

## **Presenting a proposed revised definition of school bullying**

### **World Anti-Bullying Forum, 1-3 November**

#### **Background**

In 2020, UNESCO and the French Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports convened a Scientific Committee to prepare recommendation on preventing and addressing school bullying and cyberbullying, that were presented during an International Conference on School Bullying in November 2020. These [Recommendations by the Scientific Committee on preventing and addressing school bullying and cyberbullying](#) included a series of suggestions on how to revise the commonly used definition of bullying and adopt a more inclusive definition of school bullying that would reflect the growth of understanding in bullying prevention and intervention, and help researchers, practitioners and policy makers to develop more comprehensive and targeted initiatives to tackle bullying in all its forms.

In 2021, UNESCO and the World Anti-Bullying Forum decided to partner and created a Working Group to advise on a revised definition of school bullying, building up on the recommendations made by the Scientific Committee convened by UNESCO in 2020.

This document presents a proposed revised definition of school bullying<sup>1</sup>, based on the recommendations made by the Working Group convened by UNESCO and the World Anti-Bullying Forum in 2021. The document explains what is different in the proposed new definition and why, and it describes some of the implications of using this new definition for bullying prevention policies and programmes.

UNESCO and the World Anti-Bullying Forum hope that the presentation of this proposed revised definition of school bullying during the World Anti-Bullying Forum in November will contribute to opening a new chapter in the global conversation on the nature of bullying and how best to respond to it.

Delegates who will attend the World Anti-Bullying Forum in-person or online are invited to provide feedback on the definition during the World Anti-Bullying Forum. Information on how to do this is included at the end of this document.

#### **The existing definition of school bullying**

School bullying is an unwanted aggressive behaviour that is repeated over time and involves an imbalance of power or strength.

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<sup>1</sup> Bullying occurs in different contexts. This paper focuses on bullying involving students in the school environment and online. The concepts and ideas behind the proposed revised definition for school bullying may be worth considering for other settings where bullying also takes place, and may be deemed equally applicable.

## The proposed new definition of school bullying

School bullying is in-person and online behaviour between students within a social network that causes physical, emotional or social harm to targeted students. It is characterized by an imbalance of power that is enabled or inhibited by the social and institutional norms and context of schools and the education system. School bullying implies an absence of effective responses and care towards the target by peers and adults.

### What is different in the proposed new definition of school bullying and why?

#### *The proposed new definition adopts a sociological approach to school bullying*

Previous definitions tended to present school bullying as autonomous behaviours or acts between two individuals or a group against an individual, without considering the context in which these behaviours occur and how it influences them.

The proposed new definition stresses that **school bullying always occurs within a given social network of school and community relationships**. The sociological approach to school bullying means that **power imbalances between bullies and targets are linked to their social network and to norms** that structure relationships in that network. **Power imbalances** that characterize school bullying are therefore **enabled or inhibited by** both:

- The **institutional and social context of schools** and **the whole education system** - including teachers, principals, other school staff, peers, parents.
- **Society** more broadly, including in many cases **social norms that produce and maintain bullying behaviours, particularly in terms of social hierarchies and social exclusion**.

#### *The proposed new definition calls for a comprehensive response to school bullying by the whole school community and the whole education system, as school bullying always occurs within a given social network*

The proposed new definition questions that school bullying would be only an interaction between deviant individuals: students who are “mean” on the one hand and students who are “weak” on the other hand. The new definition emphasizes that **off-line and online bullying are clearly linked to an absence of effective responses and care towards the targeted students by their peers and by adults in the education system, and by the system itself**. This implies the responsibility of members of the school community - including school principals, teachers, other school staff, parents and students – and of society in general, in building a caring environment both in schools and online, and in taking action when they witness bullying behaviours both online and off-line.

#### *The proposed new definition focuses on the personal experience of harm by the target of school bullying, regardless of how many times a student is bullied*

The proposed new definition clearly **focuses on the physical, emotional or social harm experienced by the target of school bullying instead of focusing on the “aggressive behaviour” of the perpetrator**. It is worth noting that in some countries the official definition of school bullying has

already evolved in this direction: for example in Japan, school bullying was originally defined as a 'deviant behaviour', then as 'the harm caused by deviant behaviour', to become 'a sense of being harmed'.

**The physical, emotional or social harm experienced by a student who is targeted by school bullying is not directly linked to the number of times this student is bullied. Therefore, repetition is not seen as a main characteristic of school bullying anymore.** In some instances, one incident of school bullying and the implied threat of more instances can be perceived by a student as harmful as several occurrences of school bullying, whether this incident involves one or several perpetrators. Less emphasis on repetition is particularly relevant to online bullying as harm experienced by targets of online bullying is often linked to the large number of people who can witness bullying behaviours in a very short period of time rather than repetition, as well as the fear that a one-off message or picture might be reshared online.

Evidence shows that **off-line and online bullying often cause emotional and/or social harm not only for the student who is targeted but also for students who witness it and the social group to which they belong.** This is an additional argument to focus on harm experienced by the target of school bullying, and by the group, rather than on the behaviour that causes harm.

**What are the implications of the proposed new definition of school bullying for school bullying prevention policies and programmes?**

*Adopting a sociological approach to school bullying implies that effective school bullying prevention policies and programmes should address social norms that produce and maintain power imbalance that fuels bullying behaviours*

The sociological approach to school bullying implies that prevention in and through education should address what structures in the institutional context of schools and the education system enable bullying, and more broadly which existing social norms produce and maintain the types of power imbalance that fuel bullying behaviours. This is particularly true for those social norms that lead to the social exclusion of some categories of students due to their appearance or identity, for example norms related to masculinity and femininity that justify that students who do not conform to existing gender norms can be targeted by school bullying. Reducing school bullying without addressing those norms cannot work.

*The sociological approach to school bullying that stresses that the school community and the education system should provide a caring school environment for all students and effective responses to school bullying implies that bullying prevention programmes should be comprehensive, using a whole-school and whole-education approach*

Making clear that school bullying occurs only within the social network of school and community relationships implies that all stakeholders in the school community should be involved in the response to school bullying, including principals and boards, teachers, other school staff, parents, together with other stakeholders in the wider community for both off-line and online bullying, using multiples entry points for interventions.

As school bullying is a relational phenomenon between students that involves group dynamics, all students should be involved in ensuring a caring environment where bystanders are empowered to support students targeted by school bullying. Attention should be paid to the involvement of students who tend to be victims of social exclusion as a result of social norms that discriminate against them.

*This definition focusing on the experience of harm by the target of school bullying implies that schools and the education system should not use repetition of aggressive behaviours as the condition for taking action and lack of repetition as an excuse for doing nothing*

Too often bullied students asking for help were requested to prove that their experiences fitted the definition of school bullying: were the actions they experienced not repetitive and perceived as intentional, they could not be recognized as school bullying and helping them could not be justified. By focusing on the experience of the target, schools should provide students who have experienced physical, emotional or social harm with support, regardless of how many times they have been bullied.

#### **How can you provide feedback on the proposed revised definition during the World Anti-Bullying Forum?**

You are welcome to provide your feedback on the proposed revised definition, by completing this [Online survey on the proposed revised definition of school bullying](#) by 13:00 Stockholm time on 2 November 2021. A summary of the feedback will be presented during the special session on the launch of the revised definition on 3 November 2021 between 12:30 – 12:55 CET, in Room A1.

#### **Members of the Working Group co-convened by UNESCO and the World Anti-Bullying Forum to propose a revised definition of school bullying**

Chair: **Prof. James O'Higgins Norman**, UNESCO Chair on Tackling Bullying in Schools and Cyberspace and Director of DCU National Anti-Bullying Research Centre, Ireland.

**Prof. Christian Berger**, Professor in Education Psychology – Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Chile; **Mr. Christophe Cornu**, Senior Programme Specialist and Team Leader, Section of Health and Education, Education Sector, UNESCO, France; **Prof. Donna Cross**, Professor within the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences – the University of Western Australia, Australia; **Mr. Magnus Loftsson**, Chair of the Scientific Committee, World Anti-Bullying Forum, and Head of Research and Development, Friends, Sweden; **Prof. Dorte Marie Søndergaard**, Member of the research programme ENGAGE: (Dis)Engaging Children and Young People, Danish School of Education, Aarhus University, Denmark; **Dr. Elizabeth Payne**, Education Faculty at City University of New York, and Founder and Director, The Queering Education Institute, United States; **Dr. Shoko Yoneyama**, Senior Lecturer in Asian Studies – the University of Adelaide, Japan/Australia