

Research finds school anti-bullying policies inadequate

A joint study by researchers at Australian Catholic University (ACU) and the University of Otago Medical School (UOMS) in New Zealand has found that many school anti-bullying policies are inadequate – leaving both children and teachers at risk.

Researchers examined anti-bullying programs in 93 Victorian schools and 253 schools in New Zealand, and found that current policies do not usually include bullying on the grounds of homophobia, religion or disability. Only around one-third of schools had cyber-safety policies.

Lead Victorian researcher Professor Sheryl Hemphill, from ACU's School of Psychology, said most policies were lacking in detail on how to prevent and follow up incidents of bullying. There was also little attention given to whether the bullying extended beyond school grounds or occurred after school hours – such as through social media.

Differences were also found between the two regions, with researchers noting there are stronger expectations and greater resources to facilitate the development of anti-bullying policies in Victorian schools. Victorian policies were more comprehensive than in New Zealand schools - in the ways bullying was defined and the procedures detailed for reporting and responding to incidents.

Schools in New Zealand are not specifically required to have an anti-bullying policy, and instead use their own governance structure to formulate policy. This could mean that schools take a zero-tolerance approach to bullying such as expulsion or suspension, or use more restorative practices such as mediation or counselling to keep pupils in school.

Professor Hemphill said there was a need for improved policies and procedures in Victorian schools.

“Effective programs raise awareness and empower school communities to deal appropriately with bullying,” she said. “There is now doubt some schools are doing excellent work in this area but there is a real need for improved overall guidance and regular monitoring and review of policies.”

“Schools need to acknowledge the impact of a diverse society and rapidly changing technology and respond appropriately. Having modern and comprehensive policies in place will give schools a better chance of reducing bullying.”

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For more information or to arrange an interview please contact Sara Coen, Marketing and Communications Officer, on (03) 9953 3433 or sara.coen@acu.edu.au

Notes to editors:

- Australian Catholic University (ACU) is a publicly funded university, open to all. It has six campuses – in Brisbane, Melbourne, North Sydney, Strathfield, Canberra and Ballarat.
- Completing a degree at ACU involves learning to think critically and be guided by social justice principles. We give our students the skills to bring about change in their community, profession and industry.
- The University focuses on the delivery of quality programs in specialist areas including education, liberal arts, business, nursing and allied health, social sciences, theology and philosophy and visual and performing arts.
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