



## Adapting to attrition challenges in multi-year studies: Examples from a school-based bullying and cyber bullying study



Faye Mishna\*, Lauren B. McInroy, Joanne Daciuk, Ashley Lacombe-Duncan

Factor-Inwentsh Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, Canada

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### ABSTRACT

Attrition is a significant study design and ethical challenge in multi-year research studies, and may have particular implications in research with young people due to the difficulties of conducting longitudinal research throughout key educational transitions (e.g., primary to middle to high school) and the significance of maturation on children's and adolescents' outcomes. The purpose of this research note is to review the challenges and strategies used in a school-based study of bullying and cyber bullying ( $n = 916$ ) to minimize the attrition of primary (4th grade), middle (7th grade), and high school (10th grade) students and their parents over the three-year study duration. A key process was proactively anticipating challenges on an ongoing basis and leveraging strong institutional relationships (e.g., school board, research ethics board) to adapt accordingly. In particular, midway through the study (1) passive consent and (2) mail-based surveys were incorporated, to retain as many participants as possible. Ethical and responsive adaptations to the challenges of retaining participants over an extended period are discussed and suggestions are provided for future research in school settings.

Retaining participants in multi-year studies is a well-recognized challenge, which may have particular implications in research with young people (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010; Stephens, Thibodeaux, Sloboda, & Tonkin, 2007). The purpose of this research note is to share the challenges and strategies used in a school-based study of bullying and cyber bullying ( $n = 916$ ) to minimize the attrition of students and parents over the three-year study duration. A key process was proactively anticipating challenges and leveraging strong institutional relationships to responsively adapt to difficulties throughout the data collection process. In particular, (1) passive consent and (2) mail-based surveys were employed during data collection to ethically promote participant retention.

### 1. Attrition in multi-year studies

Attrition is a concern in all longitudinal research, as maintaining sample integrity is critical to producing rigorous research (Seed, Juarez, & Alnatour, 2009; Stephens et al., 2007). It may be a particular issue in research with youth, due to the “somatic and social maturation processes that are related to outcomes of interest, particularly problem behaviors” (Stephens et al., 2007, para. 3). Previous research has identified strategies to promote participant retention in studies with adolescents, including in school-based studies. These include: (1)

collecting extensive baseline data to permit tracking if participants leave their school context (e.g., student and parent contact details); (2) recollecting data to permit effective tracking at each time point; (3) having the school support and assist in tracking efforts; (4) incentivizing throughout the study; (5) periodically checking in with participants, and (6) using online resources (e.g., databases) to support tracking (Seed et al., 2009; Stephens et al., 2007).

Many of these strategies were employed in the current study. The ongoing process of anticipating and responding to the challenges of carrying out longitudinal research, however, should be emphasized. The literature provides limited guidance on developing longitudinal research studies and implementing processes to minimize attrition (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010). Working collaboratively with institutional and community partners has been found to facilitate recruitment and retention (Ejiogu et al., 2011). In school settings, multi-level support and participation (e.g., school board officials, school administrators, teachers) have been crucial to study success (Mishna, Houry-Kassabri, Gadalla, & Daciuk, 2012). In the current study strong institutional relationships were developed and maintained and the research team proactively anticipated challenges on an ongoing basis, leading to the mid-study implementation of a unique active-to-passive consent process and expanded mail-based data collection with the aim of enhancing participant retention.

\* Corresponding author at: 246 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V4, Canada.

E-mail addresses: [f.mishna@utoronto.ca](mailto:f.mishna@utoronto.ca) (F. Mishna), [lauren.mcinroy@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:lauren.mcinroy@mail.utoronto.ca) (L.B. McInroy), [joanne.daciuk@utoronto.ca](mailto:joanne.daciuk@utoronto.ca) (J. Daciuk), [ashley.lacombe.duncan@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:ashley.lacombe.duncan@mail.utoronto.ca) (A. Lacombe-Duncan).

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## 2. Passive consent

Consent is a critical element of the research process, but also challenging; particularly in organizational settings (e.g., schools) where it may have an impact on the responsiveness and representativeness of youth samples (Bergstrom et al., 2009). *Informed Consent* ensures participants fully understand study processes and procedures, aims and purposes, and risks and benefits. *Active Consent* entails informing participants of their rights and responsibilities before asking them to provide voluntary and explicit agreement to participate (verbal and/or written) (Bergstrom et al., 2009; McInroy, 2017; Mishna, Schwan, Lefebvre, Bhole, & Johnston, 2014; Reamer, 2010). There is increasing recognition of the need to seek children's assent (Mishna, Antle, & Regehr, 2004). *Informed Assent* satisfies informed consent with participants under the age of consent (i.e., minors). Minor participants are informed about study aims, and what is expected of them. Informed assent ensures children and adolescents understand their right to refuse to participate, and solicits explicit agreement to participate in addition to obtaining active *Parental Consent* from students' parents and/or guardians (McInroy, 2017; Daly, 2005; Ondrusek, Abramovitch, Pencharz, & Koren, 1998; Pokorny, Jason, Schoeny, Townsend, & Curie, 2001). *Passive Consent* with minors, conversely, refers to a process wherein parents and/or guardians are “notified [typically in writing] about the study [and]... must contact the researchers to remove their child from participation” (Bergstrom et al., 2009, p. 482). An absence of response from parents and/or guardians is considered consent (Bergstrom et al., 2009; Pokorny et al., 2001).

Active consent in school settings necessitates substantial resources from researchers and school personnel. It has often been considered responsible for lower response rates and selection biases, which tend to miss more diverse and higher risk students (Mishna et al., 2014; Bergstrom et al., 2009; Pokorny et al., 2001), and has been found to significantly reduce participation rates. In contrast, passive consent has generally been found to result in school-based participation rates over 80%, with non-participation due to absence rather than refusal (Esbensen, Melde, Taylor, & Peterson, 2008). Employing passive consent in school-based settings, however, has important ethical implications. For example, the written notification of the study may fail to reach the parents of participants, or parents may have problems understanding the materials sent (e.g., if they have difficulties with English), or parents may have insufficient opportunity in their busy lives to fully consider the opportunity. These ethical implications are particularly salient for research on sensitive issues (e.g., substance use) (Pokorny et al., 2001).

More recent research has found that using active consent in school settings may actually be quite effective, including for students at higher risk of problem behaviors, depending on the overall participation rate and “the methodology employed to obtain consent” (Esbensen et al., 2008, p. 337). Utilizing student-delivery (i.e., sending forms home with students, to be returned to school) may be particularly effective compared to mail-delivery (Esbensen et al., 2008). Community input when determining a study's consent procedure may be an effective means of encouraging participation, though there remains a lack of attention to “techniques designed to increase participation rates for active consent” (Pokorny et al., 2001, p. 570). Approaches which incorporate multiple methods and phases (e.g., mail, student, teacher, telephone) have been highlighted as effective, though often costly (Pokorny et al., 2001). This study is unique in its mid-study blending of both active and passive consent and assent, and both student-delivery and mail-delivery, as a response to an anticipated challenge, in order to facilitate effective and ethical retention of the sample. This approach allowed the leveraging of the advantages of both (1) active consent (e.g., ensuring parents fully consented to their child's participation in a longitudinal study on a sensitive topic, and providing them the opportunity to reconsider their consent each year), and (2) passive consent (e.g., not burdening parents with repeated completion of consent forms, and promoting sample

retention).

## 3. Mail-based surveys

Mail-based research, in which paper surveys are distributed and/or returned by mail, has been critiqued for producing low response rates (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Benefits of mail-based surveys include: efficiency in reaching large, socio-demographically diverse, and dispersed groups of people; relative cost-effectiveness; and convenience allowing completion at participants' discretion (Cohen et al., 2011; Shih & Fan, 2008). When the alternative is to forego responses from participants not present in the school context, and viable tracking data methods (i.e., addresses) are available, mail-based surveys may be a worthwhile strategy for reducing attrition. In order for mail-based strategies to be effective, surveys must be easy to understand and complete, and a pre-addressed return envelope should be included (Cohen et al., 2011). Follow-up reminders may be particularly effective (Shih & Fan, 2008).

## 4. Example: a multi-year study of bullying and cyber bullying

A process of responsive adaptation to anticipated and ongoing challenges was employed in a three-year school-based study (2012–2014) of bullying and cyber bullying. Bullying is peer-based victimization, and may take multiple forms including physical (e.g., hitting, pushing), verbal (e.g., taunting, threatening), and/or relational (e.g., gossiping, socially excluding) forms. It is characterized by its intentionality and repetitiveness, as well as the disparity in power between perpetrators and victims (Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). Cyber bullying is the use of technology (e.g., internet, computers, mobile devices) to engage in bullying (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014; Wang et al., 2009). Both bullying and cyber bullying are significant concerns in school settings due to the short-term as well as long-term negative outcomes. These include: anxiety and depression; low self-efficacy and self-esteem; poor academic performance and other school problems; and delinquency, truancy and greater dropout likelihood (Chan & Wong, 2015; Kowalski et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2009).

Stratified sampling based on school-level factors resulted in 19 participating schools from across a geographically sprawling and diverse school board located in Toronto, Canada (Mishna et al., 2016). Participants ( $n = 670$ ) were in the 4th grade ( $n = 160$ ), 7th grade ( $n = 243$ ), or 10th grade ( $n = 267$ ) at the start of study. Parents were invited to participate for all three years. The initial parent sample ( $n = 246$ ) was relatively small. The study consisted of yearly 30–60 min surveys for both students and their parents. Student surveys consisted of 60–323 questions (depending on age group, and not including sub-questions). For students in the 7th and 10th grade, 123 questions came from a single measure (The ASEBA Youth Self-Report for Ages 11–18). Parent surveys consisted of 187 questions. Longitudinal research requires a minimum of two time points; though such a design inhibits investigation of change over time. Three time points are a strongly recommended minimum for reliability and the ability to characterize the process of change (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010).

A sub-sample of students ( $n = 57$ ) and their parents ( $n = 50$ ) were also purposefully selected (primarily based on bullying and cyber bullying experience) for 30–90 min interviews in years one and three of the study (Mishna et al., 2016). The qualitative sub-sample was purposefully selected to participate in interviews based on level of school need, gender, grade, and bullying/cyberbullying involvement. For more details on the study processes and procedures, measures, as well as sample composition, please see Mishna et al. (2016). An important consideration for attrition is the length of the surveys and interviews (Thomas et al., 2012). The in-depth data collection measures for this study were designed to generate nuanced data on the phenomena of bullying and cyberbullying, but the length and level of detail could have contributed

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