

A “return to normal” is not good news for students bullied at school

As the Covid-19 pandemic slows in Hong Kong, hopes have emerged that things would return to normal soon, and so have plans for classes to resume.

For some students, however, life before the coronavirus outbreak had its own share of pains and woes. School bullying, in particular, was – and continues to be – a seamy side of campus life that haunts students deemed “different” by their peers, including children with special educational needs (SEN), LGBT teenagers and others.

Some may shrug off banter and pranks as a harmless and inevitable part of school life, thus discouraging victims from speaking up. There are also those who believe, out of a grossly stereotypical and toxic view of masculinity, that “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger”.

But downplaying the problem is just adding to the trauma of the victim. Bullying, even in the most light-hearted guise, can have a devastating and lasting impact on the self-worth and well-being of minority students, whose life chances are already compromised because of entrenched barriers in society.

In some cases, bullies can risk breaking the law. Just last month, the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) instituted legal proceedings under the Disability Discrimination Ordinance (DDO) in the District Court on behalf of a minor, represented by his father.

The boy has Tourette’s syndrome, and suffers from involuntary movements, such as eye rolls, head jerks and wrist flicks. He alleged that when he was studying in P6, four of his schoolmates subjected him to harassment by mimicking his motor tics and making insulting remarks about them in front of others.

Under the DDO, harassment refers to any unwelcome conduct based on a person’s disability where it can be reasonably anticipated that the person would be offended, humiliated or intimidated.

Examples may include insults or jokes about a person’s disability. It is unlawful for a student of an educational establishment to harass a fellow student on the ground of disability.

At the heart of the problem is an educational system that is struggling to cultivate a sense of respect for difference and diversity among the younger generation, an issue that manifests yet again in the experience of LGBT students at local schools.

According to a [study](#) released by the EOC in 2016, LGBT students in Hong Kong face hostile treatment from their peers and, in some cases, teachers, principals or even counsellors. Verbal attacks often include pejorative terms such as sei gei lo (a Cantonese equivalent of the homophobic slur “faggot”) and other vulgar and degrading labels.

The bullying does not stop at name-calling. One respondent, a gay student, recalled having his homework stolen and his name written on the blackboard under the word “freak”, and being pushed into a toilet cubicle and down into the toilet bowl.

While Hong Kong’s current four anti-discrimination ordinances – the DDO, the Sex Discrimination Ordinance (SDO), Family Status Discrimination Ordinance (FSDO) and Race Discrimination Ordinance (RDO) – do not outlaw discrimination, harassment and vilification on the ground of sexual orientation, provisions against sexual harassment under the SDO may protect LGBT students from any unwelcome act of a sexual nature that they, and a reasonable third person, would consider offensive, humiliating or intimidating.

Jokes or insults directed at LGBT students and referencing a person’s body parts or sexuality can well fall within the definition of sexual harassment under the SDO, which is enforced by the EOC.

In fact, as revealed in a [study](#) the EOC released in 2019, which surveyed over 14,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students in Hong Kong, LGBT students and those with disability studying at local universities are more likely to experience sexual harassment than their heterosexual, cisgender and able-bodied counterparts.

Legal safeguards aside, both the Government and schools should consider investing more resources in nurturing ideas of diversity and inclusion among teachers and students alike.

Specifically, there is an urgent need to modernise our moral or value education curriculum, so that it can properly address issues arising from the developments of technology, be it the misrepresentation of people with disability in “funny” YouTube

videos, hate speech in chat groups, or stereotypical gender portrayals on Instagram.

From illustrated storybooks for children such as the [Tally & friends](#) series to recommendations to the Education Bureau for a holistic [reform of sexuality education](#), the EOC has stepped up its effort in recent years to build schools' capacity for teaching empathy and compassion to students.

But at the end of the day, countering bullying must be a collaborative effort among parents, teachers, school administrators, the media, content platforms, and the Government.

This month marks two important occasions for minorities: the Tourette's Syndrome Awareness Month from 15 May to 15 June, and the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia (IDAHOT) on May 17.

As the Government floats plans for letting schools resume in phases before the summer break, let us all take a moment to think about what we can do to build a campus that is not only safe from the virus, but also free from any form of bullying and harassment.

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(Note: A version of this article was released in *Hong Kong Free Press* on 11 May 2020, and on *Inmediahk.net* on 12 May 2020.)