



School Bullying in Northern Ireland - It hasn't gone away you know

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Bullying has been identified in many research studies as one of the most pressing concerns facing young people in the UK today. In 1998, Childline found that bullying accounted for 14% of calls from Northern Ireland (Childline, 1998). Furthermore, a major study commissioned by the Department of Education in Northern Ireland (DENI, 2002) indicated that 40% of primary school pupils and 30% of post-primary pupils had experienced bullying in the few months prior to data collection.

Amidst the wealth of evidence regarding the extent of bullying, and the increasing recognition of children's rights, DENI released a Statement on Bullying in 2003. It highlighted that all schools need to have plans for preventing all forms of bullying among pupils, as well as requiring that pupils be consulted on bullying policies.

The Northern Ireland the **Young Life and Times (YLT)** survey has investigated young people's experiences of school bullying for a number of years by asking questions about the extent of school bullying and about the help that their schools offer pupils for dealing with it. Questions on school bullying were first asked in 1998 and were repeated in 2005. Questions on bullying were also asked in 2004. This Research Update will explore these data, focusing primarily on the 2005 results, which are based on 819 responses from 16-year olds. Results from the 1998 and 2004 YLT surveys (with samples of 425 12-17 year olds and 824 16-year olds respectively) will provide a comparative focus.

In addition, a 2005 study commissioned by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) entitled 'Being Part and Parcel of the School' (Schubotz and Sinclair et al, 2006) will be discussed. It investigated the extent of children's involvement in the development of school bullying policies. 687 primary and post-primary pupils from nine schools completed a questionnaire for the study, which repeated several YLT survey questions. Qualitative fieldwork was also completed in 14 schools across Northern Ireland. Due to the age range of this sample, the data from this study are most comparable with the 1998 YLT survey.

Extent of School Bullying

Results from YLT 2005 indicate that bullying is still a problem that looms in the school environment. Table 1 compares the proportions of respondents of the NICCY study and the 1998 and 2005 YLT surveys who

said that students got bullied in their school. Whilst the different sampling techniques used for the 1998 and 2005 YLT surveys make it somewhat difficult to directly compare the results, the most recent NICCY study shows that almost one fifth of all pupils felt that students at their school got bullied 'a lot', with half saying students got bullied 'a little'. The proportion of 16-year olds who said they were bullied a lot was significantly lower in YLT 2005. There was no significant difference between males' and females' answers with both YLT surveys. However, it should be noted that primary-age females and post-primary age males from the NICCY sample were more than twice as likely to say that students at their school got bullied 'a lot' (21% and 23%) when compared to primary-age males (10%) and post-primary age females (10%).

The 2004 and 2005 YLT surveys asked respondents whether they had ever personally been bullied at school. In 2004, 63% of respondents said they were 'never' bullied at school,

Table 1: Would you say that students at your school get bullied... (%)

	YLT 1998		YLT 2005		NICCY 2006	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
A lot	17	13	9	12	20	17
A little	58	66	67	70	49	50
Not at all	14	13	12	8	8	6
Don't know	11	9	10	9	23	28

compared to 68% of respondents in 2005 who said they had not been bullied. Of those in 2005 who said they had been bullied (30% of the total number of respondents), just over one quarter (28%) said it had happened 'a lot' or 'a little' during the previous two months, with 72% saying 'not at all' (Figure 1).

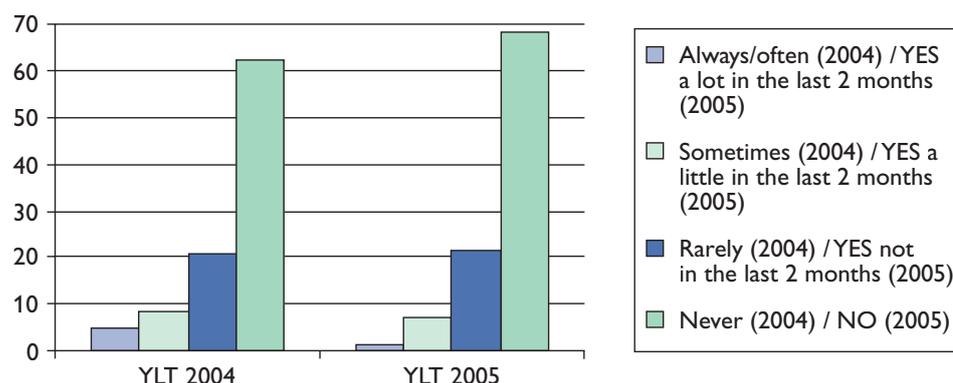
Singled Out?

Are particular children more likely than others to experience bullying?

The YLT 2005 survey asked young people how financially well-off they felt their families were, as a proxy-measure for social class. It was found that there were statistically significant differences in experiences in school bullying according to social class. 46% of 16-year olds whose families were 'not at all well off' had been bullied at school, compared to 31% of those with 'average' incomes and only 24% of those whose families were 'well-off'.

Another finding related to the sexual orientation of YLT respondents. Although the numbers of males and females from the YLT 2005 survey who reported ever having homosexual feelings was small (approximately 6% of males and 10% of females), males who had been same-sex attracted at least once were more likely to have been bullied (67%) than heterosexual males (24%). Heterosexual females and females who had had same-sex feelings did not show as big a gap in their experience of bullying (31% to 39%) and the result was not statistically significant.

Figure 1: Have you ever been bullied in school? (% YLT 2004 and YLT 2005)



Social Pressures

There was also evidence from YLT 2005 of a relationship between bullying and the experience of social pressure. Young people who had been bullied were also more likely to feel pressurised into doing things they did not really want to do (Figure 2). For example, almost one in three young people (29%) who had been bullied felt pressurised to smoke cigarettes, compared to just one in five young people (18%) who had not been bullied. Similarly, those who had been bullied were more likely to feel pressured into drinking alcohol (37%), losing weight (30%), and having sexual intercourse (9%).

Types of Schools and Bullying Experiences

Some significant relationships arose between bullying and the dominant religious background of the pupils in the school (YLT 2005). Respondents from schools where the pupils were 'all or nearly all Protestant' were more likely than students from schools with other religious backgrounds to say that students got bullied 'a lot or a little' at their school (83%). Respondents who attended schools with a school population that was 'about half Protestant and half Catholic' were the most likely to say that students were 'not at all' bullied at their school (16%).

YLT 2005 also found a significant difference between the types of schools respondents attended and the perceived

levels of bullying. Only 6% of young people from grammar schools said that pupils in their school got bullied 'a lot', whereas 16% of pupils from secondary schools included their school in this category. These figures are lower than those found with YLT 1998 - 8% of respondents from grammar schools and 21% of respondents from secondary schools said then that school bullying happened 'a lot' in their school.

What about the Bullies?

YLT 2005 asked respondents whether they had ever taken part in bullying other students: 7% revealed that they had bullied others while 90% said they had not. Males (12%) were significantly more likely than females (4%) to say they had bullied a fellow student. Students who said they had been bullied themselves were also much more likely to say that they took part in bullying other classmates than those who had never been bullied (14% and 5% respectively).

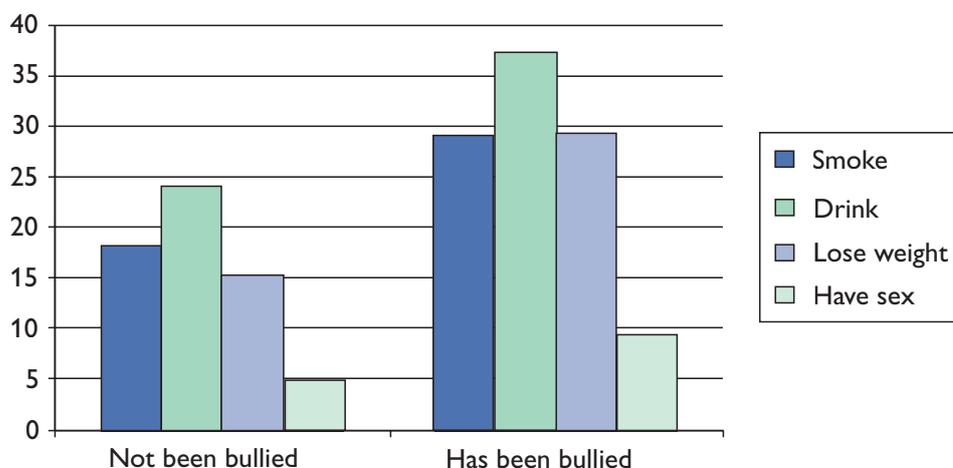
Respondents in 2005 were also asked how favourable or unfavourable they felt about people from ethnic minority communities. YLT found that 16% of those who felt unfavourably towards minority ethnic communities admitted to bullying other students, compared to only 3% of those who felt favourably towards such groups.

There was also a statistically significant relationship between the socio-religious background of the respondent and whether they had ever taken part in bullying another student. 16-year olds who saw themselves as part of the Catholic community were less likely to say they had bullied others than 16-year olds who saw themselves as part of the Protestant community or neither community (5%, compared to 9% and 8% respectively).

Getting Help

Schools in Northern Ireland are

Figure 2: Bullying by social pressures respondents experienced (%)



required to have a policy to deal with bullying; however, the usefulness of such a document may be compromised if pupils are not aware of the existence of this policy in their school. YLT 1998 found that 59% of respondents thought that their school had an official bullying policy. According to the 2005 NICCY study, 80% of post-primary pupils thought their school had an anti-bullying policy. However, the NICCY study also found that pupils' involvement in the development of school policies was limited. Less than half of the schools visited had a school council (as did 42% of schools in 1998, according to YLT). Only 15% of primary school pupils and 32% of post-primary pupils said that they had ever been asked their opinion on how something was done in their school, and only 18% of primary and 11% of post-primary pupils said that they had ever helped to change something in their school. Schools that had concrete means of involving children in the development of policies commented on the positive atmosphere it created in schools:

“They feel ownership and part and parcel of the school. They feel like leaders in the school and they feel valued and important. Their thoughts are considered and they know that the teachers are working as best they can to work alongside them. Therefore the kids are more willing to speak to the teachers.” (NICCY, 2006)

This does not mean that the role of teachers in helping with bullying is redundant:

“[Children] know a lot more than the teacher does of what's going on. Though in some circumstances you do need the intervention of other members of staff, they can't sort it all out between each other.” (NICCY, 2006)

The proportion of schools that had particular staff members at school to whom students can go to for help with bullying was smaller in 1998 (58% of YLT respondents said this), than in

2005 (67% of YLT respondents and 78% of respondents in the NICCY study).

The important question is whether young people felt that they could or would actually speak to such staff in the event of being bullied. The results show a huge increase in the numbers who said 'it depends' on the situation – see Table 2. This perhaps indicates the need for schools to provide a variety of avenues of support for their students. Indeed, during the NICCY project, it became clear that pupils' preferences of means of dealing with bullying varied enormously (for example, having trained 'outside' staff come into the school, peer mediation, circle time/Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE), have the school council deal with it, and confidential helplines, as well as involving school staff).

There was also a clear gender difference in whether a student would or would not talk to designated school staff. YLT 1998 found that females were much more likely than males to say that they would speak to school staff (33% compared to 19%). YLT 2005 found that males were significantly more likely to say they would not talk to them (28% compared to 19% for females). Females in 2005 were also much more likely to say it depended on the situation (64% compared to 54%).

Generally, over two-thirds of students from the NICCY sample felt that their school provided real help to students who were being bullied. Females were more likely to say that their school provided real help (77%) than males (61%). These figures were a little higher than in the YLT 2005 survey which found that just over half of all respondents (57% of males and 56% of females) said their school provided real help. Among females, 41% of those who had been same-sex attracted at least once felt that their school did not provide real help for people who are bullied, compared with just 26% of heterosexual females. Also, YLT 2005 showed that respondents who attended schools where the school population was 'all

Table 2: If they were bullied, do you think most people would or would not talk to school staff whose job it is to deal with bullying?

	%		
	YLT 1998	YLT 2005	NICCY 2005
Would talk to them	26	16	15
Would not talk to them	41	23	11
It depends	29	60	68
Don't Know	5	2	7

or nearly all Catholic' were more likely to say that their school gave them real help in dealing with bullies (63%) than those who attended schools of other religious backgrounds. However, 67% of those who attended planned integrated schools said that their school provided real help to students being bullied, the highest percentage of all types of schools.

One of the most telling results from the NICCY study relates to the relationship between the perceived level of bullying in a school and whether a respondent

felt the school provided real help. Only about half (52%) of respondents who said that students in their school get bullied 'a lot' said that their school provided real help, compared with nearly three quarters of respondents who said that students at their school get bullied 'a little' (70%) or 'not at all' (71%). Indeed, 82% of respondents from YLT 2005 who said bullying doesn't happen at all in their school also said that their school provided real help. It may then be concluded that effective school bullying policies directly affect the extent of bullying in a school.

References

- Childline (1998) *Children Calling from Northern Ireland*. London: Childline
- DENI (2003) *Department of Education Statement on Bullying 17 November 2003*
- DENI (2002) *Bullying in Schools: A Northern Ireland Study*. Bangor: Department of Education, Statistics and Research Branch
- Schubotz, D. and Sinclair, R, et al (2006) *Being Part and Parcel of the School: The views and experiences of children and young people in relation to the development of bullying policies in schools*. Belfast: NICCY

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Key Points

- About three quarters of YLT 2005 respondents felt that pupils at their school get bullied a little; one in ten said pupils get bullied a lot or not at all. 30% said they had been bullied themselves.
- Young people from 'not at all well-off' families and males who had been same-sex attracted reported high levels of experiences of bullying. Respondents from schools with an 'all or nearly all Protestant' population and those from secondary schools were more likely to say that pupils got bullied a lot or a little at their school than respondents from other school types.
- Those who had been bullied were more likely than those who had not to feel pressurised into smoking (29%), drinking (37%), losing weight (30%), and having sexual intercourse (9%).
- Males, and those who had been bullied themselves, were more likely to say they had bullied a fellow student than other groups; respondents from the Catholic community were less likely to say this.
- 80% of students from the NICCY study said their school had a bullying policy, however, their involvement in the development of these policies was limited.
- 67% of YLT respondents said there are particular members of staff to deal with bullying in their school, as did 78% of NICCY respondents. This compares well to the YLT 1998 figure of 58%.
- Respondents who said that students at their school get bullied 'a little' or 'not at all' were significantly more likely to say that their school provides real help for those being bullied.

The **Young Life and Times Survey** is carried out annually and records the attitudes and experiences of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland.

The **Young Life and Times Survey** is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the young people think about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/ylt) or call the survey director on 028 9097 3947 with any queries.

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