

Can't fix school bullying if society continues sending mixed messages

MOE's standardised anti-bullying framework brings welcome clarity. But it will not succeed if the adult world sends contradictory signals.

Melvin Tay

Schools are among the first public institutions where young people learn how to live with differences, negotiate status, and handle conflict under shared rules. They are places where children absorb cues about what is acceptable, what strength justifies, and whether those who stand out can expect dignity or derision. They shape social norms around power, fairness and accountability.

That is what makes the Ministry of Education's (MOE) new anti-bullying framework so important. All schools in Singapore must henceforth implement a standardised set of disciplinary measures in

managing student misconduct, reducing room for inconsistent responses.

Many will see the new framework as a matter of simply enforcing school discipline. But it is more fundamentally about drawing a line and sending the signal that no member of society should be allowed to exercise coercive power over another and that a clear and consistent response must be exercised when that line is crossed.

TACKLING AMBIGUITY

That line has not always been clear, as evidenced by a persistent spate of bullying. Schools recorded an average of three bullying cases per 1,000 primary school pupils and eight per 1,000

secondary school students each year from 2021 to 2025, according to MOE data. OECD's PISA 2022 figures showed that 15 per cent of girls and 26 per cent of boys in Singapore reported being victims of bullying acts at least a few times a month.

This is why every time a high-profile bullying case surfaces, a familiar cycle follows: public outrage, calls for tougher punishment, and renewed anxiety over whether schools are doing enough.

The moral panic over bullying over the past year speaks to something deeper: Our approach to bullying reflects the societal norms we want to cultivate through our institutions.

When schools tolerate repeated humiliation or intimidation,

students may come to see dominance as normal and vulnerability as fair game. But when institutions respond clearly and fairly, students see the opposite: that status or strength is not a licence to harm others, and that power must be constrained by norms and rules.

The problem has never been about whether schools care sufficiently about bullying to do something. It is painfully obvious that most educators do. The real issue has been that much depended on interpretation – on where a teacher draws a line between a quarrel and bullying and how seriously each case is treated.

MOE's framework, at its core, is an attempt to fix that ambiguity in three ways.

First, it draws a clear distinction between bullying and hurtful behaviours – such as one-off insensitive remarks or isolated physical fights. These differ fundamentally from the repeated and intentional hurtful acts that define bullying, which must be tackled holistically. That distinction provides institutions with conceptual clarity to respond consistently and fairly.

Second, it sets a national schedule of punishments and clarifies how severity must be mapped onto consequences, to guide educators to respond proportionately. Disciplinary measures also differentiate between first-time, second-time and repeat offenders and take into account impact, intent and recalcitrance.

Third, the framework sets out due process. Schools are expected to implement immediate safety measures, conduct investigations, apply appropriate disciplinary, counselling and restorative actions, improve reporting channels and maintain timely

communication with parents, to retain parental confidence and public trust in the process.

Taken together, the approach by MOE sends a strong signal that bullying should not be managed by instinct or improvisation, and that responses must be fair and consistent across schools.

POWER IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

Bullying goes beyond school discipline. It is more consequentially an early lesson about how power should or should not be used in society. Bullying often happens as a result of the inability to negotiate differences well: whether race, religion, accent, body type, social awkwardness, nationality, disability, or simply being unlike the majority. Seen in this light, bullying tests whether a diverse society can manage differences amicably, without resorting to domination.

If schools are where we first learn how to respond to those who are different from us, then we cannot separate anti-bullying efforts from the broader work of sustaining a plural society – one held together not only by rules, but also by everyday habits of restraint, empathy, and regard for others.

The implication is quite sobering: Even the most robust framework to tackle bullying in schools will not succeed if the adult world sends contradictory signals. Whether MOE's framework on bullying takes root will depend in no small part on whether wider society reinforces the same norms that schools are now being asked to uphold.

Young people do not learn only from what teachers tell them in classrooms. They also absorb cues from the world around them, including from how adults

behave online, how public disputes are adjudicated, how quickly people excuse bad behaviour or cruelty when it comes from someone powerful or popular, and how often rules seem negotiable when status is at stake.

With the erosion of boundaries between the school, home, and the online world, conflict no longer ends at the school gate.

This is why bullying cannot be treated as a problem for schools alone. In a world where powerful actors on the global stage can bend rules, act unilaterally, and brush aside weaker parties with few immediate consequences, if society accepts and normalises the idea that power excuses conduct, then schools have an even harder task teaching the opposite lesson.

Undoubtedly, the framework will evolve as societal norms shift. But ultimately, the success of these measures will be judged not only by how the next viral case is handled but also by whether schools act consistently on bullying across the board, whether parents reinforce rather than dilute those same norms, and whether students come to see that while conflict is inevitable, domination and humiliation are not acceptable ways of exercising power.

A society that wants cohesion cannot be indifferent to how young people learn to treat those with less power, less status, or less social protection. A safer school culture is therefore not built only through sanctions after the fact. It is built through consistent signals across classrooms, homes, online spaces and the examples adults set.

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