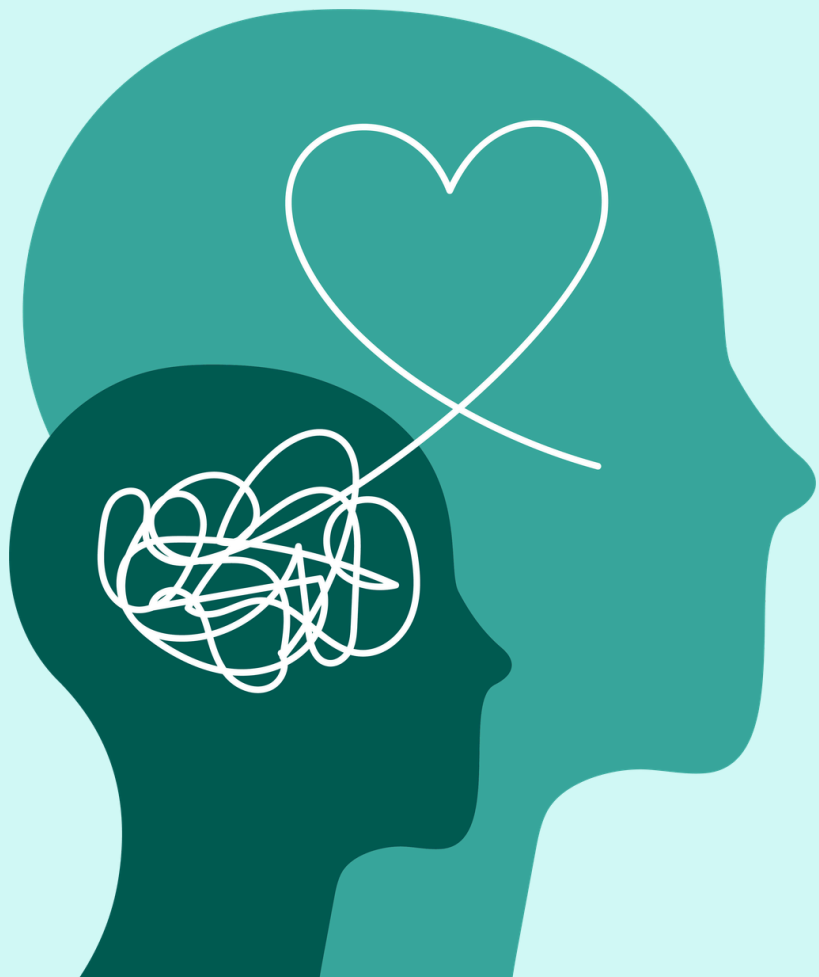




MARCH 10TH 2026

THOUGHTMEET

on Bullying and Student Well-being



What does it take for every child to feel safe, seen and able to belong in school?

This question guided a thoughtful ARC ThoughtMeet, where education leaders and researchers came together to explore one of the most persistent and complex challenges in education: bullying. While the topic is widely recognised, the conversation revealed that many assumptions about bullying — who is involved, where it happens, and how it unfolds — do not always reflect the reality experienced by children and young people.

Looking beyond common assumptions

In her contribution, Tracy Vaillancourt, Canada Research Chair in Youth Mental Health and Violence Prevention at the University of Ottawa, offered a research-informed perspective that challenged several widely held beliefs. Bullying, she emphasized, is not simply conflict or isolated incidents, but a repeated and systematic abuse of power.

While often associated with marginalized or socially struggling students, much bullying is in fact carried out by young people with high social status, strong peer networks and well-developed social skills. This shifts how schools need to understand and respond to the issue.

At the same time, the scale and impact of bullying remain significant. A substantial proportion of students report experiencing bullying, with clear links to mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression and long-term wellbeing outcomes. Bullying undermines one of the most fundamental conditions for learning: the need to feel safe and to belong.

Participants also reflected on how bullying evolves across contexts. Online bullying is often not a separate phenomenon, but an extension of in-person dynamics, amplifying harm and increasing its reach. This adds new layers of complexity to an already challenging issue.

What makes a difference in practice

The discussion highlighted that effective responses to bullying are rarely simple or isolated. Research points towards the importance of consistent, whole-school approaches that address behaviour, relationships and culture across all settings.

Early and active adult intervention plays a critical role. When educators respond clearly and consistently, they help shape shared norms about what is acceptable. When they do not, harmful behaviours can become normalized and reinforced.

Participants also explored the importance of peer dynamics, bystander roles and the broader social environment. Addressing bullying is not only about responding to individual incidents, but about shaping the conditions in which those behaviours emerge.

Technology, childhood and uncertainty

The second part of the session turned to the role of digital environments in children's lives. William Doyle invited participants to reflect on what is known — and what is still uncertain — about the relationship between technology, social media and student wellbeing.

While concerns about online environments are growing, the evidence base remains complex and at times inconclusive. This creates challenges for policymakers and education systems seeking to respond responsibly. Some countries are exploring restrictions or bans on social media for young people, while others are taking a more cautious approach.

A key message was the importance of avoiding overly simplistic conclusions. Digital experiences cannot be reduced to screen time alone, and efforts to regulate access may have unintended consequences if not carefully considered.

At the same time, there was broad agreement on the need to strengthen digital literacy and support children, families and educators in navigating digital environments in balanced and informed ways.

A shared commitment to wellbeing

In group discussions, participants reflected on what can be done within their own systems to support children's wellbeing and prevent bullying. Across contexts, several shared priorities emerged.

There was a strong emphasis on building whole-school cultures where students feel safe, included and actively involved. Strengthening collaboration between schools, families and communities was seen as essential, as was ensuring that student voice plays a meaningful role in shaping school environments.

Participants also highlighted the importance of broadening learning experiences — including outdoor learning, creative activities and opportunities for play — as part of a more holistic approach to wellbeing.

Across the conversation, there was a clear sense that addressing bullying requires more than isolated interventions. It calls for sustained attention to relationships, culture and the everyday experiences of students.

Because at its core, this work is not only about reducing harmful behaviour. It is about creating school environments where all children can feel safe, connected and able to thrive — both in and beyond the classroom.

