

THE STRAITS TIMES

Empower teachers to better deal with bullying

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The deeply disturbing alleged bullying incident that took place in a secondary school may be just the tip of the iceberg ("Jurong school counselling students in bullying video"; Sept 22).

As a former secondary school allied educator (teaching and learning), who taught the more challenging classes and often did relief duty, I can attest to numerous incidents of bullying in class, though not to such an egregious extent.

I encountered quite a few occasions when I had to call for reinforcements from other teachers to rein in unruly behaviour. I empathise with the adjunct teacher but I cannot fathom how he or she could let the situation deteriorate so badly without trying to intervene.

Teachers, who are supposed to be figures of authority that ensure students' well-being, are cowed into inaction, vulnerable students will lose trust in their teachers' ability to protect them. Allowing the bullies to go scot-free would also embolden them to be more brazen.

Not only are fellow classmates targets of bullies but teachers are also considered fair game.

An incident remains seared in my memory. A student, who lived in the same condominium as I did, began harassing me while I was swimming. When the taunts degenerated into sexual innuendos, I reported the culprit to the school.

He was disciplined but, shortly after, the shoes outside my door and my bathrobe at the swimming pool went missing. I was also ridiculed and verbally threatened in class, which I also reported to the school.

I have also heard of former colleagues who were reduced to tears by their students, who even issued threats to their property.

Schools should empower their teachers to act decisively in the face of insubordination and threats to their students' or their own safety.

For a start, I suggest that an easily accessible means of sounding the alarm be installed in classrooms deemed at risk of problematic behaviour, so as to pre-empt further escalation.

This will give teachers peace of mind, knowing they can easily get help. It will also send a signal to potential bullies that their actions will not be tolerated. Better still, install video cameras in these classrooms to further deter bullies.

It is high time we put a stop to bullying in schools, before it leaves a lasting scar on the victims, as well as other students witnessing such acts.

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