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**BULLY/VICTIM PROBLEMS IN NORTHERN IRELAND'S SCHOOLS: DATA  
FROM THE 2003 YOUNG PERSONS' BEHAVIOUR AND ATTITUDE SURVEY**

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ABSTRACT

Mc Guckin and Lewis (2003, 2006, 2008), Mc Guckin, Cummins, and Lewis (in press, under review a), and Mc Guckin, Lewis and Cummins (under review b) have reported that 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 7,223 11 to 16 year olds living in Northern Ireland who participated in the 2003 „Young Persons“ Behaviour and Attitude Survey“ (YPBAS: Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency [NISRA], 2003). Respondents were presented with three questions enquiring explicitly and three questions enquiring implicitly about bully/victim problems. Across other questions, respondents volunteered other salient information about personal experiences of bully/victim problems (i.e., through use of the „other“ response option). Almost one fifth of all respondents (17.2%,  $n = 1,026$ ) reported being a victim of bullying behaviour, and 8.1% ( $n = 492$ ) reported that they had picked on or bullied another school pupil. 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, and 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 ten 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, in press, 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: Department of Education for Northern Ireland, 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) utilised 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 behaviour 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 Behavioural Conduct and Self-Competence sub-scales. Indeed, it was reported that bullies scored lower on the Behavioural 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).

Taylor (1996) administered the BVQ (Olweus, 1989) among 145 post-primary school pupils looking at the efficacy of Anti-Bullying Policies. 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 reported have sought to address this problem (Collins et al., 2002, 2004; Livesey et al., 2007; Mc Guckin & Lewis, 2006; Mc Guckin et al., in press, 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 students and 30.2% of post-primary students claimed to have been bullied during the period of the study (March to June 2000). Indeed, 5% of the primary pupils and 2% of the post-primary 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 pupils and 29% of the post-primary 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) utilised 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 Year Six and 1,319 Year Nine pupils it was found that 16.5% of Year Six

and 7.6% of Year Nine pupils reported being bullied „sometimes or more often“ and 5% of Year Six and 2.8% of Year Nine 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).

Utilising data collected as part of the representative „Young Life and Times Survey“ (YLTS: ARK 2008 [<http://www.ark.ac.uk/yлт/>]), 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), it’s 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% ( $n = 107$ ) (frequency = „sometimes or more often“) in response to the statement „I was bullied at school“. 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“ (utilising a cut-off score of four: Mc Whirter, 2004). Indeed, direct involvement in bully/victim problems was found to be associated with impaired psychological health in terms of increased

stress ( $r = -0.21$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , 1-tailed) and lower general 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) so as to require psychiatric referral (also utilising a cut-off score of four: Mc Whirter, 2004). Direct experience of involvement in bully/victim problems was significantly associated with self-reported stress ( $r = 0.17$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , 1-tailed) and impaired psychological well-being ( $r = -0.16$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , 1-tailed).

Utilising data collected as part of the 2000 iteration of the „Young Persons Behaviour and Attitudes Survey“ (YPBAS: NISRA 2008 [<http://www.csu.nisra.gov.uk/survey.asp14.htm>]), Mc Guckin et al. (in press) among a representative sample of 6,297 11 to 16 year olds living in Northern Ireland, reported a victimization rate of 43.3% ( $n = 2,470$ ) in response to the question „Have you ever been a victim of the following - Being Bullied?“. Bully/victim problems also pervaded personal experiences of school meal times, sporting activities and perceptions of personal safety.

In combination, these ten 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 utilising 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., in press, 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., in press, 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, prevalence and correlates of bully/victim problems in Northern Ireland. However, this picture is based on only ten 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., in press, under review a, under review b; Taylor, 1996) by examining the experiences of school bullying in Northern Ireland within data among 11 to 16 year old Northern Irish post-primary school pupils collected as part of the 2003 iteration of the large and representative Young Person's Behaviour and Attitude Survey (YPBAS).

## METHOD

### *Respondents*

Of the original 150 schools identified for participation (N = 8,157; age range 11 to 16 years), 74 schools participated, 55 refused (including one which dropped out), and 21 did not respond, yielding a response rate of 49.3%. These schools were representative of school size and selection type (i.e., Secondary [69.1%,  $n = 4,991$ ], Grammar [30.9%,  $n = 2,232$ ]), management type (e.g., Voluntary, Controlled) and Education and Library Board (e.g., North-Eastern, Southern). Of those schools that participated, 93.2% participated fully and 6.8% participated only partially. One class group (Year 8 to Year 12 inclusive) in each school was randomly selected for participation. In total, 7,223 (88.5%:  $n = 3,680$ , male; 51%:  $n = 3,543$ , female: 49%) pupils were surveyed, yielding a response rate of 88.5% (73.1% completed the entire questionnaire).

### *Measures*

The YPBAS (2003) questionnaire was presented in a self-completion format and consisted of 17 themed modules topics (e.g., General Health, Policing, Anti-social Behaviour, Personal Safety: see <http://www.csu.nisra.gov.uk/survey.asp14.htm> for an overview). Six of the modules: „Nutrition“, „Physical Activity“, „Smoking“, „Policing“, „Anti-social Behaviour“, and „Personal Safety“ were of interest to the present study.

Explicit questions about bully/victim problems were included in the „Anti-social Behaviour“ and „Personal „Safety“ modules: „In the past 12 months, have you picked on or bullied another school pupil?“ (Question 129 [e]: Anti-social Behaviour), „In the past

12 months, have you been a victim of the following? - Been bullied" (Question 130 [a]: Personal Safety), and „In relation to your own personal safety, are you worried about being bullied?" (Question 131 [a]: Personal Safety). Whilst the response options for the first of these questions were „Yes", „No", and „Don't know", the response options for the second and third questions were „Yes" and „No."

Within the „Nutrition", and „Personal Safety" modules bully/victim problems were examined in a more implicit manner (i.e., through one of their response options): „What do you think is the main reason some children do not take a free school meal when they are allowed to take one?" (Question 31: Nutrition), „Which of the following makes you feel unsafe in the area which you live?" (Question 133: Personal Safety), and „Why are you worried about your safety going into your nearest town/city centre at night?" (Question 136: Personal Safety). The response option relevant to bully/victim problems for the first of these questions was „They are afraid of being bullied/teased" and the response option for the remaining two was. „Being bullied".

Across the four modules of „Nutrition", „Physical Activity", „Smoking", and „Policing" there were some questions that respondents voluntarily reported 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 30, Nutrition); Why don't you like it? [sport]"(Question 50, Physical Activity, parentheses added); „Who gave you cigarettes the very first time you smoked?"(Question 77, Smoking); „Why was this? [police]"(Question 125, Policing, parentheses added).

### *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, an Executive Agency of the Department of Finance and Personnel. NISRA is the principal source of official information on Northern Ireland's population and socioeconomic conditions. The 2003 wave of the YPBAS self-completion questionnaire was administered to over 7,000 post-primary school pupils during the months of October and November 2003. 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 bully/victim problems in an „explicit“ manner, some questions examined bully/victim problems in an „implicit“ manner (i.e., through one of the response options), 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 „In the past 12 months, have you picked on or bullied another school pupil?“ (Question 129 [e]), whilst 91.9% ( $n = 5,571$ ) of respondents stated that they had not picked on or bullied another school pupil, 8.1% ( $n = 492$ ) reported that they had done so.

In response to the question „In the past 12 months, have you been a victim of being bullied?“ (Question 130 [a]), whilst 82.8% ( $n = 4,929$ ) of respondents reported that have not been a victim of bullying behaviour, 17.2% ( $n = 1,026$ ) confirmed that they had been a victim of such behaviours.

Regarding the question „In relation to your own personal safety, are you worried about being bullied?“ (Question 131[a]), whilst two-thirds (68.4%,  $n = 3,996$ ) of respondents answered in the negative, one-third (31.6%,  $n = 1,849$ ) reported in the affirmative.

### *Implicit*

In response to the question „What do you think is the main reason some children do not take a free school meal when they are allowed to take one?“ (Question 31) 12.8% ( $n = 864$ ) of respondents reported that „They are afraid of being bullied / teased“.

Furthermore, 6.4% ( $n = 122$ ) of respondents listed „Fear of being bullied“ as one of the responses to the question „Which of the following makes you feel unsafe in the area which you live?“ (Question 133). Lastly, in relation to the question „Why are you worried about your safety going into your nearest town/city centre at night?“ (Question 136) 3.5% ( $n = 482$ ) of respondents stated that it was because of „Fear of being bullied.“ These response options of „fear of being bullied“ are similar to research by Francis and Kay (1995) who also explored the idea of „Fear of being bullied“ in relation to school and religiosity among adolescents. Respondents were presented with the statement „I am worried about being bullied at school“ where 52% of the sample disagreed with the

statement, 25% said that they agreed with it, and a further 23% said that they were not certain. Thus, nearly half of all pupils were fearful of being bullied at school.

### *Voluntary*

In relation to the question „If you don’t usually eat a school dinner/snack, why not?“ (Question 30), 16.6% ( $n = 517$ ) of respondents reported the response option of „Other reason(s).“ Of the 35 different themes of „Other“, 1% ( $n = 5$ ) reported that because of „Bullying/pushing in the queue“ they did not eat a school dinner or snack.

Respondents who did not enjoy playing sports or physical activity (20.3%;  $n = 1,452$ ), were asked „Why don’t you like it?“ (Question 50), 1.6% ( $n = 70$ ) stated that it was due to some „Other“ reason. Of the 25 different themes of „Other“, 6.4% ( $n = 4$ ) reported that it was because they „Get bullied/others shout or laugh at me.“

When asked „Who gave you cigarettes the very first time you smoked?“ (Question 77), 6.1% ( $n = 141$ ) reported that it was „Someone else.“. Of the 11 different themes that emerged, 0.9% ( $n = 1$ ) stated that it was a „Bully.“

With regard to „Policing“, those that had either spoken to, or been spoken to, by a police officer in Northern Ireland in the past 12 months were asked „Why was this?“ (Question 125). „Some other reason“ was reported by 20.9% ( $n = 638$ ) of respondents and of the 53 different themes of „Other“, 0.9% ( $n = 6$ ) stated that it was because of „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 2003 iteration of the YPBAS survey. From the present analysis four points are worthy of note.

First, the data clearly indicates that the incidence of victimisation among the sample was high, with nearly one-fifth (17.2%,  $n = 1,026$ ) of all respondents reporting that they had been the victim of bullying behaviours. In comparison to previously reported research findings from Northern Ireland, whilst this incidence rate was high in relation to the findings of Livesey et al. (2007), Mc Guckin et al. (under review b), and Taylor (1996), it was lower than that reported by Callaghan and Joseph (1995), Collins et al. (2002, 2004), Grant (1996), Mc Guckin et al. (under review a), and Mc Guckin and Lewis (2006). Such a rate of victimisation clearly warrants further research, especially research that utilises 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, the data clearly indicates that the incidence of involvement in bullying behaviour among the sample was low, with nearly one-tenth (8.1%,  $n = 492$ ) of all respondents reporting that they had been involved in bullying other pupils. In comparison to previously reported research findings from Northern Ireland, whilst this incidence rate was high in relation to the findings of Livesey et al. (2007), it was lower

than that reported by Collins and Bell (1996) and Collins et al. (2002, 2004). However, Callaghan and Joseph (1995), Grant (1996), Mc Guckin et al. (in press, under review a, under review b), Mc Guckin and Lewis (2006), and Taylor (1996) did not report any data regarding involvement in bullying behaviour. As argued previously, this rate of involvement in bullying behaviour clearly warrants further research, especially research that utilises appropriate psychometric instrumentation across large and representative samples of pupils in the Province.

Third, in a similar manner to the data regarding self-reported 'actual' experience of victimization, almost one-third (31.6%,  $n = 1,849$ ) of all respondents reported being 'worried' about becoming the victim of bullying behaviour. This figure is lower than that reported by Mc Guckin et al. (in press) where nearly half (43.5%,  $n = 2,475$ ) of respondents were 'worried' about this and almost one-fifth (19.9%,  $n = 1,132$ ) reported that it was either 'quite likely' or 'very likely' that they would be the victim of such behaviours. Furthermore, 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 behavioural 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 behavioural effects of bully/victim problems.

Fourth, 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 prompts highlights the pervasive effect of bully/victim problems outside of actual behavioural 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 2003 iteration of the YPBAS 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 theoretically derived content and administered through robust sampling procedures. Only by implementing such an 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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