Research summary

Title: The prevalence and effectiveness of anti-bullying strategies employed in Australian schools

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Rigby and Johnson’s report examines the prevalence and effectiveness of anti-bullying policies used in a sample of 26 Australian government schools. This was the first systematic study undertaken on how Australian schools are responding to bullying and with what success.

The research project involved questionnaires completed by school representatives (26), students (1,688), parents (167), teachers (451) and regional personnel (10). This research featured information directly from students which is essential in understanding bullying in schools.

Due to the small number of schools and individuals involved, the findings must be interpreted cautiously in terms of implications for schools. Despite this limitation, several findings will be of interest and will provide opportunities for discussion and further investigation.

The research shows a reduction in the prevalence of reported bullying, a result which is consistent with other research findings from around the world. Approximately 15% of students reported being bullied, most commonly in verbal and covert ways. Students commented that they are unable to focus on learning if they experience bullying or don’t feel safe.

Students with a disability reported being victimised more often than other students. Indigenous students were not bullied more than others, but were more often racially harassed. This finding about sub-groups of students more likely to experience bullying aligns with findings in international research.

While all 26 schools reported having a written anti-bullying policy, less than 50% of students were aware of it. Also consistent with other research, only a minority of students (37.7%) reported bullying to the school. Teachers and students varied in their views about the effectiveness of the school’s actions in response to bullying.

The authors make the following recommendations for schools:

- enable all members of the school community to be familiar with the school anti-bullying policy;
• seek out and act upon student feedback on the helpfulness of actions taken by the school in addressing bullying;
• pay particular attention to students who are most vulnerable to being bullied;
• engage more effectively with students who are being bullied and require help from the school; and
• provide more anti-bullying professional learning for both pre-service and practising teachers.