



Bullying in Irish schools: Testing the effect of question wording and school diversity on prevalence rates

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Abstract

This paper tests two hypotheses about bullying among school children using original data collected from surveys with thirteen-year old students in 10 Irish secondary schools. First, it aims to understand the effect of two alternative bullying measurement scales on reporting rates. Second, it tests the effect of intergroup diversity and school diversity on bullying behaviour. These analyses are novel for the Irish context.

Prevalence of bullying

Student self-perception on having experienced being bullied has been linked to higher dropout rate, lower academic performance (Cornell et al., 2013), and adverse physical health (Jennings et al., 2017). Yet measures of bullying have offered different estimates about its prevalence (Van Roekel, Scholte, & Didden, 2010). Studies have shown statistically significant differences between reporting rates linked to different measurement scales. If the word 'bully' is not used on measurement scales, reported incidence of victimization behaviour is higher (Kert et al., 2010). This is consistent with research on sexual harassment and sexual assault. Studies have showed that if the measurement scales do not mention the words 'sexual assault' or 'sexual harassment', reporting rates increase both for victims and perpetrators (Fisher, 2009).

The lead source of data on bullying in the Irish context is the longitudinal study Growing Up in Ireland (GUI). One GUI cohort has been followed since age nine every four years. Relevant data is available until the age thirteen. Participants in the GUI have been asked both about having been the victims of bullying and about engaging in bullying behaviour themselves. At different ages, participants in the GUI are asked about bullying using different question formats. In the current version of the GUI survey for age thirteen, the items that measure bullying filter respondents using the following questions 'Have you been bullied in the last 3 months?' and respectively 'In the last 3 months have you bullied someone?'. The results of GUI suggest that 10 percent of thirteen-year olds have experienced bullying and that 1.9 percent of children reported they bullied others (Williams et al., 2018). These figures are lower than those reported in the previous wave of research with the same cohort, at age nine. Overall, 40 percent of nine-year olds have experienced bullying and 13 percent of children reported they had picked on somebody (Williams et al., 2009). The variations in prevalence rates between the two waves has been explained by changes in the bullying measurement scales used (Williams et al., 2018).

This study evaluates the effect of how questions about bullying are asked on reporting rates in the Irish context. As part of a survey with secondary school students at 10 schools in Ireland (n = 1,300), questions

about incidence of bullying are randomly asked in two distinct ways. One experimental condition replicates the questions about bullying as asked by GUI at age thirteen. A second experimental condition asks respondents if they experienced or have inflicted the operationalised components of bullying, as defined by the verbal and physical abuse scale of the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (Schulz et al., 2018). The reported bullying rates are then compared with the results of GUI as well as other international documented bullying reporting rates. This experiment may have implications for how data on bullying is collected by further instruments and studies, including the GUI.

Effect of intergroup and school diversity on bullying rates

Intergroup friendships have been shown to have positive effects on diminishing stereotypes about other groups, increasing prosocial behaviour (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000), improving intergroup attitudes (Chen & Graham, 2015), and on increasing the psychological well-being and resilience among minority children (Bagci, et al., 2014). Studies evaluating the relationship between friendship groups and bullying have generally used small samples (Espelage, Green Jr, & Wasserman, 2007; Merrin et al., 2018; Ostrov, et al., 2015; Pellegrini, Bartini, & Brooks, 1999; Savage, 2005). This paper also presents findings on how friendship diversity and school diversity (Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2006; Simpson, 1949) affects bullying in the Irish context using the same survey with students in 10 Irish schools.

The survey data is scheduled to be collected between October and November 2019. As such, no preliminary results can be provided at this stage. However, the author anticipates no challenges in completing the paper by the conference date, as the research is part of a grant due to be completed in the Spring of 2020.