

**Young people's perceptions and management of cyberbullying in  
secondary schools: An exploratory study using a socio-ecological lens**

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy.

Department of Educational Research,  
Lancaster University, UK.

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## **Abstract**

This exploratory, qualitative study investigates youth perceptions of cyberbullying in secondary schools. Using youth participatory action research (YPAR) and drawing on constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014a) the researcher gained insight into the lived experiences of young people. The researcher worked for an academic year with a group of 13 – 14 year old students to develop their own research project on cyberbullying; alongside this project, in-depth interviews were conducted with twenty-eight students across two schools in areas of socio-economic deprivation. Qualitative data consists of transcriptions of the YPAR meetings, interview data and a focus group conducted by the YPAR group.

Research into cyberbullying has been mainly quantitative to date. This study provides insight into the perceptions and experiences of young people who engage in roles related to cyberbullying: cyber-victims, cyberbully/victims and bystanders. It uncovers the complexity and inter-relatedness of influencing factors which contribute to cyberbullying roles. Young people share their experiences of living in an online-connected world which bridges school and home; they discuss the inter-play between these different environments through online connections. Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological framework is used as a holistic lens through which to view these inter-related systems which influence how young people respond to cyberbullying situations.

The original contributions to knowledge are in five areas: constructing a new definition for cyberbullying which addresses the current challenges within the definition; identifying three types of cyber-victimisation which will aid analysis of the causes of cyberbullying; revealing the seriousness of cyberbullying as perceived by adolescents; identifying the dilemma faced by young people when deciding whether to disclose cyber-victimisation to adults, and a means to provide graduated support; and the construction of models to support analysis of cyberbullying in schools drawing on the socio-ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994, 2005).

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## **List of abbreviations**

AR	Action research
CGT	Constructivist grounded theory
GT	Grounded theory
OL	Our Lady's High School
PAR	Participatory action research
RQ	Research question
TC	Trinity Catholic Academy
YPAR	Youth participatory action research

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## **Chapter 1      Introduction and Background**

This study seeks to explore with adolescents their lived experiences of cyberbullying. Most studies on cyberbullying are quantitative, therefore, this qualitative study aims to uncover the perceptions of young people in relation to cyberbullying. The contributions to knowledge fall within five principal areas: exploration and construction of a new definition for cyberbullying based on the experiences of young people; identifying the forms of cyber-victimisation; recognising the seriousness of cyberbullying for those who are impacted by it, whereby it is described as serious as online grooming; adolescents wish to retain control of their situation and face a dilemma when deciding whether to inform others about their victimisation, hence a staged response for support is proposed; and a theoretical model has been constructed to aid schools who wish to analyse their context in relation to cyberbullying.

In this chapter, I will present the rationale for this study and the research questions, the choice of methodology will be briefly explained, as will the choice of guiding framework for the analysis of the study. The thesis structure will be presented and contextual information provided about the schools which have participated in the study. Then, definitions of terms used within the thesis will be shared. Finally, I will present some brief biographical details which are related to the study and consider how these might have influenced my decisions; this is offered to facilitate transparency.

## **1.1. Rationale**

### **1.1.1. Research questions**

There are serious issues around the definition for cyberbullying which have not been resolved by researchers despite much debate (e.g. Bauman, 2010; Brewer & Kerslake, 2015; Hemphill & Heerde, 2014). The current definitions used in the literature adapt the definition for traditional bullying (intention to harm the victim; perpetration is repeated; and a power imbalance between the bully and the victim) and add that cyberbullying is perpetrated via electronic means. Unfortunately, there are significant challenges with this definition as it does not adequately represent cyberbullying activities. For instance, perpetrators frequently claim they did not intend harm to the victim as they were engaging in banter or a joke; single aggressive incidents online can be repeated through sharing with others, which is perceived as repetition by the victim, but not by the perpetrator; and a cyberbully and cyber-victim can be of equal status or a traditional-victim may cyberbully their traditional-bully. The issues around definitions are explored further in the Literature Review (Chapter 2, section 2.2).

Some researchers have broadened their definition to use the term ‘cyber-aggression’ which encompasses cyberbullying and other aggressive incidents online (e.g. Pabian, De Backer, & Vandebosch, 2015; Wright, 2015). When a definition is not clear or agreed upon it becomes difficult to compare findings from different studies. There have been calls for further research to explore and ascertain a global definition for cyberbullying (Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2013). Some qualitative research has started to explore definitional issues, for instance, Dredge, Gleeson and Garcia (2014) interviewed 15 – 24 year olds about their experiences, and identified impact on the

victim as a key criterion for the definition for youth, while power imbalance was not a factor, but there was no consensus about intentionality and repetition. Meanwhile, Moreno, Suthamjariya and Selkie (2018) surveyed stakeholders and held group discussions, including with youth, about the uniform definition of bullying (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, n.d.) and how it relates to cyberbullying experiences. Moreno et al. (2018) found aggression to be their top definitional criteria, followed by power imbalance, repetition and then being anonymised. Dredge et al. (2014) provided a list of negative online behaviours on which the participants could comment and Moreno's participants completed a survey, then discussed their responses in a facilitated group, then they could alter their written responses. I have taken an exploratory approach within this study to enable freedom of expression with youth. There is clearly a need for more research on the definition for cyberbullying and the input of youth, who experience this within their context, is valuable. This has resulted in my first research question: how do young people perceive and define cyberbullying?

Individuals respond to victimisation differently depending on their levels of resilience (Hinduja & Patchin, 2017), which may be developed through inter-related factors in their lives, such as family and friend support (Fanti, Demetriou, & Hawa, 2012). The literature suggests perpetration of cyberbullying rises steadily between the ages of 11 – 14 years (Brown, Demaray, & Secord, 2014). There is less consistency in the literature for older age ranges, however, it is clear techniques related to cyberbullying become more sophisticated with age (Tarapdar & Kellett, 2013). Schools contend with cyberbullying incidences frequently and seek guidance on the best methods to

employ and how best to advise young people. We know peer bystanders can be effectively mobilised to reduce traditional bullying perpetration (Cowie, 2014), and some limited studies, such as Cross et al. (2016) evaluate transitioning peer support initiatives to cyberbullying. Yet, there are difficulties associated with bystanders intervening in online incidents, such as, making a judgement about the form of exchange, whether it is aggressive or banter between friends (Patterson, Allan, & Cross, 2017). It is unclear how young people cope with cyberbullying and how peers may be able to support victims, as research based on traditional victimisation does not always transfer easily into the online world. Therefore, my second research question is: how can young people manage cyberbullying incidents in their own lives and those of their peers?

Quantitative studies indicate adults can be positively involved in reducing cyber-victimisation and perpetration (e.g. Fanti et al., 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2013). Parenting style and monitoring can influence the likelihood of both victimisation and perpetration (Fanti et al., 2012). Similarly, positive and supportive school and classroom climate are associated with reductions of both (Betts, Spenser, & Gardner, 2017). However, young people are reluctant to involve adults when they are victimised online (Tarapdar & Kellett, 2013). It is important to establish the reasons for young people's reticence, to enable stakeholders to respond appropriately and develop interventions. Young people are on the cusp of adulthood, and it is appropriate to seek their views and perceptions regarding the support adults could provide. My third research question is: how do young people perceive the role of adults in managing cyberbullying incidences?

A fourth question arose from the data, which can occur in studies employing grounded theory approaches (Charmaz, 2014a). The young people involved in the research frequently discussed their wider social context in school. They discussed the role of the social hierarchy, peer judgements and their use of technology for socialising. A fourth research question arose from these discussions: how do young people respond to peer judgement within the school social context and what role does peer judgement have in cyberbullying?

Hence, there are four exploratory questions which this study seeks to address:

RQ1 How do young people perceive and define cyberbullying?

RQ2 How can young people manage cyberbullying incidences in their own lives and those of their peers?

RQ3 How do young people perceive the role of adults in managing cyberbullying incidences?

RQ4 How do young people respond to peer judgement within the school social context and what role does peer judgement have in cyberbullying?

## **1.2. Methodology and theoretical framework**

In this study, the voices of young people are paramount; young people have been involved as fully as possible in the research process, to develop my understanding of their constructions of cyberbullying. Participatory research approaches offer a means to involve a community in the research process to produce authentic research which is

of use to them. So far, cyberbullying research has predominantly been conducted *on* youth rather than *with* them; however, cyberbullying impacts young people and they have a right to be involved in developing understanding and finding a solution (United Nations, 1989). As a former secondary school teacher, I felt young people had the capability to engage meaningfully in the research process. Youth participatory action research (YPAR) is a critical, emancipatory methodology grounded in the work of Paulo Freire (1993, 1996). Unlike British action research, it does not require iterative cycles, but can be completed as a single project. YPAR was selected as one part of a pluralistic methodology as it had the potential to give greater insight into youth perceptions and experiences, and it could, also, develop new skills and knowledge for the participants. I facilitated the young people's own research project into cyberbullying. I worked with them to identify their assumptions, areas of interest, to develop research questions, learn about and select appropriate research methods to collect data to answer their research questions, collect the data and analyse it. This process, which took place over an academic year, meant we became trusting collaborators; I developed a greater insight into their lives, perceptions and experiences of cyberbullying and the online world than I would have by conducting interviews alone.

The YPAR project itself did not collect sufficient data to draw robust conclusions to be used beyond the school. A criticism of participatory action research (PAR) approaches is the localised nature of the methodology and, therefore, the limitations for use in wider settings and contexts (Dick, 2007). I wished for the research to be of practical use to schools who sought methods to counter-act cyberbullying. Therefore,

the contextual information about the study is important to allow schools to judge the applicability of the research to their own context and whether the theory developed is useful (Burchett, Mayhew, Lavis, & Dobrow, 2013). Dick (2007) suggests utilising both PAR and grounded theory approaches to exploit the strengths of both methodologies. Grounded theory approaches facilitate the development of theory through rigorous analysis of the data (Baskerville & Pries-Heje, 1999), while PAR allows greater insight into the lived experiences of participants. Hence, my methodology is pluralistic utilising YPAR and drawing on grounded theory approaches for interviews and analysis. This should not, therefore, be considered a grounded theory study. To strengthen the data and provide triangulation, I conducted twenty-eight interviews across two school settings (Trinity Catholic Academy (TC) and Our Lady's High School (OL)), alongside the YPAR project which took place only in TC. The data set, therefore, includes the transcripts of the meetings held with the YPAR group, qualitative data collected by the YPAR group in the form of a focus group, interviews with the YPAR group, and individual interviews with other young people in the two schools. I spent most of an academic year working alongside the group of YPAR students in TC, whereas I conducted interviews for two days in OL. In TC I had become a familiar presence in the school which, I believe, resulted in more open and honest interviews, even with those who had not been involved in the YPAR project. In particular, one student who was involved in the YPAR project explained that they had been more candid with me because I had spent significant time with them and they knew me.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994, 2005) socio-ecological framework has been used as the organising framework for this thesis. It requires a holistic view to be taken of the inter-relationships between different parts of an individual's life, from the systems with which they directly interact, such as family and friends, through to the implications for the individual of the society in which they live. The convergence of exploratory research questions, a pluralistic methodology incorporating a participatory approach and Bronfenbrenner's framework in this thesis, required the researcher to adopt an open perspective.

### **1.3. A brief biography**

Engagement with constructivist grounded theory (CGT) and holding a constructionist epistemological position (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), requires that the researcher considers and reflects on their "taken-for-granted privileges accompanying our positions and roles" and on those aspects of our biography which may influence engagement with the research process (Charmaz, 2017, p. 36). I am a former secondary school teacher, I am now a teacher educator; these aspects of my career have influenced my decision to utilise YPAR as my methodology. Young people are capable of engaging in complex tasks with appropriate guidance; further, as an educationalist, I believe it is incumbent on me to provide opportunities for young people to learn new skills, develop a richer understanding of their community and how they may influence it. However, my participants may perceive my position as one of authority and privilege therefore, efforts were made throughout the research process to minimise this effect and secure equality with the participants, as far as possible.



A moral panic about cyberbullying was evident in the press earlier this decade with sensationalist reporting regarding youth suicides connected with social networking sites. Vandebosch, Simulioniene, Marczak, Vermeulen and Bonetti (2013) identify the moral panic as originating in the popular press that presented negative stories focused upon individual cases, without reference to academic research. My own role as a mother, meant the moral panic caused concern and an interest in pursuing this line of research. In addition, I have insight and empathy for victims as a former victim of traditional bullying at school. These factors may result in additional empathy for those with victim status and a focus upon those in my study.

The research is set in schools located in areas of socio-economic deprivation. Many studies of cyberbullying appear to be located in more affluent areas, yet socio-economic circumstances may impact upon the lived experiences of cyberbullying for all involved. Being from a working-class family, I am cognisant of the different experiences young people will have based upon their family circumstances, access to resources, social influences, and so on. A central tenet of YPAR is working with disadvantaged and disempowered groups. Youth voice, and youth voice from disadvantaged areas, is largely overlooked in the cyberbullying literature and this study seeks to go some way to redress this.

#### **1.4. Definitions**

As this study is exploratory, I have sought to be open with definitional criteria; however, young people are educated regularly in English schools regarding cyberbullying and are presented with definitions which will influence their

perceptions. The YPAR group also asked me for definitions and I shared the definition of cyberbullying as it is currently used, but we also discussed the problems with this definition. Consequently, through my interactions with young people I have not imposed a definition of cyberbullying on them, rather they have discussed incidents and their perceptions based on how they define it. Young people refer to a wide range of activities within the scope of cyberbullying, such as spreading rumours, creating fake profiles, social exclusion. Although some researchers (e.g. Wright, 2015) suggest these activities could be included in the more encompassing term of ‘cyber-aggression’ instead (see Chapter 2), I have retained these within the definition of cyberbullying reflecting the perception of young people.

The research has been carried out in two secondary schools for those aged between 11 – 16 and 11 – 18 years. The terms ‘young people’, ‘youth’, ‘students’ and ‘adolescence’ are used to describe this age group throughout the thesis. There will also be reference to ‘school staff’ in the thesis, this includes teachers, but also the other members of staff in school, such as learning mentors, safeguarding officers and teaching assistants, who are often significantly involved in providing pastoral support to students. I will, also, use the term ‘parents’ and this is used inclusively to capture multiple configurations of families and the people within them who fulfil the role of parenting (e.g. biological parents, step-parents, grand-parents, foster carers).

## **1.5. Participating schools**

The main school for the research is Trinity Catholic Academy (TC)<sup>1</sup>, a school located in an area of socio-economic deprivation in Liverpool. It is a larger than average Catholic Academy with over 1,100 students of which 270 are in the 6th form. The number of students who receive Pupil Premium (a measure of socio-economic deprivation) is 41% and well above the national average of 30%. The school has lower than average students who are minority ethnic, speak English as an additional language or who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. The school is currently graded as Requires Improvement by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). Ofsted is the body responsible for inspecting schools in England and currently uses a four-point grading system: Outstanding is the highest grading, followed by Good, Requires Improvement and Inadequate. A Requires Improvement rating will result in more regular inspection visits, while an Inadequate grading will place the school as a cause for concern and additional measures will be put in place aimed at securing improvement (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, 2018).

The second school participated in student interviews for two days. Our Lady's Catholic High School (OL) is located in Sefton in an area of socio-economic

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<sup>1</sup> Both schools have been allocated pseudonyms which reflect their status and faith.

deprivation and a high proportion of the students are disadvantaged. The percentage of students at the school who are eligible for Pupil Premium is 51%. It is a smaller than average school with 500 students on roll, educating students between the ages of 11 – 16 years. A lower than average proportion of students are from minority ethnic groups. Most students speak English as their first language. The school has a greater proportion than the national average of students who have special educational needs and/or disabilities. The school is currently graded as Inadequate by Ofsted.

## **1.6. Outline of the thesis**

Next, I will present a brief outline to orient the reader through the thesis.

The next chapter is the literature review. The literature has been predominantly drawn from the global north as these contexts most closely replicate the cultural and social values of England. Recent international research has found cultural and social differences impact the findings from cyberbullying research, hence it is important to consider the implications of drawing on cyberbullying research from diverse geographical regions (Wright et al., 2018). In the literature review, I will explore the issues related to definitions for cyberbullying research; review how young people cope with involvement in cyberbullying activities and the role of bystanders; the role of adults will be explored in both the home and school contexts; the social context of school and how this may contribute to cyberbullying will be investigated; and finally, I will present information on the socio-ecological framework which is used to organise and analyse the findings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994, 2005).

In Chapter 3, I will discuss the methodological approach and consider the epistemology which underpins this study. I will explain different participatory approaches as this is a vibrant area of research with different approaches and similar names. The methods used will be justified, with consideration of authenticity and trustworthiness of the research. I will discuss the ethical implications of this study and how these have been addressed throughout. The analysis techniques, drawing on grounded theory approaches, will be explained.

In Chapter 4, I present the work of the YPAR group. This chapter celebrates the work undertaken by the 13 – 14 year olds with whom I worked over the course of an academic year. My thesis draws on the transcripts from the YPAR group meetings and the rich discussions we had while they discussed their project and analysed their data, as well as the qualitative data they gathered during a focus group. In Chapter 4, I also reflect on the impact the project had on the participating young people, which is a key component of YPAR, and my own perceptions of using YPAR within this doctoral work.

Chapter 5 presents the findings from this qualitative thesis, analysing the YPAR meeting transcripts, the YPAR-led focus group and the interviews across the two schools. The findings have been arranged to address each of the research questions. The data have been analysed using constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014a) and the categories are presented. The discussion can be found in the separate discussion chapter (Chapter 6).

In Chapter 6, the discussion is organised around the research questions and there is consideration of each of the categories in relation to the literature; how the study contributes to the research on cyberbullying is discussed. Finally, within Chapter 6, the socio-ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994, 2005) has been used to further analyse the categories and establish inter-relationships between them. Through this analysis models have been constructed for use in schools.

Chapter 7 concludes the thesis with consideration of the original contribution to knowledge, the limitations of the study, recommendations and future research.

Appendix A and B are offered for transparency. Appendix A provides examples of the process taken for open and focused coding and Appendix B presents my notes as I developed the models.

## **1.7. Concluding remarks**

In this chapter, I have provided a rationale for this qualitative study and for the exploratory research questions posed. I have briefly explained my chosen methodology and the socio-ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994, 2005). An outline of the thesis has been presented with definitions and contextual information about the schools. My own biography has been discussed to consider influential factors for the research process. In the next chapter, the Literature Review discusses key literature arranged broadly around the themes of the research questions.

## **Chapter 2      Literature Review**

In Chapter 2, I will firstly examine the issues around forming a definition of cyberbullying (RQ1 How do young people perceive and define cyberbullying?).

Next, I will consider how young people prevent or respond to cyberbullying and the role of bystanders (RQ2 How can young people manage cyberbullying incidences in their own lives and those of their peers?). The role of adults for influencing cyberbullying behaviour and supporting young people will be considered (RQ3 How do young people perceive the role of adults in managing cyberbullying incidences?).

Then, I will discuss the social context within which cyberbullying occurs and how this may influence cyberbullying perpetration and victimisation, as cyberbullying does not occur within a vacuum (RQ4 How do young people respond to peer judgement within the school social context and what role does peer judgement have in cyberbullying?).

Finally, I will introduce the theoretical framework which has been used for this study: Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979, 1986, 1994, 2005) socio-ecological framework.

In the literature review, I have drawn upon literature which uses the terms cyberbullying or cyber-aggression; some authors are electing to use the broader term 'cyber-aggression' which includes cyberbullying and associated activities to overcome the issues with the definition; definitional issues will be explored in this review. I have opted to use the term 'cyberbullying' as the term used in schools and with which young people are familiar. The literature has been checked for relevance to the secondary school age range (11 – 16 years). I have also limited my literature

predominantly to the global north due to differences in findings between different cultures (Wright et al., 2018).

## **2.1. Definitions**

Although cyberbullying is a relatively new area of research, it sits within the wider field of research into bullying. There is significant debate about definitions and scope related to cyberbullying, so it is worthwhile spending time exploring these and the inter-related areas which inform our understanding of cyberbullying. Through my research, I hope to uncover the way young people perceive and define cyberbullying activities; the commonalities and disparities between the lived experience and the definitions suggested by researchers. Hence, research question (RQ) one is: how do young people perceive and define cyberbullying. As definitions for cyberbullying are drawn from a definition of traditional bullying, I will first consider these roots.

### **2.1.1. Bullying**

In 1993, Dan Olweus published a key text in which he sought to define bullying. His definition forms the basis of definitions offered by many researchers into bullying today (e.g. Bayar & Uçanok, 2012; T. Cassidy, 2008; Fanti et al., 2012; Harel-Fisch et al., 2011; Nickerson, Singleton, Schnurr, & Collen, 2014). Olweus (1993, p. 8ff) identified three main attributes for school-based bullying: (i) the intentionality of the “negative actions” (p. 9); (ii) these actions take place repeatedly over time; and (iii) there is an imbalance of power, whereby the victim cannot defend themselves against the perpetrator(s). All three of these factors need to be in place for bullying to be said to have occurred.



There is debate in the literature regarding the definition and use of the term 'cyberbullying' to describe various aggressive online acts (e.g. Pyżalski, 2012; Slonje et al., 2013); arguments centre on whether the current definition is too broad and some acts should be relabelled as cyber-aggression or if the definition itself needs to be altered or applied differently when the activities are online. This debate is currently at an academic level and it appears that the perceptions of youth are not an integral part of the debate. Bullying activity itself is perceived as a sub-set of aggressive behaviour (Bayar & Uçanok, 2012; Lester, Cross, & Shaw, 2012; Menesini, Codecasa, Benelli, & Cowie, 2003). It can manifest in diverse ways including, physical (e.g. pushing, punching, damaging possessions), verbal (e.g. threatening, name-calling), social (e.g. excluding from activities, spreading rumours), psychological (e.g. humiliation) and relational (e.g. damaging friendships, manipulating friendship groups) (Baldry & Farrington, 2004; Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Harel-Fisch et al., 2011; Nickerson et al., 2014; Paul, Smith, & Blumberg, 2012). All of these activities, except for physical bullying, are directly transferrable into the online environment. These activities generally fall into direct (e.g. physical, verbal) and indirect, sometimes called covert (e.g. social, psychological, relational) bullying activities (Berry & Hunt, 2009; Lester et al., 2012). Cyberbullying is categorised as indirect or covert bullying.

Some studies place slightly different emphasis upon other factors related to bullying. For instance, the victim's status is highlighted through assertions that the abuse is unjustified (Lester et al., 2012) or it is unprovoked (Menesini et al., 2003; Olweus & Limber, 2010); Nickerson (2014) focuses on gender preferences for bullying with boys engaging in physical bullying, while girls focus on relational bullying; Salmivalli

(2001) includes the stability of the victim and bully roles, where there is no intervention to stop bullying, as part of her definition. These nuances within the bullying definitions are particularly interesting when considering cyberbullying, as these factors become more fluid. Definitions related to traditional bullying are generally well-established, including the nuances identified above. However, in cyberbullying, these definitions and nuances can be inverted; for instance, cyberbullying may be perpetrated by a previous victim as retaliation for traditional bullying attacks (Wong, Chan, & Cheng, 2014; Zhou et al., 2013) which calls into question the notion of a power imbalance. These definitional challenges for cyberbullying are discussed next.

### **2.1.2. Cyberbullying**

The literature demonstrates a lack of consensus regarding a definition of cyberbullying; this is a debate which has been ongoing for some time (e.g. Bauman, 2010; Brewer & Kerslake, 2015; Brown et al., 2014; Dredge et al., 2014; Heirman & Walrave, 2012; Hemphill & Heerde, 2014; Macháčková, Dedkova, Sevcikova, & Cerna, 2015; Slonje et al., 2013; Zhou et al., 2013). This creates problems for comparison between studies, building successfully on previous research and developing theoretical understandings. Similarly to Olweus (1993), a few researchers have created definitions which others have then used as the foundational definition for their research. For instance, Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, Fisher, Russell and Tippett (2008) extended Olweus's definition of traditional bullying to include electronic contact, formulating the definition as "An aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time

against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself” (p. 376). Patchin and Hinduja (2006, p. 152) define cyberbullying as the “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the medium of electronic text.” Both of these definitions are referenced multiple times in the literature, often with extended lists of the ways in which the bullying is perpetrated, e.g. mobile phones, Internet (Bayar & Uçanok, 2012; Paul et al., 2012), email, chat-rooms, social networking sites, instant messaging, video and text messages (Hemphill & Heerde, 2014), fake websites (Brewer & Kerslake, 2015), blogs, multi-user-domain gaming sites (Pearce, Cross, Monks, Waters, & Falconer, 2011), computers and other devices (Elledge et al., 2013). Clearly, the list of technologies used for cyberbullying will be ever evolving which is problematic if it is to form a substantive part of a global definition. However, there is debate around the applicability of the three facets of Olweus’s (1993) definition – intention, repetition and power imbalance – when applied to cyberbullying.

Some believe there to be role continuity between the physical and online worlds (Baldry, Farrington, & Sorrentino, 2017; Shin, Braithwaite, & Ahmed, 2016; Wolke, Lee, & Guy, 2017). Victims of face-to-face bullying are at a high risk of also becoming cyber-victims; their aggressors may engage in multiple means of victimising them across different mechanisms (Lazuras, Barkoukis, & Tsorbatzoudis, 2017) and the majority of cyber-victims are also victims of traditional bullying (Wolke et al., 2017) suggesting cyberbullying may be a continuation of traditional aggression. However, despite the apparent flow of aggressive activities between the two realms, bullying and cyberbullying are seen as distinct activities by others (Brown et al., 2014; Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Lazuras et al., 2017; Meter & Bauman,

2018). Brown et al. (2014) state there is little evidence of an overlap between conceptions of traditional and cyber victimisation and, so, they should be treated as distinct. They identify differences between understandings of cyber-behaviours between males and females, suggesting an awareness of contextual factors may be important to definitions. Pabian et al. (2018) highlight aggression can move between different online platforms as well; for instance, between Facebook and WhatsApp; public and private conversations. Qualitative studies are needed to understand more about the contextual factors and how they impact on cyberbullying; insight into the lived experience of cyberbullying from young people is needed to hone a definition and understand any relationship between bullying and cyberbullying. Focusing on the impact on the victim rather than the intent of the perpetrator is advised by Dredge et al. (2014) who conducted in-depth interviews with 25 adolescents; the adolescents offered contrasting perspectives to the definitions provided by researchers. The different perspectives uncovered by Dredge et al. (2014) support additional research on definitions and perceptions of cyberbullying from those who are affected. In the following sections I will explore some of the definitional areas which become more problematic within the three strands of Olweus's (1993) original definition.

#### **2.1.2.1. Intentionality**

The notion of intentionality for the bullying act is problematic for cyberbullying; youth often see the actions involved in cyberbullying as fun or jokes rather than harmful (Li, 2010; O'Brien & Moules, 2013; Zhou et al., 2013). Livingstone, Kirwil, Ponte and Staksrud (2014, p. 280) suggest "the line between jokey comments and hostility is often ambiguous" and comments from young people support this assertion:

“‘[Happy slapping] is just mates fooling around ... it all depends on what they record and how you are with your friends. It’s not all bullying ... it’s funny.’” (Tarapdar & Kellett, 2013, p. 470). This raises a disconcerting issue whereby someone may be identified as a cyberbully although their intention may have been banter. The definition for traditional bullying is clear: it is an intentional act, whereas cyber-victims self-identify in circumstances where perpetrators intention to harm is not always evident.

#### **2.1.2.2. Repetition**

For traditional bullying, repetition is quite clear; however, for cyberbullying it becomes difficult to apply. Repetition may be enacted through: sharing material for a single incident online (e.g. personal information or a picture) which is then viewed multiple times, potentially by a wide audience (Elledge et al., 2013; Moreno et al., 2018; Obermaier, Fawzi, & Koch, 2016; Slonje et al., 2013; Steffgen, König, Pfetsch, & Melzer, 2011); or the level of publicity or the severity of the act may have equivalent harm to repetition in traditional bullying (Dredge et al., 2014). Hemphill and Heerde (2014) rightly question if repetition is a necessary feature of cyberbullying, in the sense used within the traditional bullying definition. How do we classify a perpetrator of a single incident when the material they upload leaves their control and is shared multiple times by multiple people? The perpetrator has only ‘bullied’ once – which does not fall within the definition – yet the impact on the victim is felt repeatedly. Indeed, Moreno, Suthamjariya and Selkie (2018) found stakeholders did not include repetition in their own definitions of cyberbullying consequently, this aspect of the definition should be re-examined.

### **2.1.2.3. Power imbalance**

Olweus (1993) emphasises a fight or argument between two people who are equally matched is not the same as bullying, yet, power dynamics appear to shift online. The definition for traditional bullying refers explicitly to physical and psychological imbalances of power (Olweus, 1993). Online we need to consider alternative forms of power, although psychological power may still exist. Some youths may have increased power through greater technological expertise (Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014) and anonymity (Bauman, 2010; Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Cuadrado-Gordillo & Fernández-Antelo, 2016b; Mark & Ratliffe, 2011; Moreno et al., 2018; Slonje et al., 2013). Yet, research which investigates who the cyberbullies and cyber-victims are, reveals unexpected patterns. Traditional bullies appear to see cyberbullying as an additional way to harass their victims, so the activity continues online (Brighi, Guarini, Melotti, Galli, & Genta, 2012; Wong et al., 2014). However, traditional victims can also bully online, perhaps as a form of retaliation and utilising the potential anonymity afforded by the medium through fake accounts (Wong et al., 2014; Zhou et al., 2013). The adoption of a bullying role by victims online creates challenges for established notions of a power imbalance. Indeed, Dredge et al. (2014) found young people did not consider power imbalances as necessary for a definition of cyberbullying on social networking sites. However, Wolke et al. (2017) suggest cyberbullying is about peer relationships, dominance and power. Cyberbullying can occur when a power imbalance does not exist, but victims become more upset when there are multiple perpetrators or offline contact by the bullies, rather than through a

power imbalance or repetition (Mitchell, Ybarra, Jones, & Espelage, 2016). Therefore, power imbalance does not seem to be a feature of cyberbullying.

The lack of consensus for a definition causes challenges in the literature and for researchers. Different researchers use different conceptions (e.g. timescales for cyberbullying incidences to have occurred within) (Brown et al., 2014) and different terminology (e.g. cyber-aggression, cyber-abuse) and are selective with their use of definitions (Slonje et al., 2013) which makes it challenging to compare and build upon studies. Given the factors above, it is questionable whether consensus for a definition may be reached (Dredge et al., 2014). However, a first step should be to listen to the lived experiences and views of the young people who have different roles within cyberbullying and examine their own definitions and attempt to identify defining features. Young people's definitions of cyberbullying will be explored through RQ1: How do young people perceive and define cyberbullying?

## **2.2. Young people and management of cyberbullying**

In this section, I will explore how young people's use of technology may influence cyberbullying and the behaviours of cyber-victims and cyberbullies, including the ways of responding to victimisation. I will, also, consider the role of bystanders, who have been identified as an influential group for supporting victims who have been traditionally bullied. Young people do not always seek the support of adults so it is important to establish how they support themselves and others consequently, RQ2 asks: how can young people manage cyberbullying incidences in their own lives and those of their peers?

### **2.2.1. Developing use of the online world**

In the United Kingdom (UK), technology is widely used in everyday life.

Smartphones are popular among adolescents and through these devices they have ready access to the online world. In the UK, 86% of 12 – 15 year olds have their own smartphone, 99% of them are online and three-quarters have a social media profile (Ofcom, 2017). There are mixed reports regarding the impact of age on cyberbullying activities. Cyberbullying perpetration and victimisation rises steadily during the early years of secondary school (11 – 14 years) (Ackers, 2012; Brown et al., 2014; Mark & Ratliffe, 2011; Paul et al., 2012; M. Price & Dalgleish, 2010). In particular, cyberbullying increases around transition from primary to secondary school, which can cause difficulties for children making this transition (Paul et al., 2012; M. Price & Dalgleish, 2010; Tarapdar & Kellett, 2013). Following transition from primary school, students tend to increasingly have a smartphone and use their technology to go online (Ofcom, 2017) and use social media, which may increase the opportunities for perpetration and victimisation. For older age ranges there is a varied picture arising from the literature. Studies suggest older adolescents cyberbully younger age groups (Pabian & Vandebosch, 2016); cyberbullying rates are higher in the 14 – 18 years age group (Nickerson et al., 2014); cyberbullying increases for older youths and the creativity and sophistication of techniques to conduct the cyberbullying also develops (Tarapdar & Kellett, 2013). There are some studies which indicate the opposing view: age does not have any impact (Elledge et al., 2013; Festl & Quandt, 2013; Macháčková et al., 2015; Macháčková & Pfetsch, 2016). Nevertheless, it is apparent this is a school-wide issue, and the development of more sophisticated techniques, as



students grow older, will impact forms and approaches to victimisation and resolution. Here age is acting as a proxy for sophisticated use, however, other factors may also influence technological expertise.

### **2.2.2. Behaviour online**

The majority of cyberbullies are in the same school as their victims (Slonje & Smith, 2008), indeed, Gradinger Strohmeier, Schiller, Stefanek, and Spiel (2012) state 62% of cyber-victims are victimised by classmates. Some suggest the motives attributed to bullies have not changed, only now they are also achieved through online mechanisms (Ackers, 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). However, Shin et al. (2016) suggest cyberbullies feel unable to trust their peers, lacking peer support; this is different to traditional bullying where the pivotal factor appears to be a negative relationship with teachers and school (Harel-Fisch et al., 2011). In addition, compared to traditional bullies, they have lower self-esteem; this may explain their choice of bullying mechanism, which reduces the risk of retaliation or conflict (Brewer & Kerslake, 2015). Therefore, some factors for cyberbullies are different; this could mean those who are engaging in cyberbullying are a different group than traditional bullies, driven by new factors, such as a lack of trust, poor peer support and low self-esteem. Certainly, Brown et al. (2014) state there is no overlap and cyberbullying and traditional bullying are distinct. It is possible for traditional bullies to utilise new technology to increase their perpetration, while new perpetrators are attracted by the technological means of perpetrating online. The different motives for perpetration need to be explored further.

Meanwhile, studies show cyber-victims are socially less competent with lower self-esteem (Romera, Herrera-López, Casas, Ortega-Ruiz, & Gómez-Ortiz, 2017; Shin et al., 2016; Wolke et al., 2017) and, in contrast to traditional victims, cyber-victims can become aggressors themselves. Sontag, Clemans, Graber and Lyndon (2011) suggest the ease and relative safety of retaliating in an online space may encourage cyber-victims to seek revenge. This could establish a cycle of aggression, whereas forgiveness helps to break this cycle (Quintana-Orts & Rey, 2018). Cyber-victimisation is less stable than traditional victimisation (Gradinger et al., 2012), although the reasons for this are unclear. It may be due to protective strategies put in place by victims or short-term victimisation which ceases quickly, perhaps within friendship groups.

Many cyberbullies are also cyber-victims (Bauman, 2010; Connell, Schell-Busey, Pearce, & Negro, 2014; Festl & Quandt, 2013; France, Danesh, & Jirard, 2013; O'Brien & Moules, 2013; Sontag et al., 2011; Williford et al., 2013), however, this relationship is under-researched. Connell et al. (2014) identify those who report being a cyber-victim are four times more likely to also report being a cyberbully; this applies regardless of gender. They suggest a reciprocal relationship where cyber-victims may not be blameless. Indeed, this suggests a cycle of cyber-abuse between peers which has perhaps become normalised. Flexible roles seem to be undertaken with individuals moving from cyber-victim to cyberbully to cyber-bystander (D. Price et al., 2014) the causes of short-term cyber-victimisation may be related to individuals transitioning through these roles. Bauman (2010) suggests cyberbully/victims may be engaged in cyber-conflict with equally matched peers. If the cyberbullying activity is

reciprocal, then this could change the ways in which schools intervene and educate young people about cyberbullying. In particular, a focus upon the development of appropriate peer relationships may be a positive intervention (D. Price et al., 2014). Importantly, young people comment on the lack of rules and enforcement in the online environment (Pabian et al., 2018; Patterson, Allan, & Cross, 2016). Unlike the offline world, there is a limited socio-historical context upon which young people can draw to identify social rules and positive behaviour models. While young people are capable of identifying appropriate rules, they need adult support to enforce these, then the social rules need to become normalised online. It may be appropriate to seek the views of young people on appropriate online social rules and then integrate these into school policies. Insight from adolescents who are involved in these activities is needed to better understand the dynamics and potential solutions.

### **2.2.3. Passive response to cyberbullying and impact on mental health**

Victims can either situate the blame for their victimisation with themselves or with their aggressors. This can influence the type of action victims take: self-blame leads to non-aggressive strategies, such as ignoring; while aggressor-blame may lead to retaliation (Wright et al., 2018). Li (2010) suggests that victims use predominantly passive coping strategies, such as ignoring aggression, which may encourage cyberbullies to continue. However, some victims may consciously decide to ignore victimisation, as a proactive strategy, in order to deter their aggressors.

The term mental health encapsulates the emotional and psychological well-being of an individual, including factors such as social anxiety, depression and well-being; some

studies report that cyber-victimisation is a risk factor for mental health (e.g. Fahy et al., 2016). Those who are cyber-victims can suffer in a number of ways. They are more likely to experience loneliness, have lower levels of support from friends, experience less self-efficacy (Heiman, Olenik-Shemesh, & Eden, 2015), lower self-esteem (Brewer & Kerslake, 2015; M. Price & Dalgleish, 2010; Wolke et al., 2017), more challenging behaviour (Wolke et al., 2017) and may self-harm and have suicidal thoughts (Ditch the Label, 2017). Appel, Holtz, Stiglbauer and Batinic (2012) suggest there is a cycle of feeling lonely, seeking online interaction, but experiencing negative reactions online which reinforce the feelings of loneliness. Hence, activities to aid victims in socialisation activities beyond the online world may be helpful.

Cyberbullying can induce negative feelings, such as fear (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Kofoed & Ringrose, 2012; Mark & Ratliffe, 2011; M. Price & Dalgleish, 2010), distrust, hate, envy, embarrassment, despair (Kofoed & Ringrose, 2012), anger, frustration (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; M. Price & Dalgleish, 2010; Slonje et al., 2013), distress and depression (O'Brien & Moules, 2013). These affects can spill over into school, impacting on academic work (Mark & Ratliffe, 2011; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; M. Price & Dalgleish, 2010) and friendships (M. Price & Dalgleish, 2010). Most worrying is when young people self-harm or express suicidal thoughts associated with cyberbullying incidents (Perren et al., 2012; M. Price & Dalgleish, 2010).

Brown et al. (2014), though, suggest females are at higher risk of negative outcomes as they experience higher levels of depression, stress and negative emotions, than males when victimised online and appear to react more sensitively to their

victimisation. Also, females tend to engage in relational bullying (Smith et al., 2008) and cyberbullying is considered to closely align with this (Elledge et al., 2013); this may explain why females report higher levels of victimisation (O'Brien & Moules, 2013), as they appear to be more sensitive to online aggression (Brown et al., 2014). However, Macháčková et al. (2015) assert gender does not impact on cyberbullying when other contextual factors are considered. Cassidy (2008, p. 72) states “females with poorer family relations, reporting less encouragement from teachers, and poorer self-esteem, were more likely to be bullied.” These contextual factors may help to explain the greater reporting of cyberbullying incidences by females, but should also cause concern regarding female mental health outcomes when victimised.

Some young people report cyber-victimisation does not impact negatively on them (Dredge et al., 2014; O'Brien & Moules, 2013; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Slonje et al., 2013) this may be related to their resilience (Hinduja & Patchin, 2017), accepting cyberbullying acts as banter (Tarapdar & Kellett, 2013), or other factors, such as a perception that what happens online is not real (Slonje et al., 2013). Further insight into the perceptions of young people may help identify suitable strategies for support.

#### **2.2.4. Active response to cyberbullying**

While younger children will normally tell an adult or friend about bullying activities, this strategy seems to fall away during Key Stage 3 (11 – 14 years) (Ackers, 2012). Instead, adolescents begin to develop strategies for coping independently with cyberbullying, such as using a comment to diffuse the situation (Paul et al., 2012), deleting or ignoring the message or taking more proactive actions like confronting the

perpetrator (Ackers, 2012). Sharing appropriate strategies which work for other adolescents may help victims who have greater difficulty developing their own strategies. It is important the measures suggested by adults reflect the needs of young people as they mature. Hence, strategies for 11 year olds may not be appropriate for 16 year olds.

Hinduja and Patchin (2017) highlight resilience as a key protective factor. It is possible for people to regulate their emotional states, including the types of emotion experienced, the intensity and duration of the emotion; this management of emotional states is referred to as emotional regulation (Erreygers, Vandebosch, Vranjes, Baillien, & Witte, 2018). Emotional regulation can help victims to manage the negative effects of cyber-victimisation; however, Erreygers et al. (2018) found this has a limit and when there are too many incidents, emotional regulation is no longer helpful, perhaps due to the additional stress and negative impact. Emotional regulation is important; yet even low levels of cyber-victimisation can lead to poorer mental health outcomes (Fahy et al., 2016). A literature review from Perren et al. (2012) identified a difference in levels of victimisation; those using active strategies were victimised less than those who used passive strategies. Helping victims to identify appropriate proactive strategies early is necessary to minimise victimisation and negative impacts on mental health. It seems peers have frequently developed successful strategies which could be shared, if schools can identify methods to disseminate this expertise appropriately.

### **2.2.5. The role of bystanders**

Bystanders are a potentially powerful group through whose actions the cyberbullying can either be sustained or challenged. Approximately half of students have witnessed cyberbullying (DeSmet et al., 2016; Li, 2010); however, while bystanders may approach a teacher with a report of face-to-face bullying, they do not tend to do this for cyberbullying (Patterson et al., 2017). Bystander behaviour which acts to support the victim is influenced by their own attitude to positive bystander action, friendship with the victim, their self-efficacy, personal experience of victimisation, and their awareness of online monitoring by their mother (DeSmet et al., 2016). Also, there is some evidence girls are more empathetic and likely to act (DeSmet et al., 2016); however, this is disputed by others (Macháčková, Dedkova, Sevcikova, & Cerna, 2013; Macháčková & Pfetsch, 2016). Bystanders are more likely to act if they are present when the cyberbullying occurred and if the victim reports the incident to them (Macháčková & Pfetsch, 2016). The moral engagement of peers, also, influences bystanders' decisions to intervene. Those with high moral standards are more likely to intervene when other peers are morally disengaged (Allison & Bussey, 2017), although most say they will intervene when the cyberbullying is very severe or when they are friends with the victim (Macháčková, Dedkova, Sevcikova, & Cerna, 2018; Pabian et al., 2018; Patterson et al., 2017). Bystanders weigh a complex range of factors when deciding whether to intervene. When friendships are not involved, contextual factors are taken into consideration, such as, assessing whether it is a joke, the likely motive of the poster and any history between the parties and the gender of the victim, as these factors influence their assessment of the severity of harm

(Patterson et al., 2017). It may be more difficult for bystanders to make an accurate assessment of the situation online when social cues are not as apparent.

Cowie (2014) suggests bystanders worry about the victim, but are also concerned for their own safety within the group. Bystanders are influenced by the group norms in terms of their intervention patterns (Allison & Bussey, 2017), hence, a culture of not intervening will make proactively supporting a victim more difficult (group norms are discussed further in section 2.4). Proactive support-seeking from victims may be necessary to activate bystanders (Macháčková et al., 2018), however, the vulnerability of victims makes this challenging. Bystanders can offer either supportive behaviour (e.g. comforting and providing advice, soliciting friends not to participate or directly challenging the cyberbully) or negative behaviour, the most frequent of which is ignoring the incident; however, they can also support the bully through laughing and forwarding the material to others (DeSmet et al., 2016). Reasons for negative bystander behaviour include self-protection, developing popularity, blaming the victim (DeSmet et al., 2016), distance from the incident making it easier to ignore, difficulties interpreting the context leading to delays, uncertainty about authority/reporting structures for cyberbullying (Patterson et al., 2016) or being friends with the bully (Macháčková et al., 2013). Bystander intention in hypothetical scenarios versus reality are different (Nickerson et al., 2014); this suggests bystanders understand the moral imperative to act, but may be inhibited by other factors when dealing with a real situation. Hence, bystanders need support to develop appropriate actions when witnessing cyberbullying, grounded in support systems provided by schools or other



sources. However, victims should also be supported to proactively contact bystanders to seek support (Macháčková et al., 2018; Macháčková & Pfetsch, 2016).

The way in which young people manage cyberbullying is important to attain more positive mental health outcomes. Bystanders provide a potentially powerful mechanism for support, yet they are under-utilised in many schools. Older adolescents, also, develop technological expertise and strategies which could aid victims, but this is not exploited. Further insight into the way in which young people wish to be supported, how they currently support each other and manage cyberbullying themselves can be used to inform interventions for support. RQ2 asks: how can young people manage cyberbullying incidences in their own lives and those of their peers?

### **2.3. The role of adults**

Adolescents gradually move away from adult support, instead turning to their friends and peer group for support and advice. However, adults remain an important aspect of their lives. Parenting style can be influential in how children adapt to increasing independence and autonomy during adolescence and how they are influenced by their peer group (Beckett & Taylor, 2016). This has implications for adolescents who become involved in cyberbullying as perpetrators or victims. A parenting style which is nurturing and caring, yet also provides firm boundaries tends to increase children's self-esteem, decrease the likelihood of their involvement in risky behaviour and provides a sense of security in the home environment (Beckett & Taylor, 2016). Close family is still an important source of support for most young people

(Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016). Schools also provide a key support mechanism for many young people who are involved with cyberbullying (Tarapdar & Kellett, 2013). Figures for reporting cyberbullying vary between studies; however, only a small number of those experiencing cyberbullying actually report the situation in school, for instance, Tarapdar and Kellett (2013) found only 10% reported to a teacher. Hence RQ3 investigates: how do young people perceive the role of adults in managing cyberbullying incidences?

### **2.3.1. Parent's role**

There is debate about where responsibility rests for dealing with cyberbullying incidents; most incidents occur outside of school, yet the impact is felt in the school environment (Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014). Parents often lack knowledge and understanding of their children's online activities, and monitoring of online activities is frequently ineffective (Bauman, 2010; W. Cassidy, Brown, & Jackson, 2012; Corcoran & McGuckin, 2014; Hemphill & Heerde, 2014). Consequently, schools frequently deal with the incidences which emerge; however, they do not always receive parental support due to misunderstandings about the severity and seriousness of the online activities (W. Cassidy et al., 2012).

There is good evidence in the literature for involving parents in efforts to prevent cyberbullying, although traditional advice of installing blocking and monitoring software or reviewing a child's Internet history has been found to be ineffective (Law, Shapka, & Olson, 2010). Unfortunately, there is no 'quick fix' for parents to put in place; research indicates a positive parenting style, open dialogue with children and

clear rules with sanctions reduce cyber-victimisation and cyberbullying perpetration (Brighi et al., 2012; T. Cassidy, 2008; Fanti et al., 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2013; Law et al., 2010; Pyżalski, 2012). Positive and open parental relationships can be used to model methods to deal with cyberbullying and build resilience for future episodes (Papatraianou, Levine, & West, 2014). Research suggests cyberbullying is related to parenting style and aggression within the family unit (Brighi et al., 2012; T. Cassidy, 2008; Fanti et al., 2012; Pyżalski, 2012). Hemphill and Heerde (2014) suggests families need early education on how to set rules and monitor appropriate online activity. Consequently, it appears parental interventions to prevent cyberbullying need to be established at the earliest stages of parenting, rather than when cyberbullying begins to occur.

Pyżalski (2012) investigated cyberbullying as part of a wider set of online aggressive acts, finding young people engage in a wide variety of online aggression towards people they frequently do not know. Cyberbullying is a small part of this picture. Those who engage in aggressive online acts had negative attitudes towards school, peer norms, norms of behaviour online, were pro-aggressive and assessed “relations within a family as hostile” (Pyżalski, 2012, p. 314). Could the family relationship be the starting point for the other negative attitudes and aggression? Hinduja and Patchin (2013) suggested young people who recognised there would be parental disapproval of and sanctions for cyberbullying behaviours, were less likely to engage in those behaviours. They, also, advocate positive parenting and open dialogue. Where open dialogue in families exists and young people self-disclose their online activities their involvement with sending aggressive messages reduces (Law et al., 2010). Parenting

style appears to influence the likelihood of adolescents becoming involved in cyberbullying.

Family relations impact on both cyberbullying perpetration and victimisation.

Victims are more likely to have poor family relationships (Brighi et al., 2012; T. Cassidy, 2008): males have low family self-esteem; and females experience greater loneliness with parents (Brighi et al., 2012). They are less likely to receive encouragement from parents and have poorer problem-solving strategies (T. Cassidy, 2008). An unsupportive home environment may establish a pattern whereby victims anticipate a lack of support and, consequently, do not disclose their victim-status. Those who feel supported by their family are at lower risk of cyber-victimisation, even if they do not have supportive friendships; at greatest risk are those who lack both supportive families and supportive friendships (Fanti et al., 2012).

Lower parental engagement with adolescents may provide more opportunities for going online; the more time spent online, the greater the opportunity for perpetrating or becoming victimised. More time online, also, suggests young people's online activities are monitored less (Brighi et al., 2012). Indeed, non-perpetrators of cyberbullying report more restricted use of the Internet than perpetrators (Zhou et al., 2013). Single parent households are also a risk factor for victimisation (Fanti et al., 2012) and given the previous discussions in this section, single parents may have greater difficulties providing the levels of monitoring and support discussed due to time and capacity pressures.

### **2.3.2. School climate**

Nickerson et al. (2014, p. 163) state school climate includes themes of “Instructional and Emotional Environment; Safety and Belonging; Respectful and Responsive Staff; Academic Self-regulation; and Welcoming and Diverse Environment.” Levels of involvement with cyberbullying alters perceptions of school climate by those involved. Those who are uninvolved with any activities related to cyberbullying (i.e. bully, victim, bystander) have the most positive perception of school, their teachers and peers. Perhaps surprisingly, cyber-victims have a higher positive perception of school than those who engage in cyberbullying behaviour. Those involved in cyberbullying perpetration (either as a bully or a bully/victim) or online aggression have the most negative perception of school and peer norms online (Bayar & Uçanok, 2012; Nickerson et al., 2014; Pyżalski, 2012). Nickerson et al. (2014) hypothesise low level, infrequent bullying may not damage victims’ overall perception of school, although they have lower perceptions of safety in school. A poorer sense of belonging to the school community has been found to be a significant predictor of cyberbullying behaviour (Betts et al., 2017; Nickerson et al., 2014; Wong et al., 2014). This could form a trigger for intervention to help those individuals and prevent future aggression.

Williford et al. (2013) identified classroom-level differences of cyberbullying and cyber-victimisation. This suggests individual teachers are an important factor in preventing cyberbullying; young people are aware of policies and sanctions, and how these are applied by different teachers. Elledge et al. (2013), though, found teachers who were very effective at stopping overt bullying in their classrooms, experienced an increase amongst students of using covert forms of bullying, such as cyberbullying,

instead. Hence, the actions of individual teachers and their impact on bullying or cyberbullying does not always achieve the expected results; young people may react in unanticipated ways to different classroom environments. Unfortunately a number of young people state when they report cyberbullying to teachers/schools that their concerns are not taken seriously or they receive unhelpful responses (Ackers, 2012; Li, 2010; O'Brien & Moules, 2013). Some teachers believe cyberbullying does not have an impact or will serve to 'toughen up' victims; up to 25% ( $n=66$ ) of teachers participating in a survey in America held these views (Stauffer, Heath, Coyne, & Ferrin, 2012). This is mirrored in interviews with some senior staff in Canadian schools where there appeared to be a lack of awareness of the issue and denial (W. Cassidy et al., 2012). If teachers lack confidence and believe cyberbullying does not harm young people, then adolescents cannot expect appropriate support from them. Teachers' perceptions of bullying, including cyberbullying, will influence the supportiveness of the school climate (Brighi et al., 2012) and it is of particular concern when senior staff do not appear to be aware of cyberbullying and the implications for young people in their care. Victims often choose not to disclose cyberbullying and "teachers may misinterpret this as lack of cooperation and withdraw their support and encouragement" (T. Cassidy, 2008, p. 72) further damaging a victim's sense of safety in school. Williford and Depaolis (2016) suggest teacher empathy towards a victim and their own perceived self-efficacy for dealing with the cyberbullying will influence their decisions about intervention. If effective teacher intervention is dependent upon a range of factors beyond the control of young people, then they are faced with uncertainty and may be less willing to report cyberbullying.

Schools need to have clear policies in place for responding to cyberbullying, which are used by staff, and which make clear the sanctions which will apply (Hinduja & Patchin, 2013). Schools in England are required by law to have a policy in place for addressing bullying activities (Department for Education, 2017). The existence of clear school rules enforced by appropriate sanctions provides the framework for bystanders to report bullying (Patterson et al., 2016) and dissuades the majority of adolescents from becoming involved in cyberbullying perpetration (Hinduja & Patchin, 2013). Unfortunately, current policies are not always effective (O'Brien & Moules, 2013) and teachers do not always notice cyberbullying happening under desks in their classrooms (W. Cassidy et al., 2012). Therefore, since these policies should already be in place, questions remain regarding effectiveness and best use of these or if there are alternative strategies for adults to support young people. These issues need to be explored with young people.

### **2.3.3. School-based interventions**

There are a range of approaches to intervention. At its simplest, English schools will enforce their mandatory anti-bullying policies (Department for Education, 2017) and should have regard to the e-safety educational requirements in the National Curriculum (Department for Education, 2013b). Other schools will take a more proactive approach to attempt to pre-empt bullying and cyberbullying activities.

Mark and Ratliffe (2011) investigated cyberbullying across three schools which were different types of American school: public, private and charter. The results indicated the charter school had the lowest level of cyber-victimisation. As well as

hypothesising about relative access to technology and a smaller school generating more positive relationships, this was also the only school which had a curriculum designed to teach about Internet safety. Many interventions include use of a curriculum to educate students, suggesting this may be a proactive technique schools can utilise (Mark & Ratliffe, 2011; Pearce et al., 2011; Perren et al., 2012). In England, e-safety has been part of the National Curriculum since 2008 (Qualifications & Curriculum Development Agency, 2007) meaning children and young people should receive some education about e-safety.

Many schools have adopted restorative justice techniques which were first employed in the criminal justice system. Through restorative techniques schools seek to address a raft of inter-related problems including “exclusions, truancy, bullying, violence, and other forms of antisocial behavior” (Cowie, Hutson, Jennifer, & Myers, 2008, p. 500). Restorative approaches are seen as a whole-school approach and require a change in thinking from sanctions and control towards consideration of reasons for why the harm was caused and what can be done to rectify it (Song & Swearer, 2016). This involves consideration of the harm experienced by the perpetrator as the root of the anti-social behaviour, as well as the harm caused to the victim; the school must also reflect on any areas of policy and practice where they may be contributing to the harm experienced (Anfara, Evans, & Lester, 2013). Anfara et al. (2013) claim the approach is participatory and democratic, and inconsistent with punitive approaches of sanctions; yet, many schools attempt to use restorative justice within their existing system of sanctions. Some researchers have expressed concern about the fidelity of implementation of their anti-bullying programmes in schools, and attribute less



positive results to schools trying to take short-cuts to implementation (Karna et al., 2012; Olweus & Limber, 2010; Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, & Voeten, 2005), which may also occur with restorative justice approaches. Song and Swearer (2016) are concerned that restorative justice approaches have many forms, practitioners are inconsistent in the application of rules, as there is a lack of carefully researched and published guidance, and, consequently, it is difficult to evaluate the success of restorative approaches. They call for rigorous testing of restorative approaches to discover if it works and if so, which strategies are successful within a school environment (Song & Swearer, 2016). Morrison (2006) reports victims in the criminal justice system generally have positive outcomes from restorative approaches. Song and Swearer (2016), though, have serious concerns about the use of restorative approaches for bullying cases; a victim must face their bully and discuss the harm caused, which may lead to further victimisation. There may be differences between bullying, which is often protracted and personal, and criminal activities, which are likely to be one-off events, although they may be deeply traumatic. Restorative approaches may be effective for some cases of bullying, but may also be traumatic for the victim, even if they have apparently agreed to participate voluntarily. There is a significant power differential between a member of staff asking a victim to participate and a traumatised victim who is a child. Clearly, additional research is required for the use of restorative approaches in schools.

Peer-based interventions have been well-researched in schools and offer an alternative approach (Cross, Lester, Barnes, Cardoso, & Hadwen, 2015; Cross et al., 2016; Karna et al., 2012; Menesini et al., 2003). These interventions deploy students to support

peers and provide a mechanism for developing a greater sense of belonging (Cowie, 2014; Cross et al., 2015). Of course, if the aim is to develop a greater sense of belonging, then schools need to be aware of who is selected for these roles. Frequently, those selected for peer leadership roles already have a positive relationship with the school, a strong sense of belonging and leadership skills. For instance, the Cyber Friendly Schools Project (Cross et al., 2015) trained peer mentors who frequently had no personal experience of cyber-victimisation. Yet, High and Young (2018) found victims attribute more significance to messages of support from those who have prior experience of victimisation themselves, and did not believe those without experience were credible supporters. Students who have a balance between leadership skills and experience of victimisation appear to be the optimum for empathy and credible support. A key role for peer mentors can be gathering and relaying the common anxieties and worries of their peers to enable schools to take timely and effective action (Cowie, 2011). However, it is also important to take account of the context of each school as there are cultural differences in how individuals respond to cyberbullying (Wright et al., 2018). School climate is complex and depends on school ethos, policies and the actions of individuals with the school. As well as ensuring a supportive framework is in place for all students, teachers also need support to respond appropriately within the framework as situations arise. Student input should be a key part of the dialogue for designing an appropriate framework to be utilised by staff and students together. It is not currently clear, though, how victimised young people want to be supported by adults, hence RQ3 asks: how do young people perceive the role of adults in managing cyberbullying incidents?

## **2.4. Social context through school**

Cyberbullying occurs within a wider social context which centres around school and then continues into the online world. It is important to better understand how this social context influences cyberbullying behaviours, therefore, RQ4 asks: How do young people respond to peer judgement within the school social context and what role does peer judgement have in cyberbullying?

Technology has become an integral part of life for many adolescents. It presents challenges, but also opportunities for them to explore different facets of life which they may not have encountered without technology (EU Kids Online, 2014). For some young people, technology enables them to explore aspects of their identity with which they may be struggling. For instance, Dehaan, Kuper, Magee, Bigelow and Mustanski (2013) interviewed adolescents who used online communities to explore their lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) identity, particularly when they did not feel safe to do so offline; the anonymity of being online afforded them freedom to express themselves without embarrassment. However, Davis (2013) suggests adolescents who diffuse their identities online are in unsupportive friendship groups and then struggle to draw together the diffuse areas of their identity into a coherent whole. Consequently, while there are opportunities to explore different facets of identity through online interactions, we need to be aware of the potential impact this may have on identity formation for some adolescents. Goffman (1959), though, relates different personas to performances which each person acts out in different contexts. The performer may be more or less convinced of their own performance, but seek to convince their audience of the persona they have adopted. The

performance may change from setting to setting and will reflect the values and attitudes of the society in which the performance is situated. However, the performer may also adopt different performances in order to increase their upward mobility or downplay their social status. Consequently, adopting different personas may be a common technique which is employed by everyone as they move between different contexts; however, care may be appropriate for adolescents who become entrenched in using multiple personas.

The context within which cyberbullying takes place is important. Young adolescents want to be popular and included in social groupings; as they reach later adolescence this need wanes (Closson, Hart, & Hogg, 2017; Gamez-Guadix & Gini, 2016).

Bullying is now thought to be a social process, rather than a characteristic of the perpetrator (Cho & Chung, 2012; Schultze-Krumbholz, Schultze, Zagorscak, Wölfer, & Scheithauer, 2016; Wolke et al., 2017). While in secondary school, peers are structurally organised by age and class creating a homogenised group who will spend five years together. Within these groups, there is peer pressure to engage in bullying behaviour as a means of ensuring conformity to group norms (Cho & Chung, 2012).

Cho and Chung (2012) hypothesise conformity bullying may be related to maintenance or elevation of an individual's peer status and relationships, particularly when the perpetrator is popular and is invested in maintaining their status. Popularity attracts victimisation as adolescents struggle for position amongst their popular peers (Badaly, Kelly, Schwartz, & Dabney-Lieras, 2013; Closson & Watanabe, 2018).

Popular girls who have high levels of peer conformity are reputationally victimised, while popular boys are reputationally victimised regardless of their peer conformity

level (Closson et al., 2017). Closson et al. (2017) suggest popular girls with high conformity may over-achieve in conformity to group norms of materialism and superiority, and, consequently, be perceived as superficial and insincere resulting in victimisation. Girls enjoy posting complimentary photographs on their social media accounts, yet peers can damage this carefully crafted image when they post embarrassing and unattractive photographs of them (Cowie, 2014). Material posted online can then form the basis of gossiping the following day in school (Pelfrey & Weber, 2014). This kind of victimisation happens within friendship groups and may explain the sporadic nature of some cyber-victimisation (see sub-section 2.2.2).

Felmlee and Faris (2016) examined different degrees of relationships within a peer group, including romantic ties, and overlaid this with the network of cyber-aggression. Aggression typically occurred between friends, friends of friends and previous romantic partners. This is attributed to the competitive nature of forming romantic relationships and gaining popularity during early adolescence. Hence, cyberbullying may occur through different people and for different reasons than traditional bullying; insight from young people is needed about this.

There appears to be a normalised version of social interaction amongst young people which includes activities from insults through to publishing humiliating videos or images (Cuadrado-Gordillo & Fernández-Antelo, 2016a; Tarapdar & Kellett, 2013). However, victims and perpetrators have different perceptions of the intent to harm associated with these; insults seem to be generally accepted as part of social interaction for adolescents, but other activities are seen as harmful by victims (e.g. hurtful rumours, videos). Perpetrators demonstrate a high threshold, only perceiving

impersonation or sexual harassment as harmful (Cuadrado-Gordillo & Fernández-Antelo, 2016a). Cyberbullying may be perceived as a more socially acceptable form of bullying with adolescents suggesting cyberbullying does not matter (France et al., 2013; Pabian & Vandebosch, 2016) or is just fun (Bauman, 2010; Law et al., 2010; O'Brien & Moules, 2013; Smith et al., 2008; Tarapdar & Kellett, 2013). Clearly, this perception needs to be addressed. The normalisation of cyber-aggressive activities within youth culture makes it problematic to identify when activities cause hurt to others and when adults should intervene. This also helps to account for differences in perception between adolescents regarding harmful activities and whether cyberbullying is real.

Students are influenced by classroom-level attitudes to victims; classrooms with lower pro-victim attitudes have a higher level of cyberbullying, while the converse is also true (Elledge et al., 2013). Conformity bullying can be either perpetrated or resisted depending on an individual's own conformity or resistance to antisocial peer pressure (Cho & Chung, 2012). A reduction in cyberbullying incidents can be achieved when group norms devalue conformity bullying. Relationally, when peers are cyberbullies, this tends to apply to the friendship group; the activity is normalised (Hinduja & Patchin, 2013). It may be possible for adults to still be able to influence peer norms, through the social context, influencing adolescents' views and non-acceptance of perpetration.

Reputational victimisation is easier to disguise and hide than other more overt forms of aggression, such as exclusion. Those who engage in reputational victimisation are unlikely to want their own aggression to be recognised by peers, as this would impact

on their own status, but, instead, they use relational victimisation to sully the reputation of their competitors (Closson et al., 2017; Wolke et al., 2017). However, the class-based group norms or norms within a friendship group provide justification for cyberbullying and releases the perpetrator from individual responsibility (Cho & Chung, 2012; Gamez-Guadix & Gini, 2016). Betts et al. (2017) suggest cyberbullying can destabilise peer relationships and those involved in cyberbullying activities in any role, experience lower acceptance from peers, hence a desire for some to hide cyber-aggressive behaviour. Amongst unpopular peers there is motivation to conform to peer norms to avoid victimisation. Girls who are unpopular and have low peer norm conformity are more likely to be victimised, as opposed to unpopular girls who strive towards conformity with peer norms (Closson et al., 2017). Cyberbullying appears to be a complex issue which is fuelled by adolescent peer relationships and group norms. The levels of cyberbullying perpetration can differ from class to class, which highlights the importance of the social context and group norms (Gamez-Guadix & Gini, 2016). The social context within school, which feeds-through into the online world, is influential for cyberbullying activities, consequently, RQ4 explores: how do young people respond to peer judgement within the school social context and what role does peer judgement have in cyberbullying?

## **2.5. Socio-ecological framework: A theoretical perspective**

In this section, I introduce the framework which is used as a theoretical lens to analyse the data from this study, and I explain the rationale for engaging with this framework.

In 1977, Bronfenbrenner critiqued the contemporary work on developmental psychology, which generally took place in laboratory settings, describing it as “the science of the strange behavior of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time” (p. 513). In response, he proposed his socio-ecological model which he continued to develop and refine during his life-time. Bronfenbrenner did not dismiss laboratory work and equally did not advocate only research in naturalistic settings; Bronfenbrenner called for research to be undertaken in the most appropriate setting for the research questions.

The socio-ecological framework suggests

“human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment. To be effective, the interactions must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time” (1977, p. 38).

The interactions in the immediate environment are proximal; interaction levels become more remote as the concentric circles of the model move outwards (see Figure 2.1); however, they still impact on the child and the child’s development.



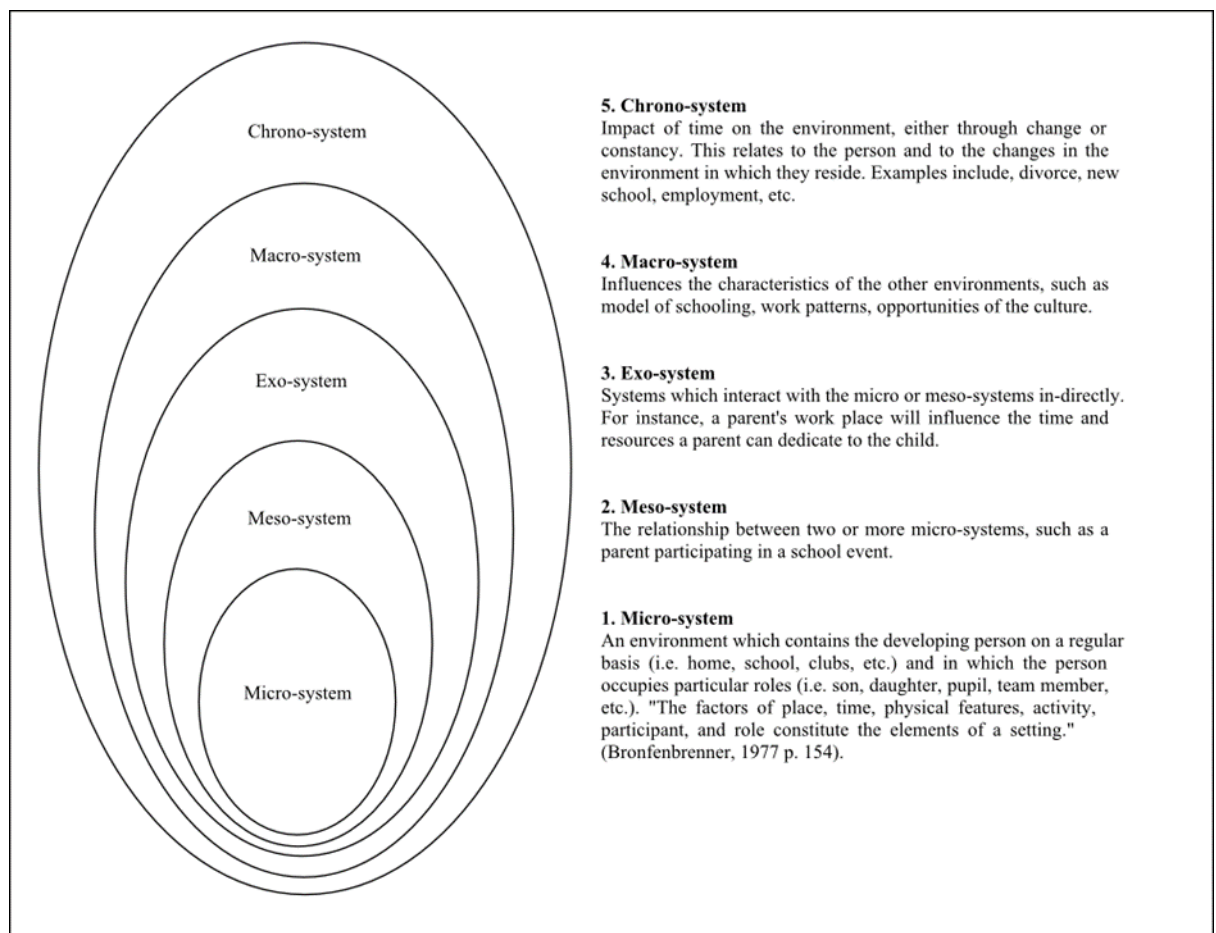


Figure 2.1 Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological framework (1977, 1994)

Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979, 1986, 1994, 2005) socio-ecological framework has been suggested by some researchers as an appropriate framework to examine bullying and cyberbullying activities, for instance, Espelage (2014) provides a literature review on bullying which is mapped to Bronfenbrenner's framework, while Bauman (2010) has suggested it as a suitable framework for research into cyberbullying. Despite this there is limited research which has used the framework as more than an initial reference point for cyberbullying research. The micro-system and meso-system are the two contexts which appear most frequently in the literature on bullying; however, even this use of Bronfenbrenner's framework is limited (Espelage, 2014). Indeed,

criticism is offered by Espelage, Rao and de la Rue (2013, p. 17) of the “piecemeal” approach taken by researchers into bullying who reference the framework. This mirrors Bronfenbrenner’s own critique of research on child development, identifying the initial family unit as the primary area of research (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 82). McGuckin and Minton (2014) also consider the benefit of Bronfenbrenner’s socio-ecological framework for researchers into bullying activities. They suggest those who develop bullying intervention strategies “are often data driven”, but fail to consider the wider social and cultural context of the child and their impact on their environment (McGuckin & Minton, 2014, p. 37). An innovative use of the framework is provided by Papatraianou, Levine and West (2014) who use the framework to identify risk and protective factors at different levels of interaction while analysing the resilience demonstrated in two cyberbullying case studies. However, their interaction levels are again limited to micro-system and meso-system levels. Through being in the school environment, working with young people across an academic year and through the interviews across two school contexts, I have gained some appreciation of wider factors which influence cyberbullying across a range of levels in Bronfenbenner’s ecosystem.

A principle benefit of the socio-ecological framework is the holistic approach to a child’s life. Instead of focusing narrowly on a particular instance or event, it allows us to consider multiple facets at different levels of proximity to the child across time. The socio-ecological framework facilitates consideration from a socio-historical perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 96f); the life history of the child and the influences which have contributed to their development thus far. I believe this holistic

approach is more appropriate; an individual's identities are formed through their life experiences, their interactions with those around them, and the cultural and historical influences in their community. For instance, young people will be influenced by their school environment, their peers, their parent's parenting style, home environment, working patterns and income, the involvement of wider familial and supportive structures and, importantly, the opportunities and challenges available through the online world.

### **2.5.1. Applying the framework**

The socio-ecological framework was developed over Bronfenbrenner's lifetime from 1942 with his doctoral dissertation until the end of his life in 2005. The framework is shown in Figure 2.1 (page 49). The framework is frequently presented as a series of circles or ovals showing the different levels of interaction which intersect in the child's life but also have progressively less direct influence on them.

In the centre is the *micro-system*:

“A microsystem is the complex of relations between the developing person and environment in an immediate setting containing that person (e.g., home, school, workplace, etc.). A setting is defined as a place with particular physical features in which the participants engage in particular activities in particular roles (e.g., daughter, parent, teacher, employee, etc.) for particular periods of time” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514).

The micro-system is likely to exert the most influence on the child's development; Bronfenbrenner spends much time considering research studies involving babies and pre-school children and their interactions with parents/other adults, then considering how these could utilise his framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). However, we can also apply the framework to adolescents; for instance, Papatraianou et al. (2014) examined case studies from two 16 year olds who had experienced cyberbullying and related these to the socio-ecological framework, examining risk and protective factors. In my study, I have worked with adolescents in the school micro-system, but they have also talked to me about other micro-systems, such as home and clubs.

We can see the influence of the micro-system on the developing child through the literature on cyberbullying; for instance, earlier in this chapter we explored the role of parenting. Those adolescents who assessed relationships in their family as hostile and had a range of other negative perceptions related to school, peers and behaviour norms were more likely to also be involved in cyberbullying and other aggressive online acts (Pyżalski, 2012). Conversely, those who have open dialogue with their families and believe sanctions will be applied for involvement in cyberbullying behaviour are less likely to cyberbully others (Hinduja & Patchin, 2013; Law et al., 2010). Parental attitudes and parenting style appear to have an influence over the child's likely engagement in cyberbullying activities.

The next level is called the *meso-system* which forms the inter-relationships between the different micro-systems with which a child interacts. Bronfenbrenner (1977, p. 515) describes this as "a system of microsystems". This would include communications between parents and school or school friends communicating in the

home environment via social media. The use of social media to communicate with peers from school or clubs, while in the home environment, is a relatively new phenomenon which enables cyberbullying to take place. It draws previously separated micro-systems together, integrating the life children lead at home with the life they lead in school, in a new way. Burr (2003) discusses the role of language in the construction of our identities; we are a product of the language we and others use about us and the roles offered to us through dialogue with others. Burr (2003, p. 54) states, "If the self is a product of language and social interactions, then the self will be constantly in flux, constantly changing depending upon who the person is with, in what circumstances and to what purpose". If, then, adolescents are constructed, through dialogue, as victims in a school micro-system and that micro-system merges, through online media, with a home environment micro-system, does the victim identity become more entrenched as a part of their identity, rather than in former times, when a victim could escape the victim identity while away from school? I would suggest the constant cycle of cyberbullying and offline victimisation for some adolescents makes it problematic for them to construct an alternative representation of the self. It is, consequently, important to consider the roles of different micro-systems and how they interact through the meso-system level.

An *exo-system* interacts indirectly with micro-systems and meso-systems; however, they do not contain the child. Examples are "the world of work, the neighborhood, the mass media, agencies of government (local, state, and national), the distribution of goods and services, communication and transportation facilities, and informal social networks" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515). An impact of the exo-system on the

participants in this study comes from the work patterns of their parents; many of the young people I worked with in the YPAR group at Trinity Catholic Academy make their own way home after school and return to an empty house. This will impact on activities with which they will engage between school and when their parents return, the level of adult supervision for those activities, additional time with peers, and so on. In particular, literature suggests adolescents who experience less parental supervision online are more likely to become involved in cyberbullying activities, either as a victim or a perpetrator (Law et al., 2010; Mark & Ratliffe, 2011). In Our Lady's High School, staff talked about the gangs which inhabited the community and how they recruited students from the school; I was told one of the Year 9 interview participants had recently joined a gang from the local estate. While many students will not be members of gangs, they will be aware of them in the community in which they live and it colours their lives in different ways. This will be returned to in Chapter 5

A *macro-system* refers to the structures and ideologies in society which influence the micro-systems, meso-systems and exo-systems. They often have invisible influence over people; they are accepted as 'how things are'. Bronfenbrenner refers to these as "blueprints" (1977, p. 515). An example pertinent to this research is the structure of schooling in the UK. Most schools operate in similar ways: utilise the National Curriculum (Department for Education, 2013a); operate systems of rewards and sanctions based on the school rules; have policies (i.e. anti-bullying, behaviour management) which meet the requirements set out by the government; the buildings are designed in similar ways with individual classrooms, library space, offices, dining

room, etc. However, macro-systems are also developed from communities which share characteristics, for instance, religious beliefs, ethnicity, social classes, family structures (i.e. single parent, two-parent, step-parent) (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. 150). In addition, macro-systems can develop over time and are judged by whether they meet the defining characteristics of a macro-system. It is worthwhile, therefore, to consider Bronfenbrenner's definition which was extended in 2005 to include these defining characteristics (the italics are the extension and highlight the characteristics):

“The *macrosystem* consists of the overarching pattern of micro-, meso-, and exo-systems characteristic of a given culture, subculture, or other broader social context, *with particular reference to the developmentally instigative belief systems, resources, hazards, lifestyles, opportunity structures, life course options, and patterns of social interchange that are embedded in each of these systems.* The macro-system may be thought of as a societal blueprint for a particular culture, subculture, or other broader social context” (2005, p. 149f).

I would argue the online world and social media comply with this definition and can consequently be recognised as a macro-system. The online world offers a host of opportunities to young people, as well as risks (Byron, 2008; EU Kids Online, 2014). It can give insight to different cultures, religious beliefs, identities, learning, and so on, as well as chances to interact with people who you may never meet in the normal course of existence. The ability to communicate with others and to participate in the wider world is facilitated by the Internet, particularly in societies (such as Britain) which are increasingly protective of children and restrict their movement in spaces outside the home (boyd, 2014). Some young people aspire to new careers which have

been created through the advent of social media and the online world, such as YouTubers, social influencers and professional gamers. The online world is widely used in today's global north societies; it should be classed as a macro-system within which children's lives unfold.

A *chrono-system* refers to development of the child over time. This might be through change or continuity (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). For instance, young people at secondary school will have altered developmentally when they transitioned from primary to secondary school, as they seek new friendships or encounter bullying behaviour. There may be other activities which also influence their development which take place outside of school, such as the arrival of a new sibling or their parents deciding to separate. Importantly, within the cyberbullying literature, we are aware of a change over time regarding perpetration. Some studies indicate cyberbullying increases around the time of transition between primary and secondary school, when children are 11 years old (Paul, Smith, & Blumberg, 2010; Tarapdar & Kellett, 2013), and cyberbullying increases to a peak between the ages of 14 – 18 years (Nickerson et al., 2014). Clearly, this age group are also transitioning between childhood and early adulthood with significant changes as they go through puberty and search for their own place in society. Hence, the chrono-system can have significant impact on young people and any engagement with cyberbullying.

Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979, 1986, 1994, 2005) socio-ecological framework facilitates investigation of the life worlds of young people who are involved in cyberbullying – as a perpetrator, a victim or a bystander – taking into consideration the different facets of their lives which may impact upon their involvement. The



framework also allows us to raise questions about the nature of the social world which young people inhabit and how this may impact on their development. The socio-ecological framework affords a holistic approach to considering cyberbullying within this exploratory, qualitative study.

## **2.6. Concluding remarks**

In this chapter I have explored the definitional issues which academics are attempting to resolve for cyberbullying; factors pertinent to how young people engage with cyberbullying have been explored; the role of adults, in terms of parents and schools, have been discussed; and the social context within which young people operate in school has been considered. I have also introduced Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994, 2005) socio-ecological framework and explained how this can be used to explore the range of factors which influence young people's involvement with cyberbullying, regardless of their role as either victim, perpetrator or bystander. In Chapter 3, I will explain how constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) has influenced my decisions regarding methodology and how I have combined youth participatory action research with elements of constructivist grounded theory (CGT) to collect and analyse data. I will describe the methods used to collect data, how ethics and the desire to create authentic and trustworthy research have influenced decisions. Finally, I will explain the way in which I have analysed the data drawing on CGT and Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological framework.

## **Chapter 3      Methodology**

In Chapter 2, I explored the literature on cyberbullying and established the rationale for the four exploratory research questions (see page 5). In this chapter, I will explain the methodological approach for this thesis. This will focus upon my rationale for using youth participatory action research (YPAR) and how I have drawn upon constructivist grounded theory (CGT). Also, I will discuss research methods employed, authenticity and trustworthiness of the research, ethical issues, and safeguarding procedures for keeping the young people safe and dealing with issues which might arise. I will, also, discuss how I have analysed the data drawing on CGT and Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological framework. Finally, I will acknowledge the messiness of conducting research of this type with young people.

A brief note is made here regarding Chapter 4 which presents the YPAR research project undertaken with Year 9 students (aged 13 – 14 years) in school. The YPAR project formed a largely discrete project from which I have drawn qualitative data in the form of meeting transcripts and the transcript of the YPAR-led focus group. In Chapter 4 the design of their project, data collection methods, analysis of data and their findings will be discussed in more detail. I will, also, reflect on the challenges presented while engaging in YPAR, such as the epistemological challenge when, as a constructionist researcher, the YPAR group decided to employ mixed methods research.

Therefore, I have divided my discussion of methodology into: i) the methodology for my thesis (Chapter 3) which includes qualitative data generated by the YPAR group

and the separate interviews conducted in school; and ii) the methodology employed by the YPAR group (Chapter 4) which, as a discrete project, has a separate group-directed rationale. The purpose of dividing the chapters in this way is principally for clarity. As the YPAR project took place within the remit of the thesis, yet has only contributed particular data-sets, it was important to be clear about the design of the work for the thesis, yet also celebrate the achievements of the YPAR group and reflect on this work. Two discrete chapters was deemed the most appropriate way to achieve these aims.

### **3.1. Epistemological influences**

This research seeks to understand the way in which young people perceive their experiences in relation to cyberbullying. Puig, Koro-Ljungberg and Echevarria-Doan (2008) argue researchers should make their epistemological beliefs clear as these will influence the way in which they design, analyse and interpret their research. My research is underpinned by constructionism and critical pedagogical approaches.

Constructionism and constructivism are contested terms which are often used interchangeably. Helpfully, some scholars have drawn a distinction between these terms: constructivism is used to refer to individual cognitive processes of constructing our own world which can mean individuals perceive the world in slightly different ways; constructionism, rather, focuses upon the social processes and interactions which construct and maintain our reality (Burr, 2003; Puig et al., 2008).

Constructionism holds that we construct meaning when we engage with the world and interpret it; there is “*no* true or valid interpretation. There are useful interpretations”

(Crotty, 1998, p. 47). Here, I am using the social constructionism of Berger and Luckmann (1967), rather than Papert's (1993) constructionism which focuses on constructing artifacts for learning in computer science.

Our constructions are set within a socio-historical context. We enter a world of meaning and are socialised into this world through the institutions which form our social world. Our parents initially socialise us into the world in which they live, then, as we grow, we are socialised into secondary institutions, such as school and work. We typically accept our social world as 'reality' and common-sense; controlled by the institutions which we have inherited from our predecessors and which we will pass on to the next generation (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Crotty, 1998). The institutions which form the social fabric of our lives cast us in the role of actors who fulfil particular functions; this is a form of control (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). But some of these roles can be more or less desirable to us; for instance, in the case of this research, the roles of victim and perpetrator within the institution of school.

Meanings are constructed using signs and the most important of these is language; people in dialogue construct the social world and their own identities within the world (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Through language and dialogue, people can endeavour to change the world in which they live (Burr, 2003); this is a fundamental concept for critical pedagogical approaches, such as YPAR, which seek to effect change in society through emancipatory education with those who are disadvantaged (see sub-section 3.2.3). In addition, language and other non-verbal signs construct our self-identity. Where there is dissonance between the identity constructed for us by others in different areas of our lives, for instance in school-based bullying versus home-life, we

may resist or accept the identities offered to us (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Burr, 2003).

I was drawn to YPAR as a methodology as it allows the researcher to become a close part of the life-world of their co-researchers and privileges the knowledge which young people have about their own lives. Together we work to understand more about the topic we are studying; the insights of the young people are key in this.

YPAR is informed by critical pedagogy and underpinned by constructionism. I have endeavoured to promote equality within the research group, as befits both constructionist research and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1993, 1996; Puig et al., 2008), although this has caused an epistemological challenge when the group moved towards mixed methods (see section 4.1 for a full discussion). Freire (1993, 1996) explains how the privileged often construct the oppressed as incapable, and this construction is internalised by those to whom it is directed. Critical pedagogical approaches seek to overcome this through education and empowerment. In essence, it seeks to construct a new social reality in partnership with the oppressed. I want to help to effect change through my research and hope it is of value to the participants, although I also recognise the limitations of what is possible within the scope of this research.

### **3.2. Methodology and methods**

I decided to use a pluralistic methodology to enable me to fully explore my research questions as I did not believe using a single methodology would allow me to gain the insights and knowledge I sought; a more flexible approach was used (Dick, 2007). My research questions focused upon the lived experiences and perceptions of young

people in relation to cyberbullying, however, I also wished to develop a theory or framework which would be useful to schools; the main arbiter for cyberbullying in young people's lives. Consequently, I decided YPAR would be an element of my pluralist methodology to enable me to work closely with young people to ascertain their experiences and perceptions and to identify those areas of cyberbullying which were of most concern to them (Ardoin, Castrechini, & Hofstedt, 2014; Glassman & Erdem, 2014; Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016; Tarapdar & Kellett, 2013; Zaal & Terry, 2013). I was concerned YPAR would generate insufficient data to be able to propose a theory or framework on cyberbullying, therefore, the second part of my methodology draws upon grounded theory (GT). Hence, additional interviews were incorporated, including others outside of the YPAR group, which generated supplementary data and enabled triangulation (Creswell, 2013). I have drawn on GT to aid my analysis and for theory development. There are a small number of studies (e.g. Butterfield, 2009; Teram, Schachter, & Stalker, 2005) which have taken a similar approach, using either action research (AR) or participatory action research (PAR) and using GT to aid analysis and develop theory. In 2007 Dick called using AR and GT together an emergent methodological approach. Dick has supervised PhD candidates using this combination, and he advocates this can strengthen both AR and GT. Given that eleven years later there are still relatively few publications which use both methodologies in tandem, this may still be seen as an emergent design.

Methodological strengthening is through the use of GT as a developed and systematised form of analysis to increase the rigour of a participatory methodology (Butterfield, 2009; Dick, 2007; Teram et al., 2005). Urquhart (2013, p. 16) calls on novice researchers to apply thought and creativity to their use of GT, rather than

simply following the procedures set out; the integration of the two methodologies has required creativity and flexibility.

My own desire for this research was to create something of use to schools, in order for them to help young people experiencing cyberbullying. Schön (1995, p. 28) discusses the “dilemma of rigor or relevance” referring to the “manageable problems” on the high-ground and comparing them to the “swampy lowlands [where] problems are messy and confusing”. I have been experiencing Schön’s ‘swampy lowlands’ through opting to investigate an area under-researched using qualitative methods, using novel approaches by merging two methodologies, both of which are less frequently used in doctoral work (Klocker, 2012; Nagel, Burns, Tilley, & Aubin, 2015) and choosing to work with young people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. Cook (2009, p. 279) exhorts researchers to describe the messiness we experience during the research process; as I wrestled with the messiness of this project I had a variety of emotions akin to the experiences of Mellor (2001), as my project did not resemble the neatly presented and packaged research I had read. Although I have struggled with the messiness of my research journey, I believe I have been wrestling with “confusing but critically important situations” for young people (Schön, 1995, p. 28) and this is important work.

### **3.2.1. Action research: same name different roots**

As a former teacher and a current teacher educator, I am very familiar with the notion of AR as used within the teaching profession; a cycle which requires action, then reflection on and evaluation of action, with a plan to further develop practice (McNiff

& Whitehead, 2009). However, the YPAR methodology I have selected does not fit into this pattern and is, instead, one of the many varieties of AR and participatory action research (PAR) which are available. Consequently, a brief summary of AR and PAR may be helpful, as it is important to clarify my epistemological basis for engaging with YPAR (Anderson et al., 2015).

The version of AR presented by McNiff and Whitehead (2009), amongst others, is based on the work of Stenhouse in the 1970s and 1980s in Britain. Stenhouse (1981) discussed the difficulties of using traditional, scientific research in classrooms given the number of variables which need to be controlled; he advocated systematic and self-critical research by teachers through AR. A similar form of AR which promoted the development of teachers' practice had developed separately in the United States of America in the 1950s which was founded by Kurt Lewin (Carr, 2006; Hammersley, 1993; Helskog, 2014). These are both aimed primarily at the development of teachers' own professional practice and, therefore, unsuitable for addressing the RQs for this thesis.

### **3.2.2. PAR**

PAR emerged in former colonial countries across the world in the 1960s and 1970s, as a response to colonialism and oppression, and sought to change the existing social order (Glassman & Erdem, 2014). Hall (1985) notes the futility of positivist research on oppressed and exploited peoples in the global south – research which provided no opportunities or benefits for those who were studied – contrasting sharply with participatory methods which sought to positively influence the lives of participants.



The work of Freire (1993, 1996), who developed adult literacy programmes using critical pedagogy to facilitate the liberation of peasants<sup>2</sup> in Brazil and went on to develop school-based programmes, is an influential part of this movement. The ‘action research’ element of critical pedagogies comes from the action undertaken to improve the lives of the oppressed, rather than the iterative cycles of action in teacher professional development AR.

However, there are still other terms which could be confused with the revolutionary PAR which emerged at this time. For instance, in the 1980s Carr and Kemmis named their version of AR, ‘emancipatory action research’ in which they advocate teachers should become more critical and reflective of their long-held beliefs and assumptions while engaging in AR to develop their practice (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Carr and Kemmis (2009) argue all AR is political as education reproduces social life and can also be used to transform it; whether an educator seeks to develop their practice while maintaining the status quo or to change educational practice, there is a political bias to that decision. My own decision-making is grounded in seeking social justice for those

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<sup>2</sup> The use of the term ‘peasants’ reflects Freire’s language as he discusses the rural peasant-class who worked on the farms in Brazil. Their status as peasants is important; Freire sought to liberate them from their disempowered position through his critical literacy programme. It is used by Freire as a descriptive term within the socio-historical context.

who are cyber/bullied and an attempt to develop theory which can support practice in school.

PAR has been used in different ways over time. The roots are based on the political and social emancipation of oppressed peoples; however, it has also been used in contexts with privileged people instead. When used with privileged people, the political, critical element of PAR – which seeks to empower and liberate people from societal oppression – is diminished. Instead, PAR is then used as a way to involve participants in the research process rather than as a revolutionary act (Anderson et al., 2015). For instance, Stoudt (2008) used PAR to investigate bullying in an elite, independent preparatory school for predominantly white boys. Stoudt discusses the inherent tensions of using a methodology grounded in critical pedagogy with privileged participants. Yet, even in this context Stoudt reflects on the changes he had hoped to invoke in this privileged school regarding bullying, such as, reflection by staff on bullying which is hidden by tradition, and exposing discourses of power and privilege. Therefore, all PAR has at its core a focus on “enabling spaces of solidarity, learning, and social transformation” (Anderson et al., 2015, p. 184), however, the emphasis placed on these aspects are different depending on the context in which the research takes place.

PAR has a number of key strengths: the close relationship to the community and participants provides authentic research which is expected to be of practical use (Hawkins, 2015; Vaughan & Burnaford, 2016); learning is a key feature of the research for all who are involved (Anderson et al., 2015); analysis of data with co-researchers provides insights unknown to those outside of the lived experiences

(Cerecer, Cahill, & Bradley, 2013; Hall, 1985); and it empowers participants by casting them in a role where their voices are heard and are valued (Fox & Fine, 2015; Hawkins, 2015; Wartenweiler & Mansukhani, 2016). These strengths were fundamental in my decision to use YPAR and were moderately successful. However, these strengths also bring with them challenges, some of which were not recognised until engaged in the research process, necessitating reflexivity and compromises. Importantly, engaging with PAR is time-consuming for all those involved in the process (Fletcher, MacPhee, & Dickson, 2015; Hall, 1985; Hawkins, 2015); the involvement of the co-researchers can, therefore, fluctuate depending on their time-availability and willingness to participate at different stages, leading to negotiations and compromises to still allow meaningful participation (Fletcher et al., 2015; Hawkins, 2015); and participation may highlight inequalities and issues which cannot be rectified by the project, so expectations must be realistic from the start (Kaukko, 2016; Klocker, 2012), this is particularly the case when working with vulnerable participants, such as adolescents.

### **3.2.3. Youth and PAR (YPAR)**

The strengths and challenges described for PAR are replicated and further complicated in YPAR. The majority of research studies on cyberbullying have been conducted *on* young people rather than *with* them and while researching with children and young people is messy, complex and time-consuming, it is also crucial when investigating something which impacts their lives. Tarapdar and Kellett (2013) explain the value of the insider perspective offered by researching with youth who provide insight into their culture; an insight which is not afforded easily to adults. We

should also be cognisant of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which gives children “the right to say what they think in all matters affecting them, and to have their views taken seriously” (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett, & Bottrell, 2015, p. 4); the British Educational Research Association also draws attention to the rights of the child in their updated ethical guidelines (2018). It is important to build relationships with young people and spend time listening carefully to the multiple layers within their conversations, in order to access their authentic voices (Spyrou, 2011). My own interest in developing a richer understanding of cyberbullying is grounded in my role as a parent; my roles as a parent and as a former teacher have led me to value the contributions and capabilities of young people, and consequently underpinned my interest in YPAR. I recognise children and young people are experts in their own lives, yet their voices are often under-valued, particularly where there are dominant discourses from privileged adults; for instance, within cyberbullying research, young people are used predominantly to create data sets (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). YPAR was selected as a methodology to facilitate making young people’s voices about their own lives and experiences heard (Anderson et al., 2015; Ardoin et al., 2014; Mirra et al., 2016) and evidence from the YPAR meetings is they valued that I listened carefully to them. I further hoped to develop a useful skill-set with the group who could use this in their academic work and beyond, for instance through decision-making skills, critical and analytical thinking, team work, presentation skills, and so on (Ardoin et al., 2014; Kirshner, Pozzoboni, & Jones, 2011; Ozer & Douglas, 2012; Zaal & Terry, 2013) and some of the group commented on their development of these skills in their interviews with me. Empowerment is a key aspect of YPAR and I hoped this project would increase the

self-esteem of the young people, helping them to see they had valuable contributions to make which could impact on their lives, even if this was only in a small way (Kirshner et al., 2011; Mirra et al., 2016; Ozer, Newlan, Douglas, & Hubbard, 2013). Hence my aspirations were in no way revolutionary, but are underpinned by a desire to impact positively on the lives of young people who live in more challenging circumstances.

One of the benefits and challenges of conducting YPAR is that trusting relationships are formed with the young people while this is a positive experience, it can also be difficult when they describe situations and experiences which are upsetting. For instance, the futility of trying to stop bullying was frequently discussed and the young people's acceptance of bullying as a part of life was disheartening, the actions we advocate as adults were unpicked, and considered well-meaning but useless (although not always). Burke, Greene and McKenna (2017) reflect on the challenges they have faced when engaging with YPAR; they acknowledge the difficulties of giving hope of change, while being honest about the realities of the situations youth face. I tried to be honest with the young people from the beginning of the project –we could not change the world and conquer cyberbullying – but could perhaps find out more about it and pass on our knowledge to others to help them.

Kellett (2011) comments about the scepticism of adult researchers regarding children's capability to conduct research. There can be a perception that research conducted *with* or *by* children is less rigorous than research conducted *on* children (Flores-Kastanis, Montoya-Vargas, & Suárez, 2009). Instead, as noted by Kellett (2011) and Ozer et al. (2013), some adult researchers have minimised the involvement

of children while still claiming to be engaged in youth-led PAR. I have sought to be led by the young people throughout their research, providing a guiding and facilitating role which scaffolds their development as beginning researchers (Mirra et al., 2016). However, there can be challenges which arise when seeking equality within PAR, for instance, the dilemma I have encountered between equality in the group and my own epistemological beliefs regarding research. There are other constraints too, for instance, young people can be resistant to taking on responsibilities (Burke et al., 2017; Ozer et al., 2013) and may only wish to participate in the fun aspects of research. However, while minimising their involvement to key areas may have provided more control and speeded up the overall research process, I have involved them in all aspects except selecting the initial topic as cyberbullying, which was pre-determined as the focus of this study, and data entry of the questionnaire results, which was primarily due to resourcing of appropriate information technology (IT) equipment in the school.

Kirshner, Pozzoboni and Jones (2011) suggest children need to learn how to manage bias when engaging in research when data contradicts their long-held beliefs and assumptions. They advise that children's insider perspective provides insight into issues, but can also be a barrier to their ability to consider the data dispassionately. I was fortunate with the group of young people who attended the YPAR meetings; there were times when someone would express initial disagreement with the data, but they were generally open minded and would consider reasons why the data did not resonate with their experiences. Often in the group another young person would be able to

offer a different insight or perspective from their experiences which would help everyone to consider the data in different ways.

Time is also a constraint for children and young people, “the school year puts many additional pressures on students as they balance their classwork, homework, and other extracurricular activities” (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 102). These were some of the reasons for students missing group meetings or deciding to only opt-in occasionally.

### **3.2.4. Grounded theory**

Grounded theory (GT) is a systematised and iterative method of generating theory from qualitative research, which was first developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 (Higginbottom & Lauridsen, 2014). Over time the views of Glaser and Strauss diverged resulting in two distinct forms of GT: Glaser’s version becoming known as Glaserian or Classic grounded theory; and Strauss partnered with Corbin to develop Straussian grounded theory (Higginbottom & Lauridsen, 2014). Classic GT is deemed to be rooted in positivist thought, emphasising objectivity and discovery of theory from a single reality (Kenny & Fourie, 2015).

Since the 1990s Kathy Charmaz has been the main proponent of a third form of GT called constructivist grounded theory (CGT); she states “I chose the term ‘constructivist’ to acknowledge subjectivity and the researcher’s involvement in the construction and interpretation of data” (Charmaz, 2014a, p. 14). A key principle of CGT is that our interpretation of reality is a construction and in the application of CGT this interpretation involves both the participants and the researcher (Charmaz, 2014a; Thornberg, 2012), consequently, it has affinity with PAR approaches

(Butterfield, 2009; Charmaz, 2014b). Charmaz has developed CGT as “a more flexible, intuitive and open-ended methodology” (Kenny & Fourie, 2015, p. 1283). Mills, Bonner and Francis (2006) suggest CGT requires that:

1. The participants and researcher are co-constructors of data and theory which draws on the subjective experiences of both participants and researcher;
2. The relationships formed between participants and researchers should seek to redress any power imbalance which may be inherent in the relationship; and
3. The researcher needs to make clear their own biography and how this may influence the data analysis and theory development.

The synergies between CGT and PAR can be seen through these statements: PAR, too, sees participants and researchers as co-researchers; seeks to address power imbalances; and acknowledges subjective experiences. These similarities make CGT a good fit for research which employs PAR methodology. However, there are also other synergies with PAR, such as: the flexibility of CGT; use of reflexivity; and CGT gathers rich and detailed data which is situated in its relevant context (Charmaz, 2014a; Mills et al., 2006). While Charmaz has introduced flexibility into GT through her version, many of the core techniques of GT are identifiable. Charmaz (2014a) advocates in-depth interviewing with co-construction of data with participants; using two forms of coding technique (initial coding and focused coding); theoretical sampling and saturation; writing memos throughout the research process; and theorising from data. A main focus is on the epistemological beliefs of the researcher who engages in CGT. Charmaz argues that using CGT within a constructionist



epistemology allows the researcher to access the social constructions of participants, but, also, allows the researcher to be innovative, thinking “through what they are doing and how and why they are doing it” (Charmaz, 2008, p. 403). Further, she argues that the research process itself is “an emergent social construction” (Charmaz, 2008, p. 407). This fits well with both my epistemological beliefs and my research design.

### **3.2.5. Drawing on GT within YPAR**

AR has been criticised for being focused on practical, local action rather than theory development (Dick, 2007) and consequently blending an AR or PAR methodology with GT can help invest the research with the potential for rigorous theoretical development (Baskerville & Pries-Heje, 1999). There are only a small number of studies which use this approach, but those which do tend to involve PAR participants in data analysis through a confirmatory/disputational exercise whereby they examine the coding and conceptualisations generated by the lead researcher (Butterfield, 2009; Manuell & Graham, 2017; Rand, 2013). Although Dick (2007) has commented that an experienced facilitator should be able to guide PAR participants through a simplified GT process, it was not feasible to analyse all the data generated for the thesis with the young people in the research group due to timing, willingness to participate and ethical concerns for the individual interviewees. However, they were involved in coding and analysing questionnaire data and considering data from the focus group (see Chapter 4). An additional meeting was held with the YPAR group to discuss my findings, the categories, the theoretical models and their perspectives on these. Data for the thesis was generated from the recordings of the YPAR meetings,

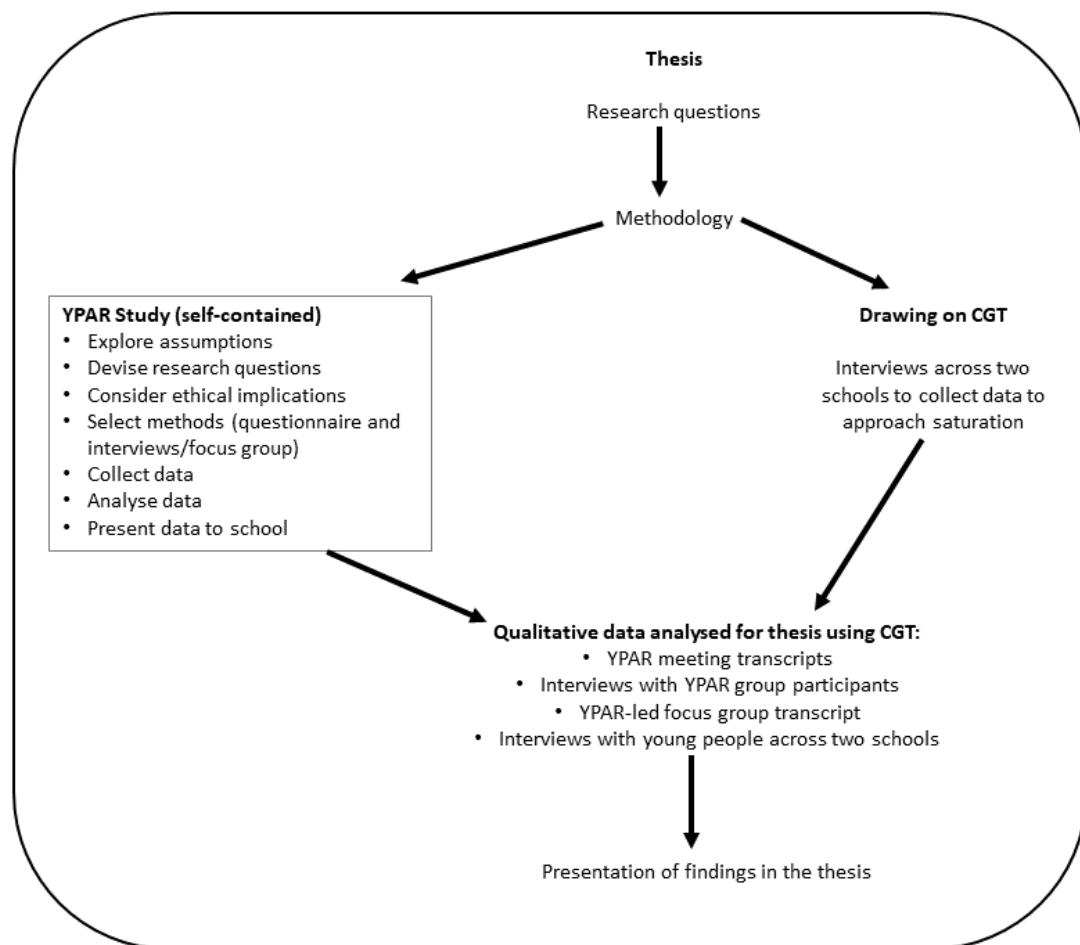
the focus group conducted by the YPAR group, and 28 interviews I conducted separately from the YPAR group project. The quantitative data from the YPAR project was used within that project only and has not formed part of the data for this thesis (see Chapter 4 for further details).

CGT methods were used to strengthen the analysis and theoretical conceptualisation from the data, rather than conducting a pure CGT research project. Charmaz (2014a, p. 15) identifies strategies all grounded theorists use, to help novices check a project is actually GT. There are a number of strategies which I have omitted, including simultaneous data collection and analysis, and theoretical sampling. These two areas became impossible to manage due to personal circumstances impacting on available time. Also, the “hustle” (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 104) towards the end of the project meant a large quantity of data (focus group and interview data) was generated in a short space of time. I am, therefore, drawing on the CGT guidelines to “use the strategies to the extent that help you complete a specific task” (Charmaz, 2014a, p. 16) which, as originally planned, was to aid with analysis of the data and to construct a theoretical perspective which may help schools.

### **3.3. Methods**

YPAR necessitates a flexible approach to the research design. It was important to be able to respond to the students’ areas of interest and to work with them flexibly to create a project which resonated with them. The YPAR project was a self-contained study which occurred within the research for the thesis. Qualitative data generated during the implementation of the YPAR project were used within the thesis, which

comprised: the transcriptions of the YPAR meetings during which the participants discussed cyberbullying generally and in relation to their own project; and the focus group data which was separately analysed for both the YPAR project and for the thesis. Figure 3.1 shows the inter-relationship between the self-contained YPAR project and this thesis.



*Figure 3.1 Situation of YPAR project within the thesis*

The YPAR project, in this context, consisted of weekly meetings after school to work collaboratively, supporting the young people to devise their research questions, methods of data collection, to carry out their study and to analyse the results. It was

interesting to note the parallels between their areas of interest, as indicated by their research questions (see Chapter 4) and my own research questions; while this might appear to be by design, it was actually a fortunate convergence which, in hindsight, should perhaps have been planned. The weekly meetings were audio-recorded and these, together with the focus group from the YPAR research and the interviews, have been analysed by drawing upon CGT. Table 3.1 details the data sources collected and those used for analysis.

<b>Data source</b>	<b>Year Group and participants</b>	<b>Data collected</b>	<b>Use</b>
YPAR meetings at Trinity Catholic Academy	Weekly meetings ( $n=20$ ) held for 1 hour after school between October 2016 and July 2017 with between two – ten participants from Year 9.	Qualitative data: recorded meetings including personal stories, reflections and analysis of data	<b>Thesis:</b> analysed transcripts (CGT)
YPAR Focus Group at Trinity Catholic Academy	Ten participants from Year 7 and Year 8 identified via YPAR questionnaires	Qualitative data: personal stories and reflections.	<b>YPAR:</b> identified broad themes. <b>Thesis:</b> analysed transcript (CGT)
YPAR questionnaires	Year 7 $n=156$ Year 8 $n=126$	Quantitative data: experiences of cyberbullying and bystander actions	<b>YPAR:</b> analysed data using graphs and charts
Interviews with YPAR Group Participants at Trinity Catholic Academy	Six participants (Female $n=3$ , Male $n=3$ ). Two individual interviews; two paired interviews.	Qualitative data: perceptions of cyberbullying and reflection on YPAR	<b>Thesis:</b> analysed transcripts (CGT)
Interviews at Trinity Catholic Academy	Year 7 $n=1$ (Female $n=0$ ) Year 8 $n=3$ (Female $n=2$ ) Year 9 $n=8$ (Female $n=4$ ) Year 12 $n=3$ (Female $n=3$ )	Qualitative data: perceptions of cyberbullying	<b>Thesis:</b> analysed transcripts (CGT)
Interviews at Our Lady's High School	Year 7 $n=6$ (Female $n=4$ ) Year 8 $n=3$ (Female $n=3$ ) Year 9 $n=4$ (Female $n=3$ )	Qualitative data: perceptions of cyberbullying	<b>Thesis:</b> analysed transcripts (CGT)

Table 3.1 Data sources

### 3.3.1. YPAR group meetings

The YPAR group first met in October 2016 at Trinity Catholic Academy (TC) and then met weekly for an hour after school, as an extra-curricular activity, during the academic year 2016/17. The students elected to attend and could decide at any point to stop attending. The participants were sought via the professional knowledge of the school contact and were all in Year 9 (aged 13 – 14 years). The participants varied from week to week; there was a core group of seven students who attended the majority of meetings during the first term and this became five participants following the Christmas break. Each meeting was recorded, transcribed and analysed in nVivo 11.

### 3.3.2. Data generated by YPAR group

The YPAR group discussed their own conceptions and assumptions regarding cyberbullying, we then worked to identify aspects which they wished to investigate. We used art work, mind-mapping, post-it notes, worksheets and open discussions as ways to instigate debates about these issues some examples are shown in Figure 3.2.



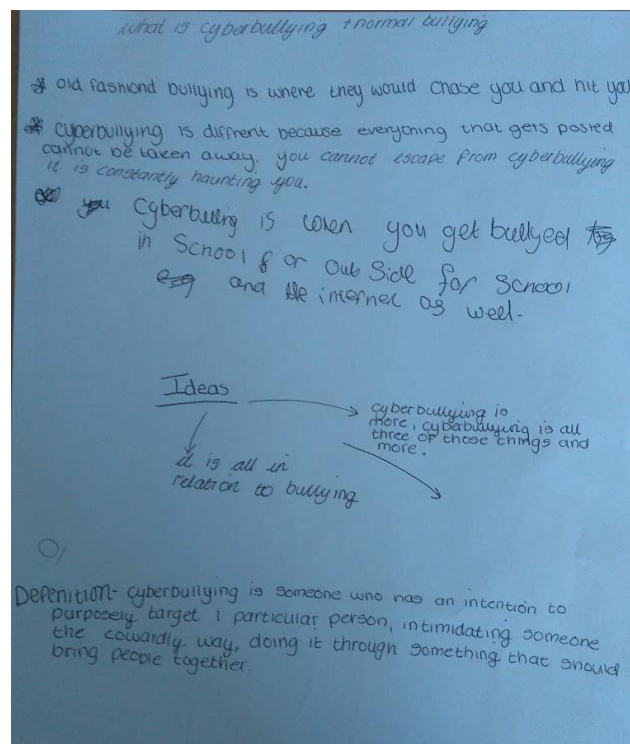
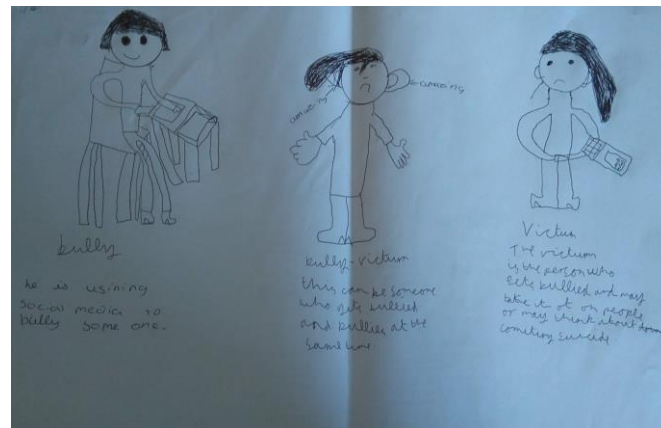


Figure 3.2 Examples of work with the YPAR group

The group identified a list of questions which I moulded into research questions (see section 4.3); these were discussed fully by the group. The group discussed a range of different methods to collect data. Despite enthusiastic discussion by the group of methods such as vignettes and photo elicitation, and encouragement to use qualitative methods, the group chose mixed methods using questionnaires and semi-structured

interviews. This, perhaps, reflects a level of comfort to be found in methods which are already familiar to the group (Fletcher et al., 2015); although this presented a dilemma for me. This decision went against my own epistemological beliefs, yet had I rejected this decision and forced them to use qualitative methods, I would have undermined the participatory nature of the research and the relationship and trust I had worked to secure. As the time for them to use these methods to collect their data approached, they expressed their rising anxiety as these tasks were unfamiliar and beyond the scope of their previous experience. The group worked together to design questionnaires and interview schedules to address the research questions.

The group discussed the population sample to be used and elected for Year 7 (11 – 12 years) and Year 8 (12 – 13 years). There was a high level of anxiety associated with researching their own year group and above (13 – 16 years), so consequently we focused on the younger year groups only. This was an ethical and moral issue; there were suggestions from some in the group that including older participants could stimulate bullying activities directed towards the YPAR group, all of whom had experience of cyber/bullying. Some in the group were keen to interview Year 12 students (16 – 17 years), however, this could not be arranged within the operating time of the group and others in the group disagreed with this approach.

The YPAR group introduced their research and the questionnaires during assemblies for Year 7 and Year 8. The questionnaires were then distributed to form tutors and were completed in hardcopy by Year 7 and Year 8 students during morning registration. Based on their experience, the group decided hardcopy was a more confidential medium within a classroom environment; students look at each other's



screens in an IT room, which could influence results. The questionnaire results (Year 7  $n=156$ ; Year 8  $n=126$ ) were entered into a spreadsheet and graphs were generated (see Chapter 4). There were a number of open questions to be coded, this process was shared with the group and they contributed to the coding process. The data were discussed by the group and it was related back to their research questions. Here the experience of the group was valuable to interpret and explain data.

Included in the questionnaire was a request for students to identify if they were willing to talk to the YPAR group. From this list, ten students from across Year 7 and Year 8, whose questionnaire data indicated they had experience of either being cyberbullied or helping their friends who were cyberbullied, participated in a focus group. The use of a focus group, rather than individual interviews, was a pragmatic decision as the end of the school year was approaching. The interview schedule was used during the focus group with additional questions being posed as they arose. The YPAR group had participated in interview-based role-plays prior to the focus group. All participants were required to provide written consent for themselves and from a parent prior to participation in the focus group.

The focus group was recorded and I extracted key points from the dialogue<sup>3</sup>. The students had also made extensive notes during the focus group. The key points were

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<sup>3</sup> The focus group transcript has been separately analysed using CGT for the thesis.

discussed during a YPAR meeting and students brought their own experience to bear on these results. The students intended to feedback their findings through a drama-based assembly which they were creating as part of their General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) Drama qualification which can be taken at the end of Year 11 when the students are 15/16 years old. The drama production presented key themes from the research. The YPAR group regularly discussed ethics and understood the importance of preserving anonymity and not disclosing information which could identify participants. The drama production was based on the broad findings, rather than individual case studies.

### **3.3.3. Interviews**

In addition to working with the YPAR group, I conducted interviews with 28 individuals across two schools. I interviewed the core members of the YPAR group; four members of the group asked to be interviewed in pairs and this was accommodated. This equates to 24 individual interviews and two paired interviews. Out of the twenty-eight interviewees, six were members of the YPAR group and one student had also participated in the YPAR focus group. The other twenty-one participants had no prior involvement with the research. Thirteen interviewees were from a different school.

Interviews took place across two schools, as there was difficulty recruiting a sufficient sample of participants within a single setting. The schools were purposefully selected as they were situated in areas of socio-economic deprivation. In both schools the contact person for the research identified students who they felt were suitable and

would be able to contribute an informed perspective on cyberbullying. For instance, many were drawn from those who were cyberbullying victims while some had prior experience of engaging in cyberbullying activities themselves. A small number had no prior experience of cyberbullying providing an alternative perspective on the issue. Details of the participants can be found in Table 3.1 (page 77).

The interviews were held in the schools, in a private room, during the school day. They lasted between 20 minutes to over an hour depending upon the experiences of the participant in relation to cyberbullying. All of the interviews were recorded, transcribed and then coded in nVivo 11. During the interviews I sought to adopt an informal tone and make the interview as relaxed and conversational as possible; it was important to put the young people at ease quickly, so I started each interview with a brief introduction, reiterated their ethical rights and reassured them that they did not need to disclose anything about which they were uncomfortable, yet explained I was bound by safeguarding rules (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). The interviews were semi-structured with an interview schedule; therefore, additional questions were posed as needed. Sometimes a participant would state something which was new to me, which I would then reflect on and, where relevant, incorporate into subsequent interviews (Birks & Mills, 2015). Reflective memos of initial ideas from immediately after interviews were hand-written into a research diary; later relevant memos were transcribed into nVivo (Charmaz, 2014a).

### **3.4. Authenticity and trustworthiness**

Validity and reliability are contested terms in qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2007). Alternative terms are suggested which move away from positivist terminology of validity and reliability, for instance, Guba and Lincoln (2005) argue for the use of terms like fairness and authenticity. PAR researchers use a variety of approaches to ensure their work is authentic and trustworthy. For instance, some discuss integrity and authenticity (Ardoin et al., 2014) or that the decision-making processes should be transparent. Consequently, I have attempted to set out a clear and honest account showing how I have engaged in this research process. Others suggest that triangulation of data is important (Zaal & Terry, 2013), so I have sought opportunities to gather data in multiple ways. In the context of this thesis, triangulation comes through the different methods used in dialogue with young people across the two schools: the YPAR meeting transcripts provide in-depth, authentic discussions about cyberbullying within the context of their project; the interviews allowed me to listen to individual stories and constructions of cyberbullying and to probe these through the semi-structured interview approach; the interviews occurred across two different school settings and, while they were in similar socio-economic areas, within the same geographic region and from schools of the same faith, their lived experiences were distinct; and the focus group transcript provided a further perspective, as young people involved in the YPAR group posed questions and engaged in dialogue with Year 7 and Year 8 students, whereby they were able to probe constructions from an insider perspective. Some PAR researchers suggest fully including participants and being faithful to their contributions (Fletcher et al., 2015), and working to ensure that

research has impact, it is of use, locally or further afield (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Cerecer et al., 2013). Therefore, I have sought to involve the YPAR participants as fully as possible throughout their YPAR project. My use of CGT is used to strengthen analysis of the data and to facilitate theory development to create research which can be used within schools.

In order to construct an authentic and trustworthy account, I have worked with the young people for an extended period of time; used triangulation; debriefed and sought participant checking of data analysis; clarified researcher bias; used recording devices and verbatim transcription; and used qualitative analysis software tools, such as nVivo (Creswell, 2013). All of the meetings, interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed and analysed in nVivo 11. As the thesis is a solo piece of work and confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed as part of the Information Sheets provided to interview participants, it was not possible to engage with inter-coder arrangements for the individual interviews (Creswell, 2013). However, the group were involved in a further meeting which considered the coding and analysis I had conducted across the data sets and they concurred with my analysis (Teram et al., 2005).

### **3.5. Ethics and safeguarding**

As the research involved young people of school age, there were additional ethical issues to consider. Also, the topic area of cyberbullying meant the research could uncover sensitive issues. Hence, the consideration of ethics and safeguarding of children was paramount from the start of the research. The ethical guidance from

Lancaster University, Edge Hill University and from the British Educational Research Association (2011) were used to inform the development of the research in line with ethical standards.

Informed written consent was obtained from the headteachers of the participating schools. Each participating student and their parents provided informed written consent for participation in the YPAR group meetings, focus groups and interviews. The language used on the information sheets was adjusted to be age appropriate and the reading ages were checked. The questionnaires developed by the YPAR group included a statement providing information about the research and the study was explained during an assembly to the Year 7 and Year 8 students. All the participants were informed in writing, and verbally reminded, of their right to withdraw from the research at any stage without any penalty (British Educational Research Association, 2011), however, they could only withdraw their data if they informed me of their withdrawal within two weeks of the data collection event (e.g. a meeting, interview), after this time the data would be integrated with other data and unable to be extracted. The first meeting with the YPAR group included a discussion about the ethical procedures for the project to ensure full understanding; all questions were addressed and the young people had the opportunity to inspect the recording devices I would be using during the meetings/interviews. Regular conversations were held with the YPAR group to ensure the project was proceeding as they wished and to help maintain the cohesiveness of the group. Pseudonyms were allocated to participants and used throughout the research process for anonymity. Data were held securely using

password protection and encryption. All data were regularly backed up securely to minimise the risk of data loss (British Educational Research Association, 2011).

Participants were informed that normal school safeguarding procedures would apply. Consequently, if they disclosed details to me which indicated they may be at risk of harm I would have to inform the safeguarding officer at the school and may need to inform the Edge Hill University safeguarding officer (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). In addition, I monitored the young people carefully during discussions, so these could be adjusted, if they were causing distress. The research with the YPAR group was designed in such a way to minimise any activities which the group perceived as a risk, for instance, working only with younger children. I was in regular contact with the safeguarding officer and the young people in the YPAR group had an excellent and trusting relationship with him; the young people felt confident they could always seek support from him and I would regularly remind them of the support available via the school.

It is important to recognise the potential power-imbalance between adults and children/researcher and participants which may occur in interviews, focus groups and throughout the YPAR project. All interviews, the focus group and the YPAR meetings took place in the schools to ensure participants were comfortable in their surroundings. I sought to create an appropriately informal atmosphere to facilitate discussions. During the YPAR project I was a facilitator aiming for the young people involved to take supported ownership. The young people appeared to enjoy being in a context where their views and ideas were taken seriously and acted upon

(Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015); trust was developed by acting on their ideas each week and working consistently with them to move the project forward.

An important facet of this research was also training the YPAR members to act ethically with regard to the research they were carrying out and in relation to each other; confidences were shared in the group and the rules established by the group at the start of the project emphasised the trust they were putting in each other to not share confidences outside of our meetings. Their training in ethics involved one meeting at which we considered ethics, but also regular reminders; the YPAR group would self-monitor their ethical obligations as the meetings progressed, as demonstrated when a member might suggest actions which were ethically dubious and their peers pre-empted me explaining why this could not be done ethically (Kellett, 2005).

### **3.6. Analysis**

The verbatim transcriptions from the meetings, focus group and interviews were imported into nVivo 11 for analysis. CGT advocates a process of open coding, allowing the codes to emerge from the data rather than imposing codes. Although a literature review had been conducted, this had been completed approximately a year before the coding commenced. This allowed the data to be viewed with a more open perspective without prior findings from the literature imposing themselves on the data unduly. Following analysis and identification of the categories, the literature was reviewed again. Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994, 2005) socio-ecological framework was used to further analyse the categories and organise these into models which could



be used in school. In this section, I will discuss the CGT coding strategies and analysis used, plus the use of the socio-ecological framework to further analyse and abstract the categories to construct theoretical models.

### **3.6.1. Open coding and memoing**

The data were read carefully during the coding process and the audio was listened to alongside the careful reading. This facilitated understanding and recall of expression, emphasis and nuances in the data which may not be achieved through close reading alone. The data were coded in a combination of ways including fragments of sentences, line by line, sentences and paragraph level (Forsberg & Thornberg, 2016). The choice depended on the content of the data. Sometimes a sentence fragment contained a key idea, while at other times a paragraph provided the context and examples of how an incident unfolded (see Appendix A). While guidance on applying grounded theory often advocates line-by-line coding, others suggest a combination of techniques may be needed to fully understand the data (Charmaz, 2014a). Codes were developed using a combination of themes and gerunds, as recommended by grounded theorists (Charmaz, 2014a).

Alongside coding the data, I also developed memos about the data. CGT suggests developing memos about each emerging code, yet I found this process problematic. The interviews were telling a story of an individual's experiences and perceptions and I believed this was an integral whole which provided additional insight into the way the participant constructed their experiences. The process of chopping this into coded pieces and focusing only on the codes did not feel helpful at the early stages of

analysis. In addition, this approach would have meant that I missed the development of the story of each individual. While some interviewees had limited experience of cyberbullying, others had in-depth and nuanced histories. Instead, I opted to memo about the individual's story, their history and perceptions. Alongside this I coded my memos, so they could later be extracted for detailed examination of the data relevant to each code. This worked well for me; as I memoed, for instance, Grace's interview (from Our Lady's High School and in Year 9) I was able to identify inconsistencies in what she said, to identify the different layers of identity she had constructed to help her to manage school and the bullying which happened there. Without examination of her story at this level, I would have likely missed these data. This resonated with other data collected from other individuals and it has become an important aspect of this thesis.

### **3.6.2. Focused coding**

Focused coding is the second phase of coding suggested by Charmaz (2014a). Codes were reviewed alongside the research questions and sorted according to these. I examined the codes and the data they contained checking for duplication, opportunities to merge codes and to rationalise the codes I had created; memoing aided in this process (Dey, 2007). This was an on-going process rather than a single event. Only at this point did I re-examine my original research questions and begin the process of identifying which codes were related to each research question. As an open coding process was used, there is some cross-over between some of the codes and research questions. The open coding process had also uncovered other data which suggested emerging research questions (Urquhart, 2013). Those codes which had

most significance, or more analytical or explanatory power were used, while others were set aside. Charmaz (2014a) explains how these codes may be returned to later for subsequent studies using the data. For the codes I have set aside, I would need to conduct further research to reach saturation. The relationships between the codes were examined; some codes were merged to create categories of more conceptual significance. The data were re-examined to ensure the codes and concepts devised at this stage were supported by the data. Relationships between the codes and categories were analysed.

To be explicit regarding this process, an example is presented. For RQ2 (How can young people manage cyberbullying incidences in their own lives and those of their peers?) five key categories emerged from focused coding:

- i) Managing expectations of public persona versus online protection
- ii) (Not) recognising boundaries for behaviour
- iii) Feelings of futility and damaging mental health
- iv) Taking control of the situation
- v) Bystanders and friends supporting victim in a managed way

If we consider i) *Managing expectations of public persona versus online protection*, this has been created from four initial codes:

**1. Managing expectations of public persona versus online protection –**

captures the tension between developing a public persona online, one which

peers can recognise and with whom they can engage, versus the online protection young people also seek, to evade online threats, including cyberbullying;

2. **Managing online threats** – related to more general threats, using privacy settings and being cautious about sharing personal data;
3. **Protecting yourself from cyberbullies** – how individuals managed cyberbullying as a specific threat, which may have some cross-over with the code *managing online threats*, but was more specific to cyberbullying; and
4. **Using pseudonyms** – about how some used the ability to hide their identity on the Internet by using false identities which allowed them to engage in activities without their peers recognising them.

The final three codes were about protection online, while the first code (which became the category name) highlights the tension between building a profile and managing online dangers. These four codes were united in the category: *managing expectations of public persona versus online protection* as this had most explanatory and conceptual power (Charmaz, 2014a). Further details about this process are provided in Appendix A.

### **3.6.3. Using the socio-ecological framework for analysis**

A critique of some researchers who engage with grounded theory methods is they fail to grasp the full potential of grounded theory, instead simply developing categories and omitting the next stage of analysis: developing theory (Charmaz, 2014a; Urquhart, 2013). As theory development was a key rationale for choosing to draw on CGT, it

was important to engage with this final stage. Urquhart (2013, p. 136) advocates using the literature to deepen analysis of the categories and advises using ‘grand’ theories to form “an interesting lens” through which analysis can be enhanced. As a range of factors influence the perpetration and victimisation of individuals through cyberbullying, including factors such as individual resilience (Hinduja & Patchin, 2017), friendship groupings (Felmlee & Faris, 2016), class norms (Elledge et al., 2013; Williford et al., 2013), school climate and ethos (Betts et al., 2017; Nickerson et al., 2014) and parenting style (Brighi et al., 2012; Fanti et al., 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2013), it was necessary to consider a theoretical framework for analysis which would enable a holistic approach to be taken, to draw together these different facets of an individual’s life. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1994, 2005) socio-ecological framework was deemed appropriate to this task.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1994, 2005) socio-ecological framework (see Figure 2.1, page 49) provides a holistic way to analyse contexts by looking at systems which impact on an individual at different levels of proximity to the individual. The socio-ecological framework has been explained in section 2.5, however, I will briefly recap the main points here.

The *micro-systems* are those systems which contain the individual, such as home and school, and these are the most proximal systems. The *meso-systems* are where micro-systems over-lap, for instance a parent visiting the school with their child. *Exo-systems* are areas of influence which do not directly contain the individual, but still have influence on their lives, for instance, their parent’s workplace influences the time a parent returns home, which impacts the time spent with the child. *Macro-systems*

are wider influences which often fade into the background, unnoticed; Bronfenbrenner describes these as the ‘blueprint’ for the society in which the child resides (1977, p. 515), so, a macro-system can be the way in which a school is organised – with a timetable, tutor groups, discrete subjects following a curriculum – but also systems like local and central government, laws, policing, and so on. Finally, the *chrono-system* is the passage of time and how factors within the systems will change, hence altering the impact on the individual, for instance, the birth of a sibling, changing schools, new curricula, etc. These systems are typically represented via concentric circles, progressively becoming more distant from the individual who occupies the micro-systems.

Theory-building involves moving from detail and specifics to greater degrees of abstraction (Charmaz, 2014a). This is a complex process which involves examining the findings, the literature, theory (Urquhart, 2013), analysing the inter-relationships, arranging and re-arranging data and applying “theoretical playfulness” which allows different analysis and interpretations of the data to emerge (Charmaz, 2014a, p. 245). The key points from the discussion around each of the categories were extracted for further analysis of the inter-relationships and how these applied to the socio-ecological framework. Firstly, the data were examined to identify whether it was relevant to the micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- or chrono-systems (see Appendix B). In some cases, data could be relevant to two systems, for instance, a micro-system which is interacting with another micro-system, becomes a meso-system, therefore, some data were labelled as both. This was initially a sorting exercise. Then, the data were analysed for inter-relationships within and across the different systems. For instance,

analysis of inter-relationships identified three ways young people can respond to victimisation, whereas previously I had identified two, and only two have been suggested in the literature; the two initial forms were *passive* and *active* strategies, to this I have added *protection*. Also, some inter-relationships crossed systems, particularly between micro- and meso-systems. For instance, the micro-system *peer context in school* sets out rules and norms with which the peer group is expected to abide; however, it relates to a meso-system where home and school micro-systems are bridged by the online world; while the rules are set in the *peer context in school* micro-system, young people are victimised to *ensure compliance* with the rules through the meso-system of home/school, bridged by online mechanisms (see subsection 6.5.1). These inter-relationships were identified and analysed through mind-mapping processes, which successively identified and developed the inter-relationships and how they fitted into the socio-ecological framework. This resulted in a detailed model (see Figure 6.1, page 216). This model is complex and may not be suitable for discussions within school; however, it has been discussed with my contact at Trinity Catholic Academy who is keen to evaluate it.

I believed a further level of abstraction was required to make the model more user-friendly for schools and could have the details of each section behind the model. This resulted in Figure 6.2 (page 226). To achieve this level of abstraction, I took apart the first model and further analysed the relationships. Here I began with the victim as the central point, with the choices they can make about how to respond to their victimisation. The factors which will influence their decision, based in their micro-systems are arranged around the victim: friendships in school; peer context in school;

school as an organisation; and parents/home environment. The three forms of cyberbullying, which have been identified through this study, are arranged in the meso-system layer where the home and school micro-systems interact online. The relationship with the peer context and friendships is indicated. Finally, the wider online community and its impact on the other systems encompass the others. The technical language associated with the socio-ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994, 2005) has been removed in this model, however, the influence on the model is still visible to those who are aware of the framework. This abstracted model is based on the detail from the first, but is more helpful to stimulate conversations with school staff and students.

### **3.7. Messiness**

The primary context for this thesis was a school in an area of socio-economic deprivation and working for an academic year with young people who have experienced bullying or cyberbullying. This context is ideally situated for employing critical, emancipatory YPAR. However, working with young people is a ‘messy’ process (Cook, 2009); they have their own agendas and priorities which do not always mesh with those of adults. While the young people did learn from the experience (see section 4.7), they were not always fully engaged in the process, moving in and out of the YPAR group as suited their own priorities; an issue of sporadic engagement is reported by other PAR researchers (e.g. Fletcher et al., 2015; Hickson, 2009). The young people with whom I worked were aged 13 – 14 years and engaging in YPAR as an extra-curricular activity. This contrasts with a number of published critical, emancipatory YPAR projects where the young people are often older (aged over 18



years), may be engaging in YPAR for academic credits (Morrell, 2008; Ozer & Douglas, 2012) or where YPAR is integrated into the school curriculum (Kellett, 2011). These different contexts can impact on the stability of the YPAR group and form ethical and logistical challenges, for instance, managing varying degrees of engagement and attendance without coercion or impact on remaining members. Working with the young people for this research was sometimes frustrating, but always rewarding; their insight and analysis of their own contexts has increased my understanding of how they navigate and construct their lives online.

### **3.8. Concluding remarks**

In this chapter, I have explained how my constructionist epistemology has influenced my choice of methodology; my rationale for electing to use both YPAR and CGT within the study to strengthen both my ability to gain insider perspectives and to develop theory from the findings. I have explained the methods used within the study and how these are used to triangulate and provide trustworthy and authentic data. I have also considered the ethical implications for my study and explained how I engaged in ethical discussions with the young people in the YPAR group about their own study. Finally, I have explained the data analysis processes while drawing on CGT and using the socio-ecological framework as a lens. In Chapter 4, I will discuss the discrete YPAR project, the dilemma caused by the group using mixed methods, their findings and the impact of the project on the young people and my own reflections on researching through YPAR.

## **Chapter 4      YPAR project**

In Chapter 3, the design of the thesis was explained: I have drawn on qualitative data using a pluralistic methodology of both YPAR and CGT approaches. In this chapter, I will outline the design of the YPAR project, explore the epistemological challenge I faced, report on the findings from the YPAR group project as analysed by the young people, consider the impact the project had on the participants based on discussions during the YPAR meetings and their interviews with me and I will reflect on the YPAR project process. This chapter is largely focused on celebrating the work of the YPAR group, their achievements and the impact the project had upon the YPAR participants. It should be noted that the qualitative data generated through YPAR, and used in the thesis, has been separately analysed drawing upon CGT.

### **4.1. Concerning epistemology**

In Chapter 3, I explained the underpinning of my research as situated within constructionist and critical pedagogical approaches. I recognise the socio-historical contexts within which social lives are lived out and how our socialisation, within our separate contexts, influences how our ‘reality’ is constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). I discussed the role of language and dialogue in the construction of the social world and individual’s identities (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Burr, 2003), which is particularly important when considering the impact of cyber/bullying on individuals and their constructions.

YPAR privileges the knowledge residing within the community which is being studied and seeks to establish equality with co-researchers from that community. The co-researchers bring the capacity to illuminate the social constructions within their own community, to offer insights which are not available to an outsider. In Chapter 3 (sub-section 3.2.3), I highlighted that YPAR researchers take different approaches to the degree to which young people are involved as co-researchers. Kellett (2011) and Ozer et al. (2013) highlight that in some studies, claiming to be youth-led, the involvement of youth co-researchers is minimal, meanwhile other studies fully involve the co-researchers in every aspect of the project from conception to completion (e.g. Mirra et al., 2016; Wartenweiler & Mansukhani, 2016). My aim was to involve the young people as fully as possible in the project in their school: my only specification was the topic as cyberbullying.

Seeking to develop research with young people and striving for equality within the decision-making processes brings risks and challenges. Although I steered the group towards qualitative methods, the group decided to use a mixed methods approach utilising questionnaires and interviews/focus groups. I had explained to the group that much of the research on cyberbullying had been quantitative and, consequently, another survey would not necessarily add to our knowledge; however, they still wished to pursue this data collection method within their own context.

The paradigm wars from the 1980s onwards have established clear delineation between quantitative and qualitative methods, grounded in different philosophical beliefs and ways of constructing the world, however, mixed methods researchers see these sharply-defined lines as unhelpful (Denzin, 2010), instead suggesting that “the

dividing lines are much fuzzier” (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007, p. 117).

Mixed methods research is firmly established as a methodological approach to research which utilises, pragmatically, the most helpful methods and methodologies to address the research questions (Johnson et al., 2007). However, I do not construct my own research in this way; I am interested in localised contexts and problems, recognising the way in which context may impact on the issues and problems under study. Therefore, I faced an epistemological challenge during the YPAR project: I did not agree with the selection of questionnaires as a data collection method, however, I had also committed myself to equality of voice and decision-making in the YPAR group. I decided that I needed to maintain my commitment to equality and allow the young people the freedom to explore their research questions in the way they wished: over-ruling them would have undermined the democratic principles of YPAR (Karnilowicz, Ali, & Phillimore, 2014).

While quantitative methods may not be a first option for me, the young people were engaging in the research process and creating knowledge based on their own experiences and drawing on the experiences of others through their research (Martí, 2016), which matched with my constructionist beliefs. Also, I acknowledge that quantitative research is another construction of the social world which can give a different perspective to develop our understanding (Mason, 2006; Onwuegbuzie, Johnson, & Collins, 2009). Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) explain that qualitative researchers are likely to use quasi-statistics to support and enhance their narrative reporting, using terms such as most or few as descriptors to strengthen their analysis

consequently, some quantitative data usage can be compatible with qualitative research.

Consequently, the YPAR group collected data using a mixed-methods approach to address their research questions. My thesis, however, has drawn solely on the qualitative data which were generated through the YPAR project and the interviews (see section 3.3 for details), which corresponds to my constructionist epistemology.

## **4.2. YPAR group participants**

All YPAR group participants were from Year 9 (13 – 14 years old) and attended Trinity Catholic Academy. There was variable attendance at the group throughout the year. During the first term there were seven who attended frequently and this decreased to five regular participants following the Christmas break. In the first term there was regular attendance from Alice and Ryan, after which they drifted away, despite promises of future attendance. Alice did not return after the first term, however, Ryan participated in a few further meetings and helped to lead the focus group. The core members of the group throughout the year were three females: Layla, Bella, and Hannah; and two males: Josh and Daniel<sup>4</sup>. The five core group members had experienced either bullying or cyberbullying in the past, one was still an

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<sup>4</sup> All participants have been allocated a pseudonym.

intermittent victim. The females enjoyed being on social media, whereas Josh and Daniel participated in social media, but were more interested in online gaming. Daniel had his own YouTube channel. The influence of YouTubers was evident during some of our meetings as they discussed different YouTubers, sang songs from YouTube, but also discussed the abuse famous YouTubers received in their comments.

### **4.3. Identifying research questions**

In October 2016, the group brainstormed ideas for questions using post-it notes. The questions were discussed in the group initially, and I was tasked with reformulating those of most interest into research questions. The discussion document drafted for the subsequent discussion is shown in Figure 4.1 and includes the group's initial questions and the proposed reformulated research questions. The main areas of interest for the group can be seen from the thematic titles: focus on the cyberbully; transitioning away from cyberbullying; focus on victims; focus on bystanders; and general questions about punishment and prevention.

## Draft questions arranged into themes

### Focus on the cyberbully

- Who does/ doesn't like you?
- Why do you bully?
- Does the bully need help?
- How does home life/ childhood/ mental health effect actions of the bully?

### Research Question

1. Which factors in a student's past or present life contribute to their decision to cyberbully others?
2. How could these factors be altered to allow the bullying behaviour to stop?

### Transitioning away from cyberbullying

- How quickly do cyberbullies feel remorse?
- Does remorse stop them bullying?

### Research Question

3. Why do cyberbullies stop bullying others?

### Focus on victims

- Have you ever been bullied?
- Do you know why you are bullied? If so, explain
- How do people deal with cyberbullying?
- How do people react to cyberbullying? ← *What does 'react' mean here?*

### And Bystanders

- What is the role of bystanders?

### Research Question

4. How do victims respond/ feel to/about cyberbullying incidents?
5. How do people protect themselves *and others* from cyberbullying?

### General

- Do you think a bully should be punished or helped?
- How do you prevent cyberbullying?

### Research Question

6. How should school respond to cyberbullying? *Should this be broader and include parents, community, police, peers, etc.?*

Figure 4.1 From initial questions to proposed research questions

Two factors contributed to the decision to reduce the number of questions to three.

Firstly, the group were unable to find a suitable (and ethical) strategy to identify

cyberbullies to interview. Groundwater-Smith et al. (2015) argue that researchers working with children should develop ethical values, beyond those set out in institutional guidelines, to guide their decision-making and interactions with children. The young people had serious misgivings about interviewing cyberbullies and I believed their anxiety about this was an ethical issue. The group were concerned that interviewing cyberbullies could potentially result in harm, through members of the group becoming victims of those they interviewed. I took the decision, with group approval, that this was not appropriate. It was important to me that the group were not exposed to potential harm or a perception of potential harm through the project. Secondly, when we started to consider the methods of data collection and logistics for collecting data, we decided that we would be most able to address the final three questions with the time and resources we had available to us. When working with children, deciding on a manageable research problem which can be achieved within the timescale is necessary to maintain interest (Kellett, 2005). The three questions focused upon by the group were:

1. How do victims respond to cyberbullying incidents?
2. How do people protect themselves and others from cyberbullying?
3. How should school (and other adults) respond to cyberbullying?

#### **4.4. Data collection**

The YPAR group discussed a range of approaches for data collection including qualitative methods such as: interviews, focus groups, photo elicitation, vignettes and



observation. These methods were explored through practical activities and discussion over two weeks. Following discussion of possible data collection methods, the group debated these for each of the research questions. The YPAR group decided to use a mixed methods approach using questionnaires and interviews and/or a focus group. The data collection method for each research question is outlined in Table 4.1.

<b>YPAR Research Question</b>	<b>Data collection method</b>
How do victims respond to cyberbullying incidents?	Questionnaire and interview/focus group
How do people protect themselves and others from cyberbullying?	Questionnaire and interview/focus group
How should school (and other adults) respond to cyberbullying?	Interview/focus group

*Table 4.1 YPAR data collection methods*

The YPAR group decided to conduct their research with Year 7 and Year 8 students. As previously explained, the group were anxious about researching their own age group (Year 9) or above.

#### **4.4.1. Questionnaires**

Questionnaires were designed by the YPAR group based on their research questions. Josh had raised concerns that questionnaires would not be taken seriously by the students and they would give false results as a joke; however, the statistics from the

YPAR questionnaires were generally in line with statistics reported in the literature. For instance, Hinduja and Patchin (2017) found 22% of young people (aged 12 – 17 years) were cyberbullied (sample  $n=1204$ ) within the past month. Meanwhile, Shin et al. (2016) report that 7% of 12 – 13 year olds were victims of cyberbullying (sample  $n=3956$ ). Smith (2014) highlights the difficulties with prevalence rates due to differences in definition and measurement. Whilst using a smaller sample ( $n=282$ ), the statistics generated by the YPAR group are in line with published statistics for prevalence of cyberbullying victimisation (Year 7 17% and Year 8 15% prevalence ever; or 9.62% of Year 7s and 6.35% of Year 8s in the past year). However, prevalence statistics are quite wide-ranging. In addition, we could also triangulate our findings from the questionnaires with the group's own "contextualized expertise" (Fine, 2008, p. 224) and findings from the interviews/focus group.

The questionnaire was designed by the young people with my support. We discussed issues for the design of questionnaires including avoiding bias in the question formulation, we used a four-point Likert scale to avoid neutral responses, with questions arranged in a matrix, and we developed open questions where we believed responses could not be accurately predicted (Cohen et al., 2007). The arrangement of the questions was considered so that routine questions, such as year group and gender were situated at the beginning of the questionnaire, and questions about their own behaviour as bystanders, towards the end (Flick, 2015).

The young people explained their research project to Year 7 and Year 8 students during their year group assemblies. The YPAR group created a presentation and script which they used during the assembly and negotiated the roles they would take during

the presentation. The questionnaires were distributed in hard copy, during form time at the beginning of the school day. The YPAR group believed hard copy questionnaires were a more confidential means of collecting data and more likely to elicit honest responses from participants. The numbers of questionnaires returned were 156 in Year 7 and 126 in Year 8. They were distributed on a single day and were completed by those who were present during form time, unless they opted not to complete the questionnaire.

#### **4.4.2. Focus group**

Participants for the focus group were identified through responses to the questionnaire. The final question asked for the participants to provide contact information if they were interested in participating in further research with the group through an interview or focus group. Those who had indicated interest in talking further with the group, and had either experience as a victim or a bystander of cyberbullying were invited to participate in a focus group. The school-based contact spoke to the individuals and provided information sheets on the project. The participants and their parents provided informed written consent prior to the focus group. The focus group took place with ten participants from across Year 7 and Year 8. They were interviewed by Josh, Daniel and Ryan from the YPAR group, and I facilitated the process. The YPAR group had participated in a number of role plays to prepare for interviewing and we met before the focus group to go through the questions again and prepare. The focus group lasted for 53 minutes and was held in a meeting room in the school. The YPAR group had a list of semi-structured questions, which they had divided between themselves, but they also probed for additional

responses when needed (Cohen et al., 2007). The focus group was audio recorded and the YPAR group took extensive hand-written notes. Before commencing, we verbally summarised the informed consent statements for the focus group participants and provided the opportunity for any questions to be addressed.

## **4.5. Analysis of data**

### **4.5.1. Questionnaires**

The questionnaire data were entered into a spreadsheet for analysis, including data from incomplete questionnaires. Quantitative content analysis was used to analyse the open questions generating categories, then frequency analysis was applied to the categories (Flick, 2015) and graphs were generated to display the data. The YPAR group participated in the generation of categories and coding the data during one meeting. I completed most of the coding due to time constraints and the availability of technology in the school. The group confirmed a sample of the coding I had completed (Creswell, 2013). The frequency of responses for the quantitative questions was calculated and used to produce bar charts showing the incidence levels for each item (Cohen et al., 2007). The YPAR group discussed the graphs and free-text responses during a YPAR meeting. The young people were able to draw on their own experiences to explain data-sets and their meanings. Within YPAR the ability of co-researchers to triangulate findings with their own experiences is seen as a strength and a way to assure the trustworthiness and authenticity of the research (Fine, 2008; Fox & Fine, 2015).

#### **4.5.2. Focus group**

The group held a meeting immediately following the focus group when we discussed our initial findings referring to the hand-written notes. Between this meeting and the following meeting, I listened to the audio-recording and identified the main themes which emerged; these themes were then discussed with the group who contributed their own experiences to the themes identified. Complete analysis of the focus group data with the YPAR group was restricted due to timescales and diminishing attendance at YPAR meetings. The analysis offered from the YPAR group of the focus group data is, therefore, tentative.

### **4.6. Findings and discussion**

In this section I will present the findings from the questionnaires and the focus group, drawing on the discussions which took place with the YPAR group while analysing the data.

#### **4.6.1. Questionnaire responses**

In Year 7 17% ( $n=27$ ) and in Year 8 15% ( $n=19$ ) of participants had been cyberbullied in the past (see Figure 4.2).

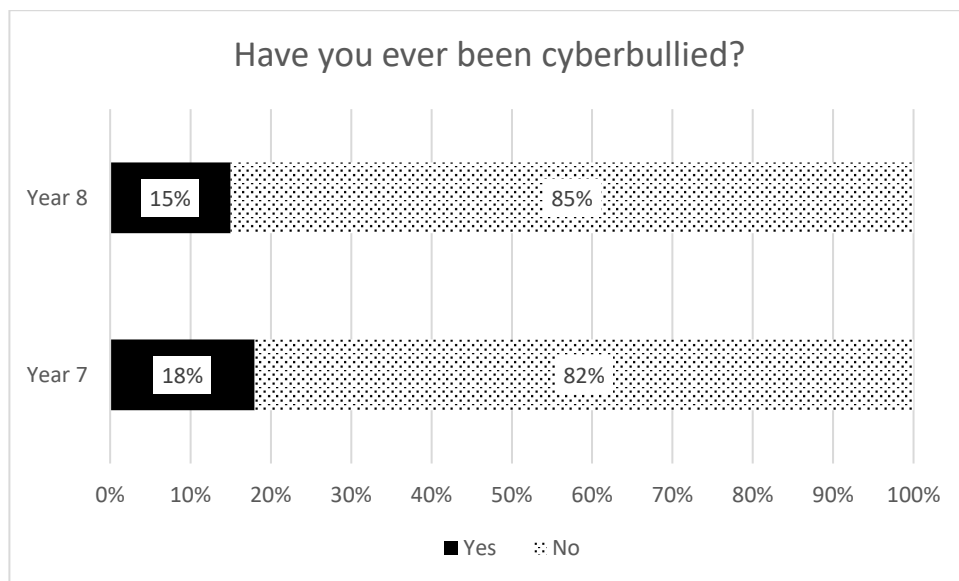


Figure 4.2 Have you ever been cyberbullied? (Year 7 n=152; Year 8 n=126)

Figure 4.3 shows that 9.62% of Year 7s and 6.35% of Year 8s had been cyberbullied more than once in the past year; 5.26% of Year 7s and 4.76% of Year 8s had been cyberbullied once; and 3.85% of Year 7s and 3.97% of Year 8s had been cyberbullied in previous years, but not the current year.

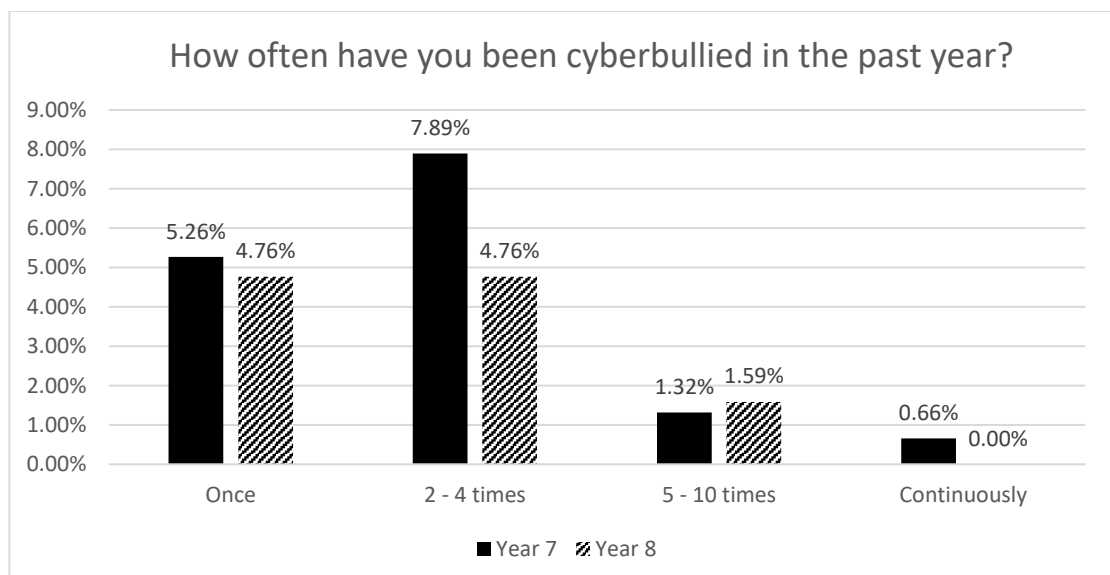


Figure 4.3 How often have you been cyberbullied in the past year? (Year 7 n=23; Year 8 n=14)

For those in Year 7 who had been cyberbullied in previous years this means they were cyberbullied in primary school (5 – 11 years of age). We asked if they were still being cyberbullied now: the majority said no (61% in Year 7; 69% in Year 8), but 36% of Year 7s and 25% of Year 8s said they were not sure (see Figure 4.4). The group felt that this indicated the uncertainty around cyberbullying, whether it had stopped and that it could resume at any time.

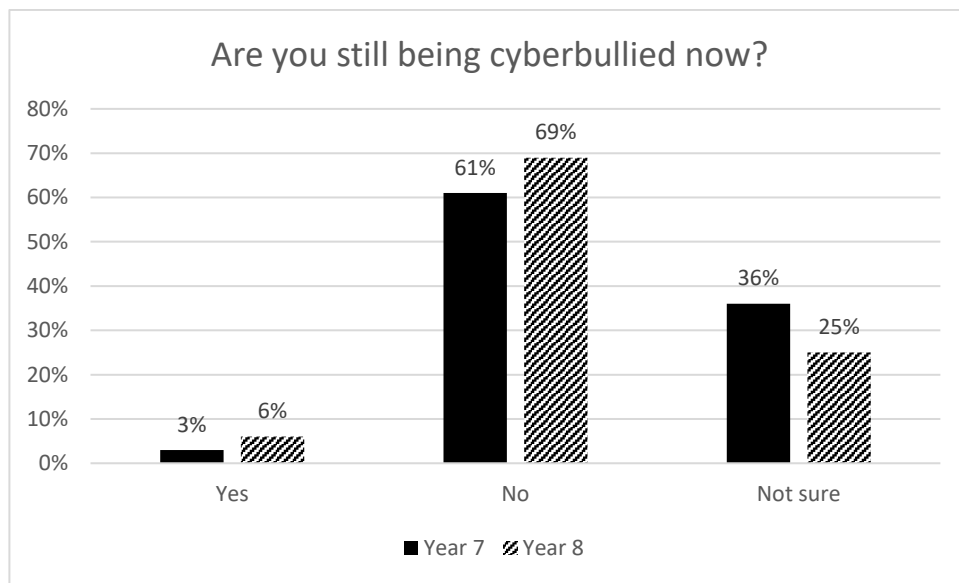


Figure 4.4 Are you still being cyberbullied now? (Year 7 n=28; Year 8 n=16)

Figure 4.5 (Year 7) and Figure 4.6 (Year 8) show the response to the question ‘how did you react to the cyberbullying?’ which addresses their first research question: How do victims respond to cyberbullying incidents?

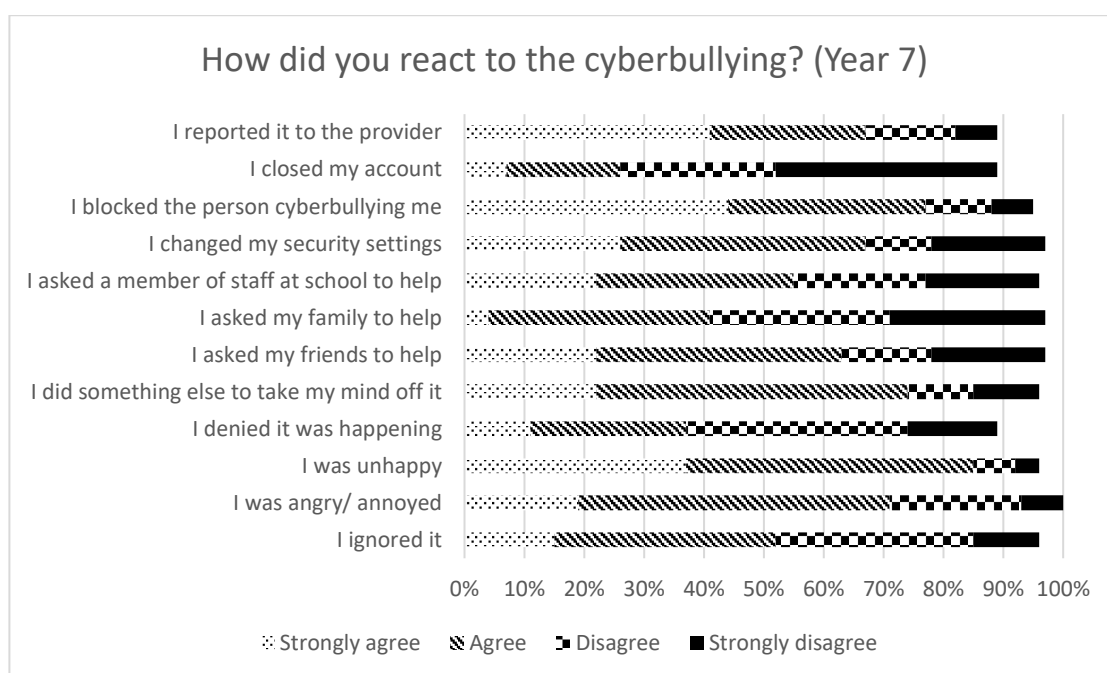


Figure 4.5 How did you react to the cyberbullying? (Year 7 n=26)

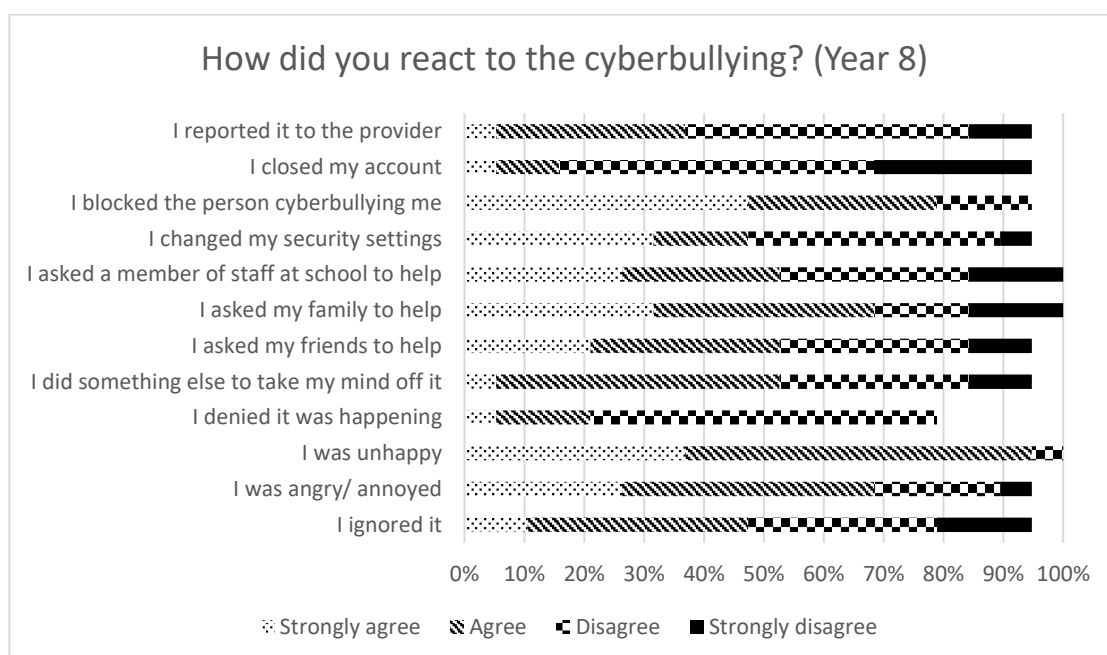


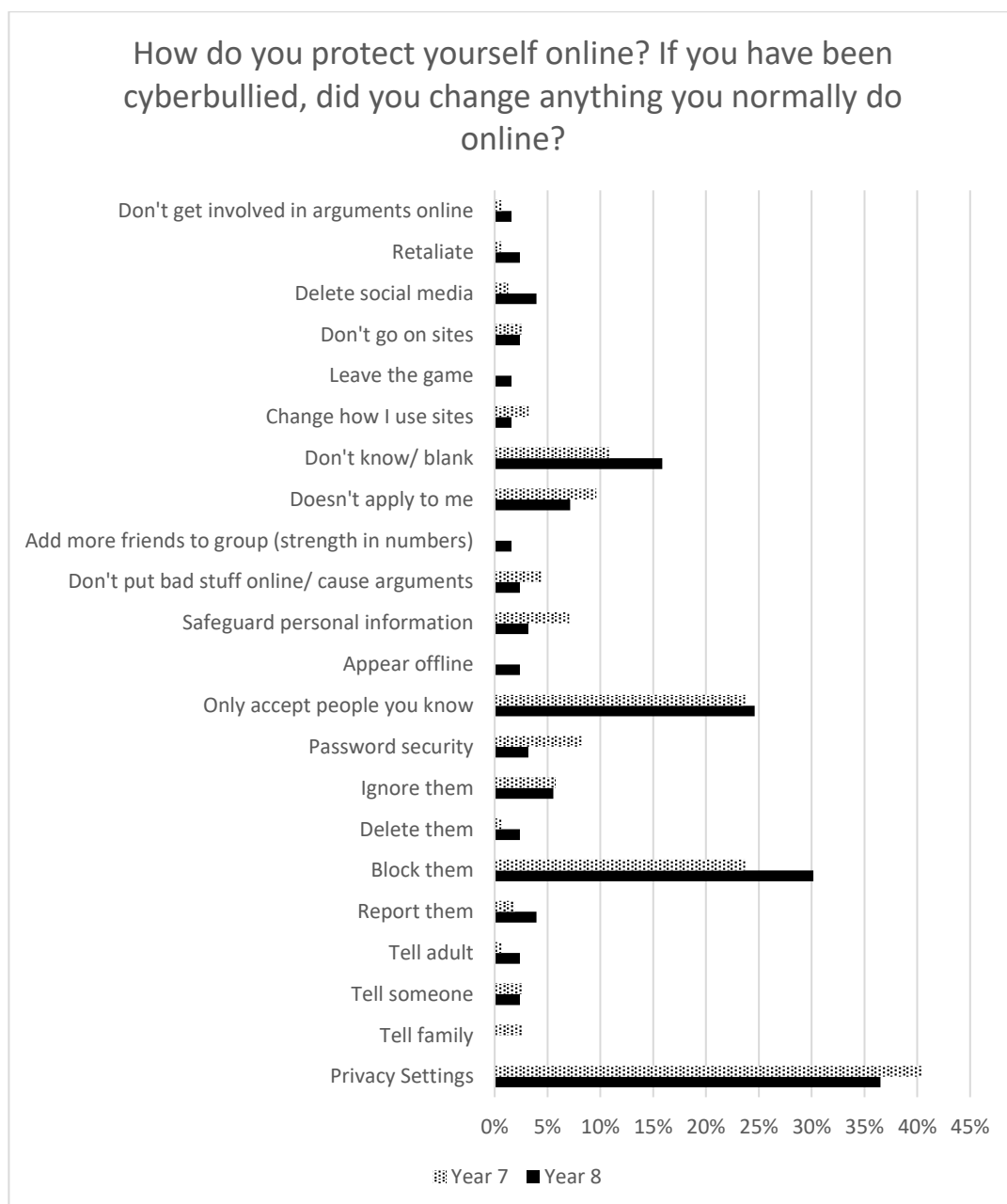
Figure 4.6 How did you react to the cyberbullying? (Year 8 n=18)

The majority in both year groups changed their security settings or blocked the cyberbully. Over half of those cyberbullied sought help from friends, family or



teachers. The YPAR group were very surprised at the number in Year 7 claiming to report their cyberbullying to the provider; this means reporting to Instagram, SnapChat, etc. so that they investigate the cyberbullying and take action against the perpetrator. The high number concerned the group with regards to its accuracy and whether the Year 7 students had understood what it meant; not everyone in the YPAR group had been aware that they could report to a provider. In Year 8, the figure was more in line with their expectations. However, it is possible that education on e-safety has developed and younger students are more knowledgeable about the actions they can take.

Open response questions were used to gather data for the group's second research question: How do people protect themselves and others from cyberbullying? (see Figure 4.7). The YPAR group assisted in coding the responses, adding categories as required. A number of the categories only contained one response and, for presentational clarity, I have removed these from the graph; however, the complete data were discussed by the YPAR group. Notable is the high number of responses for using privacy settings, blocking cyberbullies and only accepting people they know.

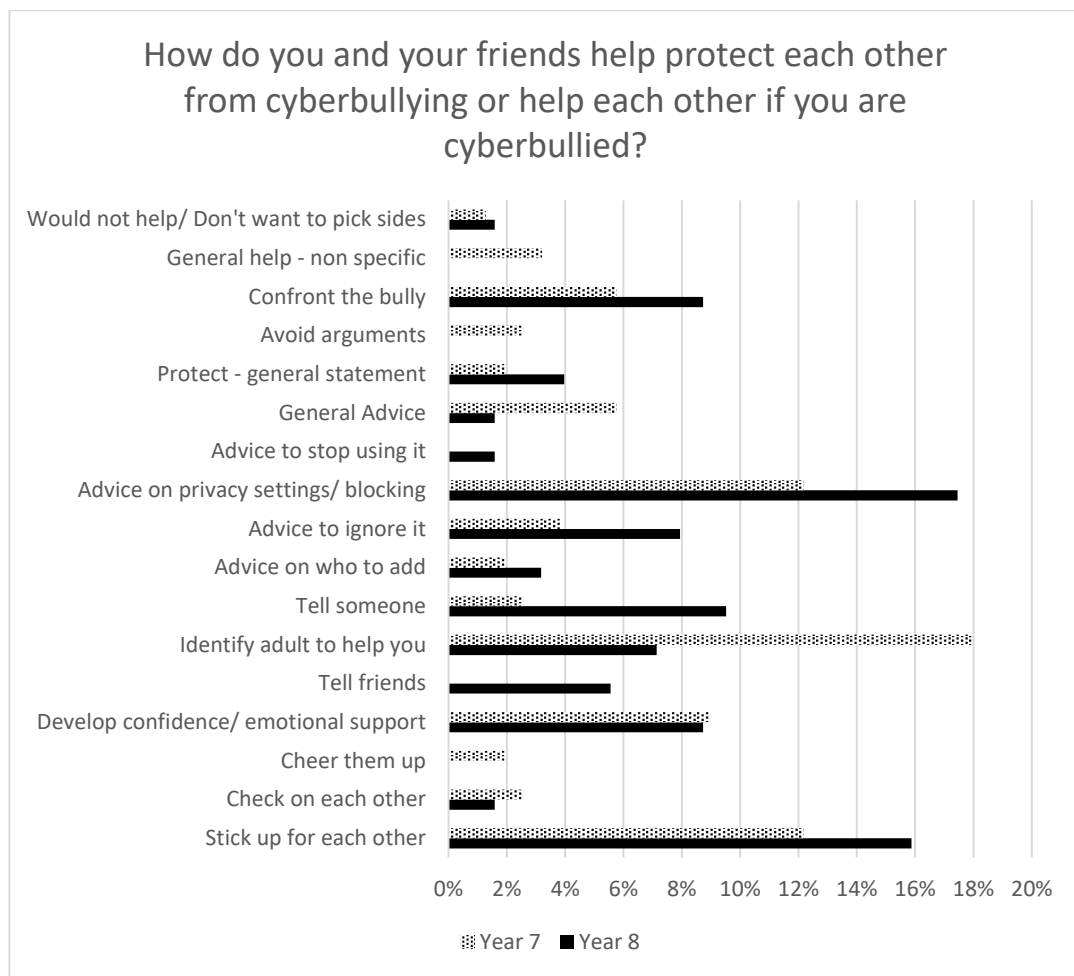


*Figure 4.7 How do you protect yourself online? If you have been cyberbullied, did you change anything you normally do online? (Year 7 n=141; Year 8 n=108)*

They were also asked how friends helped to protect each other in the event of cyberbullying. For both Year 7 and Year 8 33% did not respond to this question.

Following the coding by the YPAR group, there were some categories containing only

single responses which have been merged with other data or removed from Figure 4.8 for presentational clarity. In Figure 4.8 we can see a shift in how the cyberbullying is dealt with between the two year groups. Year 7 are more likely to seek adult support (18%), which would have been a successful approach in primary school, however, only 7% of Year 8 students suggest this approach. Instead, Year 8 students are more likely to support their friends to change their privacy settings and block the cyberbully. Year 8s are also more likely to advocate ignoring the problem or to confront the cyberbully.



*Figure 4.8 How do you and your friends help protect each other from cyberbullying or help each other if you are cyberbullied? (Year 7 n=120; Year 8 n=90)*

While this question was to some degree hypothetical, the group also included some questions for those who had experience of supporting their peers through cyberbullying. The questionnaire asked, ‘Have you ever helped someone who was being bullied online?’: Year 7 responses indicated that 25% ( $n=39$ ) had helped someone; and Year 8 stated that 23% ( $n=29$ ) had helped peers. They were then asked an open response question to state what they did to help them; some did not respond to this question, despite indicating that they had helped someone. Those who answered the question in Year 7 indicated that the most popular responses were to provide

advice on the privacy settings and how to block ( $n=11$ ); to identify an adult to help ( $n=8$ ); tell them it would be fine ( $n=8$ ); or to confront the bully ( $n=7$ ). In Year 8 there were only a small proportion who provided additional information, but the most popular response was to confront the bully ( $n=4$ ). Other strategies were to develop their peer's confidence or provide emotional support ( $n=2$ ); tell them to ignore it ( $n=2$ ); add friends online to support the cyber-victim ( $n=2$ ); or report the cyberbullying to someone ( $n=2$ ). The YPAR group explained that the response to 'add friends online' is about developing strength in numbers against the cyberbully, hence the bully is confronted by a group rather than the victim alone. The YPAR group suggested that this could be an effective strategy to make a cyberbully retreat. The YPAR group also identified the shift from asking for adult support, to more self- or peer-reliance in Year 8.

#### **4.6.2. Focus group**

Notes from the focus group made from the recording and the notes made by the YPAR group members during the focus group were discussed at YPAR meetings. The analysis of the focus group data was constrained by time implications and a reduced number of participants in the YPAR group. Key areas identified from the focus group were:

- i) The participants conflated the terms bullying and cyberbullying. Although they could define these two terms, in practice they did not draw a distinction as their experience drew the two areas together.

- ii) There is name-calling online, but the perpetrators will not say it to the victim face-to-face; the focus group believed this was because the perpetrator is cowardly.
- iii) There are difficulties getting the perpetrator to take responsibility due to hacking and the claim, 'It was just a joke.'
- iv) The support from the school was recognised, yet they believed that further investigation is needed; in particular, victims feel very aggrieved when they report cyber/bullying and the perpetrator manipulates the situation so that the victim gets blamed. Victims can also have an emotional, retaliatory outburst towards their bullies during school; the high profile of these can mean that the victim receives sanctions, again leading to them feeling aggrieved.
- v) Being seen as 'different' can lead to cyberbullying, including areas such as race and religion. Family connections can also lead to victim status, if a family member is already a victim.
- vi) Young people want their parents to take a more active role in monitoring communications online and being more proactive when they do report cyberbullying to them. They talked about the difference between primary and secondary classrooms and ethos; there are significant changes during the Year 6 to Year 7 transition, and this includes the amount of responsibility young people are expected to embrace just as support from teachers and parents is withdrawn. Also, this point is where the risk of cyberbullying (and other online hazards) increase as young people increasingly use the technology.
- vii) Involving the police is only for the most serious cases where there is a threat to life. However, the police are seen as having the power to stop cyberbullying,

whereas the school has more limited power. Even exclusions do not necessarily stop cyberbullying.

- viii) There is a mixed response about teacher responses to cyberbullying (and bullying in general). There is acknowledgement that teachers are busy with other aspects of teaching, but some teachers were singled out because of their empathy and proactive approach; this seemed to be a minority, however.

While there are systems in place to protect younger students (separate staircase for Year 7s was discussed) these are not enforced sufficiently, leading to aggressive incidents.

- ix) Friends are important for emotional support and advice, but they were not expected to stand up to the bullies due to the danger of the bullies switching attention to the supportive friend. Examples of when this had happened to themselves or others were given.

#### **4.6.3. Findings in relation to research questions**

In this section we summarise the findings in relation to the group's research questions.

##### **1. How do victims respond to cyberbullying incidents?**

The majority of students who were cyberbullied, across both Year 7 and Year 8 were unhappy and angry or annoyed that they were cyberbullied. In the focus group, the young people described cyberbullies as cowards and expressed their frustration over the actions of these individuals. In particular, they were vexed by the claim that cyberbullying was a joke or banter. Young people become frustrated about cyber/bullying and felt that they could be provoked into emotional outbursts in class

which divert attention from the bullies and shift school-based sanctions to the victim; it was felt that cyber/bullies can be very manipulative. Over 70% were proactive and blocked the cyberbully; in Year 7 it prompted 67% to change their security settings. In Year 7, they are more likely to seek support from friends (63%), a member of staff (55%) or family (41%); in Year 8 the focus shifts as they seek support from family (69%), friends (53%) or a member of staff (52%). Friends provide an important source of emotional support and advice. This suggests that education initiatives could be targeted at friends to provide more targeted and better advice.

## **2. How do people protect themselves and others from cyberbullying?**

The most popular way of protecting themselves online is to use the privacy settings. Yet only 37% of Year 7s and 40% of Year 8s state that they do this. Although this is the most popular means for protection, the figures suggest that more can be done to educate the young people about the benefits of using privacy settings for their protection online. The other most popular responses were also about utilising control through the settings available online, including blocking individuals and only accepting people they know as friends online.

In terms of protecting others, the YPAR group were surprised by the relatively small proportion of people who stated that they had helped others; they suggested that this might be because they were younger and did not know how best to support their friends and peers. It would be beneficial to develop a menu of choices about how friends can support each other through cyberbullying, drawing on the expertise in the student body. Emotional support from friends is important to young people; however,



practical support and intervention is seen as more problematic. There are risks to the supportive bystander of becoming a victim of the bullies too.

### **3. How should school (and other adults) respond to cyberbullying?**

Following the focus group, the YPAR group suggested that the school should consider whether the separation of the terms cyberbullying and bullying is an accurate portrayal of how victimisation occurs. The provision of specific members of staff to support students who are having difficulties was appreciated by the students. The focus group indicated that additional investigation was needed around cyber/bullying; in particular, the bullies were felt to be excellent at manipulation and had the ability to turn a situation around and make the victim the wrong-doer.

The focus group's comments about teacher support was mixed. Some had found specific teachers who mentored them and provided an excellent level of support, however, others felt that teachers generally ignored bullying behaviours and did not have time to adequately deal with incidents. It was believed by the focus group and YPAR participants that this is not a core function of a teacher's role; teachers were there to teach them instead.

The focus group demonstrated that students want parents to take a more active role in monitoring what happens online. Students also want more proactive support from parents when they tell them that they are being cyber/bullied. At precisely the time that they transition to a new school and are more likely to experience cyberbullying, they are also given a lot of new responsibility without commensurate support from parents and teachers.

The focus group also discussed police involvement in cyberbullying; it was felt that police should only be involved for the most serious cases, such as when there is a threat to life (including self-harm). It was felt that the police have more power to stop cyberbullying compared to the school.

Josh and Daniel, with some others from their GCSE Drama class, are developing a drama production to communicate the findings from the YPAR group research project to the students in the school.

#### **4.7. YPAR and the participants**

YPAR is a critical, emancipatory pedagogical methodology (Mirra et al., 2016). Consequently, the impact of the research is not just the results obtained for the research questions; it is also important to consider the impact on the participants in the research group. Ozer and Wright (2012) highlight that young people can develop new skills, their voice in their community and professionalism. Engaging in the research process develops skills around planning, data collection, analysis, presentation skills, communication and so on; all of these are concrete skills which can benefit young people as they grow older (Ardoin et al., 2014). However, the development of new skills occurs with assistance and training (Kellett, 2011; Mirra et al., 2016), consequently, the impact of the YPAR project on the individuals is an important part of the worth of a YPAR project. The impact on those who took part is considered below.

The YPAR group participants felt that they understood more about cyberbullying by the end of the project,

*Just experienced more about cyberbullying how like, how it can effect people, how it came, like how it can happen mostly and how it's like developed. (Ryan)*

*But it's definitely expanded my knowledge of it, and, and I understand...I definitely, like, know more about it, 100%, like how to sort it, how to handle it, how if someone else comes to me, or I go to them, or just...oh yeah, definitely a lot more about it. (Bella)*

They also had engaged in a range of activities which they had not used before, developed their skills and confidence, and felt that they might use those skills again in the future,

*I might take like the stuff I've learnt and do something else like that. (Hannah)*

*I think it helped English. Definitely [...] 'cause, like, the type, the...type of data we got, like how to read it and, like, analyse it and take things out of it, and 'oh, wait, that looks weird', and [...] stuff like that, yeah. (Bella)*

*The most enjoyable part about it is the assembly and stuff, because they are the type of things that you need to learn. Speaking in front of people, because I would never do that if [a teacher] asked. [...] All the pie charts and things that we were looking at, I learnt a lot from that because it was what people were actually saying. (Josh)*

Although Hannah felt that she would not want to do a similar project again despite learning from the experience,

*I actually did learn quite a lot. So like but then I did kind of get a little bit bored with it 'cause I am... I'm more of a practical person so I like hair, beauty and fashion and all that. (Hannah)*

During the coding of the questionnaires, Bella suggested that she was not clever enough to do the activity, yet as I talked her through the process, she gradually gained confidence and was able to code successfully,

*I feel dead like I know what I am doing. Okay. Nice one. (Bella)*

Part of this project also demonstrated that learning can be hard work, but that this is acceptable. I always tried to stress that while it might be difficult, that they were doing the work and being successful, for instance, in this dialogue with Bella during the coding:

*Bella: I'm not smart...*

*Claire: You are, you're doing it!*

*Bella: This hurts my brain. It's like when I smile it hurts to smile.*

*Claire: It's meant to hurt your brain!*

The group enjoyed being listened to, having their ideas taken seriously and seeing their input into the project being used to move the project forward each week:

*You know the 'focus on victims' the first two bullet points there are mine! [applause] Those are two that I'd written down! [...] So they were good! (Ryan)*

*It's like everyone has a voice in it and everyone's in it. And everyone is cooperating and we all get our own opinion and it's not all, like, shouting like politics. (Bella)*

The YPAR group had not participated in a research project before. They were exposed to a range of new skills and developed their understanding of the research process. They enjoyed participating in the sessions although attendance waned towards the end.

#### **4.8. Reflections on YPAR**

YPAR appears to offer significant potential for working with young people in a productive and egalitarian way which provides advantages to the young people, their community and to the researcher. As I was researching in an area of socio-economic deprivation I was enthused by the empowerment agenda within YPAR (Mirra et al., 2016; Scott, Pyne, & Means, 2015; Zaal & Terry, 2013). I relished the opportunity to help develop young people's skills and knowledge in new directions (Ardoin et al., 2014; Kirshner et al., 2011) and had a strong desire for the research to be of use to the young people and their school community (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). However, YPAR can also be challenging, in this section I reflect on the impact of challenges I encountered while conducting YPAR.

YPAR requires the researcher to minimise power differentials between themselves and their co-researchers (Scott et al., 2015), yet this can introduce tensions too. There were occasions where the focus of the young people was difficult to maintain, as they perceived extra-curricular activities as additional and social. As a former teacher there was a temptation to adopt a teacher persona, however, this would have negated the work I had done to establish equity in the group. Encouraging leadership within the group, rather than a collective, may have helped to overcome this issue and help to develop a greater sense of responsibility and self-governance (Ardoin et al., 2014), although this would need to avoid introducing power imbalances to the group.

The group were resistant to taking on responsibilities for the research process outside of our time together and youth leadership may have helped to overcome this reticence. As I visited the school for an hour a week, I could not provide the additional hands-on support required to move them on in the project in a timely way. Consequently, I would arrive for a YPAR meeting, expecting actions to have been completed by the young people, to find that they had not; this became very frustrating and elongated the timescales for the project. This occurred mainly around data collection and without data we could not move forward with the project. Youth leaders within the group may have helped to manage this process more effectively. They may also have helped to hold the group together until the project was fully completed. As previously mentioned, the girls' attendance tailed off towards the end of the project; instead, the boys completed the project together, with my support. While youth leadership may have alleviated some of the challenges, Burke et al. (2017) suggest that young people are resistant to adopting leadership roles, particularly with unfamiliar adults. Mirra et

al. (2016) discuss the rush which can take place towards the end of a YPAR project and how adult authority often resumes, to delegate tasks and ensure the project is completed. It appears that there is no simple solution to these issues, but further iterations of YPAR perhaps sensitises the researcher to the likelihood of these challenges arising, enabling appropriate action to be taken.

Although there have been challenges, I believe that YPAR has contributed positively beyond the qualitative data which I have used in my thesis. The time I spent with the young people allowed me insight into their “lived experiences [to reach] more exact knowledge” (Freire, 1993, p. 24); their analysis of the data presented explanations which I would not necessarily have considered without their insider perspective (Cammarota & Fine, 2008); and through working with the group, I became a more familiar presence in the school. Indeed, Josh commented that they had been more open with me because of the relationship we had established.

*because we got to know you I think I would be more honest than I  
would have been if you had just given us a questionnaire and said,  
“Oh, fill that out”. (Josh)*

There is a sense of unease, however, regarding the gap between reality and vision for the project. Similarly to Burke et al. (2017), I was naïve about the challenges which emerged; the reality did not match my expectations. Instead, I am straddling the positions of researching *on* and researching *with* children, rather than being positioned firmly as a researcher who researches *with* children (Cerecer et al., 2013; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015; Hawkins, 2015). Some researchers have used PAR

approaches as a way to develop greater understanding of the participants, take seriously different ways of knowing and avoiding using participants to just generate data (Datta et al., 2015), which resonates with my current position and the way I have used the data in my thesis. Burke et al. (2017) suggest that conducting YPAR has a learning curve, which they have engaged with over several iterations it is therefore, my hope to move towards more robust use of YPAR in the future.

#### **4.9. Concluding remarks**

In this chapter, I have presented the YPAR project, considered the challenges presented by engaging in YPAR, discussed the data collection methods, analysis of data and the findings of the group for their research questions. I have also considered the value of YPAR to the group in terms of the skills and knowledge they have acquired during the project. Finally, I reflected on my use of YPAR, with the benefits and challenges of this approach. In Chapter 5, we return to the qualitative data analysed for my thesis, which draws upon the YPAR meeting transcripts, the interviews and the YPAR-led focus group transcript. These data have been analysed using CGT and the following chapter presents the categories constructed, and the data which support these categories.



## **Chapter 5 Findings**

In Chapter 3, I discussed my constructionist epistemology which informs my choice of methodologies, methods and interpretation of the data. I introduced youth participatory action research (YPAR) and how I have combined this methodology with aspects of constructivist grounded theory (CGT) (Charmaz, 2014a) to strengthen the theory-generation potential of my thesis. Hence, the analysis draws on the qualitative data generated through my meetings with the YPAR group, the YPAR-led focus group, and the interviews with participants from two schools. The data have been coded using nVivo 11 and drawing on CGT, to establish the major categories which are presented in this chapter. In Chapter 5, I discuss the findings in relation to my research questions (see page 5). Then, in Chapter 6, I will present a discussion of these findings in relation to the literature and the implications of the data.

Throughout the chapter, pseudonyms are used for the participants. The participants are indicated by their pseudonym followed by an acronym for their school and their year group. Therefore, a participant attending Trinity Catholic Academy (TC) in Year 7 will be indicated by the code TC/Y7, while the OL code indicates participants from Our Lady's High School.

### **5.1. RQ 1. How do young people perceive and define cyberbullying?**

As there are challenges associated with the definition of cyberbullying, it is important to investigate young people's own perceptions of cyberbullying and how they would

define it, as this may contribute to a more honed definition. When asked to define cyberbullying young people would give a generic definition which reflects the e-safety education which is well-integrated into most English schools, for instance:

*It's when someone is like humiliated or like saying stuff about you on the Internet. (Noah OL/Y7)*

*It's where like someone's saying like horrible stuff to you and using not very nice language or skitting<sup>5</sup> you, or calling you names or stuff like that. It's like, if there's anything bad on the Internet which is being said to you personally by someone, I think that's what it is. (Eva TC/Y8)*

*So cyberbullying, a definition is where, in my opinion, is like where you want to harm someone online, cause you don't want to do it to their face. (Alice TC/Y9)*

However, as they talked further, nuances became evident. There is an established definition of bullying which incorporates three key aspects:

- i) intention to harm someone through their negative actions;

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<sup>5</sup> Skitting is a colloquial Liverpool phrase meaning to tease or make fun of someone.

- ii) a power imbalance between victim and perpetrator which makes it difficult for the victim to defend themselves; and
- iii) it happens on multiple occasions, it is not a one-off event (Olweus, 1993).

This definition has been adapted for cyberbullying to include actions which take place through electronic media. When analysing the data, participants draw out the following key aspects:

- i) intention to harm or humiliate;
- ii) the victim cannot escape from the activity or activities perpetrated against them;
- iii) attempts to transfer power from victims to perpetrators; and
- iv) the perpetrator hides behind the screen.

These are closely related to, yet not quite the same as, the original definition of bullying. Next, I will consider the different dimensions of these four points.

#### **5.1.1. Intention to harm or humiliate**

The original definition for bullying, and the adapted definition for cyberbullying, include the intention to harm. Here, humiliation has been added. Humiliation can be deemed a form of harm; however, young people seem to perceive humiliation as a separate issue and not necessarily harmful. Some adolescents argue cyberbullying is joking, fun or banter; indeed, there were discussions with the YPAR group regarding banter when they would become frustrated with peers labelling bullying activities as

‘banter’. Banter is normally between friends when they are gently teasing each other, it should not involve humiliation or harm, as this is when it becomes cyber/bullying. It appears perpetrators may have difficulty identifying humiliation as a harmful activity and do not regard it as part of cyberbullying. However, others do identify humiliation as an aspect of cyberbullying. Including humiliation within the category, makes it clear humiliation is also harmful and a cyberbullying activity.

*And then you’re just basically trying to make them look stupid in front of other people (Josh TC/Y9)*

The perpetrators take something which young people like, for instance a photograph which has been posted, and ruin it. Ruining it in this sense is not just about the physical changes they make, but the way the victim also feels about it. The wide audience on social media, which is predominantly their peer group in school, ensures humiliation is complete.

*Especially when they’re taking your pictures, so you felt confident enough to post that picture and then they’re turning it into something bad, they’re using it against you. (Amber TC/Y9)*

The range of cyberbullying activities described is extensive. Posting nasty comments on photographs the victim has posted is one of the most common activities. The cyberbullying becomes more serious when the perpetrators repeatedly add the victim into group chats or send direct messages where they are verbally abused by multiple people. As perpetration escalates fake hate accounts can be set up, where malicious material is posted online about the victim; the audience can be large, but may exclude

the victim. Then, there may be threatening messages and phone calls to their mobile phone from unknown perpetrators which scare the victim.

*Well, like, they all just, like, type horrible things in and then they'll just send it to me, 'cause the other week, there was girls from my other school texting me that I don't really like and then, like, they was, like, eight or nine of them on to me. (Olivia OL/Y9)*

*they make Instagram accounts about people ... and like, they're just dead nasty and, oh it just, it wrecks me head. (Charlotte TC/Y12)*

*Like, phoning you on the phone and what have you. ... Like, calling you names and all that. ... And like, threatening you. ... Like, I'm going to batter you, or I'll get someone to batter you. (Jessica OL/Y8)*

When perpetrators obtain a personal mobile phone number, this is perceived as an escalation of threat beyond accessing someone via their social media accounts, as Jacob explains:

*letting you know, they've got your number and they might like find out where you live or something. (Jacob OL/Y9)*

The intention here is to instil fear and maximise harm to the victim. This can potentially be very damaging to the mental health of the victim. Perpetrators appear to use multiple methods of cyberbullying together to maximise the impact on the victim

and there can be multiple perpetrators. However, Charlotte, reflecting on assemblies with outside speakers about cyberbullying, makes the point:

*when you say 'cyberbullying' and 'bullying' people just like, "Oh well, I don't do that," but then they realise that...they don't realise that by you saying nasty things to people, that's bullying. (Charlotte TC/Y12)*

There is an escalation of harm to the victim, which includes humiliation. The intention to harm is very clear through most of these activities, yet young people appear to need additional clarity regarding humiliation, which some perceive as fun or banter.

#### **5.1.2. The victim cannot escape from the activity or activities perpetrated against them**

Emerging strongly from the data is that young people see cyberbullying and traditional bullying as linked parts of bullying. Although they can recite the definitions for cyberbullying and bullying which they have been told, their reality is different. These are not generally separate activities. If you are being cyberbullied, you are very likely to also be bullied in school and vice versa. Although there are times when they are separated out, the majority of participants did not experience cyberbullying and traditional bullying as two separate activities. Consequently, it makes sense to link these terms and I have chosen to do this using the term 'cyber/bullying'. Cyberbullying takes place out of school, typically while the victim is at home. Meanwhile traditional bullying takes place in school. Cyber/bullying is where both activities take place on a continuous cycle; the activities from one form of

bullying feed into the other. The victim feels they are unable to escape, they are victimised continuously in both the online world and the physical world.

*they are joined somewhere along the line, like, you could basically, like, have somebody be mean to you in the school and then they could be, like, texting you stuff during the night. Like, they might, say, text you, like, saying, like, I'm going to get you in the school tomorrow and stuff (Amelia OL/Y7)*

*the mixture of them both is possibly the worst, because you don't, you don't get, like, a break from it. (Megan TC/Y12)*

Participants also discussed the permanence/impermanence of the material posted for cyberbullying and how it impacts upon the victim in different ways to make them feel trapped. Some social media are designed to be impermanent, such as SnapChat, where material posted can be viewed a limited number of times for a limited duration, then it is deleted forever.

*mainly Snapchat, only because the chat can...you say it and then the chat deletes itself so no one else can see it. (Jack TC/Y9)*

There is an element of controlled risk here for the perpetrator. They may send something unpleasant, but it then becomes their word against the victim's as to what the message contained and their intentions when they sent it, which makes reporting victimisation problematic, further trapping the victim. Perpetrators also delete material when they reflect more carefully on what they have posted. This appears to be related to removing an evidence-trail (not taking responsibility for actions will be

discussed in sub-section 5.1.4); however, the victim is still conscious of the negative material and a wider audience of peers have also seen it.

*you can say something, or you can post something, and be, like...so you get your reaction out of it, but then, like, if you think, like, once it's all calmed down, kinda thing, was that worth it? so you can delete it. But it's deleted and, like, obviously you can't really trace it, but the person who's been the victim of it, still knows about it and it still affects them whatever has been said. (Megan TC/Y12)*

Meanwhile, other material remains as a permanent reminder of what has been posted about the victim until the perpetrator removes it or it is removed by the service provider (i.e. Instagram). Where material is always available for victims to see, Alice highlights they can keep looking at it, renewing and building on their victimisation which compounds the sense of being trapped in the cyberbullying.

*You don't want to do it to their face, so you do it online. And it's always there so they can always keep looking at and feel more bad about themselves (Alice TC/Y9)*

Even once the material has been deleted it was suggested the impact remains with the victim. The impact can also be developed since a wide audience has seen the material, they continue to refer to it, gossip about it or build upon that victimisation, thereby increasing the sense of not being able to escape.



*It's something that once you post something and people see it, when you're going to school people aren't going to stop saying it. (Grace OL/Y9)*

This contrasts with traditional bullying where the victimisation tends to be more covert, the number of people who witness the bullying tends to be smaller and so while others may know it is happening, those who have access to original perpetration is limited. A wider audience online means victims feel everyone knows and have been witness to their humiliation.

Young people rank cyberbullying as one of the top threats online. The majority stated cyberbullying was equal to or above the threat of online grooming; those ranking it below online grooming generally placed it just below, although some qualified this based on the level of cyberbullying experienced (i.e. a brief argument with friends versus long-term, serious cyberbullying). The reasons for this high ranking were two-fold: their perception of how easy it was to stop both; and the harm which could be caused to the victim. For online grooming they said the groomer could be blocked which would stop all further contact, whereas cyber/bullies are persistent, they are in school with the victim and if they are blocked they find another way to continue the victimisation (i.e. fake accounts, using other people's smartphones/accounts, involving friends). Young people suggest that the persistence of cyber/bullies can lead to mental health issues, self-harm and suicide.

*I think grooming and everything can be bad, but it's cyber bullying's worser. ... Because that's someone that's your age, you*

*know, where grooming you can just say, "No," and block them, where ... the other thing you can block them, but they'll always find a way to text you back. ... Like people say things about you and then you start thinking, "Oh it's right," and then you start, like, 'cause people have changed themselves and everything haven't they?*

*(Charlotte TC/Y12)*

The perpetrators can be so persistent that young people perceive cyberbullying to be equal to or above the threat of online grooming. The victim believes they are unable to escape from cyberbullying due to this harassment.

### **5.1.3. Attempts to transfer power from victims to perpetrators**

Participants make it clear anyone can be cyberbullied, so we do not necessarily start with a power imbalance, as is required in the original definitions for bullying and cyberbullying. However, it becomes apparent through the interviews that there is a transfer of power or an attempt to transfer power during the victimisation process and, if successful, this negatively impacts on the mental health of the victim. Within youth culture nasty online behaviour seems to be normalised in some groups and can manifest through cyber/bullying. This behaviour can isolate individuals, and develop a situation where they feel unable to trust other people.

*Everyone bullies everyone nowadays, everyone bullies anyone, it happens. Friends bully friends, it's just, it's...I mean you get people nowadays saying they have trust issues and things like that, it's not*

*a surprise because everyone has it now because you can't really trust. (Grace OL/Y9)*

Grace highlights how damaging this culture is for individuals, they feel unable to trust others because even their friends will bully each other online; this diminishes the confidence of individuals. While the issue can appear widespread, there are individuals who have not experienced cyberbullying, particularly in younger years, so it should not be assumed that everyone experiences a lack of trust in others.

Charlotte said victims should block cyberbullies immediately, and then considers the impact on the victim of reading cyberbullying posts:

*block them, tell someone. ... 'Cause if you're gonna sit there and read it and not keep it in you, gonna start getting, it's gonna work on you mentally. ... But if you tell someone and block the person altogether, and every time someone pops up you block them, don't sit there and go...and talk back to them, just full on block them. (Charlotte TC/Y12)*

Her rationale here is interesting because she seems to divide actions into passive and reactive. Passive is where “you're gonna sit there and read it” and the victim accepts the comments, internalises them so they “work on you mentally”, whereas the second part where the victim is actively telling and blocking suggests action, taking control. Charlotte says not to engage with the bullies; the victim has control and the power to decide what they will read, who can post on their feed, etc. So, victims can be active or passive. This is related to power and a victim using their power to decide what will

happen within the limits available to them; they can decide what will be read, internalised and how it will affect them mentally. Choosing not to engage with the bullies at all helps to reduce their power over the victim. The most popular response when questioned about how to manage cyberbullying was to block the bully.

However, Amber argues blocking a bully can be counter-productive:

*sometimes especially when they're in school then it's like blocking them could be worse because now they're like "Oh okay so now she's shook" and you've got this-this like... shadow kind of that "Oh she's scared of us." And then that's when it, kind of, spills again into real life 'cause now you've blocked them, so they've kind of won in a sense. (Amber TC/Y9)*

Here she is talking about when cyberbullying has reached a stage of group chats. The perpetrators can keep adding the victim into a group chat which is focused on bullying activities. They can see when the victim leaves the chat and then they keep repeating the process of adding them back into the chat. The only escape is to block the perpetrators. In this extract we have a sense of power transfer between victim and bully. Blocking provides a reaction to the bullying activity and the perpetrators know they have “*shook*” the victim, the victim is scared; the bullies have won.

While cyberbullying does not necessarily start with a power imbalance, the perpetrator seeks to establish power over their victim through the cyberbullying process. Yet victims can try to stop the power transfer through deciding to respond proactively to cyberbullying.

#### 5.1.4. The perpetrator hides behind the screen

This category is a new aspect to the definition for cyberbullying, but emerged strongly from the data. Young people often repeated the view that the cyberbullies are cowardly; they hide behind the screen. Some participants have suggested cyberbullying gives the bully a relatively risk-free environment in which they can perpetrate their activities. Not only are they behind a screen, but they can also use a fake username.

*I think 'cause when it's online I think people have a lot more confidence to say things that they say a lot more, like, you wouldn't just walk up to someone and start saying some of the things that they'll say online 'cause online you're, kind of, protected yourself you're behind a screen. Or some people use, like, fake user names and all this stuff so it's a lot more brutal online I think. (Amber TC/Y9)*

Some surreptitiously use someone else's smartphone – an apparently regular occurrence among younger adolescents – so the cyberbullying activities cannot be traced back to them. Young adolescents appear to have lax attitudes towards security of their devices and technology, sharing passwords and rarely changing them; however, this alters as they mature. This makes it simple for others to access someone else's smartphone or social media account to engage in perpetration.

*You could like make a separate account or you can go on someone else's phone and send it, so it looks as if they have started it.*  
(Caitlin OL/Y7)

However, there appear to be degrees of protection. Where a cyberbully is anonymous, this is clearly a high degree of protection from most people who might intercept the messages; however, cyberbullying does occur where the victim knows who the bully is. Indeed, it appears this is frequently the case. However, this idea of hiding and being protected behind a screen is still discussed even when the identity of the perpetrator is known.

Amber (above) realises people would not say the same things face-to-face that they do online; cyberbullies are experiencing disinhibition through the online mechanism. Grace (OL/Y9) offers this from her own experience of saying horrible things via online mechanisms to her sister when they are arguing:

*it's more or less they're hiding behind a screen, they, like everyone says, it's 'cause you think you can say it all, I've done it before when I've texted someone, like me sister and said, I mean don't get me wrong it's social media it's one of the greatest inventions, it's amazing but I'm like that sometimes texting and feeling really awkward, saying somehow text and go, but like if I'm arguing with my sister [laughter] we'll text each other when we're in the next room. ... But I'll say it on there so it is the coward way out cyberbullying. (Grace OL/Y9)*

She recognises what she is doing is cowardly, she is hiding behind a screen rather than just saying what she wants to say to her sister during the argument. There seems to be a level of protection afforded by the screen, even if you are physically close to someone. I believe there may be a nuance here about being protected, in the same way as we are from animals at the zoo, where they are behind glass or in a cage. We each know the other is there, but cannot reach them. Potentially this is what protection means for cyberbullies, rather than anonymity. Therefore, protection may lie on a continuum from bullying face-to-face where there is no protection through to anonymous cyberbullying with apparent total protection.

Participants also talked about the evidence-trail for cyberbullying. It appears when young people are cyberbullied they are expected to produce evidence of perpetration which can be used by the school in their investigation. This seems to contrast with face-to-face bullying where victims are unable to gather evidence in the same way. The ability to delete messages, use of apps like SnapChat which automatically deletes messages, and using other people's smartphones and accounts make it problematic for victims to prove what has happened to them.

*after they send something you can press a button and it unsend it so it's gone from the chat (Jack TC/Y9)*

*You could like make a separate account or you can go on someone else's phone and send it, so it looks as if they have started it. (Emily OL/Y7)*

Although sometimes it appears to the person deleting the messages that it has disappeared, but it is still available to the victim on their account.

*they can delete it and act like they've never done anything but it stays on the other person's screen. (Eva TC/Y8)*

As explained, the younger adolescents had a very lax attitude to security; they share passwords and do not appear to change their passwords when discovered.

*Hannah: Everyone knows my password. You know my password don't you? I should really change my passwords for SnapChat. ...*

*Layla: Yours are still the same because I remember yours when you told me, when you gave it to me. ...*

*Bella: I told you as well. Why am I telling everyone the passwords? (TC YPAR Meeting 3.4.17)*

They also use each other's smartphones with or without permission, sending messages to others from the smartphones of family or friends.

*someone came up to her and said why are you texting someone this about this and she was like 'what?' someone had took their phone, got their, the sister's phone or something, and text them and changed the name to me, to me, er...my friend's name. (Grace OL/Y9)*

When young people are so lax about security, it becomes very difficult to state definitively the person who is thought to be the perpetrator, definitely sent the original



message. This provides another means for protection behind the screen, built-in deniability, and could foster a lack of responsibility. Combined with the capacity to delete messages, this is really powerful for perpetrators who wish to hide and avoid responsibility or sanctions. It is much harder for victims to demonstrate and prove what has happened to them and who is responsible.

A further reason for perpetrators to hide was raised by a few participants who identified that sometimes nice people are cyberbullied, but bystanders would take action, if the perpetrator was seen to be doing this.

*people could be seeing it and they're like then they decide to go behind... behind the screen 'cause then no-one can see they're doing it to them. ... 'Cause they feel scared that they might lose the rest of their friends because they're bullying the person and they can all see it. (Hannah TC/Y9)*

The perpetrator may also want to protect their reputation and avoid being labelled as a bully. Hiding behind the screen, therefore, is about protection for the perpetrator; it is not, necessarily, about anonymity. Rather it provides distancing from the victim and, in some cases, the opportunity to protect their own reputation and status, avoiding a 'bully' label.

## **5.2. RQ 2. How can young people manage cyberbullying incidences in their own lives and those of their peers?**

There are five key concepts related to RQ2:

- i) Managing expectations of public persona versus online protection
- ii) (Not) recognising boundaries for behaviour
- iii) Feelings of futility and damaging mental health
- iv) Taking control of the situation
- v) Bystanders and friends supporting the victim in a managed way

The concepts of *managing expectations of public persona versus online protection* and *(Not) recognising boundaries for behaviour* are linked. All participants were attempting, in their different ways, to manage both the persona which they projected through online and face-to-face means to their peers in school and beyond, while operating in an arena of inconsistent social rules and boundaries set by their age group. *Feelings of futility and damaging mental health* and *taking control of the situation* are opposite positions, but not necessarily exclusive for victims who may transition between them. *Bystanders and friends supporting the victim in a managed way* captures that bystanders may be people other than friends, although those who support victims in the two research schools, tend to be friends rather than other bystanders who may witness cyber/bullying incidents. I will explore each of these concepts in more depth in the following sub-sections.

### **5.2.1. Managing expectations of public persona versus online protection**

There appears to be a tension between developing an online presence and identity, and being able to protect yourself online. In a YPAR Meeting (19/12/16) the group discussed privacy settings on YouTube. Some used privacy settings on YouTube and others were critical of this as the aim of the platform is to share videos. Josh suggested publishing YouTube videos is about making money, which is not possible if the

Youtuber's account is unavailable. This tension is also apparent when young people were discussing the need to build their Instagram accounts. Their peers expect everyone to have a certain number of followers – this ensures you are not bullied for having too few – yet having a private account means it is more difficult to reach this number. One participant had moved schools due to cyber/bullying, yet still retained her bullies on her Instagram account as they contributed to her number of followers; she had accepting bullying as the price for building followers and developing a robust profile. Here she reflects that her number of followers (four hundred) had probably reached a level where she could now remove her bullies:

*Yeah, well my mum always tells me to block people, but I think it's just about, like, having, like, the most followers and stuff, but I probably will block them now. (Olivia OL/Y9)*

The majority of participants discussed using privacy settings, yet some also referred to unpleasant incidents in the past which had made them review the security of their accounts. This seems to fit into a broader picture of young people sharing their own and other's personal information/accounts freely and not treating security seriously enough.

*Some random person has got my phone number and they keep voice mailing me and it's creepy and they are just mumbling. (Josh TC/Y9)*

*He used to, like, text me and all that, saying he was my age, but then, like, he posted a picture, and he was, like, very old. ... Like, he scared me, but I just blocked him. (Jessica OL/Y8)*

Conversely, Lucy (TC/Y8) had created a range of online personas for each of her interests, then a separate school-based persona which she maintains online and in school. These personas serve to compartmentalise her life and interests. Her school-based persona reflects the interests of her friendship group, rather than her own interests which she describes as ‘nerdy’. She manages the privacy settings of each persona carefully to ensure there is no cross-over between them.

Young people can be lax about securing their accounts and may unwittingly share personal information which is then used by others for more nefarious purposes. Yet they also experience tensions between online identity/presence building and the mechanisms to secure their protection.

### **5.2.2. (Not) recognising boundaries for behaviour**

In the social world there are unwritten rules for behaviour to which people subscribe, often without conscious thought; they are part of a socialisation process for the society in which people live (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Burr, 2003). Adolescents are learning to navigate these rules in both the offline and online worlds; however, the online world does not have the socio-historical culture of the offline world which has been developed for each generation to pass to the next. Therefore, through the data, there is evidence of adolescents struggling with the boundaries for behaviour in both the offline and online worlds.

A number of interview participants believed cyber/bullying was a normal part of life. However, this belief was not reflected in my discussions with the YPAR group, and other interviewees discussed their supportive friendships. Therefore, it seems for certain groups of young people, cyber/bullying has become a normalised part of their lives, one with which their social circle engages on a regular basis. They perceived this as normal behaviour, whereas others believe friends do not normally bully friends and instead offer support. This has serious implications for those who are within a normalised cyber/bullying circle as it could damage relationships, their sense of trust and mental well-being.

*Most of the time it's people that you're close to. (Ryan TC/Y9)*

Sometimes cyber/bullying between friends happens when there is an argument. This can escalate into friends taking sides, then individuals become isolated from friends and victimised. This will damage trust, not just through the original argument, but also through the negative actions of the group.

*There's just an argument, and then they turn all cold on you and stuff, and start bullying you. (Jessica OL/Y8)*

This can be a trigger for sharing materials or information which friends believed would be kept confidential, which, again, feeds into trust issues. Here Ryan (TC/Y9) is discussing the difficulties of finding someone to confide in, if you are being cyberbullied, but his statement reflects wider issues of trusting friends:

*Just really tell someone...tell someone and it's not like just telling anyone, so telling someone like that you can trust. Someone adult*

*and not only your friends, and just keep it private really because if you tell it and like say like you say to one of your mates yeah? They could spread it, cause you don't know, cause you can't really trust anyone. (Ryan TC/Y9)*

There seems to be an issue with respecting confidentiality and privacy. When friendships break down, this becomes a more significant issue as they may seek to damage the reputation of the friend with whom they have argued.

*Like, it's where you get filters and some of them like make you look horrible like, there is one where you have massive teeth, if a girl takes a picture of someone and then as soon as they fall out she might like post it and send it to everyone. (Emily OL/Y7)*

Friends have fun with the technology, they share secrets, thoughts and dreams, but then as soon as there is an argument the 'between friends' material can become ammunition which can be used online and quickly spread. There needs to be awareness of boundaries for sharing personal information with others, even in the event of a friendship breakdown.

### **5.2.3. Feelings of futility and damaging mental health**

Repeatedly, young people discussed the futility of actions to try to stop cyberbullying and the resultant negative impact on people's mental health. Indeed, the effect of cyberbullying appears to remain with the victim even if the perpetration is stopped. Even though cyberbullying may be deleted, the effect of seeing the material remains with the victim.

*cyberbullying is, like, you know it's there, but it can quite easily,  
like, be deleted, like, the effects of it, it's like, still with you (Megan  
TC/Y12)*

The ephemeral nature of some material online does not lessen its impact. Where material is not deleted, it seems victims may revisit it, strengthening its impact on them. The perpetrators hound the victim constantly, making them feel like they cannot escape.

*Well, if you get bullied online they can bother you, bother you,  
bother you, bother you...do you know what I mean. You can get the  
notification, notification, notification ... When you're in school you  
can just walk away, but online it's always gonna be there and  
eventually you're gonna read it and it's gonna be there (Jack  
TC/Y9)*

Young people seem to be drawn to their notifications, as it sits on their smartphone waiting for them. Jack's description of this is like an invasion of their space, their property; they cannot escape it. The young people discuss the impact on mental health, including thoughts of suicide, for example:

*Because it actually like made my heart like really sink, like....I  
wanted to kill myself. (Sofia OL/Y7)*

*That's why, sort of, you see more cases of people kill...having  
suicidal thoughts about...because of online, than they do in real life,  
'cause in real life they, sort of, people can do stuff about it more*

*than online. Online's sort of a one way ticket to someone else's head, you can mess with their head, you can make them feel great, you can make them feel horrible (Harry TC/Y8)*

The hounding is an important part of the cyber/bullying ordeal, and this reinforces the feelings of futility which are often expressed. This aspect is two-sided though: young people say cyberbullying cannot ever be stopped, yet they advocate telling an adult to make it stop, although this sometimes 'makes it worse'. Within the data there is sufficient evidence of either approach working or not, so young people themselves are likely to be reflecting their knowledge of relative successes and failures of stopping cyberbullying which, in turn, are likely to be based around different contextual factors. Some of these contextual factors will be related to the individual and how they process their victimisation. Here, Ryan suggests victims need to accept cyberbullying as part of life, and instead try to control their emotional state to minimise impact on their mental health; to develop resilience:

*No. You can't, you can't really stop cyberbullying. It's just about, can you get over it? Can you get over that fear? (Ryan TC/Y9)*

Cyberbullying is a complex issue which is influenced by contextual factors, including the victim's own attitude and resilience. The way in which victims can be hounded by perpetrators and the invasion via their own, personal devices can increase feelings of futility and the impact on mental health.



#### 5.2.4. Taking control of the situation

Young people describe choices which involve an affirmative decision about how they will take control of their situation. Sometimes this may appear to be a passive response, but they have still actively chosen this response. For instance, they may decide to ignore the cyber/bullying; this requires resilience and that they act as if the cyber/bullying does not bother them. They need to try not to take on board the negative messages they are receiving.

*You can't get away from cyber bullying, no one can. But the only thing you can do is just don't listen to it. (Ryan TC/Y9)*

*Don't show them that you're scared and it bothers you. ... Anyway, they'll move on because they think it doesn't bother you. (Jacob OL/Y9)*

Alternatively, they may decide to be more proactive through gathering evidence of the cyber/bullying ready to present to someone else; they may tell someone else and seek support from them.

*Well, if people say something bad to you should block them straight away and tell someone because it's better. I've done it and, like, a bit, like, if you don't tell anyone, then nothing's going to happen. You should always tell someone. (Olivia OL/Y9)*

Alternatively, they may actively confront the perpetrator either verbally or physically. Verbal confrontation requires a set of skills to off-set potential risks of becoming

further embroiled in victimisation or the victim of a physical assault. Sometimes, directly confronting the perpetrator can remove misconceptions and misunderstandings, resulting in a cessation of cyberbullying and empowering the victim.

*It, like, depends if you feel confident to them, like, to just go and speak to them, which I've done in the past, with loads of people.*

*(Jessica OL/Y8)*

*She got jumped<sup>6</sup> and then she fought back and she obviously won and everybody heard about it. So if everyone's heard that she-she got jumped and the people that jumped other people have ended up losing then no one else is gonna say something to her or hit her in a way, 'cause they think she's not scared to give it back now (Jack*

*TC/Y9)*

Although physical violence is alluded to by some participants, this seems to be something which most wish to avoid. It is seen, by the majority, to be a last resort. In the case related by Jack, the girl managed to overcome her attackers, but this is not a guaranteed result; she fought because she was given no other option. It seems most

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<sup>6</sup> Jumped is to be physically attacked by a group

will try to avoid this form of resolution. Even verbal confrontation is risky as it may escalate to physical violence, if it is mishandled.

This concept is the converse of sub-section 5.2.3 *Feelings of futility and damaging mental health*. In sub-section 5.2.3 the victim is a passive recipient of the cyber/bullying; they are overwhelmed and unable to cope. When the victims take control of the situation they regain some control, some power which was transferred to the perpetrators when the victim was fearful.

### **5.2.5. Bystanders and friends supporting the victim in a managed way**

The young people perceived their friends as a key support during cyber/bullying incidents. They discussed how friends ‘stick up for you’, ‘support you’, ‘help you’ and ‘get you through it’ (TC Focus Group). However, this support is tempered by the risk involved for their friends – and other bystanders – hence the inclusion in the category of supporting in a ‘managed way’. Over time young people learn to carefully manage the risk of becoming a victim themselves, through their involvement as a bystander. A number of younger participants explained how they or others, had become victims after they tried to defend a friend.

*‘cause when I stuck up for my mate and then like, like, they’d, are alright with that person who they were being mean to and then they just turned on me (TC Focus Group)*

Older students, though, had devised ways of mediating with their friend’s bullies while minimising the risk to themselves. They judged the perpetrator’s demeanour before approaching them, developed conciliatory dialogue, rather than escalating the

situation through aggressive tones and sought to dispel any misunderstandings which had caused the cyberbullying.

*I can sort of be like, your advocate in it, not necessarily get involved, but I could go and speak to the person who it's going on with and be, like, why are you doing this? You know, not as in attacking way, but as in sort of like, neutral ground. (Megan TC/Y12)*

However, the risks of bystander victimisation are minimised when the bystander has a higher social status in the school or are themselves considered to be a bully.

*If it's only like one or two people I'll sort of say to them, "Leave him alone now, you don't know him, you don't like him, how about you just, erm, take...jog on lad 'cause he doesn't like ya, ya not mates with him so I don't see why you're being horrible to him."*  
(Harry TC/Y8)

Harry's name was linked by some people to bullying incidents where he was the perpetrator, and he admitted he had "*been in that sort of area a couple of times*".

However, he also discussed times when he had defended others and taken action to stop perpetration against his friends. His status protected him and gave him the means to protect those around him.

Jack discussed the social hierarchy which exists in the school and how he had moved from a middle band to the highest level in the hierarchy (social hierarchy is discussed

in sub-section 5.4.2). This change in status meant if he was bullied, his friends – who were also in the higher tier – could step in and stop the perpetration.

*It depends have you ever...what's the word I want to use?*

*Hierarchy if you know what I mean. ... So obviously if-if like if you're higher in the hier-in the pyramid then obviously and someone is lower in the pyramid tries to bully you obviously your friends are going to intervene. It's all about where you are in the...do you get what I mean? (Jack TC/Y9)*

Some young people decide there is strength in numbers and use groups of friends to defend against perpetration. However, this strategy does require the victim to have a supportive friendship network already in place who are prepared to act as defenders.

*If you have more than one person on the defence side then yeah it tends to work, because they don't want to mess about with more than two people. (Josh TC/Y9)*

Therefore, the risks of becoming involved as a bystander defending a victim can be mitigated by other contextual factors. This is not a simple process for young people and requires them to be aware of their wider context. Before deciding on appropriate actions, they need to go through a process of risk analysis for their own involvement and how best to mitigate this. Many people do not support others who are being cyber/bullied. While the YPAR group were analysing data from the Year 7 questionnaires, this exchange occurred between the girls:

*Bella: Have you ever helped someone who has been cyber bullied?*

*Look how many people said no.*

*All: [Gasp].*

*Bella: Ninety-six people and then only 39 people said yeah.*

*Hannah: I have.*

*Layla: But in a way, I see that they might not know how to...*

Layla raises an important point here; the Year 7 students may not know how to help others who are being cyberbullied. The inactivity of bystanders was raised in OL as well:

*most of the time, other students in the school are just bystanders and they don't do nothing. (Amelia OL/Y7)*

This suggests more can be done to educate bystanders regarding the best actions to take when witnessing cyberbullying. Charlotte (TC/Y12) suggests bystanders could help to stop cyber/bullying, but will not risk themselves; however, this may be caused by inexperience rather than a lack of desire to act.

*people can be, "Well I don't wanna get bullied," because it can get turned round, but by you saying something that could stop it, that could make someone's life a whole different thing. ... But if you sit there and watch it then what are you doing? You're just, if anything, they're getting...they're getting upset about it 'cause they're watching someone getting bullied, like ... I know for a fact*

*that'd be horrible. 'Cause I always think of the people that watched me getting done, and I always have them coming up to me, "Are you alright?" But they never done nothing about it. (Charlotte TC/Y12)*

Charlotte makes this a moral responsibility to get involved and she invalidates their follow-up after the event. The bystanders watched what was happening, watching her 'getting done', a phrase which evokes the violence of cyber/bullying. The bystanders could change 'someone's life' by becoming involved; it is a moral imperative.

Yet, there is also a necessity for friends to act in a way which does not contravene the victim's wishes. Participants did not want friends (or others) to act on their behalf without their permission. During a YPAR group meeting the following exchange occurred while we were analysing the Year 7 questionnaire results:

*Claire: So friends are actually the least popular option for them to go to and say....*

*Hannah: Yeah.*

*Josh: Because in Year 7 if you tell a friend they go and tell a teacher.*

Josh (TC/Y9) captures the loss of control which victims can experience when friends or bystanders act without their permission. In primary school, children will often relate friendship issues and bullying to the class teacher who then acts to resolve those issues, however, in secondary school this changes. In Year 7 the students are still adapting to the new context and perceive telling the teacher as a positive step, indeed,

this is the advice they are given if they witness any form of bullying. During the Focus Group Josh was involved in this exchange with a participant:

*R: Yeah, and they're not really scared of the teachers, the people who are bullying because, they're just, they're not scared cause they try to act...*

*Josh: Cause the teachers can't really do much.*

The students believe there is little teachers can do about cyber/bullying. There was anger expressed about what the students perceived as teachers ignoring the problem, but some also suggested teachers are too busy to truly see and judge what is happening.

*Cause they're teaching and they don't know about it and they didn't see, they didn't see that much (TC Focus Group)*

The resistance to telling a teacher is the perception it can 'make things worse'. As well as the name-calling which can result (e.g. nark, snitch, grass) the victim loses control of the situation as the teacher will then take action. So, the role of friends is to persuade and support the victim to take action through telling others, rather than to take action on their behalf.

Strategies altered as the children and young people matured; older participants had developed more effective strategies to minimise their own risk, while also helping their friends. This ranged from directly discussing the situation with the perpetrators, advice and support behind the scenes, encouraging the victim to disclose to an adult,



advising about privacy settings or posting positive messages on social media to counter-act the negative bullying messages. It may be possible for schools to harness the strategies developed by older students to develop a training programme or script for bystanders, to help them to intervene more effectively.

### **5.3. RQ 3. How do young people perceive the role of adults in managing cyberbullying incidences?**

The participants strongly believed it was important a victim should ‘tell someone’.

They did not always state who the ‘someone’ should be, their point was someone else needed to know about the cyberbullying, so the emotional burden could be shared.

They also have different levels of expectation depending on who they are telling:

friends and family are expected to provide emotional support and advice; school has a dual role of providing emotional support for some cases, but in others they are expected to work to resolve the situation; and the police are expected to resolve complex or long-lasting cyberbullying cases quickly. Only a few participants mentioned other sources of support, such as Childline.

#### **5.3.1. Telling and damaging your reputation**

The young people are conflicted about the role of adults in cyberbullying. Young people want the opportunity to resolve situations for themselves, yet do not always have the skills or ability to do this. Young people are also very aware of the reputational damage which can occur when it becomes known they have told an adult about cyber/bullying. Young people describe a delicate balancing act of navigating the space within school and preserving their reputation. If they tell an adult they are

being cyber/bullied then they are branded as a nark, grass, snitch, etc. which increases perpetration.

*No, 'cause sometimes they can make it 10 times worse and harder on you, because it looks like, like you've told someone and like you might get called a grass, or something. (Evie OL/Y7)*

*Like, she gets involved and, like, starts... It makes stuff worse. So I just keep it to myself, and sort it out myself, because I'd rather get it sorted out myself, than get other people involved. (Jessica OL/Y8, discussing her mother)*

However, the stage at which young people report cyber/bullying and at which adults intervene seems to have an impact on this branding. Report too early and victims fix their reputation as a 'grass', and are likely to suffer more acutely at the hands of the cyber/bully and others; report later, when things have moved beyond what peers would deem normal levels of bullying type behaviour, and less reputational damage is likely. The young people interviewed advise reporting once cyber/bullying has reached advanced stages or if it has been going on for a longer time-scale – reporting, then, is to be expected, and therefore their reputation will not be damaged in the same way. Young people report their parents (and some school staff) often want to step in and resolve the situation for their child, quickly and efficiently, by going directly to the school. This is unhelpful for young people trying to avoid additional bullying due to reputational damage.

*I would probably go a little bit more often if she didn't mention school every time I said something. (Josh, TC/Y9, talking about discussing problems with his mother)*

The decision to tell someone is, therefore, contextual and needs to be carefully considered by young people due to the potential for reputational damage.

### **5.3.2. Staged processes for supporting victims**

The ways in which adults are expected to provide support does not change significantly across the parental/school-based realms. There appear to be three levels of support to which young people expect to have access: i) Reactive (listen; emotional support; advice; safe space provision); ii) Proactive (develop sense of belonging; rebuild confidence); or iii) Interventionist (mediation with bully/parents/school; sanctions; police involvement). The best support for young people seems to be the provision of these options from which they can freely choose at different stages of cyber/bullying.

Young people want support from adults, but they want to be able to decide the level of support provided. In particular, they want there to be a staged progression of support; young people want initially to have space, a listening ear and some sound advice.

*You just want to talk about it but you know you can't 'cause they're just gonna do something about it but you don't want them to you just want them to listen and understand in a way. (Jack TC/Y9)*

Supporting the young person can also help to rebuild confidence as it demonstrates to the victim that someone cares sufficiently to help them. However, young people say they need to be able to resolve the situation for themselves wherever possible. Indeed, one interviewee linked this to building resilience and being able to practice resolving situations to improve skills. Lucy draws an analogy using the immune system as a metaphor for developing resilience for cyber/bullying:

*if a child grows up in quite a bad atmosphere, the immune system tends to be better, but if a child is brought up in a really clean atmosphere, with no animals, the slightest thing can make them sick. So, like an immune system it's based on past experience, so like, it's dependent on how you're being brought up, it's dependent on how people over emphasis the matter, and if you've been like babied your whole life (Lucy TC/Y8)*

Lucy suggests resilience is attributable to the opportunities presented to practice overcoming situations, thereby building resilience. Adults could scaffold and advise on appropriate actions, rather than protecting young people in all instances. Some young people have very little or no confidence that adults can support or understand. They draw attention to the difference between how bullying was perpetrated and resolved for their parents' generation as compared to today; adults' knowledge of the technologies being used; and understanding the normalised banter between friends, which can appear as bullying to adults.

*Your parents, when they were getting bullied, they just ignored it and that would stop it. Times have changed now and if you ignore it then it still continues. And when you complain, it gets worse.*

*(Daniel TC/Y9)*

A principal barrier to young people confiding in adults is how they anticipate the adult will respond. If they believe the adult will immediately take control of the situation away from the young person, then they will only report the most serious cases to them. However, if they believe the adult will work with them, at a pace with which they are comfortable and they have an open and honest relationship with them, they are much more likely to talk through cyber/bullying issues earlier.

### **5.3.3. School approaches to cyber/bullying incidents**

As interviews were conducted in two different schools, I became aware of differences in students' perceptions about how cyber/bullying was dealt with by those two settings. Based on the interviews with the young people: TC operated a restorative justice system; while OL operated a system focused on sanctions, including exclusions where necessary. One of the interview questions was 'What is your perception of how cyberbullying is viewed at your school?'. The students at OL believed the school took cyberbullying very seriously and dealt with incidents swiftly and authoritatively.

*I know they really do take it really seriously here, like, mostly in this school, they take it, like, really really serious, like, they threatened that they'd kick the girls out if they done anything again to me and*

*then it did stop after that, 'cause they didn't want to be kicked out.*

*They took it very seriously. (Amelia OL/Y7)*

In TC this question received a more mixed response and the YPAR group also discussed the effectiveness of the school measures on different occasions. I visited TC for a year and therefore, had more opportunity for in-depth discussions with the students, whereas I visited OL for two days, this means the TC students have had more opportunity (and trust) to open up about areas of school policy which may concern them. One of the main areas of contention at TC appeared to be over the application of the restorative justice processes. A main concern was the perpetrator's ability to manipulate and lie during the restorative justice sessions, thereby turning the blame onto the victim.

*'Cause I had a little incident and they tried to make us friends, but no, we're still not friends now. (Hannah TC/Y9)*

*At first, when we first went in it was Sam who was bullying me and all of a sudden, half way through, it turned around and it was all my fault. I felt like "oh, are you messing?" ... In the end, I just accepted everything she was saying, she turned it all around, she blamed it all on me, so I went, "Whatever". I just took the blame because every time I said something she would turn it on me. (Josh TC/Y9, discussing how a member of staff had been manipulated into thinking he was the bully instead of the victim)*

*Sometimes they tell the truth, but mostly tell lies. (Eva TC/Y8,  
discussing what cyberbullies say when incidents are investigated)*

*If you came to, like, school and was like, "So and so posted this."  
And then they'd be like, "Well, you need proof!" And you haven't  
got that, because they've deleted it. (Megan TC/Y12)*

While the restorative justice process seems to work effectively in some instances, in others it does not appear to have the desired impact. However, one participant talked about when TC had excluded her bully and this made her feel safe and cared for:

*Well, it's very effective 'cause you know that someone's there for  
you and you, like people do care for you, they might not show it but  
people do care for you. (Eva TC/Y8)*

It appears young people value strong, authoritative action from school for cyber/bullying cases. However, this could be underpinned by a desire to see their bully punished for the harm they have caused.

There was some awareness of reporting cyberbullying to Instagram, Facebook, etc. so accounts could be removed by the providers. Participants also talked about police involvement in more serious cases of cyber/bullying or cases which were very protracted. There was a marked difference between the two schools with regard to police involvement. In both settings they believed the police should be involved in serious cases, but OL students related this more to violence and serious threats to individuals and/or their families. OL is in an area where there is gang activity; the school staff explained to me that the gangs were recruiting students and it was difficult

to counteract the allure of the ‘gang-related lifestyle’, such as expensive cars and clothes. This influence can be seen in a number of comments which the young people make, although they do not overtly refer to gangs as the source.

*Yeah and if people are threatening to ‘oh I’m going to get my brother to shoot you’ and all this, definitely call the police just there on speed dial. (Grace OL/Y9)*

*When they start, like, making threats or something, or to your house or your family or something. (Jacob OL/Y9)*

*Like, if you’re getting threats, or like, something happened to your family. ... Or, like, your house. Like, saying, “We’re going to smash your house, and all that. ... set it on fire.” (Jessica OL/Y8)*

*Yeah, like if someone’s saying like they’re gonna stab someone or something, in the messages and that. ... Like, people saying like watch when I see you and that and people might be frightened to go out their house and that. (Lily OL/Y9)*

In this context, cyber/bullying takes on a new perspective as part of a violent culture where the threats made can have very real repercussions for individuals and their families; they need to be taken very seriously. This contrasts with the discussions with TC students where the threat level was lower or threats were not always taken seriously.



*Like, when people threaten you same like, like loads of people say strangers could say that as well and it's just scary with strangers. But when it's like your mates, you know they can't do that, but when it's strangers you don't know them. It's just more scary getting threatened by strangers. (TC Focus Group)*

*She always says it to people. She said 'I'm gonna kill you when you're asleep' and all that. And erm, she always laughs about it and we don't find it funny. (TC Focus Group)*

Clearly, the perspective students have on the seriousness of threats made during cyber/bullying will be very context-dependent. The context of the local area in which the young people reside and are growing up will influence how they view and respond to threats. The gang-related context at OL lifts cyberbullying beyond the typical level associated with school-based bullying into a mechanism for gang-based threats and control. This is a factor which needs to be considered when researching cyberbullying.

#### **5.4. RQ 4. How do young people respond to peer judgement within the school social context and what role does peer judgement have in cyberbullying?**

This was an emergent theme from the data. It became clear the social hierarchy within school provided a mechanism for setting out social 'rules', judging peers against these, exerting power relative to social status and exerting power (via cyber/bullying) to establish conformity. Within this context, some young people were

trying to retain control of their own identity through push-back on and off line.

Judgement of peers appears to be a mechanism of control.

#### **5.4.1. Being aware of the judgement of peers which ensures conformity**

On their own social media accounts, young people post material designed to show their lives in a positive way. They are very conscious of the judgement of their peers and others on social media, and they contribute to the judgement of their peers. They are approved of (or not) through the number of likes, followers, friend requests, etc. they receive.

*You get judged by everything. You get judged by how many likes of, people delete posts because it didn't get enough likes or views so they just delete it. So I ended up just deleting it all. (Josh TC/Y9 Meeting 15.5.17)*

During the YPAR group discussion of the Year 7 questionnaire data one of the responses to the question 'How did the cyberbullying affect you?' stated: "It made me feel insecure and like I always had to look nice to post pictures/just go out." Layla commented:

*It's sad that they have to feel like they have to look pretty when they post pictures but it's also funny 'cause that's how everyone is. (Layla TC/Y9 Meeting 6.3.17)*

So young people, even from Year 7, are conscious of what they post and how this is perceived by others because of the judgements made. The personal image created

online feeds forward into their physical world image and becomes an expectation which others have of them.

*You kind of want to portray that image but it's because of the fact that people, kind of, expect it from you. ... people always say that, erm, your Instagram, when people look at your Instagram they like know you or something and they get to know you from your Instagram or from your online profiles. ... it affects your confidence 'cause now I always have to wear makeup because that's what people expect of me. (Amber TC/Y9)*

Their activity on social media is a topic of conversation the next day in school, and this in turn feeds into what happens later online. Lucy describes using social media to find out about people in preparation for social conversations in the physical world:

*I'll go on the social media and I'll go through every single picture trying to pick out as many details as I can, trying to find out what type of things they like, what type of things they find nice. (Lucy TC/Y8)*

This fits into the judgement which they feel from their peers and which they in turn apply to those around them. Lucy has gone to great lengths to avoid judgement from others which could hurt her and to ensure she fits in at school. She has multiple accounts for her different interests all neatly compartmentalised under pseudonyms and she has a separate school-facing account which reflects the interests of her school friends. She works hard to create an image for school which fits in with her clique.

*I'll always try and like make myself more acceptable in their eyes to  
as many people as I can ... I know the majority of my friends  
probably have absolutely no idea what my actual interests are,  
'cause you have to try and put this like fake persona on (Lucy  
TC/Y8)*

*There's like a group of people that decides whether you're  
acceptable or you're not, you're weird, you're not, this show's cool,  
this show's not, and it's mainly like the popular more liked people  
(Lucy TC/Y8)*

Lucy has taken image-creation to an extreme with multiple personas, using pseudonyms for each of her different interests, plus a separate, carefully crafted image for school. Social media has provided a way for her to maintain and gain affirmation from the wider world for her 'nerdy' interests, whilst she manages a school-based image to allow her to survive in school. Unfortunately, Lucy believes all her interests must be kept separate as she does not want others to judge her based on her combined interests.

Others were also aware of the judgement of their peers, for instance Olivia explained:

*...in my other school you'd get skitted<sup>7</sup> 'cause used to have, like 100 followers and then you used to get skitted for that, for having less followers than anyone else. (Olivia OL/Y9)*

Olivia was cyber/bullied and changed schools, yet she retained her cyberbullies on her Instagram account because she did not have 'enough' followers. The number of followers people had was referenced in a number of interviews. Some young people appeared fixated on their number of followers; it is a way for other people to judge them and for them to demonstrate their popularity.

*People like getting lots of followers (Eva TC/Y8)*

*I've got over 171 friend requests, it makes me happy as I know some people actually like me and, and that makes me warm inside (Sofia OL/Y7)*

Gaining a certain level of followers also helps to protect young people from cyber/bullying because they are then deemed to be popular and leading a valid life.

*A lot of people get criticised for things that they like in school, so it's like the more followers you have on social media, the more liked*

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<sup>7</sup> Skitted is a colloquial Liverpool phrase meaning to tease or make fun of someone.

*you are in person, the less likely you are to be a target for bullying  
and all that. (Lucy TC/Y8)*

While a focus on the number of followers individuals have on social media may not be a concern, it does become one when they are engaging in risky behaviour to increase their followers, for instance, retaining cyberbullies who have caused you to move school, as in Olivia's case. As well as being concerned with the number of followers they have, young people are also concerned about the number of likes they receive for content they post.

*Everything you post is for the likes, for the attention that it gets ... if  
it gets less than 2, 10 maybe comments or maybe it needs to come  
down because I haven't got enough like reassurance from other  
people that, okay, this is what they wanna see. And it's not really for  
yourself it's more for other people. (Amber TC/Y9)*

The awareness of judgement from peers puts pressure on young people to conform to peer expectations and they gain reassurance they have achieved this through the number of followers and likes they receive.

#### **5.4.2. Operating within an insular social hierarchy**

A significant number of participants talked about the social hierarchy which exists in school. They generally referred to three principal levels of hierarchy: popular group; middle band; and lower band. However, some gave more granularity to the definitions, including Layla who included a group who wants to be popular but are not:

*It's like there's the popular ones, the people who hang round with them but they're not (Layla TC/Y9 YPAR Meeting 31/10/16)*

The descriptions of this group are fairly consistent, focusing on material possessions, appearance, and disrespect for the school rules.

*they think they're God's gift ... and they think that 'cause they're better than...they think they're better than everyone 'cause they might have money, or they might be dead skinny and pretty, or ... they might be a footballer, do you know, just stupid things and you just thinking to yourself, "Why?" ... "You could be such a nice person, and you don't, you decide not to be." (Charlotte TC/Y12)*

The perception is that most of the cyber/bullying is perpetrated by those in the 'popular' group; yet, they are considered to be immune to cyberbullying.

*And then cyber bullying, the top tier is usually immune and then it's like, slowly the more you go down the more goading you get (Harry TC/Y8)*

Ethan makes an interesting observation about power and status suggesting bystanders will automatically support the 'popular' person due to fear:

*So like a popular kid can like say something to the less popular one. ... And more people will back the, back the popular one because he's probably like, they're all like scared of him or something, so. (Ethan OL/Y7)*

This group holds power due to their perceived social status within the school/year group. The people in the ‘popular’ group use this status and power to bully others, particularly those in the lower groups; those in the middle group appear to be largely ignored.

A cause of cyberbullying appears to be when there is a misunderstanding. This seems to permeate all the social groupings. A simple error or a rumour can cause arguments which then spiral into cyberbullying.

*They’re, like, they’ll, like, tell, like, they’ll tell the people you said a rumour about and then they all come up and ask you and you’re saying no, but they won’t believe you obviously, they’ll believe the other person and then it’ll turn into a big massive argument.*

*(Amelia OL/Y7)*

Bella suggests those in the more ‘popular’ group are more likely to over-react and they draw their friends into the argument.

*then they get worked up about it, and all their friends back them up, and then you’re in trouble and...it’s a nightmare ... especially the certain people there are in a group, or like a particular, like, kind like popular people and stuff like that. (Bella TC/Y9)*

Jack (TC/Y9) from his position within the ‘popular’ group also stated friends within this group would band together and support each other against others (see sub-section 5.2.5).



The impact of actions on and offline seem to be exacerbated because of the closed social environment of a school. A year group enters the secondary school together and remain together throughout the next five years. Their friendships and many of their social activities (via extra-curricular clubs) are within this closed social milieu. This creates a quite unique social environment with minimal variation. When the interview participants were talking about different situations which arose, it appears feasible these situations do not arise outside of the school context because people's social environments are more diverse; the school environment feels like a pressure cooker. Layla and Ryan (TC/Y9) were discussing how rumours spread about people:

*Ryan: It could be spread and the person that's...that the person, the person that's bullying that kid could find out and it could get worse.*

*Layla: Because friends have friends who have friends who also have friends.*

*Ryan: Who have friends.*

*Claire: ...all a network.*

*Layla: And have friends.*

*Claire: Okay.*

*Ryan: And they have more friends. (Layla and Ryan TC/Y9)*

While they were being light-hearted here, their point is serious: secrets and rumours quickly spread around a school and can get back to a victim's bully as further

ammunition. It gives a sense of the closed, insular social milieu in which young people are operating. Lucy has orchestrated an online escape from this insular environment through her extensive use of pseudonyms for different online accounts.

*And like, I'll have accounts for fan posts, so dedicated to certain groups or members of bands or like art posts and stuff like that, things I enjoy, but without using my actual name. So I can get criticised on an account where I use my real name and people in school follow me, I'll just cancel from that account and move to that one where it can be like a society where people like what you post.*  
(Lucy TC/Y8)

Lucy has created a 'fake' persona in school to manage that environment. Her hobbies would be a source of bullying in school as they do not fit the rules of acceptability set out by the 'popular' group. Lucy escapes the social 'rules', which only apply for school, by having multiple accounts for the things she enjoys. While the school social rules say she cannot like those things, the wider world says she can. She is manipulating her online presence to enable a social position in both realities - the closed school environment; and the wider world. However, she cannot be herself in the wider world, in case school 'friends' track her down, so she has secret identities on those platforms. The technology allows her to be herself and be approved by others, while surviving within a school social environment which does not provide those opportunities.

Schools create an insular environment, with a social hierarchy which sets out what is and is not acceptable for their peers. The young people are then judged routinely on what they do and what they like. The online environment exacerbates the ability to pass judgement on others. The pressure to have as many followers as possible means they are adding additional people who can judge them, and their lives, to their social media accounts. Those who do not comply may become cyber/bullied; cyber/bullying can encourage compliance.

#### **5.4.3. Constructing and reconstructing personas**

In the previous sub-section, I have discussed the formation of social rules for peers by the ‘popular’ group, the social hierarchy in school and peer judgements. The social status of young people in the school environment can give them relative power over their peers, and in particular, over their victims. Cyber/bullying does pose risks for perpetrators, yet the technology helps to minimise these risks (see sub-section 5.1.4).

Participants discussed the impact of cyber/bullying on them and others. While some victims internalise the messages presented by the bullies, others push back against this, deciding to ‘laugh it off’ and act as if it does not affect them. The messages sent to victims are hateful and hurtful, and, as discussed previously, hounding by the bullies reinforces these negative messages continuously (see sub-section 5.2.3) which can begin to reconstruct the victim’s self-perception.

*because most people their world is the cyber world. Cause you see them... they’re like a social butterfly. They’re on Instagram, they’re on Snapchat, they’re on MySpace, which died. They’re on*

*everything. Then after all these comments are coming up hating on them and just hating on them and sometimes they can't take it, so they go to the path of suicide. All kinds of things, dark roads, drugs and all that stuff. (Layla TC/Y9)*

Some present a persona of not caring about the cyber/bullies and what they say. Yet under the surface they can also be affected, despite their outward-facing bravado. Both of the following quotations are from Grace (OL/Y9) and betray the outward-facing persona and the internal struggle with victimisation:

*I'm a strong person I take nothing seriously like miserable people nowadays when I look around you've got kids crying themselves 'cause they're terrified (Grace OL/Y9)*

*Any stage, it doesn't matter where it is you need to just get it sorted, it doesn't, I was scared like in case someone like...but I'd been scared because it's, it's terrifying 'cause they can get, now you've got things where you can see location and everything, they know where you live. I was terrified in case they hunt me down and did something, but you've got to get it sorted there is no way you can just keep it like that. (Grace OL/Y9)*

These two quotes are from within a few minutes of each other. The first reflects statements she made throughout her interview in which she states people take cyberbullying too seriously. The second quote was in response to a question asking when cyberbullying should be reported. Her response is in stark contrast to her

previous ‘I’m okay’ persona, which she had presented throughout. She is ‘scared’, ‘it’s terrifying’, ‘they know where you ‘live’, they could ‘hunt me down and [do] something’; this is a very different picture of her and how she is coping with cyber/bullying. There appears to be two layers: one is the scared girl inside, and then an outer layer shown to the world; one who jokes around and does not take things seriously. This external-facing persona is ideal for apparently deflecting negative comments and cyber/bullying. This can be compared with Lucy (TC/Y8) who creates multiple social media accounts and a fake persona for school to position herself with the ‘popular’ group. Both girls are presenting different personas in school as ways to protect themselves. If people knew Grace was scared and terrified, it could make her appear as a victim and there is a risk of victimisation increasing. If she can maintain her jokey persona, she can minimise this risk, prevent people seeing and exploiting how she really feels because, she states, “you can’t really trust” people. They have both found ways to push back against the cyber/bullies, using their school-persona to deflect negative comments and retain some control.

## **5.5. Concluding remarks**

In this chapter, I have addressed the four research questions (see page 5). For RQ1, I have explored a new definition for cyberbullying, based on the perceptions of young people, including highlighting the intertwined nature of bullying and cyberbullying through the term ‘cyber/bullying’. The term cyber/bullying encapsulates the cycle of bullying between online and offline activities. I have identified that the permanence of the material posted online is not a main feature of cyberbullying, as many activities involve speedy deletion of the material, rather it is the impact the material has on the

victim. Most young people perceived cyberbullying as at least as serious or more serious than online grooming. This is due to the hounding of perpetrators, their knowledge of their victim and alternative ways to reach them if they are blocked from one route; whereas, paedophiles can be blocked easily through privacy settings. The screen provides a means of protection for the cyberbully, even when the perpetrator does not hide their identity. The protection afforded to perpetrators can be classified on a scale from no protection in face-to-face bullying, through to almost total protection when anonymous online.

For RQ2 I identified how young people experience a tension between their need to build a suitable online profile with sufficient followers and the need to protect themselves online. Some young people have difficulties recognising appropriate boundaries for their behaviour online; and some groups have normalised bullying, even between friends. Reiteration of appropriate 'social rules' around sharing personal information, including confidences, may be helpful to develop and reinforce young people's understanding. The hounding, which can be part of cyber/bullying, is very wearing to the victim; it feels like there is no escape from the perpetrators. This can affect the mental health of the victim. Victims can respond to cyberbullying either passively or actively, although an active response may be to ignore the perpetrators' actions. Bystanders can support victims, although it can take time for bystanders to learn how to intervene without increasing the risk of becoming a target for the perpetrators too; this could be an area for training in schools. Active bystanders tend to be friends. Control of the decision-making process for intervention should remain with the victim; bystanders should not take over.

For RQ3 young people again experience a tension between wanting to share the emotional burden of cyber/bullying by telling an adult, but losing control of the situation if they do, as the adult will take control. Adult support needs to be in consultation with the victim and three levels of possible support were identified: i) reactive; ii) proactive; and iii) interventionist. When schools do intervene, young people expressed support for a strong approach involving sanctions. The context of the local area needs to be considered when researching cyberbullying, as this can change the interpretation of comments and threats which are made to victims.

For RQ4 I explored the role of peer judgement and its use to encourage conformity with the social 'rules' for the peer group. I identified how schools operate as a closed and insular social milieu with a social hierarchy, whereby those in the 'popular' group decide what is acceptable, providing a means to judge each other. Some young people internalise the messages they receive from cyber/bullying, but others appear to push back against this; they create school-based personas which allow them to survive in the school environment.

In Chapter 6 these findings will be discussed further in relation to the literature and through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological framework.

## **Chapter 6      Discussion**

In Chapter 5, the findings were presented in relation to the RQs. In this chapter I will explore the findings in relation to the literature and present further analysis. Firstly, I will explore my proposed definition for cyberbullying (RQ1), rather than extending the definition for bullying. Next, I will use the literature to examine the concepts related to each of the remaining research questions; the inter-related nature of these concepts and questions will be revealed. Finally, I will use Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994, 2005) socio-ecological framework to analyse and organise the concepts further. Using Bronfenbrenner's framework, I will explore the different forms of interaction with the individual, through each of the system levels he proposed, to create a theoretical model for aiding schools in dealing with cyberbullying.

In brief, Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979, 1986, 1994, 2005) proposed his socio-ecological framework as a means to research the contextual and inter-related aspects of people's lives. His argument is what happens to an individual is influenced by a range of factors which become further removed from the child as we work through the model; hence his model is often presented as concentric circles (see Figure 2.1, page 49). When micro-systems intersect (e.g. home micro-system with school micro-system), they become meso-systems; a system of inter-connecting micro-systems around the child. The micro and meso-systems are influenced by the exo-system, which is the wider community. An example in this study is the gang-related violence which happens in the community around Our Lady's High School (OL); the community is influenced by the gangs even if they are not in direct contact with them;



the macro-system sets the blueprint for the wider community (i.e. these systems are frequently based on the culture or society in which the individual resides) and include forms of governance, the way schooling is organised, patterns of work, and so on. Macro-systems become so familiar to people they fade into the background of their lives, e.g. all schools operate on similar principles, they look similar, use the national curriculum. In section 2.5, I argued the online world has become a macro-system as it is embedded within youth culture and influences the different aspects of their lives. Running through the other systems is the chrono-system; the passage of time. The chrono-system recognises people, organisations, family structures, and so on change over time and this will have a bearing on the other systems.

## **6.1. How do young people perceive and define cyberbullying?**

### **(RQ1)**

The definitions in the literature for cyberbullying are currently based on the original definition for traditional bullying and involve three aspects:

- i) An intention to harm the victim;
- ii) A power imbalance between victim and perpetrator; and
- iii) It happens repeatedly (Olweus, 1993).

For cyberbullying this definition has been extended to include perpetration through electronic means, such as social media, text, emails, mobile phones, instant messaging and so forth (Bayar & Uçanok, 2012; Hemphill & Heerde, 2014; Paul et al., 2012).

Yet, it is clear academics struggle with this adaptation of the traditional bullying definition; cyberbullying does not quite fit. There are problems associated with each of the three aspects of the original definition when attempting to apply the definition to cyberbullying (see section 2.2 for a full discussion of the literature). Some academics have decided the term ‘cyberbullying’ does not sufficiently capture the essence of online abuse and have turned instead to the term ‘cyber-aggression’ which allows a broader range of activities to be included. Importantly, though, the definition is being debated and decided by academics, largely without reference to those who are actually involved in the activities. A few studies have involved young people, who offer different perspectives on the definitions; for instance, power imbalance appears to be a non-issue for young people and repetition does not always need to occur for them to consider the incident as cyberbullying (Dredge et al., 2014; Moreno et al., 2018). Consequently, this study sought to explore definitions through discourse with young people. While interviewees, when asked directly, would give a standardised definition of cyberbullying which they had evidently heard through educational initiatives, their discussions during the interview uncovered different lived experiences. Four categories emerged from the data, related to the definition for cyberbullying:

- i) Intention to harm or humiliate;
- ii) The victim cannot escape from the activity or activities perpetrated against them;
- iii) Attempts to transfer power from victims to perpetrators; and
- iv) The perpetrator hides behind the screen.

These will be considered in more detail next.

### **6.1.1. Intention to harm or humiliate**

The intention to harm or humiliate comes through strongly in the data. Generally, the literature supports this aspect of the definition (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Smith et al., 2008), however, some authors question whether cyberbullying always includes the intention to harm others, as some adolescents claim their intention was a joke or banter (e.g. Li, 2010; Tarapdar & Kellett, 2013). The idea of banter was derided by the YPAR group; instead, interview participants acknowledged they may have posted hurtful items without reflecting on the potential consequences. This is difficult to resolve; the technology makes it easy to send hurtful messages online before reflecting on their potential impact, but this is not banter or a joke. Indeed, once they have time to pause and think, they may decide to remove the material, regretting their actions and the hurt caused. Some young people appear to have difficulty associating humiliation with harm; Cuadrado-Gordillo and Fernández-Antelo (2016a) state perpetrators and victims perceive harm in different ways, perpetrators may only recognise the most serious forms of harm as harmful. It seems young people are adept at developing responsibility-avoidance techniques which build in deniability to excuse their actions to themselves and to others. These techniques include calling cyberbullying banter, using apps like SnapChat which deletes the material automatically or sharing their passwords and smartphones with each other.

Alongside this adolescent behaviour, they are also regularly exposed to undesirable normative behaviour via online celebrities, whose followers may deride them and call

on them to self-harm. This creates a normalised social interaction based on being abusive towards others (Cuadrado-Gordillo & Fernández-Antelo, 2016a).

Bronfenbrenner's (2005) socio-ecological framework (see Figure 2.1, page 49) explains a macro-system sets out the blueprint for communities; the normalisation of abusive behaviour, through the models presented in the online world to young people, could be such a blueprint, upon which young people base their own behaviour with others. For some peer groups this normative anti-social behaviour extends to cyberbullying between friends and breaks down trust. However, despite these contextual factors, I would argue the intention to harm or humiliate is still in place when the initial message is sent; the regret which follows does not mitigate the original intention.

#### **6.1.2. The victim cannot escape from the activity or activities perpetrated against them**

This aspect is related to the mental health of the victim, whereby the victim feels unable to escape from the activity or activities which have been carried out against them. Moreno et al. (2018) identified nuances in terms of repetition which involve the victim repeatedly viewing the abusive material or the further dissemination of the material by others; these factors could induce a sense of being trapped, even from a single cyberbullying episode, as peers who have viewed the negative material may discuss it in school (Pelfrey & Weber, 2014) and the victim's image has consequently been damaged. Dredge et al. (2014) suggested definitional components should be considered from the victim's perspective as well as through the perpetrator's actions.

Hence, refocusing the definition away from repetition to the victim's sense of being trapped by the activities may be helpful.

The converse of single incidents is where a victim is continuously hounded through both cyberbullying and traditional bullying means; this formed the majority of the stories I was told by interviewees. A cycle of abuse is created which leaves the victim without a way of escaping from the cyber/bullying. Wolke et al. (2017, p. 903) state 85.2% of the time, this cycle is formed between cyber-victimisation and traditional victimisation. During cyber/bullying, the perpetrators invoke a range of online strategies, including comments on the victim's profile, direct messages, group chats with a group of perpetrators against a single victim, creating fake accounts about the victim, mobile phone calls, and so on; this is supplemented by traditional bullying in school. In the literature review, I discussed the meso-system of the two micro-systems of home and school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994, 2005) which are mediated through the mechanism of the online world (see section 2.5). The socially constructed reality for a victim who is subjected to continuous abuse from peers, through both online and traditional means, must appear bleak. Burr (2003) explains we construct our identities through the roles which are offered to us in dialogue with others; if the dialogue is perpetually abusive (both at home via cyberbullying and in school via traditional bullying), the identity constructed by the victim will be negatively impacted by this. This can be seen through the references to mental health issues, including self-harm and suicide ideation both in this study and others (e.g. Fahy et al., 2016; Wolke et al., 2017). Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying follows the victim into their home, meaning there is no escape. Even if technology is turned off,

the abusive messages wait for the victim until they return to their smartphones and online accounts. Then they can continually revisit the abusive material, until it is removed yet the impact remains.

Some studies have found teachers and schools do not always take cyberbullying seriously, particularly in comparison to traditional bullying (e.g. Stauffer et al., 2012). However, the finding that young people perceive cyberbullying to be as serious as online grooming calls this approach into question. If young people rank cyberbullying alongside online grooming in terms of harm, then sustained cyberbullying needs to be taken as seriously as we would a child reporting online grooming. Instead, the number of young people reporting cyberbullying decreases as they progress through secondary school, not because they are no longer being cyberbullied, but because they do not have faith the school systems will support them (Tarapdar & Kellett, 2013).

### **6.1.3. Attempts to transfer power from victims to perpetrators**

The notion of a power imbalance between victim and perpetrator is problematic in cyberbullying, as peers of equal status are involved in cyberbullying perpetration and victimisation (Moreno et al., 2018). However, there is a transfer of power from the victim to the perpetrator during cyberbullying activities. The self-esteem and confidence of the victim decreases (Dredge et al., 2014; Heiman et al., 2015; O'Brien & Moules, 2013), while the cyberbully seeks to gain power and status (Wolke et al., 2017). Wolke et al. (2017) argue that, like traditional bullying, cyberbullying is about power and dominance, and this includes reducing competition for friends or romantic relationships, through increasing their own status at the expense of others. There is

not necessarily a power imbalance when cyberbullying commences, rather the cyberbully seeks to establish a power imbalance to gain ascendancy over their victim and secure their social status. The literature suggests a high level of cyberbullying activity occurs in the top level of the social hierarchy in school; Closson and Watanabe (2018) discuss how popular students are subject to covert manipulation and relational victimisation as they strive for status within the popular group. Hence, the difference between peer group perceptions: some state everyone bullies everyone else; and other groups who are mutually supportive against cyberbullies and do not bully each other have a different view. When there is no struggle for status within a friendship group, the group can focus on supportive friendship instead. Layla commented that the top level of the social hierarchy consists of the popular group and those who want to be in the popular group; membership of this group requires status maintenance and wrangling for position (Cho & Chung, 2012) which invokes cyberbullying behaviour.

Cyberbullying is also targeted at those who do not conform to group norms (Cho & Chung, 2012). This is discussed further in sub-section 6.2.1. In brief, the popular group appear to establish the social rules and norms for the year group, and these are enforced through peer judgement and pressure. If there is non-conformity, this may result in aggressive acts, such as cyberbullying, to encourage conformity. Here, the choice (or power) about how to present their lives and what they do is curtailed by the enforcement of the group norms.

Cyber-victims can maintain power by choosing to deal with their victimisation proactively (Perren et al., 2012). Allowing a sense of disempowerment to develop

impacts on mental health and well-being. Instead, victims can retain power by deciding to block the victim, refusing to engage with the cyberbullies and the material they post and seeking support from others. Blocking the cyberbully was the most popular way of dealing with cyberbullying, but it is by no means universally applied by students. The decision to block a perpetrator may be affected by an existing relationship with the cyberbully (Felmlee & Faris, 2016) – how do you block your friends? How do you explain to others your decision to block someone else from your friendship group? Consequently, the relational ties between victim and perpetrator may make it problematic for victims to take the actions recommended to them. This will strengthen the perception that a victim cannot escape from the situation and disempower them.

#### **6.1.4. The perpetrator hides behind the screen**

There is much discussion in the literature about the role of anonymity in cyberbullying, yet, the literature suggests approximately half of victims know the perpetrator's identity (Bauman, 2010; Mark & Ratliffe, 2011). The discussion centres around the use of anonymity to redress the power imbalance and aid victims in retaliating against traditional bullies (Cuadrado-Gordillo & Fernández-Antelo, 2016b; Zhou et al., 2013), or the role of anonymity as a facilitator of the disinhibition effect, which enables young people to engage in unpleasantness online which they would not do off-line (Pabian et al., 2018). This category, though, goes beyond simply being anonymous, it also captures the protection afforded by hiding behind the screen, away from a victim and their response, even if the victim knows the identity of the perpetrator. Protection is afforded through cyberbullying, even when the perpetrator



makes no effort to hide their identity. Hence, this is not just about anonymity.

Certainly, some perpetrators go to great lengths to hide their identity, including setting up fake accounts for themselves or for their victim, or using other people's accounts or smartphones. However, hiding behind the screen was also discussed when victims knew the perpetrator; this was discussed by participants across all qualitative data collection methods. Hence, there appears to be a continuum of protection afforded by cyberbullying from complete anonymity and apparent protection, through to being virtually distanced from the victim and their response, through the use of the technology.

Hiding behind the screen affords the perpetrator advantages over the victim: it is more difficult for the victim to tell someone, as school staff will ask for evidence, which may have been deleted; and the lax security which adolescents have around their own technology and passwords, means cyberbullies are able to deny it was them and blame an unknown perpetrator who used their smartphone instead. However, it may also be that it would damage their social status in the group, if others discovered they were cyberbullying someone who was nice or a friend (Closson et al., 2017).

These categories for inclusion in a proposed definition for cyberbullying are based on the lived experiences of young people, rather than extending the definition for traditional bullying. While there are similarities with traditional bullying, there are many differences too. Refocusing on what young people tell us about cyberbullying can help to develop a definition which reflects their experiences (Dredge et al., 2014).

## **6.2. How do young people respond to peer judgement within the school social context and what role does peer judgement have in cyberbullying? (RQ4)**

This question emerged from the data when it became apparent there were issues around the judgement of peers, conformity to peer expectations, the social status and power conferred by ‘popular’ status, and how personas were being used to protect young people in some circumstances. I have positioned the discussion for RQ4 here as much of the discussion sets the foundation for RQ2. The three categories which emerged were:

- i) Being aware of the judgement of peers which ensures conformity;
- ii) Operating within an insular social hierarchy; and
- iii) Constructing and reconstructing personas.

The social hierarchy is used to establish social ‘rules’ for the group within the school context and conformity is maintained through the judgement of peers and cyberbullying. These three themes are closely inter-related and aspects from one theme can re-occur in another. In the following sub-sections, I suggest there may be three principal strands within cyberbullying: i) ensuring compliance with group norms established by the ‘popular’ group and enforced by peer judgement; ii) in-clique relational aggression to secure status, typically in the ‘popular’ group; and iii) arguments between friends which escalate to cyberbullying.

### **6.2.1. Being aware of the judgement of peers which ensures conformity**

Young people are very aware of the judgement of their peers. Young adolescents are keen to be popular, to be part of a social grouping and this is a natural part of their development (Closson et al., 2017; Gamez-Guadix & Gini, 2016). The introduction of social media has provided another way for adolescents to be accepted by peers. Now, young people seek to develop a positive representation of themselves and their lives through social media, and this should have congruence with their off-line persona. Cowie (2014) suggests this is a performance, as they carefully craft an online image which shows them to advantage.

The process appears to be instigated from the group at the apex of the social hierarchy. They decide on the social rules and norms for the year group; however, they will also be influenced by what has gone on previously in other year groups and in the whole school peer community. The young people in school form a microcosm of society. Although school is a micro-system (1979, 1994, 2005) containing the individual, it also masquerades as a macro-system replicating wider society. The peer relationships in school have a socio-historical basis through the rules and norms passed on by former year groups (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) and a blueprint for the social hierarchy is inherited by each year group. This sets out the types of people who might inhabit the 'popular' group, although this 'blueprint' alters gradually over time through changing fashions, technology and so on (e.g. the chrono-system). The popular group decide what is acceptable or not. Bullying has been identified as a social process rather than, as previously thought, an individual characteristic (Cho & Chung, 2012; Schultze-Krumbholz et al., 2016; Wolke et al., 2017) hence, conformity

with the group norms is induced through peer pressure and peer judgement. Early adolescence is characterised by a desire to fit in with the peer group, so compliance is assured in most cases; however, if peers are non-compliant then forms of aggression, such as cyberbullying, may be invoked (Cho & Chung, 2012; Closson et al., 2017). For instance, Closson et al. (2017) suggest girls who appear superficial and materialistic may be over-achieving in meeting group norms and consequently experience victimisation to adjust their activities. Adolescents are very aware of the judgement of their peers. Now, through social media, this judgement is made more explicit, more tangible. Youth no longer need to guess if they have peer approval, they can check online and see how many followers they have, if people have 'liked' what they have posted about their life, and what others comment about their posts. Certainly, the number of followers attained seems to confer a degree of protection from victimisation and young people gain a sense of security through the approbation of their online followers. This would form the first type of cyberbullying: ensuring compliance with group norms established by the 'popular' group and enforced by peer judgement.

While the judgement of peers was evident in my study, there was also a sense of in-clique wrangling for position in the popular group. There was insufficient data to demonstrate this in this study, however, Felmlee and Faris (2016) suggest this as a feature of cyberbullying. Within the popular group there is covert relational aggression to damage the reputation of competitors and maintain or elevate the status of others (Felmlee & Faris, 2016). This would form the second type of cyberbullying: in-clique relational aggression to secure status, typically in the popular group. It

would be beneficial to conduct further qualitative research on cyberbullying related to in-clique relational aggression and young people's perceptions of this form of cyberbullying.

### **6.2.2. Operating within an insular social hierarchy**

The social hierarchy in the school was typically described as three levels: popular group; middle band; and lower band. Some also talked about other groups, introducing more granularity to the description. The description of the popular group, though, is contradictory; they are described as 'popular', yet the descriptions offered and attitudes about this group suggests the reverse. The perception of those outside of the group is the popular group are materialistic, focused on appearances, have a disrespect for the school rules while also believing they are better than other peers. This group, though, has status within the peer group and, consequently, there is a desire to be part of the 'popular' group. Their status can make others fearful of them; they are powerful and can victimise others. The popular group can band together against other peers to ensure they do not threaten their status and power. The precarious nature of the popular group members' status is highlighted when members over-react to suspected slights. These young people could lose their valuable status as part of the popular group, so when they are accidentally left out of communications, they may become concerned for their status in the group; they are unlikely to see this as a simple mistake or oversight. These oversights can escalate to arguments and cyberbullying, with the injured party from the popular group involving their friends as supporters in the dispute.

The nature of school is insular. Young people enter the school in Year 7 and quickly find appropriate social groups within their year group. The school day is organised into form groups and subject classes by year group and often by attainment level with a timetable, including breaks and lunchtimes. At the end of the school day, there are extra-curricular activities in which young people can participate. Outside of school there may be additional organised activities which young people can join within their local community and in which they are likely to see some peers from school. This presents a very closed circle of acquaintance for young people and it may be difficult to move beyond the approved collective group norms for interests (e.g. television programmes, music, etc.), even if these restrictions do not apply outside of the insular school/year group setting. Some students may use technology to segregate their in-school and outside-school interests, like Lucy (see sub-section 5.4.1); however, Davis (2013) warns it may become difficult to integrate diffuse identities. The insular nature of school means friendships may be placed under strain. Arguments occur between friends, yet, it is difficult to acquire distance to re-evaluate an argument, particularly when the interaction continues at home via online mechanisms. Friends who have argued use the information they have about each other to retaliate and cause distress by posting it online. This, clearly, has a negative effect as it becomes available to a wide audience and impacts on the trust individuals feel towards friends. This forms the third type of cyberbullying: arguments between friends which escalate to cyberbullying.

The judgement of peers, the insular nature of school which then permeates online and offline interactions and the necessity of having a significant social media following,

creates a pressured environment for young people in which they seek to present an appropriate image of themselves online which is, generally, congruent with their offline image. These elements influence each other in a continuous cycle. Some seek to use the technology to their advantage by only presenting aspects of their lives which they believe will gain approval within their clique, or presenting aspects of others' lives (including rumours and gossip) which will damage their status.

### **6.2.3. Constructing and reconstructing personas**

Young people develop strategies to cope with the threat of potential victimisation, which can be an inherent part of being at school. For some, the strategies may involve developing personas which provide a layer of protection between themselves and the perpetrators. In sub-sections 6.3.3 and 6.3.4, I will discuss other strategies for coping with cyberbullying, which include: passivity, which may involve internalising the negative messages online and a negative impact on mental health (sub-section 6.3.3); or active strategies (sub-section 6.3.4), which can involve a decision to ignore the perpetration and an ensuing performance to convince the perpetrator they are unaffected; or active strategies like collecting evidence and telling others. The use of personas is also an active strategy, but one used to try to avoid becoming a victim or to deflect victimisation. The person using this strategy is very convincing and appears to 'live' the experience.

There were two clear examples of persona-building within my study. The first was Lucy (TC/Y8) who carefully segregated her online activities into separate accounts for each of the different interests she had and a separate persona online for school. She

appears to be situated on the outer circle of the popular group. She has crafted an online and offline persona which reflects the interests of her group of friends. She is still victimised by this group, despite her careful curation of her persona. The person they are victimising, though, is the persona she has created; they do not have access to the 'real' Lucy, who gains validation for her interests through the other online groups in which she participates. The second example was Grace (OL/Y9) who had developed an outward-facing persona who laughs at everything and does not take anything which happens, or is said, seriously. She mocks attempts to victimise her and deflects any victimisation through this persona. However, inside she is scared and terrified, worrying they will find out where she lives and 'hunt me down'.

For both examples the maintenance of the personas appears to require much effort and there is a shift where the fake persona starts to become the real identity, because they have been performing in this role for some time. Their identity is being reconstructed through their performance. Goffman (1959) discusses this process, showing those who are initially cynical about their role-playing may come over time to be convinced by it themselves. This is particularly the case when their interactions and dialogue with others helps to reinforce the construction of the role they have undertaken (Burr, 2003). So, for instance, Lucy has developed a persona which mirrors the people in her friendship group, she participates in similar activities, discusses the same television shows and music, until, through this dialogue with others, the mirroring back of her persona from others and engaging in living in this persona, reinforces the construction. Grace, also, only temporarily allowed a glimpse at the scared girl inside; she maintains her laughing persona throughout her time at school and this was the persona



expected by her peers. Young people can be very adept at hiding their feelings through an adopted persona. Adults need to be aware that even those who appear unaffected by victimisation may be performing in this role.

### **6.3. How can young people manage cyberbullying incidences in their own lives and those of their peers? (RQ2)**

There were five categories identified related to managing cyberbullying:

- i) Managing expectations of public persona versus online protection;
- ii) (Not) recognising boundaries for behaviour;
- iii) Feelings of futility and damaging mental health;
- iv) Taking control of the situation; and
- v) Bystanders and friends supporting the victim in a managed way.

The first two are contextual features around the pressures to develop an online profile, to keep safe online and to recognise and respect boundaries for behaviour, particularly between friends. Points iii) and iv) are about how individuals respond to cyberbullying incidents, and point v) is about the involvement of bystanders or supportive friends while managing the risks to them of becoming embroiled by being victimised too.

#### **6.3.1. Managing expectations of public persona versus online protection**

Young people engage in some activities which places them at risk for becoming involved in cyberbullying. There is pressure to develop a secure online following which is demonstrated by the number of social media followers they have on their account; having too few followers can be a source of victimisation. An apparent lack

of online friends may be seen as disregarding group norms and bullying may be a way of ensuring compliance (Cho & Chung, 2012); however, less followers could also be a sign of low peer support and less social competence, making victimisation easier (Romera et al., 2017). Consequently, some adolescents may take risks, through not setting privacy settings, to build their followers online, or by retaining bullies as followers. This category is closely related to those discussed in section 6.2.

### **6.3.2. (Not) recognising boundaries for behaviour**

Adolescents push against the boundaries which have been set for them by adults. Online there is an absence of established rules and social etiquette and adolescents comment on the lack of adult presence and rule enforcement online (Pabian et al., 2018; Patterson et al., 2016). This creates a vacuum which is filled with less desirable models of online behaviour, such as abusive messages, memes, trolls, flaming, and other forms of cyber-aggression to which young people are exposed in their daily online lives. For some, these examples may normalise abusive behaviour and encourage them to engage in similar activities (Goldstein, 2016). As I have already argued, this model of online negative behaviour forms part of the online macro-system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994, 2005) forming a blueprint for acceptable behaviour online (see section 2.5). Certainly, for some friendship groups, cyberbullying has become the norm and they believe everyone engages in cyberbullying, including friends. Online negative models of behaviour can help to normalise and reinforce the abusive behaviour within their friendship group. Others' behaviour, though, is not affected by the online models or peers' cyberbullying behaviours. This may be attributable to protective factors elsewhere in their lives, for instance, a supportive

home environment, a good relationship with parents and supportive friends are protective factors against involvement in cyberbullying as either a victim or perpetrator (Brighi et al., 2012; Hemphill & Heerde, 2014) and may protect against other negative online events as well. The normalisation of abusive behaviour within a friendship group is concerning; it impacts negatively on mental health and the trust they are willing to place in others. The popular group seem to be more prone to this type of negative behaviour due to the competition for status (Closson & Watanabe, 2018).

When friends argue they may resort to cyberbullying. Some of these incidents become protracted and bitter with friends choosing sides and individuals becoming isolated. Pabian et al. (2018) explain peers become frustrated when they are asked to take sides in an argument placing further strain on friendships. Unfortunately, some friends choose to break confidences during an argument and share damaging material and secrets online which amplifies the sense of peers not being able to trust each other. This appears to betray unspoken rules about behaviour between friends, even when they have argued. Young people need to learn how to cope with disagreements and arguments – this is part of growing up – however, the ability to take their grievances to social media has added an aspect which can be very hurtful and damaging to relationships. Pabian et al. (2018) suggest schools develop the digital literacy and conflict resolution skills of adolescents; certainly a greater understanding of their own responsibilities when online, and how offline social rules can be replicated online, would be beneficial for some.

### **6.3.3. Feelings of futility and damaging mental health**

Cyber-victims can experience feelings of futility about their situation which can damage mental health. We know those who are victimised have poorer mental health outcomes (Ditch the Label, 2017; Fahy et al., 2016), but those outcomes are also differentiated depending upon the mental attitude of the victim (Wright et al., 2018). Some victims are very resilient; able to shrug off their victimisation with little apparent impact on them (Hinduja & Patchin, 2017). Others, though, are deeply disturbed by what they experience at the hands of perpetrators or when the additional stress of victimisation becomes too much for them (Erreygers et al., 2018). There are factors which contribute to these outcomes which have not yet been fully explored through research.

The nature of online material has a permanence in the mind of the victim, which does not seem to be replicated offline. The fact others have seen the negative messages or images weighs heavily on the victim, whether the material is quickly deleted (as with SnapChat) or whether it is retained for the victim to revisit. The potential audience is unknown to the victim, whereas, with traditional bullying, it is possible to see who has witnessed the bullying; the victim is left with questions about how many have seen it, who they are, if it will be sent on to others, and if they will be gossiping about it in school. Young people have mixed experiences, through their own and peers' experiences, about whether cyberbullying can be stopped. Some strongly believe it cannot be stopped or, even if it does stop, the impact remains with the victim, as others will still gossip about it. Pelfrey and Weber (2014) identified gossip as a main constituent of cyberbullying behaviour. Consequently, even if the cyberbullying itself

stops, the victim may still be gossiped about as a result of what has been shared online. Ryan (TC/Y9) explained the main question for victims was whether they could get over their fear, not whether cyberbullying could be stopped. He allocates responsibility for dealing with the issue successfully, to the victim.

#### **6.3.4. Taking control of the situation**

There appear to be two options for how victims can take control back. A popular method, and one often recommended by friends to cyberbullied peers, is to ignore the cyberbullying and pretend it does not affect them. The victim engages in a performance which hides their feelings and attempts to deter the perpetrator. This strategy is not without risks, however Erreygers et al. (2018) warn too many incidents will overcome the emotional regulation needed for this strategy, and Li (2010) suggests passivity may encourage the cyberbully to continue. While Li (2010) suggests ignoring is a passive strategy, I argue it is proactive with the appearance of passivity; it requires an active decision to pursue this strategy and resilience to continue it; it does not mean the victim accepts their victimisation. A more proactive strategy is to collect evidence, in case the victim decides to report the cyberbullying, and to seek support from others. Some decide to confront the cyberbully. The decision about passive or active strategies may be influenced by how the victim situates blame for the cyberbullying; if they blame themselves, they are more likely to adopt a passive response, such as ignoring it, whereas situating the blame with the perpetrator may encourage them to retaliate (Wright et al., 2018). Discussing blame attribution may help some victims to adopt more robust and active strategies. Older students had developed strategies to enable them to confront a cyberbully which

minimised risk of escalation; it involved careful reading of the mood of the person, trying to speak to them alone to de-escalate the situation and speaking in a non-confrontational way. Successful strategies already exist within the school setting, through the experience of older students. It seems sensible to harness this experience to educate and support younger students about how they might manage cyberbullying incidents most effectively, particularly as a significant proportion of cyberbullying appears to begin with a misunderstanding. High and Young (2018) highlight that victims find messages conveyed by those who have experienced cyberbullying more trustworthy, hence harnessing older students to peer mentor younger victims and share their successful strategies may be effective (Cowie, 2014).

#### **6.3.5. Bystanders and friends supporting the victim in a managed way**

Friends are the most likely group to provide emotional support to young people who are victimised (DeSmet et al., 2016; Pabian et al., 2018). Friends were one of the primary sources of support identified through the YPAR project, focus group and interviews, for providing predominantly emotional support. There are different ways friends can offer support to a victim (DeSmet et al., 2016), but some of these, unless managed effectively, involve a risk for the friend of becoming a victim too. The risks are contextual, hence, a bystander who has a high social status or is considered to be a bully, may be protected from victimisation when they intervene on behalf of a friend; this is part of the rationale for utilising high status individuals as leaders in peer mentoring programmes (e.g. Cross et al., 2015). Some friendship groups act as a collective to discourage the perpetrator. As discussed in sub-section 6.3.4, older students have developed strategies for minimising the risks and their expertise should

be harnessed within schools to train younger students. As bystanders, friends can mediate on behalf of their victimised friends, which establishes emotional distance between the two parties and can help to calm the situation.

Bystanders are often inactive and do not become involved (DeSmet et al., 2016).

While the literature recognises the potential of this group to change the outcomes of cyberbullying, they need to be empowered and organised via training offered by the school through peer mentoring systems (Cowie, 2014; Cross et al., 2015). This may help overcome some of the difficulties bystanders face when assessing contextual information. Victims are frustrated by bystanders' lack of action and support while the cyberbullying is going on, yet, Macháčková and Pfetsch (2016) and Macháčková et al. (2018) suggest most bystanders will act when approached for support; a formalised system would support victims to seek this help.

Some victims, though, will not seek support from friends as they may then lose control of the situation. Notably, the YPAR group discussed that Year 7 students will frequently tell a teacher about a friend who is victimised and this can have further repercussions for the victim. Those who tell a teacher, or are suspected of telling a teacher, can be further victimised; they can be called 'nark', 'grass' or 'snitch' by a wider array of people than just the original perpetrators (this is discussed further in section 6.4). So, a friend taking control of the situation and telling a teacher may be counter-productive. The theme of retaining control appears throughout; young people are reticent about telling others because they may lose the control they have in the situation, which includes telling friends, teachers and parents, everyone who might be expected to offer support. If young people do not feel able to share their victimisation

with anyone, this could compound their sense of isolation. Young people said they wanted to be able to share how they felt with someone else, without their confidante trying to resolve the situation for them.

#### **6.4. How do young people perceive the role of adults in managing cyberbullying incidences? (RQ3)**

The role of adults in managing cyberbullying incidents is complex; young people are very conflicted about adults' roles. During interviews young people would shift position from: adults cannot help at all, through to advising others to 'tell someone'; when questioned, they typically meant they should tell an adult. Young people are facing a dilemma: the advice they are given by adults – to tell an adult – can make the situation worse for them, through additional victimisation by others beyond the original perpetrator. It is unsurprising, then, that so few follow this advice and the numbers of students who do tell decreases during secondary school, as they realise the impact of telling (M. Price & Dalgleish, 2010; Smith et al., 2008; Tarapdar & Kellett, 2013). Other research has highlighted the issue of adolescents not telling, and speculated on the reasons, but do not identify this conundrum explicitly. It is only once the situation has reached an advanced level, involving a serious threat to their mental or physical health, that peers will accept adult-intervention as necessary.

There were three main categories identified for this research question (RQ3):

- i) Telling and damaging your reputation;
- ii) Staged processes for supporting victims; and



- iii) School approaches to cyber/bullying incidents.

#### **6.4.1. Telling and damaging your reputation**

Young people face a conundrum about how best to deal with cyberbullying. Advice is regularly given to tell an adult, so it can be resolved. Yet, their own experience and that of their peers demonstrates adults are not always able to resolve cyberbullying and, indeed, their intervention can make things worse for the victim. However, there are also sufficient cases, within the sphere of their experience, of when adult intervention has helped. These different experiences cast sufficient doubt on the applicability of maintaining a fixed position for giving advice to either tell or not. The decision needs to be situated within its wider context.

Cyber-victims who tell promptly, or when cyber-victimisation is considered inconsequential by peers, may fix their reputation as a ‘grass’, ‘snitch’, ‘nark’ – someone who tells on their peers. These names are reputationally damaging for young people and have longevity. The application of these names means others beyond the original cyberbully will join in with cyber/bullying activities associated with the names. Hence, the point at which adults are told, when additional perpetration can hopefully be avoided, depends upon: the duration of cyberbullying; the seriousness of the activities; and the likely harm to the victim, as judged by peers. This research did not examine the particulars of how these thresholds are judged by peers, however, this would be worthy of investigation as it could help to support victims and their supporters in their decision-making.

As discussed in sub-section 6.3.5, friends can sometimes tell on their bullied friend's behalf. While this is well-meaning, the reputational damage can be the same as if the victim themselves had told the adult. The YPAR group explained the decrease in individuals telling friends about victimisation between Year 7 and Year 8 as due to friends telling teachers about the victimisation. Unfortunately, when friends take this action, without reference to the wishes of the victim, the victim may suffer reputational damage, increased victimisation and, also, may lose their own sense of control of the situation.

#### **6.4.2. Staged processes for supporting victims**

The reticence expressed about telling an adult should not be misinterpreted: young people do want to tell an adult, but they want to have some control about what happens afterwards. Currently, this is not the case for many of the young people to whom I spoke. Resolving cyberbullying on their own (or using advice from someone else), avoids the reputational damage associated with telling an adult, and is important for building their own skills and knowledge about how to deal with similar situations in the future. It would be more helpful for adults to consider how they can best support the young adult to resolve the situation without taking control.

Some interviewees did speak openly to their parents (typically their mothers) about cyberbullying incidents and other worries and these young people were clear their parents would offer advice and support, but would not take control from them. They appeared to have an open and trusting relationship with their parents (Hinduja & Patchin, 2013; Law et al., 2010). Unfortunately, this type of relationship is not

possible to establish quickly, but requires time and effort. In some circumstances, the relationships within a family might not be supportive, resulting in low self-esteem and loneliness within the family unit, which can increase victimisation (Brighi et al., 2012; Fanti et al., 2012). This situation is clearly the converse of the open relationship where young people are willing to disclose worrying events online, and it will not be easy to change. In this study, the young people who were unwilling to discuss cyberbullying with their parents were generally indicating a relationship with parents who cared deeply about their children, but had not yet adapted to the changing relationship needs of adolescents; the parents still wanted to be fully involved in their children's lives and to resolve their problems for them. This does not fit within either of the extremes described in the literature, but can perhaps be adjusted to reflect the open and trusting relationship described as ideal for minimising victimisation and perpetration by Hinduja and Patchin (2013). Papatraianou, Levine and West (2014) present two case studies where strong family relationships and support were key in over-coming cyberbullying and the potential impact on the victim; importantly, though, they reflect on the way the family support develops skills and resilience in the young person, so they are more able to deal with similar challenges again in the future.

The anticipated adult response is important in the decision about whether to disclose cyberbullying or not, whether the adult is a parent or member of school staff.

Therefore, adults need to consider the forms of support they can provide to young people and how these might be applied in different circumstances. Themes regarding

the required support emerged from the data and I have classified these into a staged process for supporting victims of cyberbullying:

- i) Reactive (listen; emotional support; advice; safe space provision);
- ii) Proactive (develop sense of belonging; rebuild confidence); and
- iii) Interventionist (mediation with bully/parents/school; sanctions; police involvement).

The *reactive* stage involves providing a safe space for the victim to talk and be listened to without judgement; emotional support can be provided. Advice can be given which the victim can then attempt to act upon. The *proactive* stage involves rebuilding the confidence of the victim, perhaps through peer support mechanisms and buddying, a sense of belonging needs to be developed. This might be achieved through advising the victim about building additional friendship networks or involvement in activities to boost self-esteem. Finally, in consultation with the victim, the adult can deploy the *interventionist* stage where adults take a more proactive role. Parents may seek support from the school or the police. School might arrange meetings with the cyberbully and their parents, sanctions may be applied to the cyberbully, or the police may be asked to assist in the investigation and resolution of the cyberbullying. The community context will also be vital here; for instance, if gang-related violence is threatened this moves beyond the realms of cyberbullying and needs intervention involving the police. The victim should be involved in choosing the levels of support which are appropriate to them, and these might change at different stages of victimisation. At present, this system is a theoretical means to support young people who are victimised and needs to be implemented and evaluated.

### **6.4.3. School approaches to cyber/bullying incidents**

Cyberbullying victimisation and perpetration impact on adolescents' perception of school climate (Bayar & Uçanok, 2012; Nickerson et al., 2014; Pyżalski, 2012).

Cyberbullies have the most negative perception of school climate and belonging (Nickerson et al., 2014), which is why interventions to support cyberbullies, as well as victims, are important. This study involved mainly those who had experienced victimisation, although some were cyberbully/victims. Consequently, I am unable to theorise about appropriate interventions for cyberbullies, however, all parties to cyberbullying require consideration when designing interventions.

The young people who participated in interviews were from two schools who appeared to have different approaches to dealing with cyberbullying. TC used a restorative justice system, and would escalate sanctions to include exclusion, when deemed necessary. OL focused on sanctions for the cyberbully and had support systems in place for the cyber-victim. It is worth noting these are the perceptions from the adolescents interviewed, not a reflection of the schools' policies.

Restorative justice is an increasingly popular means of resolving inter-personal issues in secondary schools; however, there is little rigorous research to support its use in educational settings (Song & Swearer, 2016). Song and Swearer (2016) are critical of the use of restorative justice in schools, highlighting there is no manual for implementing restorative approaches in schools, the research is largely anecdotal, and it has yet to be shown it benefits those who are involved in bullying. Cowie, Hutson, Jennifer and Myers (2008), though, believe there is potential for restorative

approaches to impact positively in schools. However, without a well-researched approach and knowledge of the systems and process which work within educational settings, it is difficult for schools to implement restorative approaches with fidelity. Schools are finding their own way with restorative justice approaches. Anfara et al. (2013) highlight restorative approaches do not involve just facilitating children meeting to discuss the issue of contention, but is a whole-school approach and philosophy which is against blame and punitive sanctions. Young people express concerns regarding the manipulation of restorative justice by perpetrators and appear to favour a more punitive approach, with perpetrators subject to sanctions instead. It may be that victims have a desire to see their bullies punished, rather than engage in dialogue with them.

Here, I am not evaluating the restorative justice approach at TC, as this is outside the scope of this study, rather I seek to highlight some of the issues which schools seeking to adopt restorative approaches will encounter, and potential reasons why some young people may not regard it favourably. In particular, some young people were disturbed by how open the system could be to manipulation by the perpetrator, whereby the victim was accused of wrong-doing and allotted blame. Clearly, further research is required into restorative approaches in education which can then offer rigorous guidance to schools seeking to implement this approach.

## **6.5. Applying a socio-ecological framework**

In this section, I will use Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994, 2005) socio-ecological framework (Figure 2.1, page 49) to draw together the different concepts and elements

discussed earlier in this chapter, including how this study and elements of the literature may be drawn together to create a holistic view of cyberbullying to be used for analysis of cyberbullying in a secondary school context. I present two models: the first provides detail and relates the different aspects of this study to Bronfenbrenner's framework (Figure 6.1); the second has applied a greater level of abstraction to present a model of the inter-relationships which may be helpful for schools to diagnose cyberbullying issues (Figure 6.2). Appendix B presents my notes while constructing the models.

#### **6.5.1. Relating concepts to the socio-ecological framework**

In Figure 6.1, the socio-ecological framework has been used to arrange the different concepts and show how these inter-relate within the different systems specified by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1994, 2005). I will start to explain the model from the base with the micro-system.

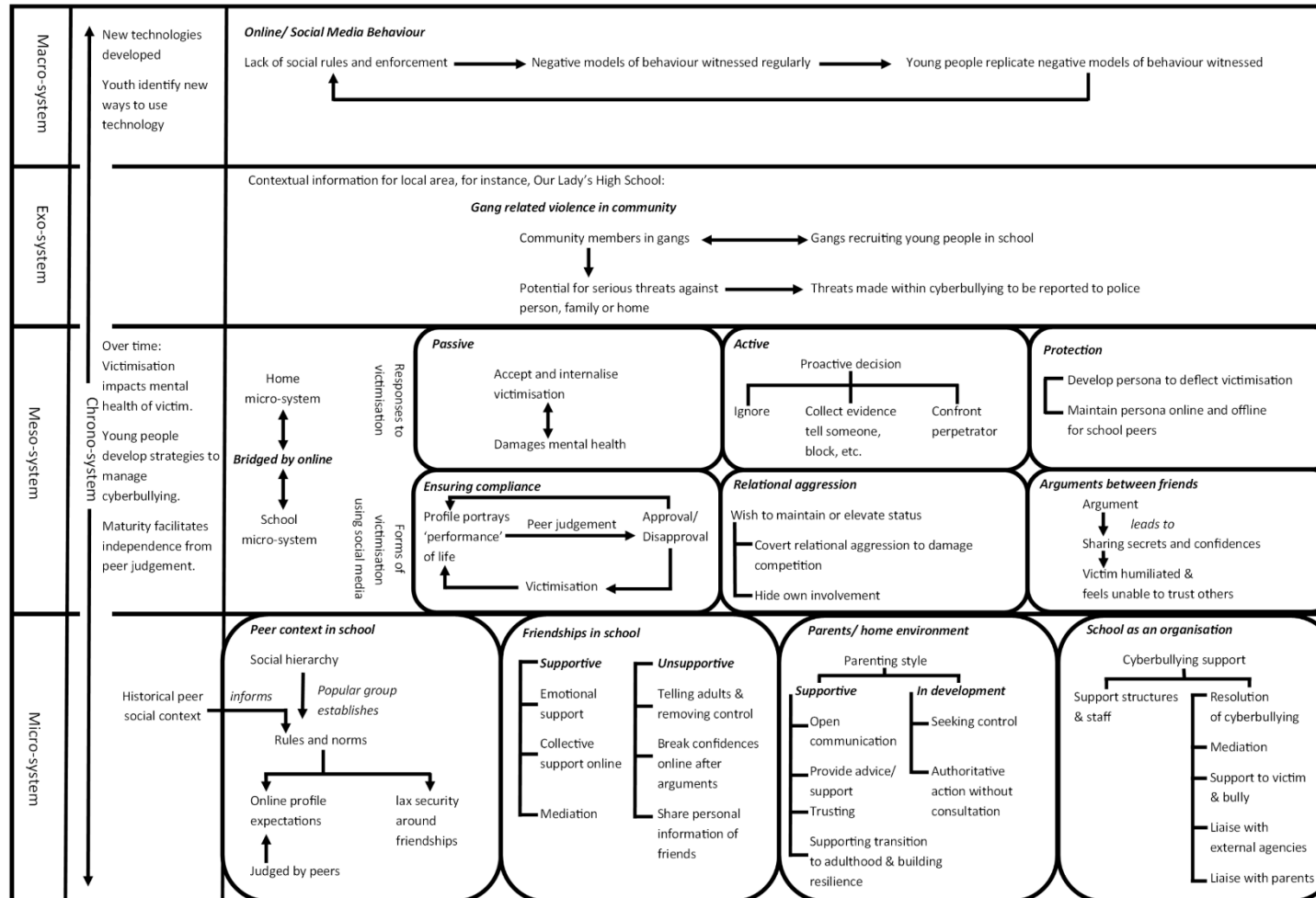


Figure 6.1 Conceptual model related to socio-ecological framework



A *micro-system* is a system which contains the individual. In Figure 6.1 I have identified four relevant micro-systems based on this research: peer context in school; friendships in school; parents/home environment; and school as an organisation. It could be argued that school is a single micro-system, however, I have chosen to subdivide this into peer group, friends and the organisation, as these three areas appear to have unique characteristics for the individual. For instance, the peer group is the wider social unit which forms the community in school; this may involve young people with whom the individual rarely or never interacts. In contrast, the friendship grouping is key to the support structures and emotional well-being of the individual. The school as an organisation is the building, the staff, the procedures, the lessons the individual attends, etc. Parents/home environment is a general descriptor for whoever provides parental care within the home; these may not always be biological parents, but step-parents, grandparents, foster parents, etc. These four micro-systems are those systems which are closest to the individual in relation to cyberbullying; there may be others which are not included in this study (e.g. clubs, church, grandparents).

The *peer context in school* micro-system draws together the social hierarchy which operates in school and establishes rules and norms for the peer group. One of the group norms is the use of social media and the development of appropriate online profiles. These online profiles are then judged by peers which facilitates the conformity to the group norms (Cho & Chung, 2012). A further peer group norm for younger adolescents is the expectation of lax security and sharing of passwords between friends which helps to facilitate cyberbullying through diminishing responsibility. The peer norms from previous year groups (within the chrono-system)

helps to inform this peer context. There will be other group norms and rules which are established, but these are the ones which are relevant to this study and cyberbullying.

The *friendships in school* micro-system differentiates between supportive and unsupportive friendships, although it is likely friendships will stray into both categories over time and in different contexts. The supportive friendships provide the individual with emotional support and advice, may develop a collective effort to deter cyberbullies and may offer mediation between the cyber-victim and the cyberbully; some of these strategies may be offered at different levels of maturity of the friendship group, for instance, older students have developed more effective strategies for mediation than younger students. The unsupportive friendships may tell adults about cyberbullying without consulting the victim, thereby removing the control from the victim; they may break confidences or share negative material about their friend following an argument, and they may unthinkingly share personal information about their friends, such as their mobile phone numbers, allowing cyberbullies to attack their victim in alternative ways.

The *parent/home environment* micro-system explains the two styles of parenting adolescents which became evident during the study. The first is about helping the adolescent transition into adulthood successfully; the parent adopts an open communication style, provides advice and support and there is two-way trust between parent and the individual young person. The second is when young people feel their parents still consider them to be children; the parent seeks to control the young person

and their life, seeks information which they are not willing to disclose and will take control when problems are revealed without consulting the young person.

The *school as an organisation* micro-system reflects the support structures which schools provide to students who are being cyberbullied. There are support structures and staff available for young people to talk to and access via the pastoral systems. Schools are also expected to try to find a resolution to cyberbullying activities, hence they engage in mediation, provide different types of support to the bully and the victim, liaise with external agencies (e.g. to provide mental health support or police intervention) and they can liaise with parents to find a suitable resolution. Schools are vital in their bridging and support roles to help to resolve cyberbullying incidents.

The micro-systems interlink to illustrate the wider context within which cyberbullying occurs (e.g. group norms, peer judgment, social hierarchy) and, also, the forms of support which are available for the individual. Research has shown individuals who have strong parental support (Brighi et al., 2012; T. Cassidy, 2008) and friendships (Fanti et al., 2012) are less likely to be cyberbullied and those schools with a positive climate who engender a feeling of belonging minimise cyberbullying activity (Betts et al., 2017; Nickerson et al., 2014). It is useful to be able to identify the key micro-systems which influence cyberbullying activity and how these may influence the outcomes.

The socio-ecological framework provides a way to examine how the school context and peer relationships from school impact on the individual, while they are in the home environment, but interacting with peers online.

A *meso-system* is when two micro-systems inter-connect. In Figure 6.1, the meso-system draws together the micro-systems for school and home via online activity, whereby young people at home interact with peers from school via technology. Again, here we are focused upon cyberbullying activities or those activities which facilitate or influence cyberbullying. The meso-system incorporates three forms of victimisation via social media, and three potential responses from which the victim can select, although, they may not be aware they are making a decision. Highlighting the different approaches for engaging with cyber-victimisation may be helpful for victims to achieve a sense of control. I am suggesting there are three forms of cyber-victimisation: cyberbullying to ensure compliance; cyberbullying as relational aggression; and cyberbullying as arguments between friends.

*Ensuring compliance* relates to the *peer context in school* micro-system. Online profiles are established by adolescents who seek to create a favourable impression of their lives through their ‘performance’ online (Cowie, 2014; Goffman, 1959). Peers make judgements about the online profiles presented and indicate their approval or disapproval through the mechanisms on social media (e.g. following, likes, comments). The expression of disapproval can result in victimisation; disapproval tends to be related to the group norms, for instance, the victim has an insufficient number of followers on their social media profile and once this is rectified the victimisation appears to cease.

*Relational aggression* is related to the *peer context in school* and *friendships in school* micro-systems. This involves covert relational aggression towards others in the same social or friendship group in order to decrease the status of the victim and increase the

status of the perpetrator, importantly, the aggression must be covert, to prevent others in the friendship group becoming aware of the aggression (Felmlee & Faris, 2016).

*Arguments between friends* is related to the *friendships in school context* micro-system. This highlights the way in which arguments can spiral into cyberbullying. As the individuals involved in the argument seek to damage each other, they share confidences, secrets and negative material about their 'friend' online. This leads to humiliation and is clearly done with intent, but, further, the process of breaking confidences destroys trust in peer relationships. Hence, even if they resolve their argument, the breaking of trust remains. This can have wider repercussions as individuals believe they are unable to trust anyone; their ability to confide in others and seek support may be damaged.

There are three types of response to victimisation which span both the school and home/online environments: passive, active or protection. These are ways in which individuals have described their responses to victimisation. A *passive* response is when the victim accepts the victimisation and internalises the messages. Part of this response may be attribution of blame to themselves, rather than to the perpetrator; Wright et al. (2018) suggests self-blame can lead to passive strategies. In contrast, *active* strategies require a proactive decision to be made about the best approach; ideally the victim should monitor the success of their approach to make adjustments. Consequently, making appropriate strategies explicit in the school context would enable victims to be more proactive about their choices. The strategies presented in Figure 6.1 are a continuum of strategies from ignoring; progressing to collecting evidence, blocking the perpetrator, telling someone; through to confronting the

perpetrator. The final response is *protection* which emerged from the data. There were two examples of protection through the interviews whereby individuals adopted a persona which protected them from cyberbullies, or from the hurt associated with victimisation, by providing a protective layer between themselves and the victimisation. The individual adopting this approach must develop a suitable persona and maintain it throughout both online and offline interactions with school-based peers. They should be aware, however, that adopting such a persona may have implications for their identity which may become diffuse or reconstructed through the dialogue and performance with which they engage (Burr, 2003; Davis, 2013; Goffman, 1959). The choices made by victims about their strategies for response are important; Perren et al. (2012) highlight a difference in levels of victimisation between those using passive versus active strategies; using active strategies results in less victimisation. Consequently, educating young people about appropriate strategies facilitates informed choices, if cyberbullying occurs.

The chrono-system within the meso-system shows there are positive and negative effects to the passage of time. Firstly, we must be cognisant of the impact of victimisation on mental health; individuals have different levels of resilience to victimisation and victims must be supported. Next, young people develop strategies to manage cyberbullying within their own contexts and as they mature they develop more sophisticated strategies. Also, maturity brings less reliance on peer judgement (Closson et al., 2017; Gamez-Guadix & Gini, 2016), which enables older adolescents to view victimisation differently.

The **exo-system** describes features of the wider community, which do not necessarily impact directly on the individual, but influence the micro- and meso-systems. An example is given in Figure 6.1 of the gang-related violence in the community of OL. Not everyone in the community will have direct contact with the gangs, yet young people are fearful of the repercussions of involvement in cyber/bullying with people connected with the gangs. The threats made in the OL community may be made by people capable of carrying them out – “*if people are threatening to ‘oh I’m going to get my brother to shoot you’ and all this*” (Grace OL/Y9) (see sub-section 5.3.3 for further discussion) – whereas threats made in TC were deemed unpleasant, yet largely idle threats. In the model, there is a two-way interaction between the gangs in the community and the recruitment of youth in the school. There is a potential for gang members to make threats against individuals, their families and their homes; threats to safety and their lives which should be reported to the police, even when these threats are made within the context of cyberbullying. Gang-related violence is an exo-system impact on the OL community, but I did not uncover any further significant exo-systems within this research study. The exo-systems will be bespoke to each school community.

**Macro-systems** are the blueprints of the society in which the individual resides; they form the over-arching systems which are frequently taken for granted. In the Literature Review chapter, I argued the online world should now be considered as a macro-system as it permeates the society and culture of the global north; it is an important part of the lives of British adolescents (see section 2.5). The online world presents many opportunities, yet there are also risks (Byron, 2008; EU Kids Online,

2014); while recognising the opportunities, this study is about cyberbullying – one of the risks – and consequently, the model includes a negative impact of the online world which influences cyberbullying.

In Figure 6.1, there is a lack of social rules and enforcement of appropriate behaviour online, and adolescents comment on the lack of adult authority in the online space (Pabian et al., 2018; Patterson et al., 2016). This is not only true for adolescents, but adults also regularly display behaviour online which would be deemed unacceptable offline. Combined, this creates negative models of behaviour which adolescents witness regularly – often on a daily basis; this may be through negative peer online interactions, but can also be the behaviour they witness in the wider community, such as trolling, flaming, and abusive comments. There is also limited use of age restrictions for user-generated content; for instance, YouTube have a voluntary scheme for allocating age restrictions on videos or they may allocate age restrictions, if the video is reported for moderation (Google, n.d.). Consequently, young people can view materials which are not appropriate for their age-range, but created and posted by users; the EU Kids Online report (EU Kids Online, 2014) highlights user-generated content as a risk which concerns young people. These negative models may be replicated by young people who are not otherwise guided towards suitable online behaviour within their micro-systems, such as home and friendships (Hinduja & Patchin, 2013). The incidence of cyberbullying behaviour is stronger within friendship groups, whereby if an individual is a friend with a cyberbully, they are more likely to cyberbully others themselves (Felmlee & Faris, 2016; Hinduja & Patchin, 2013); cyberbullying becomes a norm within that friendship group. In the



chrono-system, technologies change rapidly and young people adopt its use in ways often not foreseen; however, the technologies themselves are not the problem, but rather the models of behaviour online.

The socio-ecological framework helps to organise the concepts from this study and explore the inter-relationships between them. Through organising the concepts in relation to this framework, it is possible to see more clearly the roles of the micro-systems in facilitating or limiting cyberbullying. The inter-relationships between the micro-systems (meso-systems) and how these impact on victimisation, and responses to victimisation becomes distinct; for instance, the use of protection as a third response to victimisation became apparent when relating this concept to the framework. The inclusion of online activities as a macro-system demonstrates the underpinning power of the online world to influence young people and their actions, and the resultant influence on cyberbullying behaviour. While the model in Figure 6.1 was useful, I felt it was necessary to move to a level of greater abstraction to aid schools in understanding inter-relationships between the different systems. Figure 6.2 presents an abstracted model of Figure 6.1. I would suggest both models could be used in conjunction in schools.

#### **6.5.2. Cyberbullying and the socio-ecological framework: a model**

An aim of this study was to provide a model which may be of use to schools in relation to cyberbullying. Figure 6.2 draws upon Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994, 2005) socio-ecological framework and arranges the different concepts in a way to

help schools analyse the factors which may be influencing cyberbullying in their settings, based on the perceptions of young people.

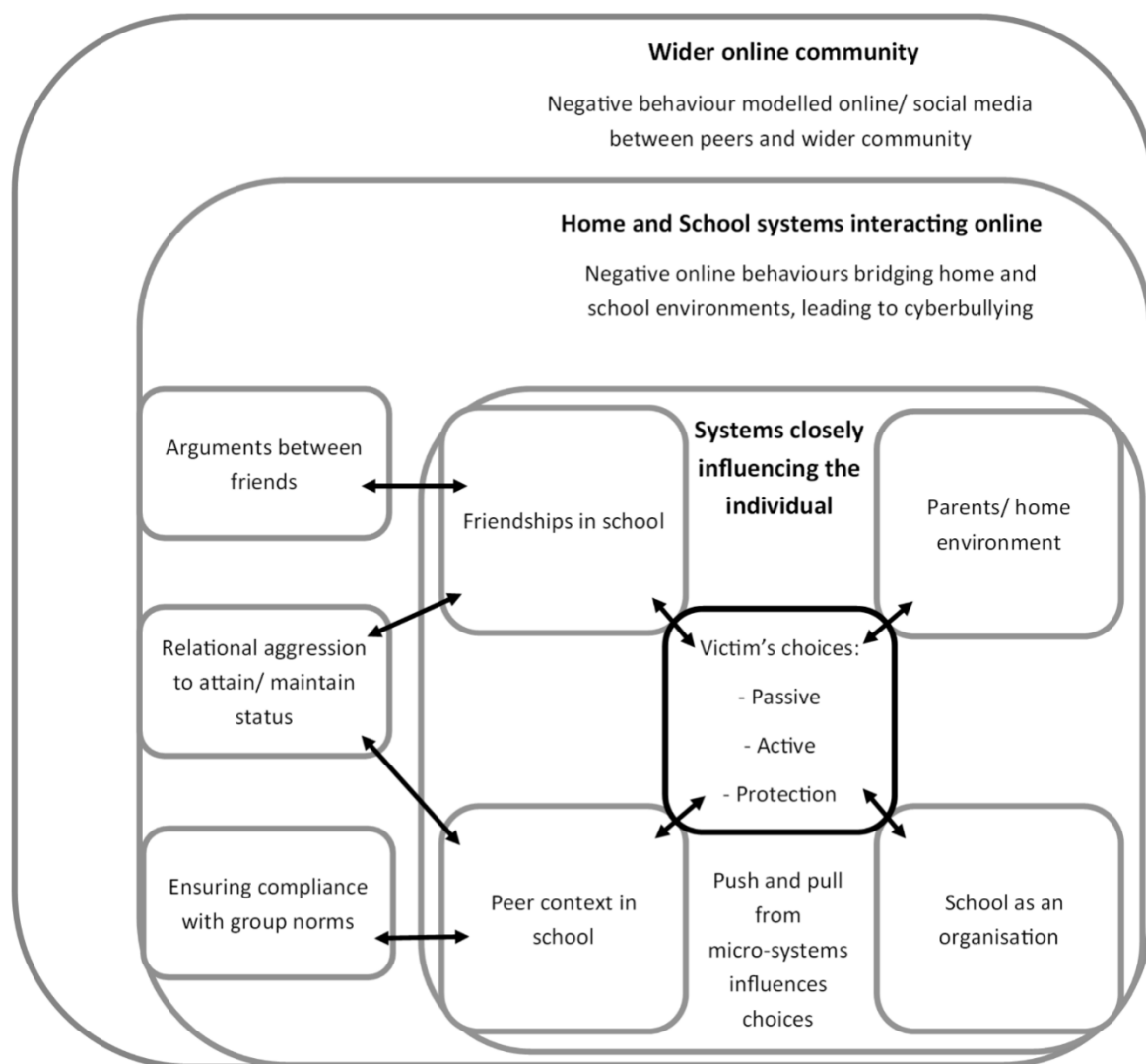


Figure 6.2 Model showing inter-related system for cyberbullying

The model begins in the centre with the choices the victim can make about how to respond to cyberbullying: passive, active or protection. Their decision about how to respond will be influenced by the levels of support which they can access from the micro-systems in which they reside: friendships in school; peer context in school;

parents/home environment; and school as an organisation. The levels of support are influential as this increases or decreases the victim's confidence and resilience to victimisation.

The next level is the *home and school systems interacting online* and the three different reasons for cyberbullying which have been identified appear here interacting directly with the friendships in school or the peer context in school. The *arguments between friends* is directly related to *friendships in school* and this can happen between any sets of friends. *Relational aggression to attain/maintain status* seems to mainly occur in the 'popular' groups of friends rather than friendship groups lower down the social hierarchy. However, it may occur in other groups also; consequently, it is related to both *friendships in school* and *peer context in school* which captures the social hierarchy element. This requires further investigation to establish which friendship groups are subject to relational aggression and young people's constructions of this phenomenon. *Ensuring compliance with group norms* interacts with the *peer context in school* as it is related to the group norms which are established and the peer judgement of these.

Beyond these interacting systems is the *wider community online* which models negative behaviour and normalises it; this occurs both through peer interactions, but also the models of behaviour witnessed more widely through other online sources. The different facets interact and this is represented by the encompassing and overlapping boxes in the model. Hence, the *parents/home environment* or the *school as an organisation* provide levels of support which will influence how individuals

react to potential cyberbullying incidences which occur, for instance, as arguments between friends.

Schools could use this model to identify the systems where they can inform or influence outcomes for cyberbullying activities. For instance, while liaising with parents they may discuss the transition to adulthood through which adolescents are progressing and how they can help this by adopting an open communication style which consults on, rather than takes over control of, situations. School could open dialogue with students about the group norms which are established and seek ways to influence these to reduce cyberbullying; for instance, through the introduction of peer mentoring systems which have strong support structures through the school. Sharing with students what supportive and unsupportive friendships look like online through form time or PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education) lessons, may help students reflect on their own actions as a 'good' friend or when their behaviour is irresponsible. Initial feedback from TC has been positive; the school contact states:

*I like the idea that the model could be used to inform staff about the causes of cyberbullying and societal influences on young people. I also like the idea of having something simple that I could use to discuss how society, peers, family etc. influences young people.*

However, these models need to be carefully evaluated in schools.

## **6.6. Concluding remarks**

In this chapter, I have proposed a new definition for cyberbullying based on the lived experiences of young people. The definition addresses the contentious areas identified by academics when they attempt to adapt the definition for bullying to cyberbullying activities. I have, also, explored the concepts identified in the findings in relation to the literature and to Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994, 2005) socio-ecological framework. Through this process I have constructed models which use the socio-ecological framework to organise the concepts from this study. The models should be of use to schools when analysing their context to address cyberbullying proactively, or when considering appropriate support structures for victims.

## **Chapter 7      Conclusions**

In this thesis, I have sought to explore the perceptions of young people about cyberbullying in secondary school. My research questions were open and exploratory (see page 5). I have used methodologies which require an open mind and perspective, with a willingness to listen carefully to the dialogue with and between young people, to enable insight into their lived experiences. Based on this qualitative data I have: proposed a new definition for cyberbullying based on the experiences of the young people; and I have constructed models to help schools to analyse their context, with regard to cyberbullying, and provide support to young people and their families.

Importantly, this research shows cyberbullying does not occur in a vacuum; there are many inter-connected aspects of an individual's life world which come together to create the conditions for cyberbullying, shapes the way in which the victim responds to cyberbullying and the support structures available to them. Engaging with qualitative research in an exploratory manner, in partnership with young people, has allowed greater insight into the issues which impact on young people who become involved in cyberbullying.

In this chapter, I will outline the original contributions to knowledge which I believe are made through this research; I will explain the limitations of this study; finally, I will recommend future pathways for research into cyberbullying.

## **7.1. Original contribution to knowledge**

There are five principal areas where this research has made an original contribution to knowledge: constructing a new definition; identifying types of victimisation; identifying that young people perceive cyberbullying as seriously as online grooming; recognising young people wish to retain control within their context and the conundrum they face when deciding whether to tell someone about their victimisation; and constructing models to support analysis of cyberbullying within a school context. I will briefly summarise these contributions to knowledge below.

### **7.1.1. Constructing a new definition**

As I conducted the literature review, it became apparent that the extension of the definition of bullying, to include electronic means of bullying, was an ill-fitting definition for cyberbullying. Researchers (e.g. Bauman, 2010; Brewer & Kerslake, 2015; Hemphill & Heerde, 2014) raise many questions about how the definition for cyberbullying would apply across the three areas of the definition for bullying:

- i) intention to harm;
- ii) power imbalance; and
- iii) repetition of harmful actions over time.

Some researchers called for definitional issues to be addressed through further research (Dredge et al., 2014; Moreno et al., 2018). Recognising the limitations of extending the original definition of bullying to include cyberbullying, I have

constructed a definition of cyberbullying which is based upon the lived experiences of young people. This definition refocuses attention on the experiences of both the victim and the perpetrator and addresses the unique characteristics of cyberbullying which differentiate it from traditional bullying.

The revised definition clarifies that humiliation is an aspect of harm; an aspect which young people can dismiss as a joke or banter. It focuses on the perception of the victim in terms of repetition and that they are unable to escape from the activities perpetrated against them; this may involve activities perpetrated by different individuals, through repeated access to materials or gossiping about the perpetration, or through the cycle between online and offline bullying activities. The current definition, that a perpetrator must have engaged in cyberbullying activities repeatedly, is unhelpful and means that cyberbullying incidences may be missed in surveys. I have clarified that a power imbalance does not need to be in place at the start of cyberbullying (current definition), but rather the perpetrator seeks to transfer power from their victim. The definition adds that the perpetrator hides behind the screen which focuses attention on the actions of the perpetrator; they seek a level of protection from the screen, which may involve anonymity, but may also just be a perception of distance from their victim.

### **7.1.2. Types of victimisation**

I propose that there are three forms of cyberbullying which have been identified through this study:



- i) ensuring compliance with group norms established by the ‘popular’ group and enforced by peer judgement;
- ii) in-clique relational aggression to secure status, typically in the ‘popular’ group; and
- iii) arguments between friends which escalate to cyberbullying.

Points i) and iii) are strongly supported through the data in this study; however, point ii) requires additional research to confirm the extent of in-clique relational aggression and whether this is limited to the popular group or extends into other groups as well. To my knowledge, the literature has not yet coherently identified these different forms of victimisation which may occur within cyberbullying; however, this is important to facilitate a deeper understanding of cyberbullying and cyber-victimisation. If researchers are able to identify different forms of cyberbullying, then appropriate interventions can be identified in school.

### **7.1.3. Online grooming and cyberbullying**

Cyberbullying is perceived by young people to be at least as serious as online grooming. Yet, the systems in place do not adequately support young people to deal with cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is not always perceived as a serious issue by adults (Ackers, 2012; O’Brien & Moules, 2013), however, adolescents focus upon the relative harm to the victim, and ease of causing harm by the perpetrator.

Cyber/bullies are creative in developing strategies to access their victims and continue to cause hurt even if they are blocked on their social media accounts; this contrasts

with online grooming by adults whereby, once the adolescent recognises they are being groomed, blocking the perpetrator's account ends the activity. This finding should not diminish the safeguarding activities associated with online grooming, which are obviously vital, but rather it should lead to a re-evaluation of how seriously adults and schools treat cyberbullying incidents and the education which can be provided to young people about managing victimisation.

#### **7.1.4. Control and the dilemma of telling**

Young people wish to retain some measure of control even when victimised. They are unwilling to discuss their victimisation because they might lose control as the other person seeks to 'solve' the situation for them. Adolescents are in between childhood and adulthood, and during this transition, they need to be supported to take appropriate actions themselves or to ask for the support which they need from others. They no longer want an adult or friend to solve their problems for them, particularly as invoking adult intervention may make the situation more difficult for the victim. The conundrum young people face regarding soliciting adult intervention for cyberbullying, means schools need to consider alternative approaches to providing support. For example, peers trained effectively for intervention and support, with suitable adult support within the programme, may be more effective (Cowie, 2014); adult intervention can then be reserved for the most serious cases. Peer mentoring systems have been used for traditional bullying and researchers are now starting to adapt these and adopt new approaches for developing peer mentoring systems for cyberbullying (Cross et al., 2016). However, the range of factors influencing decision-making for a victim, means there are no simple solutions.

Adult support can be provided in a graduated manner to those who are cyber-victimised. This allows victims to retain control of their situation while also accessing support. These are:

- i) Reactive (listen; emotional support; advice; safe space provision);
- ii) Proactive (develop sense of belonging, rebuild confidence); and
- iii) Interventionist (mediation with bully/parents/school; sanctions; police involvement).

This could work alongside a peer mentoring system; a key aspect is for young people to believe they are in control.

#### **7.1.5. Models to analyse cyberbullying in schools**

Models to support schools when analysing their context in relation to cyberbullying have been constructed based on the experiences and perceptions of young people, and using Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994, 2005) socio-ecological framework. The models (Figure 6.1 and Figure 6.2) consider the inter-connected systems which influence young people, and the types and levels of support which may be available from each system. Importantly, the models consider the different forms of influence which may occur directly adjacent to young people within their peer group, friendships and family, but then also moves outwards to influences in the wider community and online community. This provides a holistic approach to evaluating and analysing cyberbullying in school.

### **7.1.6. Regarding research design**

Much of the literature on cyberbullying is quantitative, hence qualitative research offers different insights into cyberbullying. This qualitative research has explored cyberbullying within a school context in an area of socio-economic deprivation in England; an under-researched area within qualitative cyberbullying research. In addition, I have sought to provide opportunities for young people to have a voice within their context and to speak about an issue which forms part of their life experience. Through YPAR I have endeavoured to acknowledge young people's position as experts in their own lives.

An aim of this research was to engage in theory-building to provide models which could help schools to deal with cyberbullying. By drawing on CGT to analyse the qualitative data, I have been able to theorise about cyberbullying and develop models for schools. To this end, Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986, 2005) socio-ecological framework has provided a powerful lens through which to view cyberbullying. The socio-ecological framework facilitates a holistic view of a child's life world and experiences, avoiding a narrow focus on particular variables related to cyberbullying. This has allowed the wider environment in which the child is situated to be considered, including friendships, school, family and community. I have also suggested that the online world be considered a macro-system which facilitates viewing the online world as a model for behaviour, a means of shaping what we do.

## **7.2. Limitations**

In both schools I interviewed participants from Years 7, 8, 9 (11 – 14 years) and in Trinity Catholic Academy I also interviewed participants from Year 12 (16 – 17 years). Unfortunately, I was unable to interview Year 10 or Year 11 (14 – 16 years) in either school. The Year 12 interviews were very useful as they were able to reflect back on their own experiences as they progressed through school, however, this is not the same as interviewing current Year 10 and 11 students. Interviewing participants during examination years had formed part of my ethical considerations; I had decided to be led by the school as to the appropriate age groups to interview, to minimise impact on examinations. Consequently, the age groups who were in key examination year groups (GCSE and A level) were not involved in any aspect of the project. Therefore, the data presented needs to be considered within the context of Key Stage 3 (11 – 14 years of age) and Year 12 (16 – 17 years of age). In addition, both participating schools were faith schools (Catholic) located in areas of socio-economic deprivation; the research may have yielded different results if implemented in schools with different characteristics. The YPAR group consisted of Year 9 (13 – 14 years) students, which worked well as the students knew each other and quickly bonded through the project. The YPAR age group were also at a critical age for cyberbullying (Brown et al., 2014), so had insight into the data they collected and were able to engage in rich discussions. However, the research project design and outcomes may be different if the project were to be repeated with a different age group or a mix of ages.

As qualitative research, the aim was to investigate cyberbullying in-depth, gaining insight into the lived experiences of the young people. Necessarily, the project size is small. I have interviewed 28 students across two school settings; a YPAR group project was conducted with a group of Year 9 students, whereby they were trained as researchers, developed a research project, collected their data and analysed it and are currently designing a drama production to inform others about their research. The research has been conducted across two schools within a relatively close geographical radius (Liverpool and Sefton). Hence, to verify applicability to other school contexts, the research could be replicated in other settings and with additional students.

I have predominantly interviewed young people who are cyberbullied. At OL two participants in Year 7 had not been cyberbullied and they could only tell me what they had been told via school assemblies and the like. This suggests not only had they not been cyberbullied, but also their friends or family had not experienced it either. At least one participant had been both a cyberbully and cyber-victim and others discussed their own and friends' experiences with cyberbullying, so they were cyber-victims and cyber-bystanders. However, interviewing predominantly those who have been cyberbullied, rather than a greater proportion of cyberbullies and bystanders as well, may influence the results.

### **7.3. Recommendations and future research**

The models presented should be implemented and evaluated in school settings.

Although I have received positive initial feedback from TC, the models are currently theoretical in nature and need the input of practitioners, who are using them regularly,

to evaluate their practicality. I am working with TC to develop the models into a practical toolkit which can be used with victims of cyberbullying. The definition I have presented, also, needs to be debated by stakeholders, including young people, schools and the academic community.

I have suggested a staged method of support with progression through *reactive*, *proactive* to *interventionist* support levels (see sub-section 6.4.2). These levels of support need to be evaluated by schools. Three types of cyberbullying victimisation have also been identified: i) ensuring compliance with group norms established by the ‘popular’ group and enforced by peer judgement; ii) in-clique relational aggression to secure status, typically in the ‘popular’ group; and iii) arguments between friends which escalate to cyberbullying. Further research is needed to confirm this finding, particularly in relation to point ii).

Youth may engage in risky behaviour to increase their social media following, to avoid victimisation; increase their perceived popularity; and achieve validation for their online image. As risky online behaviour was not the focus of my research, I did not explore these with young people, however, this may be a worthwhile area of investigation which may support schools with their education about online activities.

Restorative justice is a popular approach for dealing with bullying and cyberbullying incidents in schools, yet the research basis for this approach is under-developed.

Further research to evaluate the value of restorative justice approaches for cyberbullying incidents is worthwhile, and should also elicit the most appropriate restorative approaches for dealing with cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying appears to be closely related to the social hierarchy within peer groups in school settings. It influences the group norms which are established for the peer group; helps to ensure conformity through peer judgement; and facilitates peer relational aggression to maintain or increase status. This was an area which arose from the data; consequently, there are still areas to further investigate around the social hierarchy and to confirm the interpretation from this study.

Young people are in a dilemma when they are deciding whether to tell someone about their victimisation. If they tell someone too quickly, then they may experience further victimisation as their peers brand them a 'snitch', 'grass' or 'nark'. However, there does appear to be a point at which peers will accept 'telling', as the victimisation has progressed beyond 'reasonable' levels. Research to investigate the thresholds for peer judgement would be of value to victims and their support networks, such as schools.

Working with young people for my thesis, across an academic year with the YPAR project was at times frustrating and anxiety-ridden. However, it was also deeply rewarding and provided insights which I believe I would not have gained from interviewing alone. To elicit enriched responses required trust to be built through honesty, careful listening and fulfilling my commitments to them; it takes time.



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## **Appendix A    Coding the data**

### **Open Coding**

Coding for CGT can be done flexibly as line by line, sentences, or as larger sections of text, depending on the content. This was helpful as sometimes a sentence fragment contained a key idea, or in other cases a larger section of text was coded. For example, during initial open coding the following were coded under ‘*Parenting*’:

Sentence fragment:

*parent will do anything for their kids*

Sentence:

*Me Nan will try and find a way to try and help me to like, to resolve the situation.*

Paragraph:

*Well, basically, I’m mainly an only child and my nan lives with us because she doesn’t like living on her own, so I’ve basically, when it was happening to me, I went home and told my mum, my dad and my nan, I told them all about it and then she just kept on saying, ignore them, ignore them and then it got really bad and then they did, right, I’m coming to the school about this, I’m not letting it*

*happen anymore and I was, like, okay, I just didn't want me to go to the school, because then that's not my fault.*

Dialogue (Participant is indicated by P and Interviewer by I):

*P: I've told my mum, like, about it.*

*I: Okay. Okay.*

*P: Because I've had it before. So I told my mum. But I don't really tell my mum much stuff, because, like, she takes it too far.*

*I: Okay, what does that mean?*

*P: Like, she gets involved and, like, starts... It makes stuff worse. So I just keep it to myself, and sort it out myself, because I'd rather get it sorted out myself, than get other people involved.*

*I: Sure, sure. Okay.*

*P: Because, like, I'm old enough to sort stuff out myself now.*

*I: Okay. So, you're not telling your mum because, what? Will she come into the school, will she?*

*P: I'll tell my mum if it, like, goes serious. Like, if it's only on for like, three days, I won't tell my mum. But if it goes on any longer than, like, a week and a half, then I will tell my mum.*

*I: Right, okay. Okay. What does your mum do about it?*

*P: My mum speaks to the school, and then speaks to their mum,  
and then they just tell us to stay away from each other.*

The process followed was to review the transcript while listening to the audio recording, to detect nuance, humour, emphasis, etc. When I identified a section to be coded, I would review the codes which had already been created, check for similar data within the codes which appeared to be relevant. Then, if the data matched an existing code, it would be allocated to it. If the data did not match an existing code, then a new code was created.

### **Focused Coding**

Once the open coding had been completed, the codes needed to be reviewed to identify where codes could be merged and to identify those codes with most explanatory and analytical power which would then form categories. During this process, I related the codes back to the RQs and this is when RQ4 emerged from the data.

The code book was printed, cut out into stripes and then sorted according to the research questions (see Figure A.1). Then, I reviewed the groups of codes to identify those which were similar and could be merged; these were pinned together (see Figure A.2). The data from the merged codes were checked to ensure relevance to the emerging category name.



*Figure A.1: Process of sorting and merging codes to form categories related to RQs*

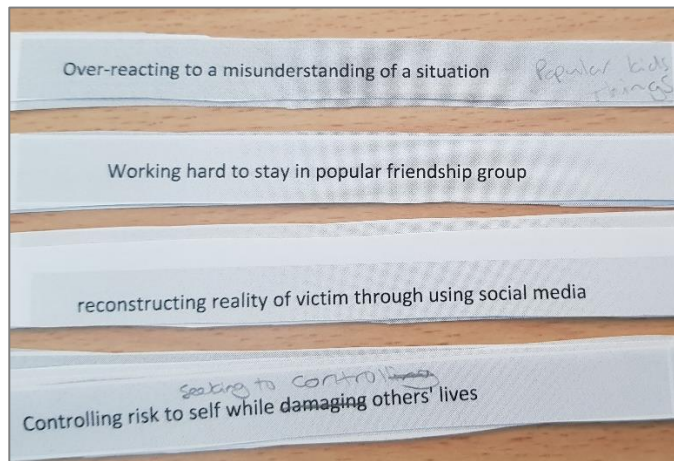


Figure A.2 Pinned codes with emerging category names and annotations

The coding structure in nVivo 11 was re-organised by RQ. The emerging categories were created and the relevant codes were merged within those categories (see Figure A.3). This provided flexibility so if codes needed to be moved around, this would still be possible.

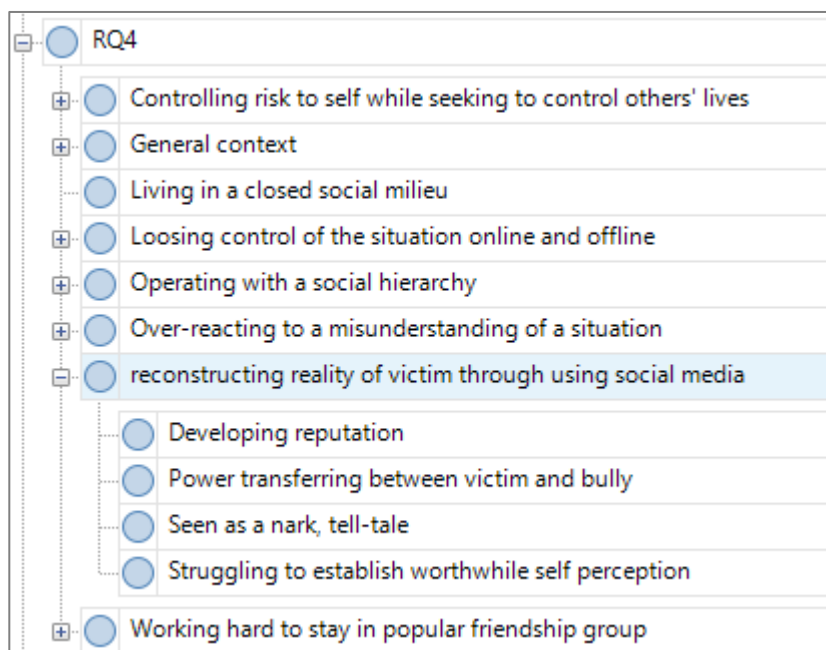
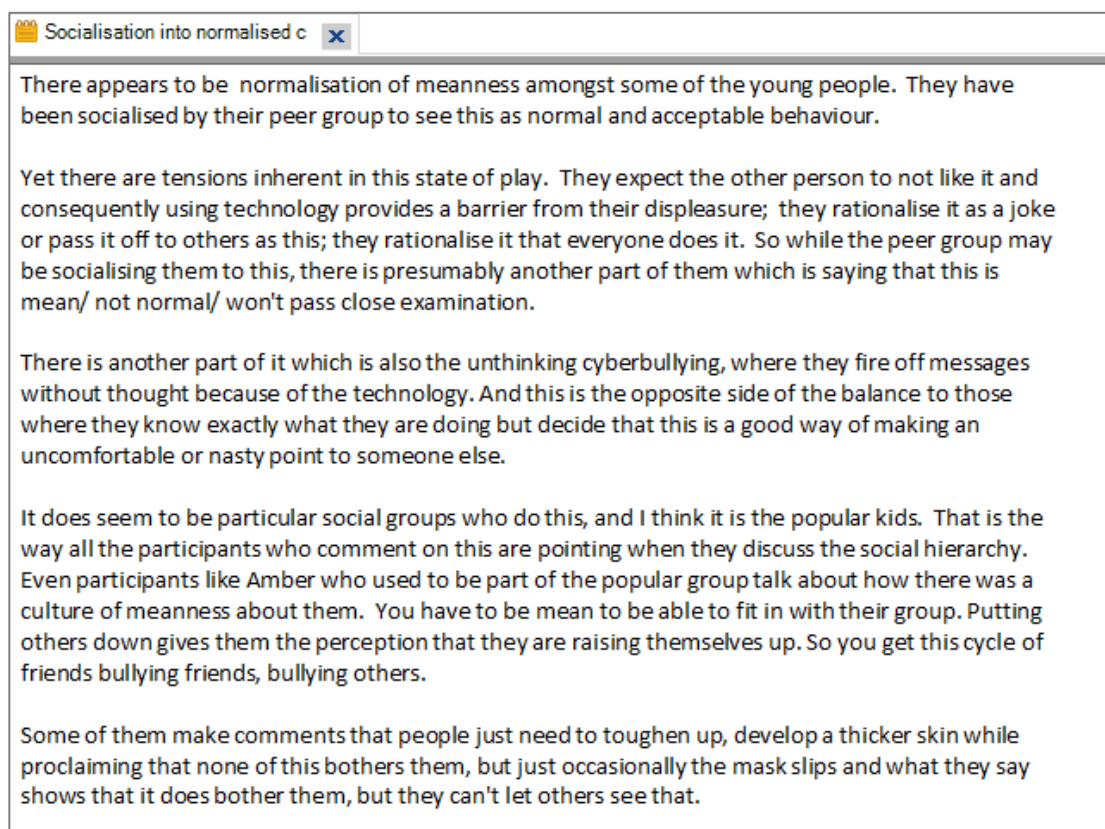


Figure A.3 Reorganised codes in nVivo by RQ

Memos were written about the emerging categories (see Figure A.4) and I analysed potential linkages between the different codes and categories through the data.



*Figure A.4 Memo about an emerging category*

Mind-mapping and writing about the emerging categories helped to further clarify thinking and establish the categories which have been used in my study.



## **Appendix B    Creating the models**

Appendix B presents notes I created as I constructed the models. I worked with post-it notes, so I could move ideas around, pencil to easily correct notes and cut-outs of paper. This is presented in the spirit of transparency.

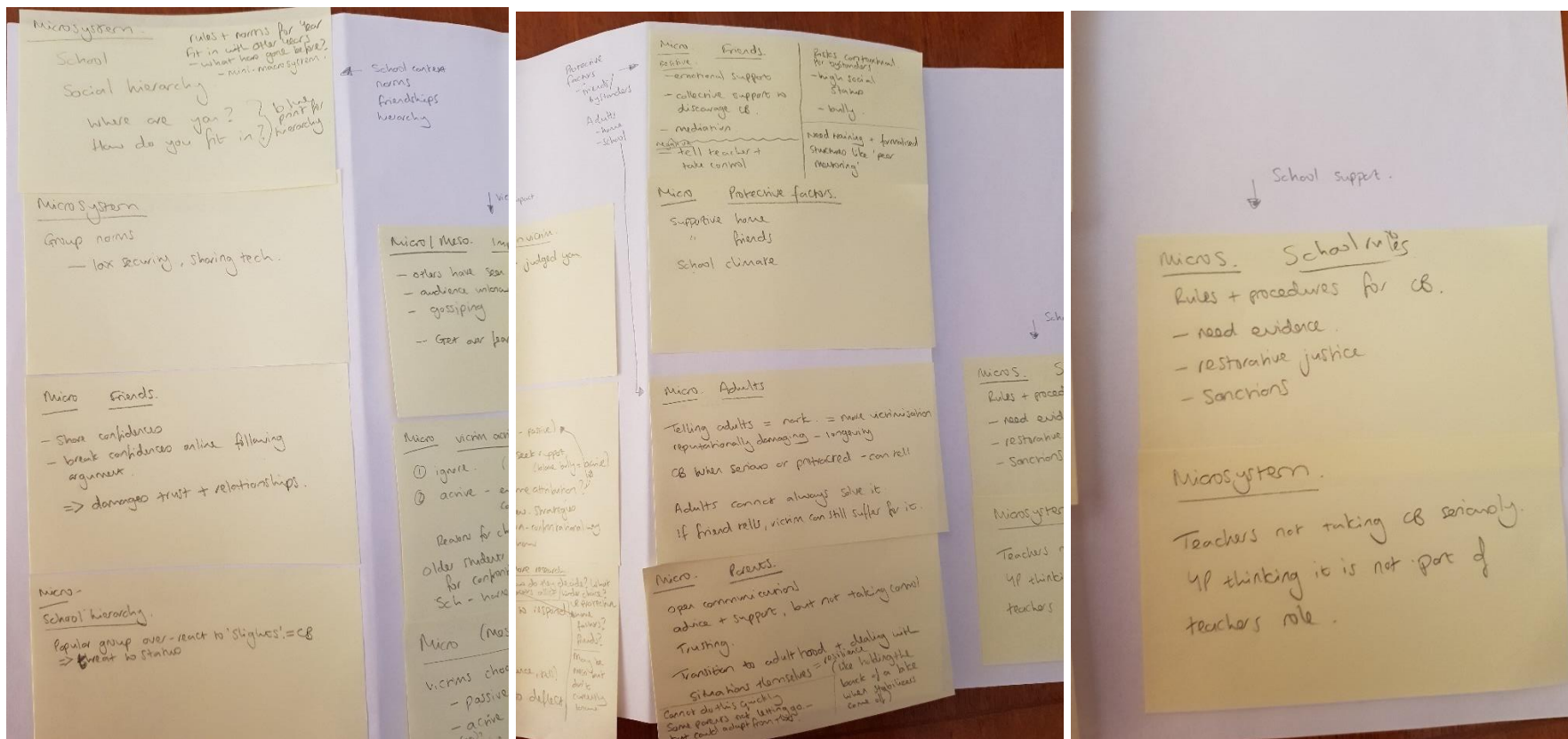


Figure B.1 Post-its for microsystems

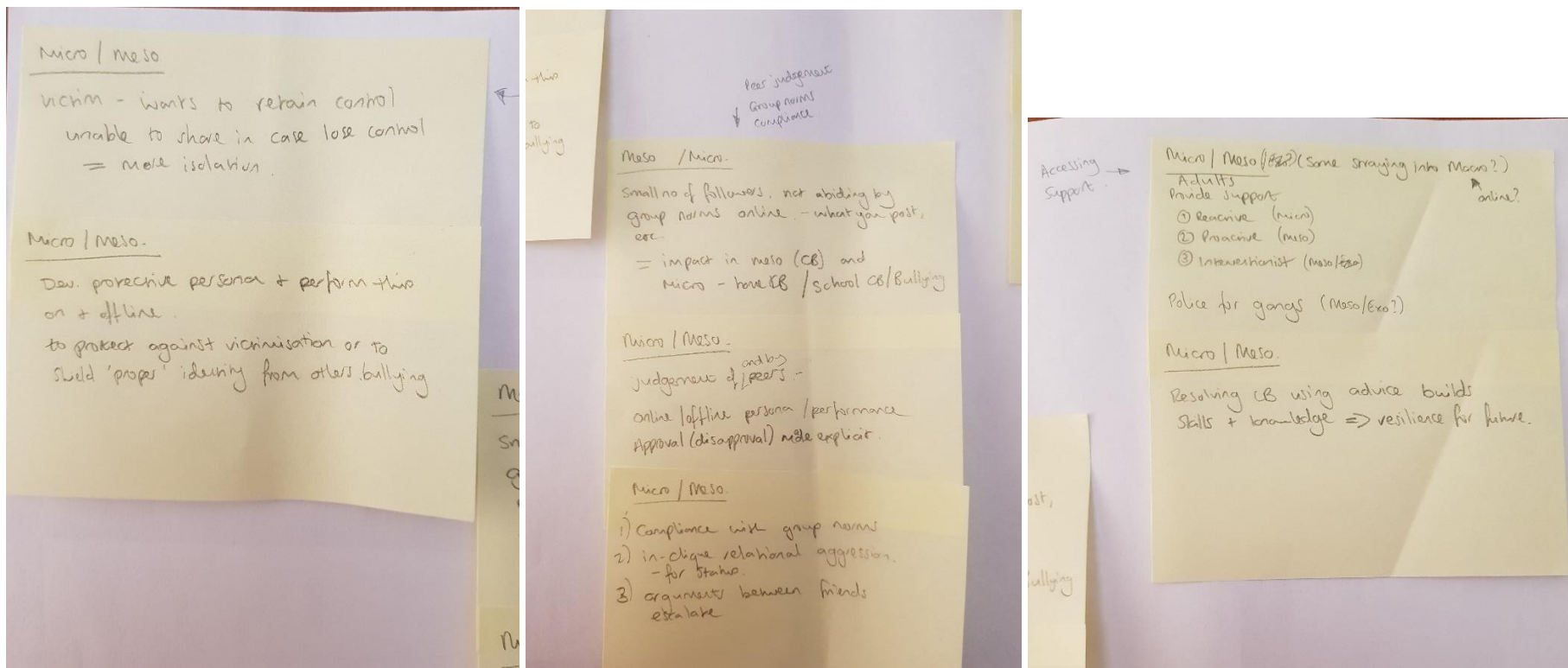


Figure B.2 Post-its for micro/meso-systems

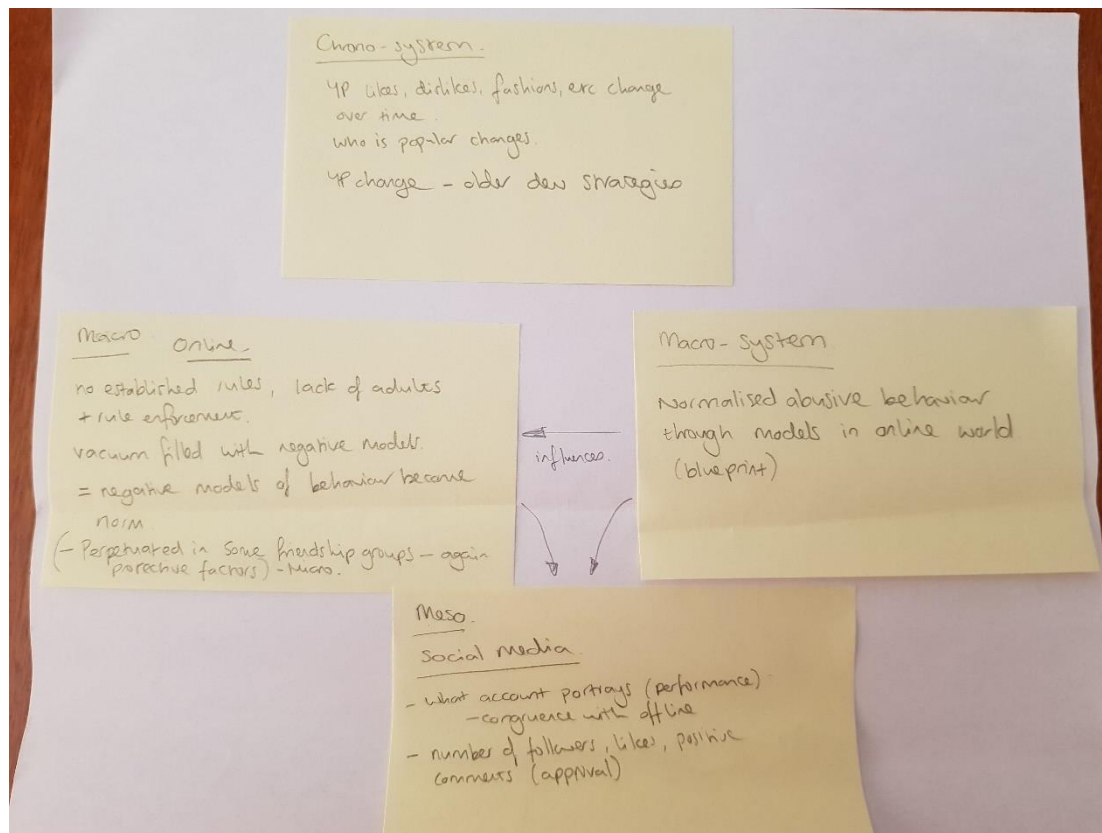


Figure B.3 Macro- and Chrono-systems

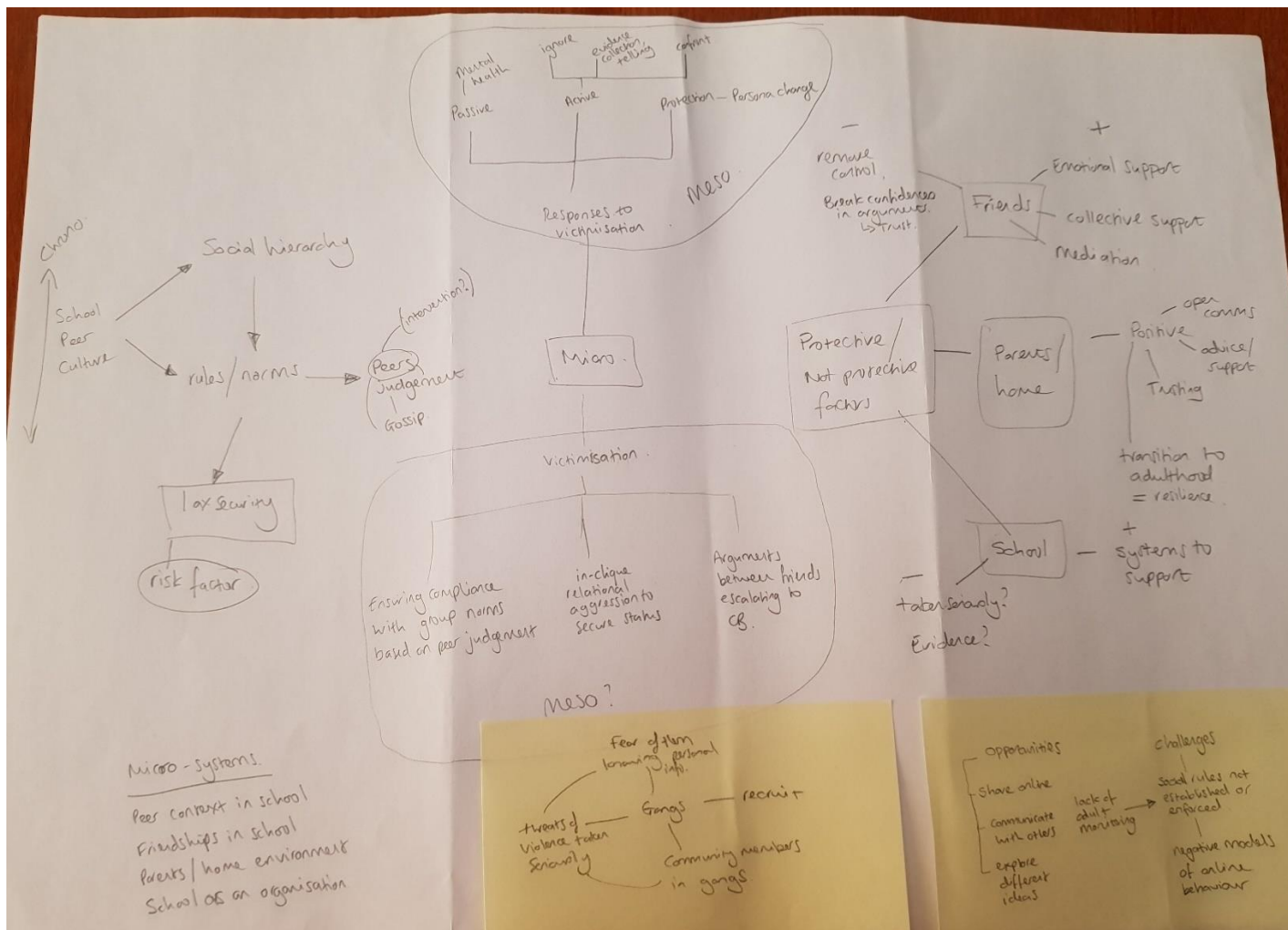


Figure B.4 Mind-mapping

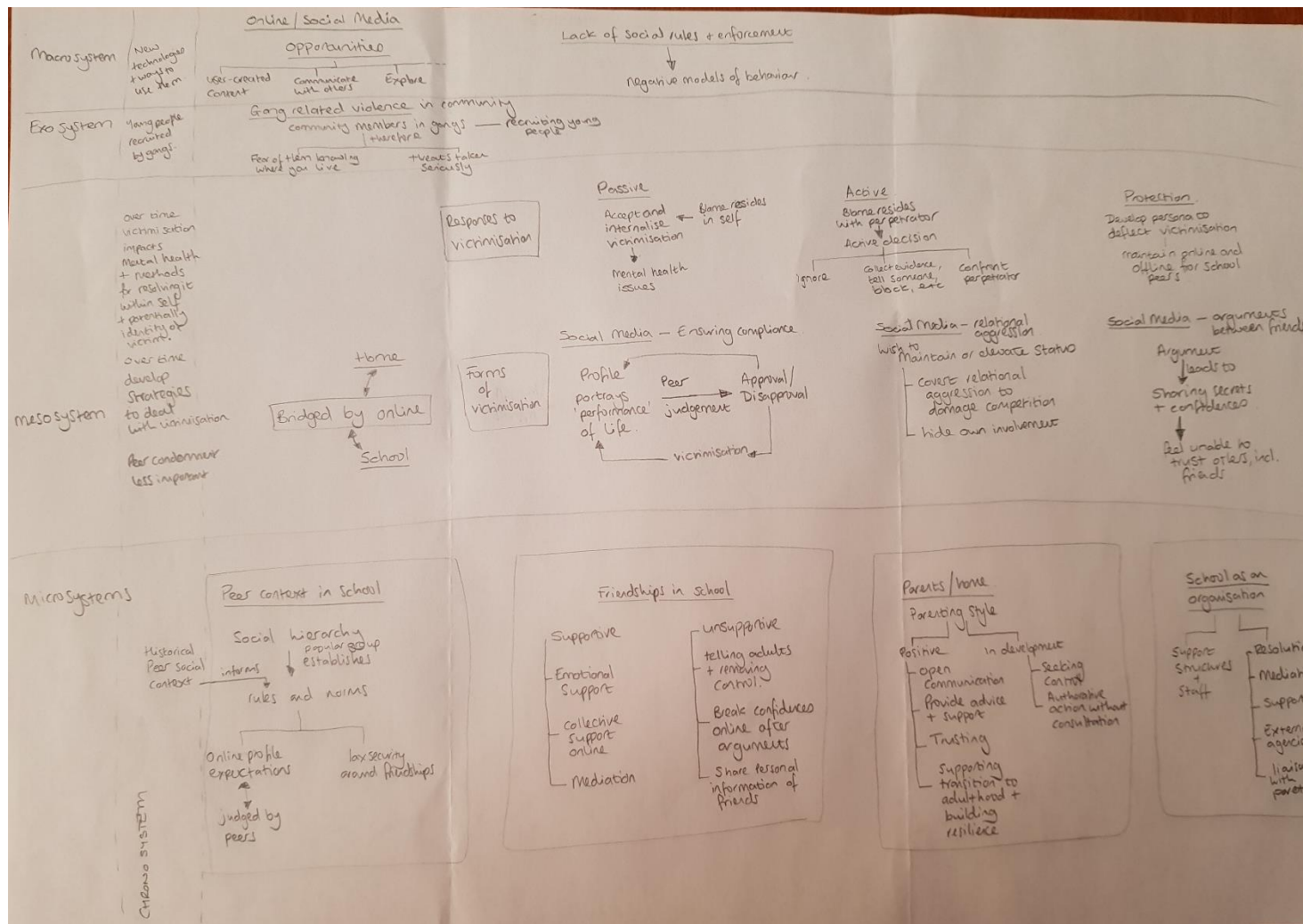


Figure B.5 Draft model



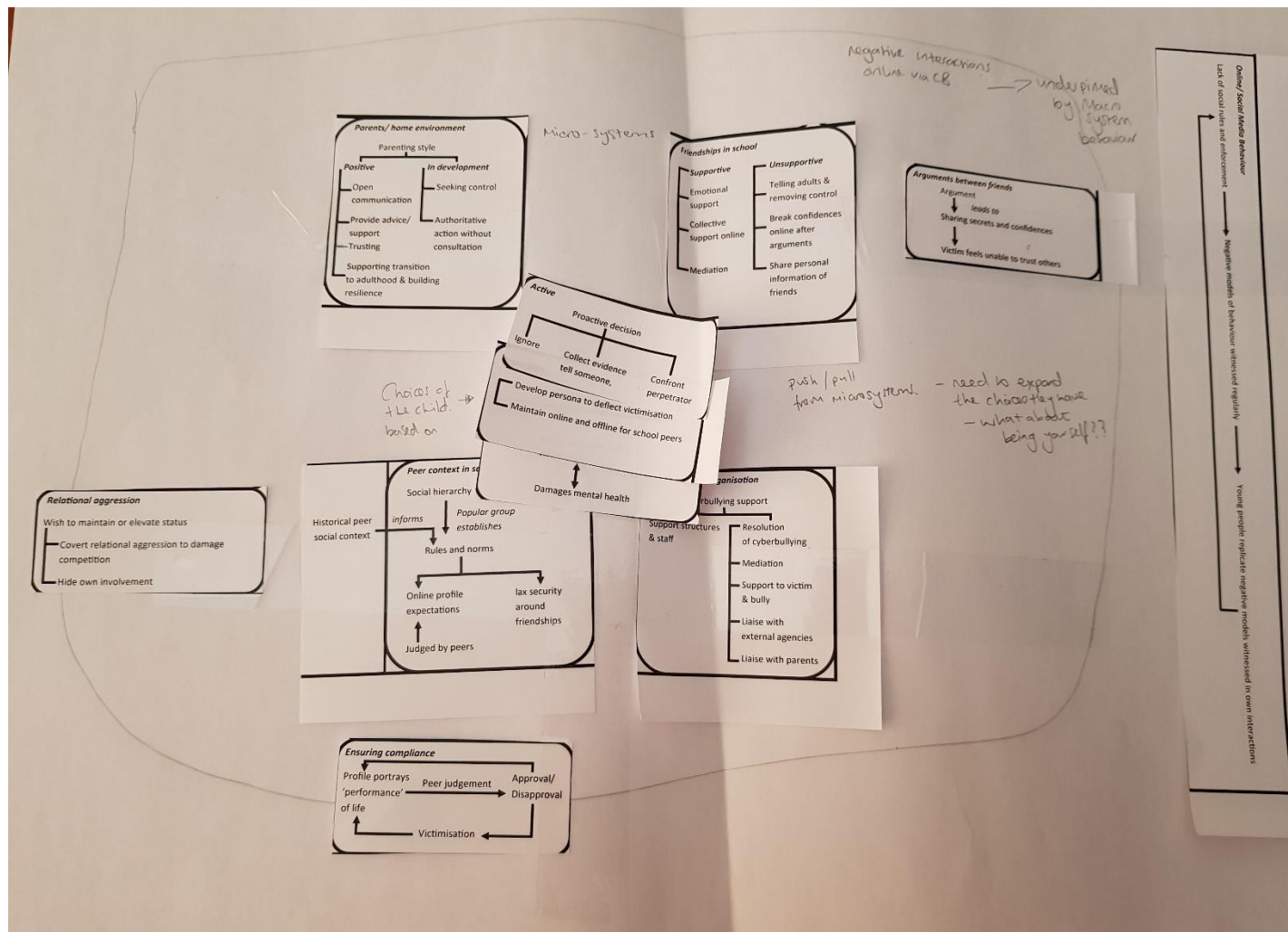


Figure B.6 Abstracting the model