. Do you think role-play usage has had a positive effect on learner understanding of bullying?	4	1	
13. Do you think peer learning has had a positive effect on learner knowledge of bullying circle players?	3	2	
14. Do you think role-play has had a positive effect on learner understanding of bullying circle players?	4	1	
15. Do you think peer learning has had a positive effect on learner knowledge of how to deal with bullying?	5		
16. Do you think role-play has had a positive impact on learner understanding of how to deal with bullying situations?	4		1
17. Do you think the BPP has had an impact by decreasing bullying in your school?	3	1	1

believed that the role-plays were sometimes teaching learners to be "better bullies" as "they've found the bully powerful". F2 reported on the Defender Role-play:

Sometimes not everyone was able to find themselves to be a defender. So, they weren't able to successfully act that out. I think failing that in the role-play has

Table 2 Stream 2 dichotomous responses to closed questions

Questions:	Yes	No	Don't know
2. Can learners define bullying now?	6		
3. Can learners list the bullying types?	6		
4. Are learners knowledgeable of players in bullying circle?	6		
5. Can learners discuss players in the bullying circle?	6		
6. Can learners relate bullying circle players to their own school experiences?	6		
7. Do learners have more empathy towards others having done the BPP?	6		
8. Do learners know what steps to take if they were a target of bullying?	6		
9. Do learners know what to do if they saw a peer being bullied?	6		
10. Can learners demonstrate confident behaviours when defending?	5		1
11. Has peer influence had a positive effect on learner knowledge of bullying?	6		
12. Do you think role-play usage has had a positive effect on learner understanding of bullying?	6		
13. Do you think peer learning has had a positive effect on learner knowledge of bullying circle players?	6		
14. Do you think role-play has had a positive effect on learner understanding of bullying circle players?	6		
15. Do you think peer learning has had a positive effect on leaner knowledge of how to deal with bullying?	6		
16. Do you think role-play has had a positive impact on learner understanding of how to deal with bullying situations?	6		
17. Do you think theBPP has had an impact by decreasing bullying in your school?	5		1

undermined them from what could happen in real life. Possibly, I don't know.

In contrast, both junior infants' teachers reported positive experiences of using role-play: "We did the role-play with them which they enjoyed, they love that. We made up scenarios about something (bullying) that would happen in the yard and the classroom. They understood." (J2). When commenting on the impact of role-play on the learners, the J1 teacher noted that:

> They are much more aware of the effects it has on other people. That's one of the biggest benefits that they could see how it could hurt other boys in the classes. It's amazing how their behaviour has changed towards one another in the class. It has been positively affected as well as out in the yard.

It is interesting that the teachers of the junior infants' classes were positive about role-play compared to senior infants and first-class teachers. This raises the issue of teacher ability to use role-play. This will be examined further in the discussion section. In contrast to Stream 1, Stream 2 feedback on teacher implementation of role-play and other BPP tasks met with little difficulty as shown in Table 2.

Overall Table 2 reflects very positive teacher experiences of implementation and usage of the BPP. Teachers had 100% agreement that role-play had a very positive effect on the areas of learner knowledge of what bullying is, the sub-types, learner knowledge of the Bullying Circle players and in giving students the knowledge of how to deal with bullying situations. With regard to this, Si reported at the end of the intervention interview:

> The fact that they are learning about bullying, the terms, the definitions, they are learning it through role-plays. They have a link in their heads, so they know what it is. So, they can very quickly identify it. And they know the steps in how do deal with it again because they've dealt with it through drama in the class.

'How to deal with it' refers to the act of defending that was learned through the Defender role-play. Of the four role-play scenarios, Defender role-plays were the most commented on by Stream 2 teachers as they were a significant topic of class discussions. In general, teachers reported there was a very positive and pro-active embracing of defending techniques by learners except for Fi2's class. According to Fi2, her learners understood that bullying must be stopped but reported that they felt that defending a peer, as they were being bullied, would be difficult. In her written feedback she reported, "Some boys said they would feel too 'shy' or 'uncool' or

'stupid' to be a defender — we discussed these feelings in detail".

There were two questions which individual teachers did not answer in the affirmative. Question 10 queries if learners can use confident behaviours. Fi2 responded "Don't know" and qualified her response with the comment that most of her pupils did know how to use confident behaviours, but they got a bit silly when doing the exercise. Question 17 queries if the teacher thought the BPP had an effect in reducing bullying at their school. The third-class teacher replied, "Don't know" and then qualified his response with the following comment: "There was no repeated aggression in my class. There was just yelling at each other. I definitely think it has been preventative."

The Se1 and Se2 teachers felt that the lessons were too long with "too much oral words for students" (Se2), being "cumbersome towards the end" (Se2). Se1 reported, "I thought there was a lot of content. Decrease the content". Se2 shared that "As teachers we do not need a lot of instructions really because we have other manuals to guide us as well". To address the lessons being "cumbersome" from week four, the Se1 and Se2 teachers decided to split their groups to aid facilitation. This reduced their lesson time to 25 minutes. Supporting this decision, the Se1 said "For the age range, the attention span, to make the lessons shorter. The attention span is better to make it in shorter spurts."

With regard to the Confident Behaviours exercise Se2 shared that the "Children didn't understand confidence" and Se1 reported that words like 'confidence' and 'belief in yourself' were "too abstract". With reference to the word confidence Se1 reported that, "A word like confidence for them needs to be fleshed out more" as "I found the concept of confidence difficult to explain". This is in keeping with the data from the junior stream teachers who reported similar concerns about the level of the language and the concepts explored in the BPP and their appropriacy for young children. However, from third class on there were no reported problems with these exercises with the Fi2 teacher reporting, "They were excellent at displaying confident behaviour — easy to set up and teach". Overall, the teachers indicated a highly positive response to the Confident Behaviours exercise.

The empathy engendering techniques of learning to label personal feelings about bullying incidents, naming possible feelings of those involved in bullying (especially those of the person victimised by bullying), were considered effective by both streams. Th reported: "Getting to act it out and empathise with their character, that was very important for their understanding of bullying. If we didn't have the role-plays, I don't think it would have been half as effective". The third-class teacher's thoughts about empathy reflect the literature, which suggests that the act of defending strengthens associations between self-efficacy and empathy (Salmivalli 2010). This view is reflected here by a sixth-class learner in the Year 1 focus group discussing a victimized

peer, "It's easier to have sympathy for the boy being bullied". This more sympathetic view was fostered during the study and is reflective of focus group responses in general on the topic. The empathy for the victimised peer also was conducive to promoting defending as described by this third class focus group participant:

> I would be a defender. I would ask the person if they would want me to tell about the bullying and if they said "yeah". And I would help them more about the bullying.

In a quantitative comparison of responses to the closed questions between the two streams there are more positive responses provided by the senior stream school teachers. Numeratively, Stream 2's responses by dichotomous category were 94 'Yes' and two 'No' responses. Stream 1 teachers gave 61 'Yes', 13 'No' and six 'Don't know' responses. As there were five teachers in Stream 1 and six teachers in Stream 2 who presented themselves for the interviews at the end of intervention, it may be more useful to look at their responses as a percentage for comparison purposes. Hence, 97.9% of responses by Stream 2 teachers were positive about BPP programme usage, whereas with the junior stream, the positive feedback percentage was 76.25%. Table 3 below presents both groups' overall answers as a percentage within the three categories of response.

The survey data from the interviews indicates that the BPP was a very useful tool for Stream 2 teachers and, even though the percentage is not as high for Stream 1, 76.25% is a strong favourable response. This favourable disposition may have had knock on effects for student perceptions of teachers as bullying defenders which will be discussed in the next section.

Discussion

'Would non-drama specialist teachers be able to use role-play to help reduce bullying in their classrooms?' was the main aim of the study. This was a crucial question to answer as the researcher has had an extensive background in role-play implementation with young people. This may have impacted upon his previous implementation of the role-play components of the BPP during his master's level study (Donohoe 2007) where he was the key facilitator. In contrast, many teachers do not have an abundance of experience with drama techniques (O'Toole and Dunn 2015). Even though teachers may have experienced drama activities and used role-play in

their training, they often do not feel able to build on the experience in their own classrooms. Reasons cited for these feelings include that they might think that they need a performers' theatrical skills to model good acting, or lack understanding of the scope of possibilities for drama in the classroom or have insufficient training and/or experience in classroom drama planning and management skills. However, the researcher argues that improvising role-plays about bullying would be a relatively easy task for the non-drama specialist teacher to facilitate. It is a situation that learners can relate to and are familiar with, since they are exposed to and/or participate in real-life bullying scenarios on a regular basis (Donohoe and O'Sullivan 2015). This argument was supported by feedback from learners who participated in the third to sixth class focus groups. They identified teacher facilitated role-play activities as one of the most effective elements of the BPP. Teachers corroborated this view in ongoing feedback and in their responses to the open questions at the end of intervention interviews. Another significant response from the focus group participants was that they all came to see their teachers as a bullying prevention resource. This perception was corroborated by learner responses to question 20 of the OBVQ, as shown in Table 4 below.

Over the course of the two school years, learners of the fourth and fifth classes reported that teachers became a more trusted and pro-active anti-bullying defender. In 2010 more than 23% of pupils perceived teachers or adults at the school as 'Almost never' helpful in stopping bullying, whereas in May 2012 no learners chose this response category. This view is corroborated by responses to question 39 as shown in Table 5.

Compared to the 2010 responses, the overall perception in 2012 was that the teacher was an effective defending resource. This result is in line with research claiming that interventions which have a lasting impact are those in which the learner has a strong belief and faith in the teacher's ability to deal with bullying (Action Plan on Bullying 2013). It is significant to note that by 2012 no students perceived their teacher to be doing 'Little or nothing' or 'Fairly little' to prevent bullying. However, a notable change has occurred in the response category of "Much" which has decreased from 58.8% to 36.7%. This view may have been due to the perception that there was less bullying in the school, as corroborated by the results of the OBVQ survey.

The interventions end data from the OBVQ surveys clearly indicated that the teacher-led intervention was successful with 53% reporting a reduction in being the target of bullying over

Table 3 Summary of closed question teacher responses to the effectivity of The BPP in reducing bullying

Summary of teacher responses to closed questions	Yes	No	Don't know
Stream 1 dichotomous responses	76.25	16.25	7.5
Stream 2 dichotomous responses	97.9	0.0	2.1

Table 4 Research School 2010 & 2012 OBVQ surveys, comparison of learner responses to question 20

How often do the teachers or other adults at school try to put a stop to it when a student is being bullied at school? (Tracking respondents from classes 4 & 5 over 2 Yyars*)

How often:	% 2010	N	% 2012	N
Almost never	23.5	8	0.0	0
Once in while	2.9	1	3.4	1
Sometimes	2.9	1	13.8	4
Often	17.7	6	37.9	11
Almost always	53.0	18	44.9	13

*6th class respondents not included as they had left the research school after year 1 of the study

the long term, while at the control school there was a 17% increase in peer bullying over the same period (Donohoe 2016; Donohoe and O'Sullivan 2015), as illustrated in Fig. 1.

Figure 1 illustrates reportage of bullying victimization, regardless of frequency compared to non-reportage at the research (blue column) and control school (red column) based on student responses to question 4 of the OBVQ: 'How often have you been bullied?'. In 2010 the number of respondents from the fourth, fifth and sixth classes were 52 at the research and 57 at the control. In 2012, as the 6th years graduated in 2011, the number of respondents for the final survey was 30 at the research and 34 at the control. Responses are presented as percentages to aid comparisons between the first and last survey. The survey data shows that by the third survey in 2012 there was a 75.2% more likelihood of bullying victimization at the control school compared to the research school (research school = 23.3%, control = 51.4%). At the start of the study the likelihood was only 4.6% more (research school = 40.5%, control school = 42.4%). As the key difference between the control and the research schools was that the control did not have the BPP resource, it would suggest that the BPP activities

Table 5 Research school 2010 & 2012 OBVQ surveys, comparison of learner responses to question 39

Overall, how much do you think your class (home room) teacher has done to counteract bullying? (Tracking respondents from classes 4 & 5 over 2 Yyars*)

Perception:	% 2010	N	% 2012	N
Little or nothing	8.8	3	0.0	0
Fairly little	14.7	5	0.0	0
Somewhat	3.0	1	3.3	1
A good deal	14.7	5	60.0	18
Much	58.8	20	36.7	11

*6th class respondents not included as they had left the research school after year 1 of the study

may have been a crucial factor in reducing bullying at the research school.

Another key concern related to the research question was to ascertain if the BPP written materials were clear, comprehensible and executable for teacher usage. The overall findings reveal that the content of the BPP handouts were generally accepted by the teachers as a coherent and valuable resource. However, some of the Stream 1 teachers found the BPP delivery problematic as they felt that there was a lack of age appropriate materials. At the end of intervention interviews, the Stream 1 teachers had a number of suggestions to improve the BPP resource, including to adapt the language for early years, provide stories, rhyming poems, pictures, a picture book with stories to follow, posters, songs, exercises asking learners to create images about bullying, predicting, connections, more work on feelings, drama activities following on from stories about bullying, three or four lessons for younger years and not the recommended five as prescribed by the BPP, mime activities and a reduced amount of bullying types and players in the Bullying Circle. From this feedback, the researcher will review the contents of the BPP for early years learners. However, in his defence, the researcher had only planned to the use the intervention for learners from fourth to sixth class over the course of the two-year intervention. It was as the start of the second year that he was requested to use the intervention for the whole school. Hence, there was a limited time to create new materials from scratch.

Looking to the feedback on the BPP role-plays, the defender role received a significant amount of positive commentary. Teachers responded enthusiastically to the employment of popular students as defenders. For example, Fi1 contributed that, "The children felt more comfortable following the lead of a popular pupil who wasn't fearful of repercussions. It is a must do in this role play". Defending behaviour may also be strengthened using role-play as Si reported that, "The quieter lads get a chance to see popular kids doing it and it [defending] gives the popular kids a taste for doing it". Hence, the approbation from their peers may influence popular students to bolster their defending efforts outside of role-play situations.

A factor that may have affected use of role-play amongst Stream 1 teachers was the age range. While the researcher never asked their ages, it was estimated that the junior infants' teachers, who had no problems coaching the role-plays, would have been in their mid to late 20s and the senior infants and first-class teachers, who had difficulties, to be around the 40-year-old range. The researcher points to the differences in age range as it may have affected a pre-existing positive disposition to using role-play in the classroom by the younger teachers. This positive pre-disposition may have arisen as drama as a subject was included in the Irish curriculum in 1999. Thus, in the intervening years until now, there has been an increasing amount of teacher training that uses drama and

Fig. 1 Comparison of bullying victimization reportage at the research and control schools pre and post-intervention
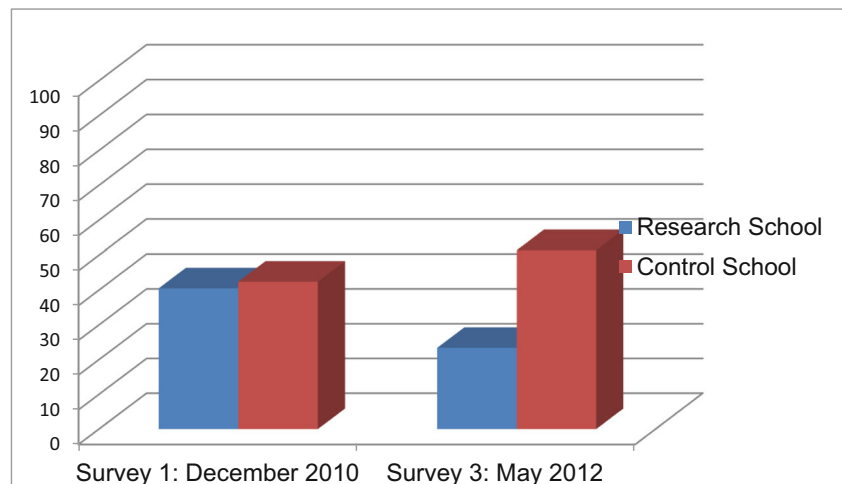
role-play activities to aid learning. However, this is conjecture on the researcher's part.

As mentioned earlier, there were concerns amongst Stream 1 teachers about using the 'bullying' word. There was concern that children might label once-off incidents as bullying and telling parents that they were being bullied. However, this was just opinion as no evidence was given to support this view. Also, there was a conception that the role-plays about bullying were teaching learners to be better bullies. Again, no evidence was given. Stream 1 teacher concerns about bullying behaviours are reflected in the literature. Concerns may arise because of a lack of knowledge about the bullying topic may leave teachers ill-prepared to tackle bullying (Alsaker and Nägele 2008; Smith 2004). This lack of knowledge may have worked against the full implementation of the BPP as some of the Stream 1 teachers felt that imparting knowledge on the topic of bullying could lead the students to report bullying to outside authority figures. In the Irish context this may be due to a "climate of teacher fear around using the 'bullying word'" (O'Moore and Stevens 2013, p.1). There can be the perception that, if bullying is happening at your school, then you are doing something wrong rather than accepting that bullying is something that happens in schools everywhere. This concern about the use of the bullying word may have influenced Fi2 to make this comment:

I think there's possibly an assumption that there's a lot of bullying going on in the school when our experience is that there isn't. It's a fairly close-knit school. I think that a lot of stuff is written with the view point that the children are experiencing a lot of this bullying and they have a lot of experience and they are carrying that with them. There were times when they were trying to come up with situations where they hadn't such experiences. From that point of view, we were trying to drag things

out. You're nearly giving them ideas where they wouldn't have had those ideas naturally. They wouldn't have those experiences in the school. It's an unusual school.

The comment, "It's an unusual school" refers to this teacher's perception that there is no bullying occurring at the school at all. It is a peculiar comment to make as this is not corroborated by the learner surveys and focus groups from students of the school. Furthermore, to this authors knowledge, there are no studies reporting schools where there is no bullying. Even though there is no prevalence data on early years experiences of bullying published in Ireland, it is unlikely that bullying wasn't happening in this age range in this school. Indeed, international research shows that children could potentially experience even higher levels of bullying in early years education than in later years (Alsaker and Valkanover 2012; Temkin and Snow 2015). For example, it has been observed that early years children (kindergarten) can display different forms of bullying, such as verbal, physical, social exclusion and rumour spreading (Alsaker and Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger 2010; Monks and Smith 2006). Furthermore, observations made by early years learners on their conceptions of bullying as bullying and not just once-off incidents have often been found to be astute (Alsaker and Nägele 2008).

The fear of using the bullying word may also have arisen because the researcher may not have given the teachers enough scaffolding on the bullying definition and topic. Teachers were given an introductory session on bullying and seemed satisfied with this, but this may not have been enough as bullying is a highly complex phenomenon. However, if anything, the teachers in the study wanted less information. For example, in the first year the resource handouts had multiple references to the literature that explained aspects of the bullying phenomenon. However, the teachers said it made the

handouts difficult to work through and so they asked that the literature references be taken out. Thus, streamlined handouts were made for the second year of the intervention.

Limitations of the Pilot Study

The pilot study of the BPP was limited by a number of factors that may have had direct bearing on the results, such as geographic location of school, the number of teachers participating, gender of students, type of survey, class size, school size, age range and that there was only one research school.

The research and the control schools were inner city Cork schools and disadvantaged. The factor may account for the reported high rates of prevalence. Victimisation by bullying was more than 40% in the research and control schools. This is generally higher than the reported norm. In the literature, it has been reported that school populations in disadvantaged areas report higher levels of prevalence than middle to upper socio-economic areas (Farrington 1993; UNICEF 2014; Zeigler and Rosenstein-Manner 1991). Therefore, it could be argued that teachers using the BPP had a better chance of decreasing bullying prevalence. Also, the amount of teacher participants was small. Therefore, the results should be taken with caution.

Another size factor to consider was the population of the research school. At 176 students, the school was an average size population for an Irish primary school. However, there are schools with student numbers more than twice that size. It is possible that the BPP may not have been as effective in a larger school with a bigger population. Smaller than average class sizes might have also been advantageous to the program success. Class sizes at the research and control schools were approximately 15 students per teacher as they were DEIS schools. This is much more favourable than the average Irish classroom size, which is approximately 25 students per teacher with more than one in four students in class sizes of 30 or more (OECD 2018). Therefore, due to the relatively small class sizes, it is arguable that the teachers were better able to conduct the role-plays as opposed to working with a larger class size. It could be that larger class sizes may necessitate additional time to be allotted for role-plays and ensuing discussions. However, the author wishes to point out that in his master's study (Donohoe 2007) he delivered the BPP to all classes at a mixed primary school from junior infants to sixth class which had several classes populated with 30 or more students.

If the survey was combined with teacher observations, it could have lent to more robust reportage on prevalence. It may have also helped teachers to come to know the bullying behaviour patterns of their students at a deeper level. Therefore, teacher claims of the research school being a bullying free school may not have arisen. However, the budget and manpower for such an extensive review of prevalence at the research school was not within the means of this study.

With regard to gender correlating with survey responses, the BPP intervention may have had more success with reducing bullying as boys, who tend to be more involved in physical and verbal bullying, report more honestly about bullying on surveys than girls (Pintado 2006). A problem is that indirect bullying behaviour (e.g. rumour spreading, cold-shouldering), which can be more common among girls, can be harder to detect than physical and verbal bullying (Olweus and Kallestad 2010). Also, girls may not consider it bullying and therefore may not be reported. Regardless, as this research was done at an all-boys school that was designated disadvantaged, the results are not so generalisable.

Finally, the BPP was created with primary school students in mind. It is difficult to know if the results would have been as effective in a secondary school. It is suggested that young children can be more open to social situations and experimenting (Fox et al. 2005), whereas in adolescence, social inhibitions can play a part in reduced participation rates as adolescents are more likely to be inhibited in a public setting where they could be vulnerable to and influenced by the opinions of peers (Essex et al. 2010). In his own professional work with secondary school students, the researcher is aware that it is more difficult to engage learners of this age range in role-play exercises. Furthermore, the number of boys participating in elective classes is much lower with males accounting for only 20–25% of the class group, whereas in primary elective classes the enrolment numbers are approximately even. Although this reluctance of teenagers to participate is only based on the author's experiences, research on social inhibition demonstrates that it can develop in adolescence and into adulthood (Essex et al. 2010; Gladstone et al. 2006).

Recommendations

The results of the research study support an argument to facilitate BPP implementation on a wider scale. Taking lessons from the current study these supports should include more workshops to aid teacher facilitation, more age appropriate resources for younger learners, whole school implementation and government supports. Research internationally indicates that such supports are needed for bullying prevention strategies to achieve statistical success in bullying reduction (Bradshaw 2015; Polanin et al. 2012; Swearer et al. 2010; Veenstra et al. 2014; Ttofi and Farrington 2011). However, with regard to Ireland, such supports are not well financed.

Substantive Irish government funding for ongoing, long term school-based anti-bullying initiatives is practically non-existent (Donohoe 2016). Even though the government is taking a firmer stand after the launch of the Action Plan on Bullying (2013), and budgeting funding to help prevent bullying, the amount of monies is small. Since the 2013 launch of the Action Plan on Bullying, the government has allocated

Table 6 Irish government spending on bullying prevention in Irish schools as of November 19, 2016

Purpose	Amount (€000s)
Anti-bullying awareness raising initiatives	336
Anti-bullying research	120
Anti-bullying resources	201
Anti-bullying training for parents and boards of management	261
Total	928

Table Supplied by Department of Education Skills (Office of Quinn, R. Personal Communication, November 19, 2015)

€928,000 to help schools prevent bullying as can be seen in Table 6.

When one considers that there are 4107 primary and secondary level schools in Ireland, this amounts to €226 per school over three years from 2013 to 2015. Unfortunately, more updates on Irish government spending on bullying prevention are not available even though this author has made multiple requests to the Department of Education and Skills over the past few years (there have been responses by Department of Education and Skills secretaries acknowledging my emails but no updates). Also, since 2015, there have been no other reported government allocations to schools to aid bullying prevention. This is unfortunate since financial restraints make it challenging for school staff to devote the necessary resources to sustain a bullying intervention programme (Hu et al. 2011). Contextual considerations such as these were reflected upon as the researcher designed the BPP to fit within the SPHE remit by creating no additional financial outlays or curriculum burdens as discussed in the "Introduction".

A course for future exploration into the potential benefits of using role-play to open the discussion on and to prevent bullying would be to enact research in several school settings that would include boys, girls and mixed schools. Besides the research methods included in this study (Ongoing teacher feedback, teacher interviews, focus groups and a student survey), a survey should also be devised for the teachers at the research schools to aid the correlation of data that could aid robust findings.

Conclusion

The evidence from this study has demonstrated that non-drama specialist teachers can use role-play to strengthen learner knowledge on the topic of bullying, reduce its prevalence and aid the promotion of a defending culture. Teacher usage of role-plays should form part of an overall whole school approach to bullying prevention where there is sufficient training on the topic of bullying and role-play for teachers and staff. This way staff will be in agreement about terminology to be used when role-play is used to enlighten students about the nature of school bullying and how to prevent it.

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