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## School policies on bullying and cyberbullying: perspectives across three Australian states

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**Abstract**

## *Background*

Despite decades of research, bullying in all its forms is still a significant problem within schools in Australia, as it is internationally. Anti-bullying policies and guidelines are thought to be one strategy as part of a whole school approach to reduce bullying. However, although Australian schools are required to have these policies, their effectiveness is not clear. As policies and guidelines about bullying and cyberbullying are developed within education departments, this paper explores the perspectives of those who are involved in their construction.

## *Purpose*

This study examined the perspectives of professionals involved in policy construction, across three different Australian states. The aim was to determine how their relative jurisdictions define bullying and cyberbullying, the processes for developing policy, the bullying prevention and intervention recommendations given to schools and the content considered essential in current policies.

## *Sample*

Eleven key stakeholders from three Australian states with similar education systems were invited to participate. The sample selection criteria included professionals with experience and training in education, cyber-safety and the responsibility to contribute to or make decisions which inform policy in this area for schools in their state.

## *Design and Methods*

Participants were interviewed about the definitions of bullying they used in their state policy frameworks; the extent to which cyberbullying was included and the content they considered essential for schools to include in anti-bullying policies. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically.

## *Findings*

Seven themes were identified in the data: (1) Definition of bullying and cyberbullying; (2) Existence of a policy template; (3) Policy location; (4) Adding cyberbullying; (5) Distinguishing between bullying and cyberbullying; (6) Effective policy; and (7) Policy as a prevention or intervention tool. The results were similar both across state boundaries and also across different disciplines.

## *Conclusion*

Analysis of the data suggested that, across the themes, there was some lack of information about bullying; and cyberbullying. This limitation could affect the subsequent development, dissemination and sustainability of school anti-bullying policies, which has implications for the translation of research to inform better student outcomes.

Keywords: bullying, policies, schools, cyberbullying

## Introduction

Despite decades of research, bullying is still a significant international problem and each jurisdiction strives to deal with it in culturally, legally and educationally relevant ways (Smith, 2014). Bullying is generally defined by researchers as: repetition of behaviour, with an intent to cause harm, ~~and~~ with an imbalance of power (Olweus 1993; Smith et al. 2008). The application of these concepts to cyberbullying has been questioned (Dooley, Pyzalski, and Cross 2009; Menesini, Nocentini, and Camodeca 2013). However, it is generally agreed that cyberbullying is defined as using online or electronic devices to deliberately hurt or harm (Campbell 2005; Hinduja and Patchin 2008; Kowalski, Limber, and Agatson 2008).

The consequences of both forms of bullying—~~that is, both~~ – traditional bullying at school, and cyberbullying, which usually occurs outside of the school grounds and hours, (Smith et al., 2008) – are felt in the school social and learning environment. Therefore, it is important to have clear policies and guidelines in any prevention and intervention approach (Cross et al. 2011; Smith et al. 2008). Policies and guidelines are designed to provide a framework for understanding and for effective and transparent practices in schools. In order to determine evidence of good practice, COST (Co-operation of Science and Technology) Action on Cyberbullying synthesised guidelines from 54 countries (Välimäki et al., 2012). In doing so, it focused on parents, teachers, young people and schools. However, missing from this mix is consideration of authorities who are responsible for developing anti-bullying policies and guidelines to be used in schools..

Shonkoff (2000) and Shonkoff and Bales (2011) note that three cultures are involved in the transmission of knowledge from research to practice: science, policy and practice. In particular, policymakers utilise knowledge to promote social, political and economic agendas.

Understanding policy-makers' views on and knowledge of bullying and cyberbullying is, therefore, of relevance to the practices which occur at the school level, and how the relationships between parents, young people, teachers and schools in relation to bullying and cyberbullying are enacted.

It is clear that when bullying occurs within school hours and on school grounds, it falls under the school's duty of care. However, when these incidents take place outside of school hours and outside of the school environment, it is less clear whether they fall within the scope of the school's duty of care (Butler et al. 2011). In Australia, ~~there has been~~ case law ~~that~~ has held that a school's duty of care may extend outside of school hours and/or school grounds where a so-called "relationship of teacher and pupil" exists; such as where a school principal gives a directive concerning student behaviour out of school hours (Butler et al. 2011). It may be possible to argue, therefore, that a school policy that seeks to regulate the use of school computer equipment both during and outside school hours, or even a school policy that seeks to extend to the use of information technology by its students both at and away from school, would create a relationship of teacher and pupil and thereby bring the relevant behaviour within the scope of the school's duty of care (Butler et al. 2011).

Notwithstanding the legal implications, Australian incidents of both traditional and cyberbullying involving students within the school are, practically speaking, often seen as a disciplinary matter to be handled within the school system (Campbell et al. 2010). Indeed, Katz et al. (2014), who examined responses to cyberbullying incidents in Australia, found that schools were the main context for the reporting of cyberbullying; ~~as~~ distinct from reporting to community or policing organisations. Similarly, schools within the United Kingdom are advised to incorporate bullying and cyberbullying incidents that occur beyond the school premises and outside of the school hours in their anti-bullying policies, as these incidents are said to be the responsibility of the school (Smith et al. 2012). Likewise, ~~thin~~

the United States bullying and cyberbullying incidents that occur outside of the school environment, but which have consequences that are brought back into the school's learning environment, are considered to be the school's legal responsibility (Hinduja and Patchin 2011).

Having an anti-bullying policy that incorporates proactive policies, plans and practices (Cross et al. 2011) that stretch beyond the school premises is thus an important strategy: it has been suggested that such a policy can assist schools to both prevent and intervene in traditional bullying and cyberbullying incidents (Smith, Smith, Osborn, and Samara 2008; Woods and Wolke 2003). As schools are primarily dealing with bullying incidents, it is surely desirable that policies are implemented at the individual school level as well as the overall school district level (Brown, Jackson, and Cassidy 2006), and should be developed with the intention of providing the individuals involved with an understanding of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour (Butler et al. 2011). It is further argued in this paper that having a policy ~~in and of itself~~ is not sufficient in and of itself, since it needs to be accompanied by a clear and simple process for reporting bullying (such as a grievance procedure).

### **Anti-Bullying Policies and Effectiveness**

Some countries, such as the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Australia, are making it a legal requirement for all schools to have anti-bullying policies in place to deal with both bullying and cyberbullying incidents (Ananiadou and Smith 2002). This does not necessarily mean, however, that they are automatically effective. Smith (2014), in an overview of international research, noted only a 'modest' relationship between strong school anti-bullying policy and lower rates of bullying. Välimäki et al. (2012), in their review of 54 international cyberbullying guidelines, identified key areas of practice which were

being handled well, and those which required more attention. School policies were deemed generally to need greater consideration in terms of content.

Ownership by those who implement and those targeted by the policy can help to increase compliance and, therefore, may increase the effectiveness of anti-bullying policies (Cross et al. 2011). Accordingly, it has been suggested that all members of the school community should contribute to its policy design and development. Brown et al. (2006) further noted that policy should be developed not only in relation to individual school needs, but also within the confines and foundation of the support provided by the state authority.

As numerous researchers have recommended, an effective anti-bullying policy needs to contain a clear definition of all forms of bullying, including cyberbullying (Campbell, Butler, and Kift 2008; Butler et al. 2011). The policy should also include proactive elements to communicate the values placed on ~~of~~ caring and respectful behaviour between students, tolerance, and a safe and nurturing environment to promote healthy development (Cassidy and Jackson 2005). Policies, it is argued, need to advocate a proactive approach to reducing bullying and include guidance about what is appropriate behaviour in cyberspace (Cross et al. 2011), with a statement about the behaviour the school expects from students (Smith et al. 2012), and the consequences if the policy is not followed (Campbell et al. 2008; Butler et al. 2011). It also needs to include a simple process for reporting the bullying to school authorities.

However, there remains a level of uncertainty about the ability of school anti-bullying policies alone to reduce bullying behaviour. Poor evidence of effectiveness may be due to inconsistencies in the level of ownership over policies (i.e. those involved in drafting the policy), in the quality of the content, and in the implementation of the policy across school communities (Smith et al. 2008). In earlier anti-bullying policy research conducted in 34

primary schools within England, Woods and Wolke (2003) concluded that policies per se have limited effectiveness in reducing bullying and that future research is needed to determine student and staff awareness of anti-bullying policies. Whilst this research was conducted prior to the significant manifestation of cyberbullying behaviour, it is important to note the high correlation that has been identified between bullying and cyberbullying behaviour (Cross et al. 2012; Dempsey et al. 2011; Erdur-Baker 2010; Jose et al. 2012). Given this relationship, it is possible that the implementation of sound anti-bullying policies could also enhance the effectiveness of anti-cyberbullying policies and practices.

### **Australian School Anti-bullying Policies**

Australia was one of the first countries to provide governmental leadership, by supporting education authorities in all states and territories to develop a consistent approach to bullying, violence and child protection in schools. The National Safe Schools Framework (NSSF) (MCEETYA 2003; 2013) was originally developed to help schools reduce bullying behaviour and promote and improve the social and emotional health of school children (Cross et al. 2011). In the Australian school context, different education sectors in each state and territory provide the schools in their jurisdictions with advice and guidelines for developing anti-bullying policies, with different documents provided for each state (The Good Schools Guide 2013). However, schools are required to adhere to the national (NSSF) guiding principles regarding the provision of safe and supportive school settings.

Cross and colleagues (2011), when examining the implementation of this framework, found that for the period 1999 – 2007, self-reported rates of being bullied weekly declined moderately. However, it was also found that greater support was needed to enhance the uptake of the recommended safe school practices amongst teachers across Australia at that time (2003 -2011).



## **Australian State Approaches to Anti-bullying/Cyberbullying Policies**

All Australian states have representatives on the *Safe and Supportive School Communities*<sup>2</sup> project, which is a national collaboration under the auspices of the state Ministers of Education, and linked to the *Bullying. No Way!* website. Spears (2012) noted that several Australian states have senior level committees which contribute directly to anti-bullying policy development and initiatives linked with the National Safe Schools Framework (NSSF): e.g., the *Coalition to Decrease Bullying, Harassment and Violence in SA Schools*; the *Queensland Schools Alliance Against Violence* and the *Western Australian Cyber Safety for Children Working Party*.

A brief examination of three states in Australia (Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia), serves to highlight the similarities and differences in approaches to anti-bullying policy development. All three states are guided by the National Safe Schools Framework, and operate within their local political and educational jurisdictions/contexts.

Firstly, the Queensland state government has three different documents that guide schools' anti-bullying policy development and implementation. These are: *The Code of School Behaviour*, *The Keeping Queensland Schools Safe Document* and the *Toolkit for Parents to Address Bullying* (Education Queensland). The documents provided by the Western Australian government to help guide schools include: the *Use of Technology Within the School Document* provided by the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australian (AISWA), and the Catholic Education Office (Australian Government 2014), and the Department of Education's *Preventing and Managing Bullying* as well as *Student Online* policies. Finally, in South Australia, the Department for Education and Child Development (DECD) has developed a set of anti-bullying policy requirements (DECS 2011) for their

schools, informed by the *Cossey Review of procedures and processes related to bullying and violence in schools* (Cossey 2011). These include requirements for all government schools in South Australia to involve parents and students in the development and update of anti-bullying policies; have a clear link from the school website to the policies; have information about interventions available; inform the governing council twice a year regarding data, trends and interventions adopted in the school; report on the data and trends in the school's Annual report; and to include a requirement for parents and students to acknowledge annually the code of conduct. In addition, each South Australian Catholic and independent school determines its own guidelines, often with reference to those created and disseminated by the state education department: *Keeping Children Safe* child protection curriculum, *Safer DECD Schools: Anti-bullying Policies and Procedures*; *Cybersafety: Keeping children safe in a connected world. Guidelines for schools and preschools; Cyberbullying and E-Crime* (<http://www.decd.sa.gov.au/speced2/pages/bullying/bullyinghome/>). Further, there are documents provided by the South Australian Police (SAPol) and the Office of the Children's e-Safety Commissioner (<https://www.esafety.gov.au/>) as well as the complete set of NSSF resources housed online through the Safe Schools Hub portal (Taddeo et al., 2015).

This variation between states is illustrative of how each state jurisdiction has developed its own sets of relevant guidelines and policies, whilst conforming to overarching national frameworks (e.g., NSSF). At the state level, it is the responsibility of the relevant authorities to translate the research and evidence-base into policies and guidelines to be used by schools and communities to deal with and report bullying and cyberbullying incidents.

Research suggests that Australia's rates of cyberbullying are similar to those in other countries, despite the presence of the national and state level guidance described above. A recent examination of Australian literature on cyberbullying involvement estimated the prevalence of being cyberbullied within the past year as approximately 20% (Spears et al.

2014). Earlier studies found that approximately 10 per cent of students between grade four and nine reported being cyberbullied in the previous school term, while 27 per cent reported being traditionally bullied every few weeks or more often (Cross et al. 2009). This compares with early studies from the United Kingdom, where 7 to 10 percent of students reported being cyberbullied (Smith et al. 2008). Elsewhere, in a Canadian study, 35 per cent of students reported they had been cyberbullied (Cassidy, Jackson, and Brown 2009). A recent meta-analytic study of 80 international studies; (Modecki et al. 2014), noted that reported rates of cyberbullying involvement (perpetrators/targets or both) were lower (at 15%) than non-cyberbullying involvement (at 35%) and argued strongly for ensuring that bullying behaviour in general be addressed, regardless of the cyber or non-cyber setting. This has implications for policy development, and we would suggest that all anti-bullying policies should include a description of all forms of bullying.

## **Purpose**

This study examines the perspectives of a range of professionals who have experience / training in education and / or cyber safety, across three different states within Australia. The aim was to determine how their jurisdiction defines cyberbullying, what processes were used to develop policy, what guidelines regarding cyberbullying prevention and intervention were given to schools and what content was considered essential for inclusion in policy.

## **Method**

**Participants** The eleven participants were from Education departments across three states in Australia. All had educational or legal qualifications and experience. One participant was a cyber/e- crime expert from a specialist division of the police force. Nine participants were educationalists and two were lawyers. Each was purposefully recruited so that the achieved sample included participants with roles in senior policy development and influence on policy

at the state authority level. A maximum variation sampling approach (Patton, 1990) was adopted, whereby each selected participant provided variation (location, system, role), thereby ensuring that a diverse range of views was available. Three participants were from Queensland, four from South Australia and four from Western Australia. Each participant was assigned a code to ensure their participation in the study remained anonymous.

## **Procedure**

Ethical approval was obtained for this study from a university ethics committee in each of the three states. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of the anonymity of their data. They were informed that their names and other identifying information would not be stored with their data, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without reason or prejudice.

In-depth interviews were conducted to gather information about the participants' perspectives on school bullying, cyberbullying and policies (See Appendix A). Questions were asked about the definitions of bullying used, preventative and intervention measures, and policy frameworks or templates provided to schools.

Data were collected from the 11 participants through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted from November 2012 to June 2013. Ten interviews were conducted face-to-face and one by telephone due to availability. The interview durations ranged from approximately 20 minutes to 80 minutes and were audio recorded with permission from the participants. Typed transcripts were generated from the audio recordings of the interviews. The individual transcripts were returned to the study's participants to enable them to make amendments to their responses. Two of the 11 transcripts were returned with amendments.

## Data Analysis

After receiving the edited transcripts, an interpretative enquiry methodology employing thematic analysis was used to identify the key themes which emerged from the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase process. Using a sequential, constant comparison technique throughout the different phases, key themes were articulated. In phase one, each transcript was read numerous times to allow in-depth understanding of the opinions of the participants regarding policies relating to cyberbullying. In phase two, initial codes were created for the data and relevant information for each code was collated. All 11 transcripts were analysed by hand because they were small in number and sufficiently brief to allow location of the themes manually (Creswell 2012). The third phase involved sorting these initial codes into themes and collating the extracts within the themes. Phase four involved reviewing the themes to ensure they accurately represented the information provided by the participants. In the fifth phase, the themes were refined further to ensure they were meaningful and clear. Finally, once all the data extracts were organised into satisfactory themes, the themes were named accordingly.

Once saturation was reached (i.e., no further themes emerged) and each of Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps were completed by the first author, the data were then reviewed by an independent coder. Data were blind-coded by the second coder to determine consistency of emergent themes, and trustworthiness and legitimacy of the data and interpretation (Creswell 2012). The key themes were accepted when a percentage agreement of 90% was reached between the coders, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), who proposed an 80% agreement as a 'rule of thumb' for reasonable reliability. Further, use of an independent coder ensured some triangulation by verifying that the data were interpreted in the same way by both coders (Creswell 2012).

## Findings

Seven themes were identified through the analysis. These were called: (1) Definition of bullying and cyberbullying; (2) Existence of a policy template; (3) Policy location; (4) Adding cyberbullying; (5) Distinguishing between bullying and cyberbullying; (6) Effective policy; and (7) Policy as a prevention or intervention tool (See Figure 1). A number of sub-themes were also identified and will be discussed by theme.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE.

The findings are discussed by theme in the sections below. Unless noted as a selective quotation from one participant, all quotations presented below represent common, core issues and sub-themes which emerged across all informants. Coding was assigned to the participants to protect anonymity and confidentiality. Letters represent the state, and the number refers to the participant identifier code. The major findings are presented first, and then a discussion of each theme follows.

### **Theme 1: Definitions of bullying and cyberbullying**

The participants' definitions of bullying were encapsulated by four general sub-themes (See Fig 1): (a) A definition was given that was similar to that generally adopted in research literature; (b) Only certain features of bullying were described; (c) The participants provided no definition; or (d) bullying was defined by reference to a specific act or acts.

Only one informant provided a complete definition similar to that adopted in the literature (sub-theme 1a):

*“A repeated, deliberate act that is designed to exert power over others: to intimidate; belittle; harm; insult; embarrass and it can take many forms. Cyber bullying is similar except it uses electronic media” (C02).*

However, over half of the participants provided a partial definition for bullying and/or cyberbullying, which contained one or two of the three features of bullying and/or cyberbullying (sub-theme 1b). In general, the two consistent elements mentioned were repetition and intention, as exemplified in the following quotation:

*“Bullying itself is similar to cyberbullying; it is repeated, targeted actions by an individual or group towards another or others ... and it is designed to cause harm.”* (B02)

No participants within this subtheme mentioned a power imbalance. Some participants also included extra elements in their definition:

*“The definition for bullying and cyberbullying is the same in that it’s the bullying behaviour; ... so it’s repeated, intentional ... and ongoing although there is a caveat around the ongoing... in that if it is a one off instance where there’s been some profound ... consequences because of that, that would be termed as bullying as well.”* (B03)

*“persistent... well as everyone else understands it, ... persistent, covert, or overt humiliation, putting down is bullying.”* (C01)

Two participants did not mention any definitions (sub-theme 1c). Instead, they provided comments regarding the behavioural aspects of the phenomenon:

*“It’s one of probably one of the bigger problems ... with that tit for tat fighting happening is that they just keep passing it on and they’ve got to think ... ok ...so what actions can you take if you receive this kind of message?”* (A03)

*“Cyber bullying... Bullying or CB themselves would be seen as behavioural, as such we wouldn’t have any way that we define them. It’s once things move into the criminal arena that we then start to define things.”* (C04)

Finally, in two cases a definition was explained in terms of reference to something specific (sub-theme 1d), with one participant referring to the National Safe Schools Framework:

*“Okay, so defining it, we (we) follow pretty much the National Safe Schools Framework definition.”* (C03)

Another referred to specific legislation, (the Fair Work Act and the Workplace Health and Safety Act):

*“My organisation will define bullying as it is defined under the Fair Work Act and the occupational...the new work and... work, health, safety act that is just coming into being.” (C01)*

## **Theme 2: Existence of a policy template**

*“There would be examples of, yes, .there is [sic] examples on the website of policies, good policies and templates absolutely.” (C02)*

This theme explored existing school anti-bullying policies in each state and guidelines or templates for schools. Over a half of the participants reported they were aware of a policy template in their state from which a school could write its own anti-bullying policy (Fig 1, sub-theme 2a):

*“It is a tough one as a lot of schools are implementing their own programs, ... what we do from the overarching point of view is that we put out the positive and an overarching policy and it is then up to schools to take that and to enact it in their school. So every school is different.” (A01)*

*“That would be all tied up in the, for ...Education Office ... there is a generic bullying policy. And then from that each school is to derive its own, so the generic one is written up on the website.” (B04)*

Other participants were unsure (sub-theme 2b).

*“To be totally honest I couldn't tell you whether the department has a template for a bullying policy.” (B01)*

Only one participant reported:

*“No there's no template. Schools (schools) develop their own policy advice within the Department's broader framework of the school discipline policy.” (B03)*

## **Theme 3: Policy location**

Just over a half of the participants reported that their organisation provided their schools with an anti-bullying policy, which was available online (Fig 1, sub-theme 3a):



*“They can get online access to that policy.” (B01)*

*“It’s on our ... website.” (A02)*

*“The safer schools document for example is the most recent one, but I would say most school leaders access them on the website” (C02)*

Only a few participants reported that their organisation’s school anti-bullying policy was located on or released through an internal database or system (Fig 1, sub-theme 3b).

*“That one I believe the schools have got available ... at least internally, to their people on their networks. In our case we forwarded it out to the crime prevention areas.” (C04)*

*“All policies, new and revised, are launched at the beginning of the year and sent to principals prior to the Director's forums which occur .... each year at ....Education Offices around the state.” (B04)*

#### **Theme 4: Revision of policy with the addition of cyberbullying**

*“The thing to keep in mind at the moment is that we are rewriting our student behaviour support, policy, regulations, guidelines, procedures, and within that there will be a social media policy for students. We do have one for staff... this one is revamping the one we have got at the moment.” (A01)*

Around one half of the participants reported that with the emergence of cyberbullying, changes have been made to their state’s anti-bullying policies (Fig 1, sub-theme 4a). Further, some participants reported changes they would like to see with the addition of cyberbullying to the anti-bullying policies:

*“I think that every school should have a great big placard up the with the department's insignia, that violence (because it is a type of violence in a way) bullying, cyber bullying, offensive language will not be tolerated in any way whatsoever.” (C01)*

Another change that was identified by one stakeholder made reference to the complexity of the broader community. This participant spoke about the increased difficulties experienced by

schools brought about by the fact that older generations do not understand computers and cyberspace (Fig 1, sub-theme 4b):

*“ ... as a community we’re still dealing with a certain degree of cyber illiteracy. Because people didn’t grow up with this type of technology, I grew up with typewriters and telex machines.” (C04)*

One participant referred to having to write anti-bullying policies numerous times:

*“That is one of the reasons rather than having it as part of the student behaviour; we are changing it to a separate component of it, with a separate cyber safety policy so that it is clearer rather than just being a little part of it.” (A01)*

Three participants observed that anti-bullying policies were a requirement, and queried the extent of their application. For example, one stated:

*“I think that it’s great to have the policies but sometimes when, if you talk about the realities, its rhetoric.” (C01)*

### **Theme 5: Distinguishing between bullying and cyberbullying in a single policy**

*It [the policy] distinguishes between the two. Yes. But highlights the commonality in the behaviour.” (B03)*

The majority of the participants interviewed indicated that they thought bullying and cyberbullying were different, with many noting that their existing policy did distinguish between different forms of bullying:

*“Yes it does. [It does refer]... It does discriminate between the two, yes it does.” (C02)*

*“Yes it does. The physical, the verbal, the indirect, all of those.” (A02)*

A small number of participants, however, did not distinguish between bullying and cyberbullying, with the suggestion being that one policy alone was adequate, in spite of the differences (Fig 1, sub-theme 5a):

*“... I see bullying being as an issue ...and I see different subsets of bullying, of which cyber would be one.” (B01)*

*“Well they’re all forms of bullying, I see them as forms of bullying.” (A03)*

*“I think we would treat cyberbullying as a form of bullying, using electronic means ... It would all be a part of the bullying policy.” (B04)*

Most participants, however, thought one anti-bullying policy was adequate to deal with all forms of bullying.

### **Theme 6: Effective policy**

*“Good policy should... outline its understanding of the phenomenon in plain English. Simple terms so that all members of the school community can actually understand it.” (C02)*

Eight subthemes emerged regarding the effectiveness of a school’s anti-bullying policy: (a) it should be clear/consistent; (b) be a position statement; (c) include practice/procedures; (d) provide for education; (e) encompass a whole school approach; (f) include examples; (g) specify roles; and (h) include definitions of both bullying and cyberbullying.

Approximately one third of the participants identified that an effective policy should have clear/consistent guidelines or rules (Fig 1, sub-theme 6a), as the above quotation indicates. One participant recommended including a position statement (sub-theme 6b):

*“It needs to talk about what is the school's position, what is their... it's almost like a position statement. What is the school's belief in relation to this?” (C02)*

All participants however, mentioned the policy should also be about procedure and process (sub-theme 6c):

*“It talks about the policy and procedures and the way that things are done around here. It's a bit of a plan of action, how the school will respond.” (C02)*

Related to this, one participant noted that roles should be clearly defined in the policy, so that all those involved understood their responsibilities (sub-theme 6g):

*“Statements and where possible flow charts defining and advising the responsibilities of each of the major parties to the policy, the principal, staff, students, parents and families, and encouraging help seeking through designated staff members when bullying, harassment, aggression or violence is experienced or witnessed.” (B04)*

The education of the school community was a factor mentioned numerous times as being part of an effective policy (sub-theme 6d):

*“I think it's more about educating kids / teachers / parents about what is appropriate behaviour ...not only about the use of multimedia and all that sort of stuff but about what is right and what is not acceptable...about how to interact properly.” (B01)*

*“All through it, a good policy would very clearly talk about the educative, the deterrent and the punitive.” (C02)*

The whole school approach was another aspect of an effective policy addressed by a small number of the participants (sub-theme 6e). For instance:

*“Probably the most essential thing would be a preventative...approach and it needs to be a whole school approach that would have to be developmentally appropriate.” (B03)*

Further, about a third of the participants suggested that examples of both behaviours and consequences would be important to include in a good policy (sub-theme 6f):

*“Perhaps some examples of what bullying is and what it isn't. We (we) often hear the term or terms ‘bullying’ and ‘harassment’ used interchangeably ... when (when) we're really clear on our advice that they're very, ... they're quite separate.” (C03)*

*“That they put in there examples of consequences for cyber offences.” (A01)*

Surprisingly, only two of the participants mentioned that a good policy should include a definition (sub-theme 6h). The importance of a definition within a policy was summed up by this statement:

*“I guess that the core of their policy would be their definition.” (C03)*

### **Theme 7: Policy as a prevention and intervention tool**

*[So]... awareness raising, I suppose ... of its existence and what it looks like online, ...so the different areas, be it in social media, ...so really very much a raising of awareness for teachers, for schools, ..what cyber... what form cyberbullying takes.” (B03)*

The seventh theme related to the roles that prevention or intervention policy can play. The majority of the participants observed that having a policy would help to prevent incidents of cyberbullying (Fig 1, sub-theme 7a):

*... always have a policy in place and have guidelines set so that people know where they are, people are aware that there is a policy and then you clearly enforce the policy.” (B01)*

*“So what we try to do is inform our principal as best we can and then provide the strategies, the policies, the interpretations and so on which allow them to engage ... [with] particular incidents or scenarios that they might be having.” (B02)*

One participant indicated that a policy with clear consequences, that is enforced at all times, would help to prevent cyberbullying:

*“We have a discipline policy ... again coming from the managing behaviour in students ... and policy where suspensions are allowed for after hours activity where it can be proved that it linked to the school through association of two students perhaps. Even though it occurred at midnight on Saturday night it doesn’t make any difference, there still can be a suspension as a result of serious cyber-type bullying and that causing harm to a particular student.” (B02)*

Educating all involved was suggested as another way policy ~~can~~ could help to prevent incidents of cyberbullying (sub-theme 7b).

*“The preventative stuff is definitely the education. Either me doing that ... and I go out to schools quite often to talk about just legal issues and keeping yourself safe. (C01)*

Raising awareness was also considered to be part of the educative role in prevention strategies:

*“It’s got a big focus on prevention (obviously). Raising awareness for all students; a universal approach; building the knowledge and the skills; competencies of young people to behave in pro-social ways and also to build their own resilience in the face of these kinds of issues.” (C02)*

Intervention was the ~~second~~ third subtheme that emerged from a large number of participant responses regarding the role policy can play and the importance of having a set of tools to use when intervening (Fig 1, sub-theme 7c):

*“Having that really strong policy in place and having everybody saying the same thing I think is what’s important.” (A03)*

The concept of a policy that applies at all times was mentioned by a number of participants who believed this would be useful in terms of intervening in cyberbullying incidents:

*“I guess first of all the significant policy direction for us is the 24/7 authority, which gives principals the authority to act on issues beyond the school gate, outside of school hours where the well-being of a member of community affected. So that’s a significant piece of work and (and) I guess it really reinforces the role that schools and principals have to play in that intervention process.” (C03)*

Participants also identified that specific tools associated directly with the policy to deal with incidents of cyberbullying are often recommended:

*“We try and give them some tools to deal with that. Like, ok, ... immediately delete it, immediately go tell your parent, immediately go and tell the teacher, so they give them strategies for then not continuing to you know ...perpetuate the cycle.” (A03)*

*“We have a step-by-step going through so there a number of things so if there is a cyberbullying incident, that has happened in the school than the school may refer to that but again how they enact it is up to them.” (A01)*

Acting in a quick manner was another tool noted by the participants for intervening in cyberbullying incidents (Fig 1, sub-theme 7d):

*“Doing something about it straight away. SEE something, DO something.” (C04)*

## Discussion

The findings from the analysis suggested similarities both across state boundaries and also across different disciplines. This could reflect the impact of the National Safe Schools Framework (NSSF), disseminated Australia-wide for policy guidance by the Federal Australian government (Australian Government 2014).

However, differences were also found, especially regarding the definition the participants used for bullying and cyberbullying in their policy frameworks. Most of the participants' definitions of bullying and cyberbullying did not correspond fully with the commonly agreed definition used by researchers. Most researchers define bullying as repetition of behaviour, with an intent to cause harm and with an imbalance of power (Olweus, 1993; Smith et al. 2006). A group of Australian researchers has recently considered the definition of school bullying for research purposes and found it was closely aligned with these elements, noting that bullying is a systematic abuse of power in relationships formed at school (Hemphill et al. 2014). Somewhat surprisingly, only one participant used all three components in their definition of bullying and over half of the participants did not mention the imbalance of power as being a condition for bullying. A small number of participants did not provide any definition when discussing bullying or cyberbullying. Research has suggested that an effective anti-bullying policy should contain clear definitions of both bullying and cyberbullying (Butler et al. 2011) as it serves to remove differences in views or opinions on the topic (Campbell et al. 2008; Butler et al. 2011). As Smith et al. (2002) found in their study of the nature of bullying definitions across 14 countries, there is great variation in what the word 'bullying' means, assuming that there is, indeed, a related word in the country's language. In Australia, through the implementation of the National Safe Schools Framework, the *Bullying No Way!* website, annual national 'Anti-bullying Awareness' days, the *Safe Schools Hub* portal, and also conferences for teachers and educators designed to support understanding of bullying and its management, awareness has been raised about what

this behaviour is and how it differs from aggression and fighting. We argue that a common understanding of the concept is desirable and necessary for those involved in providing advice and guidance to schools.

It is possible that a challenge in this regard is that the culture of research can collide with the cultures of policy and practice: empirical research is not always seen as the most relevant element for policy writers, or service providers, when they are operating in particular eco-political environments (Shonkoff, 2000). Such attention to a definition may not, therefore, seem as important to the policy writers or practitioners, as it is for researchers, who strive to understand prevalence and behaviours. Translation of science into clearly articulated policy and practices clearly requires investment in cross-cultural understanding: often, where researchers pose questions, policy writers and practitioners want practical solutions. A key implication from this study then, is that it is critical for policy-writers to have an accurate understanding of research, so that practitioners can then be guided through policy to implement effective responses which support children.

The majority of participants indicated there were differences between non-cyber and cyberbullying, although several stated that there were no differences. Most of the participants did not however, elaborate on these differences. This finding may be due to participants thinking about the mode of delivery of the behaviour instead of the type of behaviour. Concepts that define traditional bullying are often seen to be similar to cyberbullying but have a different manifestation online (Tokunaga 2010). However, some of this study's participants thought that non-cyber and cyberbullying behaviours were so different that there should be two different anti-bullying policies to deal with the different forms. This finding is similar to the idea that the anti-bullying policies developed before the emergence of cyberbullying are not guaranteed to be effective in dealing with bullying using technology (Butler et al. 2011). Nevertheless, this does not mean a new policy needs to be



created for cyberbullying, since an extension to the existing policy addressing cyberbullying may be sufficient (Butler et al. 2011) and indeed most participants saw no need for separate policies in spite of the perceived differences between bullying and cyberbullying. Salmivalli, Saninio, and Hodges (2013) found in a large sample of over 17,000 participants in Finland that the targets of electronic bullying were also mostly bullied traditionally, and that cyberbullying alone, not accompanied by traditional bullying, was quite rare. Hence, ensuring that cyberbullying is identified and addressed through traditional bullying policy may have a follow-on effect for those also experiencing cyberbullying.

Over one half of the participants indicated that as cyberbullying concerns in schools have increased, modifications been made to established traditional bullying policies. Along with the national policy, it has been shown that templates or guidelines can be useful to guide policy development in schools (Marsh et al. 2011). The participants also identified many different types of content that an effective anti-bullying policy should include. Clarity and consistency were often mentioned as hallmarks of an effective anti-bullying policy, supporting Smith and colleagues' (2012) contention that the policy should provide a position statement about the behaviour a school expects from its students. Consistent with Suckling and Temple's (2001) recommendations, clear guidelines about what behaviour is appropriate for students in cyberspace (Cross et al. 2011), along with specifying the roles of those involved and ensuring a consistent whole school approach, were suggested by participants. Further, the majority of the participants identified that an effective anti-bullying policy should also contain both preventative advice and tools for intervention, suggesting this would be useful when dealing with incidents of cyberbullying. This is similar to Dooley and colleagues (2009), who suggest that policy makers need to understand the effectiveness of prevention and intervention programmes to make evidence-based decisions for future

programs. Integral to this is the need for policies to be accompanied by simple and developmentally appropriate guidelines for reporting incidents.

The most common advice given by the participants regarding the role of the policy, offered in both prevention and intervention situations, related to policy formation. The majority of participants recommended a general policy, or a continuous policy to benefit prevention and intervention, allowing the schools' anti-bullying policies to reach beyond the school premises and its opening hours. This would allow the school authorities to deal officially with incidents between students that occur outside of school and school hours. This, however, could be contrary to what school communities want and could manage with their limited resources. In addition, the participants' advice for the prevention of cyberbullying incidents provided numerous suggestions for educating those involved and raising awareness of cyberbullying itself. They indicated that specific tools and guidelines for students and families would be beneficial, such as telling someone immediately about the incident, or providing them with a particular strategy to use when dealing with incidents, as well as ensuring the incidents are dealt with quickly (Butler et al. 2011).

### **Implications**

The analysis of data in this study suggests that there were differences in the ways that bullying and cyberbullying were perceived and conceptualised. This suggests the need for more professional development about bullying, especially in terms of agreed definitions. It is possible that greater support and training for those involved in policy development would be beneficial in creating a common, research-informed understanding of bullying. This, in turn, may lead to more effective development of policies to help combat bullying and cyberbullying in the school context.

## **Strengths and Limitations**

This study was an exploratory, interpretative study. It examined the different perceptions of definitions used for state policy frameworks, whether or not cyberbullying was included or excluded, and what content was considered to be essential for schools to include in their anti-bullying policies. We suggest that a strength of this study is the representation of senior policy officials and the contribution of their perspectives specifically in relation to anti-bullying/cyberbullying policy. Their voice forms an addition to the literature and suggests that there is scope for further engagement of this sector to expand knowledge of how policy develops, is translated and disseminated to school communities.

A limitation of this study is that it was a small sample and did not include senior officials from every State and Territory in Australia, meaning that these findings in isolation are not enough to generalise to all states and education systems in Australia. However, it provides the basis for further research into the advice and policy frameworks for anti-bullying policies for schools, and may have resonances and connections with other jurisdictions and educational settings outside of Australia who are working on strategies to combat bullying in schools

## **Conclusion**

It would be simplistic to suggest that the mere existence of an anti-bullying policy is a panacea for cyberbullying or other forms of bullying. The relationship between policy and behavioural change is a complex one, and embraces a wide range of variables. However, it can be said that an effective anti-bullying policy and grievance procedure is an essential element in developing an effective response to such behaviour. From a legal perspective, when determining whether a school authority in Australia has discharged its duty of care to ensure a safe environment for its students by taking reasonable precautions against such

behaviour, an important consideration will be whether the accepted practices in the teaching profession were followed. One aspect of accepted practice will be to not only have effective policy documentation that addresses bullying, and by extension cyberbullying, but also that those school policies are well-publicised, enforceable and implemented consistently (Butler et al. 2011; Campbell et al. 2008). An important step in ensuring that such policies are effective, is for stakeholders who are in a position to create change to be as well informed as possible about bullying in general, and cyberbullying in particular. It is also important that there is better practice in terms of developing and disseminating school anti-bullying policies (see Butler et al, 2011). Accordingly, more extensive training for stakeholders in the area of bullying and cyberbullying which addresses how to incorporate evidence-based research into frameworks and guidelines for anti-bullying policies may be beneficial. We suggest that bringing together the three cultures of research, policy and practice (Shonkoff, 2000) is , required for children to benefit from the advances in knowledge that research brings. Accurately translating research and engaging with authorities responsible for influencing or making policy in educational settings is another important element in the quest to protect children from bullying and cyberbullying experiences.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Questions**

1. Please tell me how your organisation/department defines bullying and cyberbullying?
2. Does it distinguish between the two or treat them as the same?
3. What are you advising schools in your organisation/department in relation to intervening to prevent and respond to bullying and cyberbullying behaviours? (Focus on cyberbullying)
4. What preventative strategies do you have in place? (Focus on cyberbullying)
5. What changes have needed to be made with the emergence of cyberbullying?
  - a. Do the preventative strategies for bullying also cater for cyberbullying?

6. Do you have a template/guidelines for policies that address bullying and cyberbullying that is provided to schools?

a. How do schools access these template/guidelines?

7. What does your organisation suggest a good school policy should address to reduce bullying behaviour?

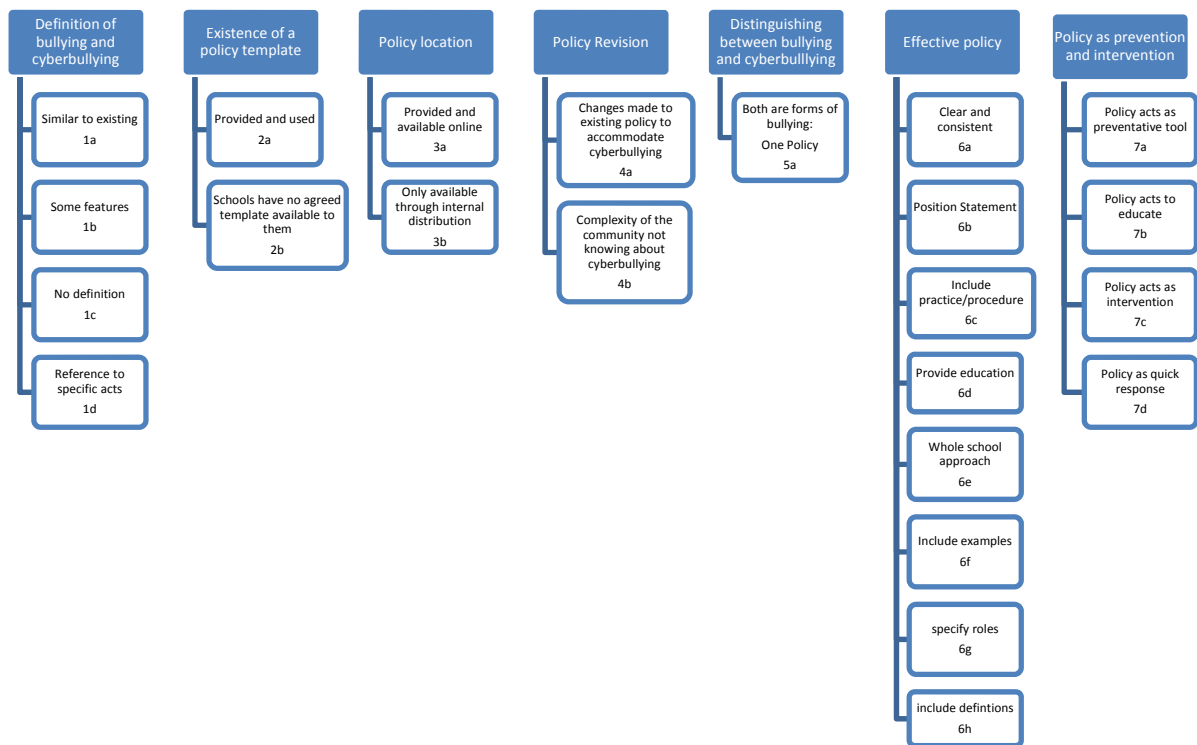


Figure 1 Structure of themes