



Assessing the bullying and victimisation experiences of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools: Development and validation of the Bullying Behaviour and Experience Scale



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ABSTRACT

Children with special educational needs (SEN) are more likely to experience victimisation at school and there is some evidence to suggest that these children are also more likely to engage in bullying behaviours; however, no measure of bullying experiences has been designed specifically for use with these children. The Bullying Behaviour and Experiences Scale (BBES) was specifically developed as a self-report measure of victimisation and bullying behaviour for children with SEN. This study examines the initial psychometric properties of the BBES using a sample of 348 children (67 of which had SEN, mean age = 10 years), and compares the incidence of both victimisation and bullying in children with SEN to their peers, controlling for behavioural and emotional difficulties. Overall, the BBES showed favourable psychometric properties using multi-group confirmatory factor analyses and differential item functioning. Comparing the frequency of victimisation and bullying using the BBES showed that children with SEN were not more likely to experience victimisation compared to their peers but when extant behavioural and emotional difficulties were controlled for then they were significantly more likely to report victimisation. Conversely, children with SEN were more likely to report bullying compared to their peers, but this effect disappeared when extant behavioural and emotional difficulties were controlled. Overall, the BBES appears to be a promising measure of victimisation and bullying for children with SEN. This study also highlights the need to consider SEN status independently of behavioural and emotional problems to help understand the nature and extent of bullying and victimisation in this important population of children.

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1. Introduction

Given the wide-reaching negative repercussions of bullying experiences in childhood, it is particularly concerning that there is growing evidence that children with special education needs (SEN) are significantly more likely to be victimised by their peers and/or be a perpetrator of bullying behaviours (Rose, Monda-Amaya, & Espelage, 2010; Schroeder, Cappadocia,

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Bebko, Pepler, & Weiss, 2014; Sentenac, Gavin, Arnaud, Molcho, Godeau, & Gabhainn, 2011; Wigelsworth, Oldfield, & Humphrey, 2013). Despite this increased risk, there are currently no available measures to assess bullying and victimisation experiences that have been designed specifically for use with such children. SEN is apparent when a child has, “significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of children of the same age; or have a disability which prevents or hinders them from making use of educational facilities of a kind generally provided for children of the same age in school...” (Department for Education, 2001, p. 6). It is particularly important to develop a set of bespoke indicators as this group of children by definition face a number of challenges that may influence the reliability and validity of existing self-report measures of bullying experiences. This was our primary aim in the current study, in which we present development details and initial psychometric properties for a new measure (the Bullying Behaviour and Experience Scale – BBES), in addition to examining differences in bullying and victimisation rates between children with and without SEN while accounting for extant emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Bullying is defined as a specific form of strategic aggressive behaviour that the perpetrator repeatedly inflicts on a victim with the intention to cause harm, and occurring within a relationship in which there is an imbalance of power (Olweus, 1999). A power imbalance may occur along a number of different dimensions, including age, intellectual capacity and disability status (Olweus, 1993; Pepler, Craig, Jiang, & Connolly, 2008; Schroeder et al., 2014). Acts of bullying may be physical, verbal, relational, or some combination of these (Olweus, 1993). In recent years, increased attention has also been placed on cyberbullying, that is bullying using technology, such as mobile phones and the internet (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014). Bullying perpetration and victimisation are associated with a range of negative social, emotional and behavioural outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, as well as poorer academic outcomes and school absenteeism (Glew, Fan, Katon, Rivara, & Kernic, 2005; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996), all of which may persist long after the behaviours have ceased.

Children with SEN were more frequently victimised by their peers, and more likely to bullying others compared to their peers without SEN (Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Rose et al., 2010; Schroeder et al., 2014; Sentenac et al., 2011; Wigelsworth et al., 2013). For example, Thompson, Whitney and Smith (1994) looked at the incidence of school-based bullying of children with SEN integrated into mainstream schools and found that students with SEN were more likely to be bullied by their peers compared to matched mainstream students. In this study, approximately two thirds of children with SEN reported being bullied compared with only a quarter of mainstream students. Furthermore, the majority of these bullying incidents involved reference to the specific characteristic of the child's educational need, suggesting that children with SEN are more frequently the targets of bullying because they have a distinctive educational requirement. Together with other similar research (Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Rose et al., 2010; Sentenac et al., 2011), this body of literature presents worrying evidence indicating that children with SEN are at significant risk of victimisation in school.

There is relatively little research directly comparing the frequency of bullying behaviour in children with SEN to their peers, but that which has shows an increased tendency to engage in bullying behaviours among the former (Kaukiainen et al., 2002; Rose et al., 2010). In one of the few studies in this area, Kaukiainen et al. (2002), found that a subset of children between 11 and 12 who had learning difficulties were not only victims of bullying, but were also more likely to engage in bullying behaviour themselves compared to their peers. One possible reason for this increased likelihood of bullying behaviour in children with SEN is that they may develop aggressive responses to combat their repeated victimisation: so-called ‘reactive bullying’ (Rose et al., 2010; Salmivalli & Nieminen, 2002).

When comparing the incidence of bullying and victimisation between children with SEN and their peers without SEN, an important issue that has often been overlooked is the increased prevalence of emotional and behavioural problems in children with SEN. It is well documented that children who engage in bullying behaviours are more likely to exhibit higher levels of externalising behaviours and, similarly, children who are frequently victimised are likely to display greater internalising symptoms (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010). However, there is a necessary confound between SEN classifications and emotional and behavioural problems; children may be classified as having SEN if they experience emotional and/or behavioural difficulties, while other classifications of SEN increase the likelihood of concomitant emotional and behavioural problems. For example, Mishna (2003) found that children with learning disabilities were not only more likely to be bullied but also had an increased likelihood of emotional and behavioural problems. Thus, to disentangle the impact of emotional and behavioural problems on the frequency of bullying and victimisation experiences of children with SEN, it is crucial to simultaneously examine children's concurrent emotional and behavioural problems. Understanding the degree to which children with SEN are both perpetrators and victims of bullying behaviours may prove important when developing interventions to prevent or reduce this behaviour in schools.

1.1. Assessing bullying and victimisation experiences in children with SEN

Given the incidence of bullying directed towards children with SEN, the likelihood that this group of children are also perpetrators of bullying, in addition to the long-term consequences of frequent victimisation, it becomes especially important to have appropriate tools for assessing bullying and victimisation in children with SEN. However, while there are a number of widely used measures assessing bullying experiences in children, these are limited to assessment of children without SEN (e.g., Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire, Olweus, 1996; Peer Relations Questionnaire, Rigby, 1998) and are validated on normative samples, thus ignoring the potential impact of children's SEN status on their responses (Wigelsworth et al., 2013). Humphrey and colleagues (Humphrey & Squires, 2011; Wigelsworth et al., 2013) noted this omission and

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