

Bully/Victim Problems in Northern Ireland's Schools: Data from the 2000 "Young Persons' Behavior and Attitude Survey"

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ABSTRACT - Comparatively little is known about the nature, incidence and correlates of bully/victim problems in the Northern Ireland school system. The aim of the present study was to examine the prevalence of self-reported experiences of bully/victim problems among a representative sample of 6,297 11 to 16 year olds living in Northern Ireland who participated in the 2000 'Young Persons' Behavior and Attitude Survey'. Respondents were presented with three questions enquiring explicitly about victimization. Across other non-explicit questions, respondents volunteered salient information about personal experiences of bully/victim problems. Almost half of all respondents (43.3%, $N = 2,470$) reported being a victim of bullying behavior. Bully/victim problems also pervaded personal experiences of school meal times, sporting activities, and perceptions of personal safety. These findings are placed within the context of previous findings.

Although the international literature on the nature, prevalence, and correlates of bully/victim problems is burgeoning (see Smith, Morita, Junger-Tas, Olweus, Catalano, & Slee, 1999 for a review), it is apparent that this work on a country and region basis is sporadic in nature. Considering that Northern Ireland is emerging from almost four decades of ethno-political conflict (Cairns & Darby, 1998), comparatively little is known about the nature, incidence and correlates of low-level aggression, such as bully/victim problems among Northern Ireland school pupils (Mc Guckin & Lewis, 2003).

In total, just nine studies have explored the nature, incidence, and correlates of bully/victim problems among Northern Irish school pupils (Callaghan & Joseph, 1995; Collins & Bell, 1996; Collins, Mc Aleavy, & Adamson, 2002, 2004; Grant, 1996; Livesey, Mc Aleavy, Donegan, Duffy, O'Hagan, Adamson, & White, 2007; Mc Guckin & Lewis, 2006; Mc Guckin, Cummins, & Lewis, under review a, Mc Guckin, Lewis, & Cummins, under review b; Taylor, 1996). In addition, one study (Mc Guckin & Lewis, 2008) has provided information on the management of bully/victim problems in Northern Ireland's schools prior to the implementation of legislation (The Education and Libraries

[Northern Ireland] Order 2003) regarding this area of school management policy (see Ananiadou & Smith 2002 for a review of legal requirements in European countries).

Callaghan and Joseph (1995) employed Neary and Joseph's (1994) Peer Victimization Scale (PVS) and a single item 'Are there any children who are bullied in the classroom?' among 120 10 to 12 year old pupils attending two post-primary schools in Northern Ireland. Seventy pupils (58.33%), including 13 (10.83%) self-identified victims were mentioned by at least one of their peers as someone who was bullied. The mean score of the 70 self- and peer-nominated victims on the PVS (Neary & Joseph, 1994) was significantly higher than the mean score for those pupils not identified as victims. Indeed, the difference found between the mean score of the 13 self-identified victims and the mean score of the 50 pupils not identified as victims was even greater.

Collins and Bell (1996) utilized Olweus' (1989) Bully/Victim Questionnaire (BVQ) among 118 8 to 10 years pupils from three Belfast primary schools. Twenty-four per-cent (18% boys, 6% girls) of pupils were identified as bullies. Comparable figures for victims, bully/victims, and bystanders were not reported. They also reported a significant positive relationship between self-reports of bullying on the BVQ (Olweus, 1989) and peer-nominations given to bullies regarding aggressive-disruptive behavior on the Revised Class Play method (a measure of social reputation; Masten, Morison, & Pellegrini, 1985). Bullies also scored higher on all categories of the Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC; Harter, 1985) except for the Behavioral Conduct and Self-Competence sub-scales. Indeed, it was reported that bullies scored lower on the Behavioral Conduct sub-scale than victims and bystanders. Victims were reported to have had low levels of self-esteem on all sub-scales of the SPPC (Harter, 1985).

Exploring the efficacy of Anti-Bullying Policies, Taylor (1996) administered the BVQ (Olweus, 1989) to 145 post-primary school pupils. Twenty-two per-cent of the pupils in schools with Anti-Bullying Policies reported being bullied compared with 31% in the control schools with no policy in place. However, chi-square analysis of the data found no statistically significant difference between policy and no-policy schools.

Grant (1996), among 150 (82 boys, 68 girls) grade 6 primary school pupils, found that in response to the question: "Have you ever been bullied?", 59.33% ($N = 89$; 68% of boys, 49% of girls) of the pupils responded that they had been bullied.

The findings of Callaghan and Joseph (1995), Collins and Bell (1996), Taylor (1996), and Grant (1996) were limited due to their small sample sizes and unrepresentative nature. Subsequent studies have sought to address this problem (Collins et al., 2002, 2004; Livesey et al., 2007; Mc Guckin & Lewis, 2006; Mc Guckin et al., under review a, under review b).

Collins et al. (2002, 2004) among a representative sample of 3,000 pupils from 120 schools (60 primary; 60 post-primary) found that 40.1% of primary school pupils and 30.2% of post-primary school pupils claimed to have been bullied during the period of the study (March to June 2000). Indeed, 5% of the primary school pupils and 2% of the post-primary school pupils reported that they had suffered bullying for several years. Regarding taking part in bullying others at school, this was reported by approximately one quarter (24.9%) of the primary school pupils and 29% of the post-primary school pupils. Collins et al. (2002, 2004) also asserted that all of the evidence indicated that

bullying was happening even in the best regulated schools, was not age or gender-specific, and was sometimes underplayed by the schools and teachers.

Livesey et al. (2007) utilized a similar methodology (i.e., Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire for Juniors and Seniors: Olweus, 1996) to Collins et al. (2002, 2004), in a post-legislative follow-up, to explore changes and trends in incidence rates and experiences of bully/victim problems in the Province's schools. Among a sample of 993 primary school pupils and 1,319 post-primary school pupils it was found that 16.5% of primary school pupils and 7.6% of post-primary school pupils reported being bullied 'sometimes or more often' and 5% of primary school pupils and 2.8% of post-primary school pupils reported involvement in bullying others 'sometimes or more often.' These data were similar to those from the initial research conducted by Collins et al. (2002, 2004).

Utilizing data collected as part of the representative 'Young Life and Times Survey' (YLTS: ARK 2008 [<http://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt/>]), Mc Guckin and Lewis (2006), and Mc Guckin et al (under review a, under review b) have reported upon the incidence of self-reported experiences of bully/victim problems and associated levels of psychological well-being. Whilst the YLTS is not focused solely upon school related issues (e.g., environment, politics), its representative nature presents meaningful data on issues that affect Northern Irish adolescents.

Mc Guckin and Lewis (2006), among a representative sample of 397 12 to 17 year olds who completed the 1998 iteration of the YLTS, reported a victimization rate of 76.8% in response to the question 'Would you say that students at your school get bullied by other students?'

Mc Guckin et al. (under review b), among a representative sample of 824 16 year olds who completed the 2004 iteration of the YLTS, reported a victimization rate of 13% ($N = 107$) in response to the statement 'I was bullied at school' (frequency = 'sometimes or more often'). Whilst nearly two-thirds of respondents (65.7%, $N = 541$) reported being stressed, approximately one-quarter (23.8%, $N = 189$) scored high enough on the GHQ-12 (Goldberg & Williams, 1988) to be classified as a 'case' (utilizing a cut-off score of four: Mc Whirter, 2004). Direct experience of involvement in bully/victim problems was significantly associated with impaired psychological health in terms of increased stress ($r = -0.21$, $p < 0.01$, 1-tailed) and impaired psychological well-being ($r = 0.21$, $p < 0.01$, 1-tailed).

Mc Guckin et al. (under review a) among a representative sample of 819 16 year olds who completed the 2005 iteration of the YLTS, reported a victimization rate of 30.4% ($n = 244$). Whilst nearly two-thirds (64.7%, $N = 522$) of respondents reported being stressed, almost one quarter (21.4%, $N = 172$) were scoring high enough on the GHQ-12 (Goldberg & Williams, 1988) to be classified as a 'case' (utilizing a cut-off score of four: Mc Whirter, 2004). Direct experience of involvement in bully/victim problems was significantly associated with impaired psychological health in terms of increased stress ($r = 0.17$, $p < 0.01$, 1-tailed) and impaired psychological well-being ($r = -0.16$, $p < 0.01$, 1-tailed).

In combination, these nine Northern Ireland based research studies provide valuable insight into the nature, incidence, and correlates of bully/victim problems among Northern Irish school pupils. However, what is apparent is the variety of methodologies

employed in terms of both samples employed and measurement instruments employed. Whilst some studies have collected data utilizing theoretically developed instruments and items (i.e., Callaghan & Joseph, 1995; Collins & Bell, 1996; Collins et al., 2002, 2004; Livesey et al., 2007; Taylor, 1996), other studies have only sought to include items that are, *prima facie*, related to the topic (i.e., Grant, 1996; Mc Guckin & Lewis, 2006; Mc Guckin et al., under review a, under review b). At the same time as some studies have used convenience samples, (i.e., Callaghan & Joseph, 1995; Collins & Bell, 1996; Grant, 1996; Taylor, 1996), other studies have employed more representative samples (i.e., Collins et al., 2002, 2004; Livesey et al., 2007; Mc Guckin & Lewis, 2006; Mc Guckin et al., under review a, under review b). Such an approach has resulted in a smorgasbord of findings that in combination provide a rich tapestry of findings from which is beginning to emerge a picture of the nature, incidence, and correlates of bully/victim problems among Northern Irish school pupils. However, this picture is based on only nine studies, and further research is required to provide a better understanding of the problem.

The aim of the present study was to supplement the research findings previously reported in Northern Ireland (Callaghan & Joseph, 1995; Collins & Bell, 1996; Collins et al., 2002, 2004; Grant, 1996; Livesey et al., 2007; Mc Guckin & Lewis, 2006; Mc Guckin et al., under review a, under review b; Taylor, 1996) by examining the experiences of 11 to 16 year old Northern Irish post-primary school pupils as part of the 2000 iteration of the large and representative 'Young Person's Behavior and Attitude Survey' (YPBAS).

Method

Participants

Sixty-two post-primary schools in Northern Ireland, representative of school size and selection type (i.e., Secondary [59%, $N = 3,708$], Grammar [41%, $n = 2,589$]), management type (e.g., Voluntary, Controlled) and Education and Library Board (e.g., North-Eastern, Southern) agreed to participate in the survey. One class group (Year 8 to Year 12 inclusive) in each school was randomly selected for participation. In total, 6,297 pupils aged between 11 and 16 years were surveyed (male: 57%, $N = 3,215$; female: 43%, $N = 3,076$; [missing: 0.1%, $N = 6$]), with 87.3% ($N = 5,500$) completing the entire questionnaire.

Measures

The YPBAS (2000) questionnaire was presented in a self-completion format and consisted of 14 themed modules topics (e.g., General Health, Policing, Anti-social Behavior, Personal Safety (see YPBAS, 2000 for an overview). Four of the modules: 'Personal Safety', 'Nutrition', 'Sports', and 'Policing' were of interest to the present study. The 'Personal Safety' module had a direct relevance as it enquired explicitly about victimization: 'Have you ever been a victim of the following - Being Bullied?' (Question 153), 'In relation to your own personal safety, are you worried about being bullied?' (Question 154), and 'How likely or unlikely is it for you to be bullied?' (Question 155). Whilst the response options for the first two of these questions were 'Yes' and 'No', the response options for the third question ranged from 'Very likely' through 'Neither likely nor unlikely' to 'Very unlikely', with a further option of 'Don't know.'

Across all four modules, whilst other questions did not *explicitly* examine attitudes or experiences of bully/victim problems or include mention of such problems in response options, some respondents did voluntarily report bully/victim related experiences in the 'other' response option to these questions (i.e., 'If you don't usually eat a school dinner/snack why not?' [Question 26, Personal Safety]; 'Why do you think some children do not take a free school meal when they are allowed to take one?': [Question 27, Nutrition]; 'Why don't you like it?' [sport]: [Question 49, Sport, parentheses added]; 'Why don't you like it?' [PE and games classes]: [Question 51, Sport, parentheses added]; 'Was this [speaking to previously nominated person] because ... Other' [police]: [Question 145, Policing, parentheses added]; 'Have you ever been a victim of the following – Other thing': [Question 153, Personal Safety]; 'Why are you worried about your safety going into your nearest town centre at night - Other?': [Question 159, Personal Safety]).

Procedure

The YPBAS is a representative survey conducted among 11 to 16 year old Northern Irish post-primary school pupils by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), an Executive Agency of the Department of Finance and Personnel. NISRA is the principal source of official information on Northern Ireland's population and socio-economic conditions. The 2000 wave of the YPBAS self-completion questionnaire was administered to over 6,000 post-primary school pupils during the months of October and November 2000. In the majority of schools surveyed, five year groups (i.e., Years 8 – 12) were sampled. One class from each of the year groups were randomly selected for participation in the survey.

Results

Whilst some questions directly examined victimization in an 'explicit' manner, respondents' answers to other questions included 'voluntary' reference to bully/victim problems in a more implicit manner (i.e., through use of the 'other' response option).

Explicit

In response to the question 'Have you ever been a victim of the following – Being Bullied?' (Question 153), whilst 56.7% ($N = 3,236$) of respondents stated that they had never been a victim of bullying behavior, 43.3% ($N = 2,470$) reported that they had been a victim of such behaviors.

In response to the question 'In relation to your own personal safety, are you worried about being bullied?' (Question 154), whilst 56.5% ($N = 3,210$) of those that responded to this question answered in the negative, 43.5% ($N = 2,475$) reported in the affirmative.

Regarding the question 'How likely or unlikely is it for you to be bullied?' (Question 155), whilst nearly half of respondents (48.5%, $N = 2,759$) reported that it was either 'Quite unlikely' (22%; $N = 1,252$) or 'Very unlikely' (26.5%; $N = 1,507$) for them to be bullied, nearly a fifth (19.9%; $N = 1,132$) reported that it was either 'Quite likely' (13.5%, $N = 770$) or 'Very likely' (6.4%, $N = 362$). Nearly one-quarter of respondents (23.1%, $N = 1,315$) reported that it was 'Neither likely nor unlikely'. The remaining 8.6% ($N = 492$) reported 'Don't know'.

Voluntary

In response to the question 'If you don't usually eat a school dinner / snack why not?' (Question 26), 15.2% ($N = 427$) of respondents reported that it was due to 'Other.' Of the 26 different themes of 'Other', 1.2% ($N = 5$) reported that because of 'Bullying/fighting in the queue' they did not eat a school dinner or snack.

When asked 'Why do you think some children do not take a free school meal when they are allowed to take one?' (Question 27: free response), 36 themes were generated from the 6,717 responses. The theme 'Bullied / slagged / teased / made fun of' was reported by 5.7% ($N = 386$) of respondents as the reason for why some children do not take a free school meal.

Respondents who did not enjoy playing sports or physical activity (13.5%; $N = 843$), were asked 'Why don't you like it?' (Question 49). Of the 48 themes that emerged from answers to this question, 2% ($N = 18$) of respondents reported that they 'Get laughed at / bullied by other pupils'.

Similarly, respondents who did not enjoy PE (i.e., physical education classes) (12.1%, $N = 754$) were asked 'Why don't you like it?' (Question 51). Of the 51 different themes, 1.9% ($N = 15$) of respondents reported that they 'Get laughed at / bullied by other pupils'.

With regard to 'Policing', 0.4% ($N = 3$) of respondents reported that they had either spoken to, or been spoken to by, a police officer, ('Why was this?': Question 125) in relation to 'Bullying (victim / perpetrator?)'.

With regard to 'Personal Safety', 5.9% ($N = 262$) reported that they had been a victim in response to the question 'Have you ever been a victim of the following – Other thing' (Question 153). When asked to expand upon the nature of the victimization (72 themes), 0.5% ($N = 1$) respondent reported 'False accusation of bullying'.

In relation to the question 'Why are you worried about your safety going into your nearest town centre at night – Other?' (Question 159), of the 25 themes that emerged, 3.4% ($N = 3$) respondents highlighted the theme 'Being bullied'.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to examine the personal experience of bully/victim problems among a representative sample of 11 to 16 years old adolescents in Northern Ireland by examining data collected as part of the 2000 iteration of the YPBAS survey. From the present analysis three points are worthy of note.

First, the data clearly indicates that the incidence of victimization among the sample was high, with nearly half of all respondents reporting that they had been the victim of bullying behaviors. In comparison to previously reported research findings from Northern Ireland, whilst this incidence rate was quite high in relation to the findings of Collins and Bell (1996), Collins et al. (2002, 2004), Livesey et al. (2007), Mc Guckin et al. (under review a, under review b), and Taylor (1996), it was lower than that reported by Callaghan and Joseph (1995), Grant (1996) and Mc Guckin and Lewis (2006). Such a high incidence of victimization clearly warrants further research, especially research that utilizes appropriate psychometric instrumentation across large and representative samples of pupils in the Province. Indeed, as argued by Mc Guckin and Lewis (2003), such a

planned body of research would provide a real opportunity for the direct comparison of findings to previous local and international research in the area.

Second, in a similar manner to the data regarding self-reported 'actual' experience of victimization, almost half of all respondents reported being 'worried' about becoming the victim of bullying behavior. Indeed, nearly one-fifth of respondents reported that it was either 'quite likely' or 'likely' that they would be the victim of such behaviors. Whilst no direct comparison to such a question is available with previous research among Northern Irish school pupils, comparable findings were reported by Francis and Kay (1995) from their large-scale research study ($N = 13,000$) exploring teenage religion and values. Francis and Kay (1995) reported that 25% of the respondents were fearful of being bullied, with a further 23% reporting that they were 'not sure'. Considering that 'fear' is an attitude and precedes behavioral experience, it would be incumbent upon future research studies to more fully explore this concept as it may present an 'early warning indicator' in relation to the incidence and behavioral effects of bully/victim problems.

Third, direct experience of bully/victim problems had a negative 'spill-over' effect on various life and school experiences of the respondents, such as; school meals, playing sport and physical activity, speaking to a police officer and personal safety outside of school. Whilst some of these life and school categories of events attracted only a few responses, the mere fact that these responses were provided voluntarily in the absence of question / question response format prompt highlights the pervasive effect of bully/victim problems outside of the actual behavioral incident(s). Future research should be directed towards exploration of these areas of concern highlighted by the respondents.

In conclusion, the representative data provided by the YPBAS (2000) survey furthers the knowledge base regarding the nature, incidence and correlates of bully/victim problems among young people in Northern Ireland. However, it is also evident that data and knowledge regarding such pervasive problems would be strengthened by research studies that are planned with a priori derived content and administered through robust methodological sampling procedures. Only by implementing such a research approach could data be accurately interpreted in relation to the international database on this issue (e.g., Smith et al., 1999). Such research would truly evidence advancement of knowledge in this important area of young people's lives and enable the development and implementation of focused and sustained policy and practice campaigns to reduce the incidence and negative life and school experiences associated with involvement in bully/victim problems (e.g., Mc Guckin & Lewis, 2008; Smith, Pepler, & Rigby, 2004).

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