FAIR:PLAY - A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO PREVENTING BULLYING AMONG APPRENTICES

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Abstract

Fair:Play is a project dedicated to preventing (cyber)bullying among apprentices – a marginalized group of young people in the workforce – by building a nationwide network that connects business and academia. The initiative targets both apprentices and trainers in companies as well as vocational schools within Austria's dual training system. While bullying in schools and organizations has been widely studied, empirical data on bullying among apprentices remains limited, despite the significance of the issue.

Using a participatory approach, the Fair:Play project develops prevention and intervention measures that integrate the perspectives and expertise of apprentices, trainers, and organizational training coordinators from diverse organizations. Analyses provide insights into how apprentices perceive bullying processes and identified prevention and intervention strategies, forming the empirical basis for the project´s practical outputs. These include prevention and intervention workshops, serious games, card-based reflection tools, graphic novels, airplane-style "safety cards" that convey key messages concisely and accessibly, and role models. The project thus delivers urgently needed data and targeted interventions for bullying prevention in the Austrian apprenticeship system.

Subsequently, a nationwide network will be established with the aim of fostering collaboration among key stakeholders and of jointly developing and providing effective anti-bullying strategies and support structures for apprentices affected.

Keywords**:** bullying, apprentices, prevention, intervention, network.

1 INTRODUCTION

They are the future of skilled labour, yet among the least protected in the present. Apprentices keep industries alive, carry forward essential know-how, and form the backbone of economic sustainability. Still, their position at the bottom of workplace hierarchies often leaves them invisible, undervalued, and vulnerable. This combination of strategic importance and systemic neglect creates fertile ground for exploitation and abuse, with bullying emerging as one of the most damaging but least addressed risks. Far from being isolated incidents, such behaviours can derail careers before they have properly begun, eroding confidence, health, and trust in the labour market itself. International data on (cyber)bullying prevention and intervention in schools and the workplace is numerous, still apprentices have not been heard for a long time. However, the latest Austrian data of 2024 [1] for the first time provide insights into this reality, shedding light on the scale, forms, and perpetrators of bullying in apprenticeship settings and highlighting important opportunities for prevention and action.

1.1 Facts and Figures

The term bullying refers to a process that is clearly distinct from ordinary workplace disputes. While there is no statutory definition of bullying, the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber [2] summarizes in

its definition the core elements that are generally understood to constitute bullying: it describes conduct by employees (and also by employers) aimed at "hurting, intimidating, discouraging, excluding, or driving a particular person out of their employment" [3]. Bullying is therefore understood as a systematic and hostile process, characterized by an abuse of power against the targeted individual [4]. In their effort to define cyberbullying across six European countries, Ersilia Menesini et al. [5] systematically examined the role of five definitional criteria. Among these, imbalance of power and intentionality emerged as the two most frequently mentioned dimensions. By contrast, the anonymity and public versus private criteria showed no significant relevance for defining cyberbullying. Descriptive frequency analyses revealed a more ambiguous role for exclusion as a form of cyberbullying, consistent with patterns observed in traditional bullying (see also [6], [7]).

The 5th Austrian Apprentice Report (2024) is the first to systematically examine bullying among apprentices involving a sample of 5539 apprentices. It finds that 34% of apprentices in company-based training and 27% in inter-company training have experienced bullying at least once, with female apprentices affected more often than males. While both training settings report similar levels of "yelling and scolding," "sexual harassment," and "physical abuse," apprentices in company-based programs more often face unjustified criticism, unpleasant work assignments, and devaluation of their performance. By contrast, apprentices in inter-company programs experience higher rates of ridicule, threats of violence, and cyberbullying. The main perpetrators also differ. In company-based training, bullying is more often carried out by colleagues and supervisors, whereas in inter-company training, trainers and fellow apprentices are most frequently named [1]. Studies that go beyond merely informing about data situations are rare, as in the case of Peter Greacen and Victoria Ross, who investigated the significance of social identity among apprentices in the construction industry suggests that the degree to which an apprentice identifies socially with work groups influences how bullying is recognized, interpreted, and prevented [8].

The 2023 Apprentice Health Report by the Austrian Ministry of Social Affairs further notes that almost 19% of female apprentices and 11% of male apprentices have been victims of cyberbullying at least once in recent months [9]. At the same time, it must be said, that the prevalence rate of cyberbullying has increased significantly in the study-period of five years as Chengyan et al. investigated in 2021 [10]. That's alarming as bullying has serious consequences and requires attention, as it can impair a victim's ability to perform their work, often accompanied by a loss of motivation, mistrust, nervousness, insecurity, and social withdrawal. Psychological and/or psychosomatic illnesses are frequently reported, which in severe cases can lead to job loss or even permanent incapacity to work [1], [11], [12]. What finally leads to suicidal behaviour does not differ or differs marginally from other contexts and cannot be answered conclusively [13].

Accordingly, employers are legally obliged to safeguard the health of their employees, as stipulated in the Employee Protection Act [10]. In addition, cyberbullying since 2016 is a criminal offense under7c of the Austrian Penal Code [14]. The International Labor Office (ILO [6]) further explores the theme of cyberbullying on the workplace internationally.

1.2 (Cyber)bullying

While people with moral disengagement and anger [15] are more likely to be offenders, studies show some differences between traditional bullying and cyberbullying. A striking difference between traditional bullying and cyberbullying lies in the anonymity of the perpetrators. While in conventional bullying, the attackers are usually known and their aggression is exercised directly and personally, the digital environment allows perpetrators to hide behind pseudonyms or anonymous profiles. This form of invisibility not only lowers the inhibition threshold for abusive behaviour but also exacerbates the power imbalance [9]. At the same time, it becomes more difficult for those affected to defend themselves or seek specific help ([16], [17]).

Another key aspect concerns the reach and visibility of the attacks. Traditional bullying is usually limited to specific locations such as schools or workplaces and to a limited number of people. In contrast, cyberbullying takes place in digital spaces where offensive content, hurtful comments or compromising photos can reach a potentially unlimited audience. This content can be saved, shared and often remains permanently accessible. There is also a clear difference in terms of time: while traditional bullying is tied to specific times of day and situations, cyberbullying knows no intermission. Attacks can occur at any time, making it considerably more difficult for victims to retreat or protect themselves. In addition, perpetrators in digital contexts rarely receive a direct response to their behaviour. The lack of immediate feedback reduces the perception of the suffering caused and can lead to attacks being particularly ruthless or uninhibited. The two forms also differ in terms of the barriers to seeking help. Victims of traditional bullying

often remain silent for fear of further attacks or social exclusion. Victims of cyberbullying, on the other hand, often fear that their access to digital media will be restricted if they confide in adults – for example, through bans on smartphones or the internet. This fear reinforces their sense of isolation [18].

1.3 Fair:Play

The Fair:Play Project builds on these needs and aims to establish a nationwide initiative dedicated to protecting apprentices. By fostering a strong network between businesses and academia, it seeks to empower both apprentices and trainers within Austria's dual training system, which combines hands-on work experience with classroom-based learning over a period of three to four years. Bullying can have profound and lasting effects on young people's mental health, professional development, and long-term career prospects. Nevertheless, despite extensive research on bullying in schools and workplaces, there remains a striking lack of empirical data on the specific experiences of apprentices, particularly regarding prevention and intervention strategies. The Fair:Play project addresses this gap.

2 METHODOLOGY

In spring 2025, ten apprentices aged between 15 and 19 were interviewed about their experience of bullying. Six of them had been directly affected by bullying, while four had witnessed bullying among their peers. The group consisted of one male, one non-binary, and eight female apprentices. They were recruited from a medium-sized company, an international technology corporation, and an inter-organisational training organisation. The interviews were conducted on-site in two Austrian federal states.

In addition, three persons responsible for apprenticeship training (two women and one man) were included in the study. All of them had long-standing experience in organizing, conducting, and supporting apprentices, particularly in crisis situations. Semi-structured interviews were carried out, and the data were analysed using Philipp Mayring's qualitative content analysis [19], which follows the steps of paraphrasing, categorization, subcategorization, and citation. Furthermore, the statements within each subcategory were counted. The results are described in the following.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Apprentices´ voices

Table 1. Apprentices´ expertise (N=10)

Theme	*Code*	*Sample Quote*	*Mentions*
Forms of Bullying	Social exclusion	"It's actually pretty devastating at such a young age when you just don't have anyone."	6
	Physical violence	"It happened over a very long period of time, but I think more about violence. There was a lot of hitting and everything."	2
	Threatening	"They threatened us, several times. That they would make sure we got kicked out of school and stuff."	1
	Spreading rumours	"Talking behind your back, because that's where most of the nonsense comes from."	2
	Cyberbullying	"Because on social media, you can bully people much faster."	2
Causes for bullying	Country of origin	"They more or less made fun of him for not being from there."	1
	Sexual orientation	"Well, that I'm bisexual. And physically, I'm a bit heavier."	1
	Performance (too high/too low)	"And then there were the others who ganged up on us because we didn't have a riding license or take any tests."	1

	Physical appearance	“Yes, it's all about physical appearance. Or if you look a little different. Like your appearance, or if you have any illnesses or something, or if you're in a wheelchair.	2
	Clothing	“Because everyone else wore normal pants, lighter-coloured pants and stuff, and I always wore darker clothes.”	1
Bullying Process	System failure	“And yes, we went to the director and told him that wasn't right... and then we got a warning.”	8
	Power dynamics of the perpetrators	“I think he often said stop, or that he didn't want to do it anymore. And they continued anyway.”	8
Coping strategies	Social environment: parents and friends	“I had my parents, who stood by me, and friends outside of school.”	9
	Social environment: teachers, social workers, psychologists	“Maybe ask adults who passed by if they could (…).”	1
	Distraction	“Otherwise, I just watch a series or go drawing, or I don't know, go for a walk, ride my scooter.”	2
	Adaptation	“Yes, because then I had better hair, and suddenly I was the centre of attention in class.”	1
	Class or school changes	“The only thing that helped was moving away.”	5
Consequences	Physical stress and self-harm	“Bullying can also lead to physical injuries, self-harm, yes.”	2
	Psychological stress	“It's a fact that it's completely over mentally, so to speak.”	4
	Depression and fear	“I became depressed, and I still am, even though everything has gotten better.”	2
	Suicidal thoughts	“I wanted to kill myself. With pills and alcohol afterwards.”	2
Prevention measures	Raise awareness of the issue	“I think children should learn much more about this in kindergarten or primary school.”	3
	Promote commonalities	“it's probably mainly shared interests, especially among boys. Cars are interesting, or anything that has an engine or drives.”	5
	Structural interventions	“Because if they [trainers, managers, company directors] don't respond to it, then it's all pointless.”	8
Recommendations for those affected	Get help	“I would just tell the person to go to someone they trust.”	5
	Stay true to yourself	“You should stick to the goal you are pursuing. And then just implement it positively.”	4
	Trust in you	“I would say, appreciate your worth and have self-confidence, you are a beautiful person and don't put up with things like that.”	3

The statements of the apprentices show that bullying is a multifaceted problem with serious consequences. A central issue is social exclusion, often triggered by characteristics such as appearance, clothing, sexual orientation, disability, or simply being perceived as different. Such forms of exclusion create feelings of isolation and undermine young people’s sense of belonging.

Another recurring theme is system failure. Apprentices repeatedly describe situations in which their complaints were not taken seriously or even led to sanctions against themselves. The lack of consistent and supportive responses from teachers, trainers, or managers reinforced the sense that institutions are either unwilling or unable to provide protection.

The perceived power of perpetrators is also strongly emphasised. Bullying was not only verbal but also physical and frequently accompanied by threats. Social media (cyberbullying) has further intensified this imbalance by making it easier and faster for perpetrators to exert pressure and humiliate others. Victims often experienced that their attempts to set boundaries were ignored, leaving them feeling helpless.

At the same time, apprentices point to various coping strategies. Emotional support from family and friends was often described as a crucial resource. Others relied on distractions such as creative activities, sports, or simply withdrawing from the situation. In extreme cases, moving away was seen as the only solution. Developing self-confidence and recognising one's own value were also regarded as important ways to resist bullying: Stay true to yourself and believe in yourself!

The reported consequences underline the urgency of the problem: bullying does not only cause immediate psychological distress but can also lead to long-term depression, self-harm, or suicidal thoughts. The apprentices' experiences clearly indicate the need for early prevention, systematic institutional support, and a culture of respect that protects young people during their training.

3.2 Experts´ voices

Insights from expert interviews revealed three core domains:

Table 2. Responsibles´ themes

Theme	Code	Quote	Number
Recognition and awareness	Identify bullying	"Many adults do not recognise the signs of bullying or downplay them."	1
	Forms of bullying	"Bullying manifests itself in sexual harassment, physical attacks, exclusion from the group, making someone look stupid, exposing physical characteristics, ridiculing them."	4
	Typical perpetrators	"Typical perpetrators tend to be low-performing apprentices, mostly young men who are compensating for their own shortcomings."	2
	Typical affected	"Typical affected are characterised by being 'different': too ugly, too beautiful, too intelligent, or too stupid. "	2
Intervention processes	Encourage reporting bullying	"When it comes to sexual harassment, it is often revealed by other female friends because the victims are ashamed."	1
	Design solution-oriented processes	„Cases of bullying are reviewed retrospectively (after a few weeks), with the company psychologist involved, if necessary. "	4
	Offer trusted contact points	"Apprentices who are affected by bullying should turn to a trusted person – family, friends, trainers, external experts."	5
	Intervention example	"In a case of sexual harassment via cyberbullying, there was a lengthy and intensive process involving the parents, lawyers, and AK. After the apprentice failed to show any remorse and following two warnings, the apprenticeship was terminated."	1
Prevention strategies	Awareness Raising	"Apprentices are informed about bullying and what they can do about it right from the start. What it is, who they can turn to, and that bullying is not acceptable behaviour."	4
	Corporate Culture	'... if there is a good atmosphere in a company ... then you can actually prevent something like that quite easily simply by the company's atmosphere.'	1
	Empowerment	"If you see yourself that way and grew up thinking, 'I can't do anything, I'm worthless, I have no strengths,' then it's very difficult to defend yourself against bullying."	1
	Institutional safeguards	"If there is a good atmosphere and good relations among the employees and managers in a company, then bullying can actually be prevented quite effectively."	1

Effective strategies against bullying in apprenticeship settings must combine preventive measures with clear intervention procedures. From the outset, apprentices should be informed about what bullying is, why it is unacceptable, and to whom they can turn for support. Establishing trusted contact points – such as family, friends, trainers, or external experts – is central, since victims often hesitate to speak up. In cases of sexual harassment, it is frequently peers who raise the issue, highlighting the need for a culture in which young people feel safe to intervene.

Workshops that help apprentices recognise their own strengths and build self-confidence are equally important. Those who see themselves as "worthless" or "without strengths" struggle to defend against bullying, making empowerment a key preventive approach. At the organisational level, creating a positive workplace climate is perhaps the strongest preventive strategy. Where relations among

employees and managers are characterised by respect, bullying can often be prevented before it escalates. Leaders and trainers serve as role models here: if derogatory remarks are dismissed rather than tolerated, it sets a clear standard for behaviour.

When incidents occur, structured intervention is essential. Bullying cases are typically reviewed after a short period, with the involvement of the company psychologist if necessary. In serious cases, external actors as parents, lawyers, or the Chamber of Labour may be included. Companies also need clear consequences: as illustrated in one case of cyberbullying with sexual harassment, repeated offences without regret led to the termination of the apprenticeship. Such responses send a strong signal that bullying will not be tolerated.

Prevention accordingly requires early sensitisation, empowerment of apprentices, and a respectful company culture, while intervention depends on trusted reporting channels, psychological support, and decisive organisational action. Together, these strategies create both protection and accountability, ensuring that apprenticeships remain safe and supportive learning environments.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study provide important insights into the dynamics of bullying among apprentices and contribute to filling the clear research gap. While a small number of national and international studies have addressed this target group, apprentices in vocational education and training remain underrepresented in the scientific literature. By focusing on their experiences, the study not only adds to scholarly knowledge but also establishes the empirical foundation for the prevention and intervention measures of the Fair:Play project**.** On this basis, Fair:Play will develop a range of practice-oriented outputs, including prevention workshops, serious games, card-based reflection tools, graphic novels, and airplane-style “safety cards” that communicate key messages in a concise and accessible manner. Apprentices themselves emphasized that coping with bullying sometimes resulted in positive personal development, such as greater resilience, confidence, empathy, and willingness to support others. These findings correspond with Jiping et al. [21], who highlight the role of positive role models in overcoming bullying. This underscores the importance of embedding role model functions in preventive measures, thereby reinforcing both individual resources and collective responsibility.

Fair:Play’s outputs are designed using inclusive and participatory principles [12], engaging apprentices in the development process. This co-creative approach helps to align interventions with the lived realities of apprentices, increases their relevance, and enhances acceptance among the target group. It also reflects the broader understanding that preventive measures are more effective when shaped together with those who are most directly affected.

At the same time, it must be recognized that bullying prevention strategies differ in focus and methodology. Traditional approaches typically emphasize fostering a positive social climate in schools and workplaces, and clarifying what behaviours constitute bullying. This point is especially relevant as the study found social connectedness was a common coping strategy among apprentices [7]. Accordingly, prevention should not only strengthen personal competencies (e.g., self-confidence, self-trust) but also social competencies (e.g., empathy, moral courage). By cultivating these skills, apprentices are better equipped to recognize and resist harmful dynamics, while the broader aim is to foster stable and supportive environments where individuals feel safe and able to seek help.

However, such environments cannot be created by individuals alone, as they can only show that and where an imbalance exists in the system. They require a collective effort on the part of institutions, training providers, and employers to take responsibility, reflect on their own role in the perpetuation or prevention of bullying, and establish systematic processes for recognition, intervention, and review. Structural and, where necessary, legal measures are central to ensuring that cases are addressed in a transparent, fair, and constructive manner. This highlights that bullying is not simply an interpersonal conflict, but a systemic challenge that calls for coordinated responses.

These considerations also extend to cyberbullying, which demands tailored approaches that reflect the dynamics of digital communication. Recommended strategies include responding calmly, blocking perpetrators, avoiding further engagement, and documenting incidents - for instance through screenshots - to provide evidence for reporting to platform operators. Maintaining social connections is equally crucial in this context, as isolation often intensifies the negative effects of online aggression. Access to legal and psychological support can serve as an essential additional resource [see also 22].

4.1 Limitations

This study is subject to limitations: First, the participant sample exhibits a predominance of female apprentices. Although previous research suggests that female apprentices are more frequently subjected to bullying than their male counterparts [1], this gender imbalance limits the extent to which the results can be considered representative of the broader apprentice population.

Second, the research does not encompass the full scope of the potential application area, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings to other contexts or populations. Third, the three experts included in the study were recruited through personal contacts rather than via a systematic sampling procedure, which may have introduced selection bias and influenced the diversity of perspectives captured.

Finally, as a qualitative study, the findings are inherently context-specific and exploratory, and caution should be exercised when attempting to generalize them beyond the study setting. Acknowledging these limitations underscores the need for further research involving more diverse and representative samples to validate and extend the present findings.

4.2 Further steps

In the next phase, prevention and intervention measures will be developed. As in the present study, apprentices will continue to be actively and participatively involved in the design of these measures, ensuring that their perspectives and lived experiences shape both content and implementation. The initial drafts and prototypes of these measures will be evaluated in table talks with apprentices. These conversations take place in small groups and in an informal, trust-based atmosphere, where evaluation unfolds through interaction, storytelling, and mutual reflection. The strength of the method lies in its capacity to capture socially embedded knowledge.

A further central goal of the project is the establishment of the Fair:Play Network, which aims to promote safe, respectful, and supportive learning and working environments across the country. By connecting stakeholders from education, training, and industry, the network will serve as a platform for dialogue, exchange of best practices, and the sustainable anchoring of preventive and intervention strategies.

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