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A video posted on social media last week has once more brought attention to bullying in schools, which remains prevalent in the Philippines despite a law preventing it. The disturbing video that has gone viral has also raised concerns over the culture of bullying being normalized and whether punishment against bullies is sufficient considering the trauma that such acts leave on the victims.

This recent case involving Grade 10 students in Pasig showed the victim being slapped and threatened by a schoolmate while other boys—reports said there were 11 of them—watched. The victim’s mother said he was too traumatized that he refused to leave their house and go to school. The school has sanctioned the bullies to three days of community service, which the victim’s family found too lenient. They have filed a complaint for physical injuries and violation of Republic Act No. 10627 or the Anti-Bullying Act of 2013 against the perpetrators.

RA 10627 provides mechanisms to report bullying and directs elementary and secondary schools to adopt anti-bullying policies. Aside from disciplinary sanctions, the law also requires bullies—and parents—to undergo a rehabilitation program. Schools are also mandated to submit annual reports to the Department of Education (DepEd) and Congress.

However, a study by the Second Congressional Commission on Education (Edcom II) published last June found that there is a lack of awareness about laws that protect the rights of children and students. The Edcom II report, “Understanding Bullying in Philippine Education: Impacts and Opportunities for Change,” said interpretations of these laws, including RA 10627 and RA 11036 or the Mental Health Act, were largely left to the schools. The lack of a standardized mechanism, it said, has resulted in some bullying incidents being unreported or dismissed due to lack of evidence.

This could explain the discrepancy between data coming from DepEd and international bodies such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (Pisa). Pisa 2018 findings showed that 65 percent of Filipino students had been victims of bullying, the highest among all participating countries and territories. While the Pisa 2022 assessment showed a lower figure, with one out of three students being bullied, it still indicated that bullying remained prevalent in schools. The results also said that boys (53 percent) encountered bullying more than girls (43 percent). The types of bullying ranged from physical abuse to being threatened or subjected to jokes or nasty rumors.

DepEd figures, on the other hand, reported a surge in bullying cases, from 1,158 in 2013—the year RA 10627 was passed—to 20,172 in 2018. But DepEd said these data collated from the annual reports submitted to division offices “remain unverified.” This has prompted Edcom II co-chair and Pasig Rep. Roman Romulo to ask: “The law was passed in 2013. From then, until [2023], bakit hindi na-identify [‘yung reporting issues?]. Maliwanag naman ‘yung batas. DepEd knew the responsibilities that they had.”

The recent change in leadership at the DepEd—Sen. Sonny Angara was appointed secretary in July or a month after the Edcom II study came out—is a perfect opportunity for the department to review schools’ compliance with the anti-bullying law and reassess how policies could be strengthened. DepEd has released at least two memos, one in 2014 and another in 2017, that reminded schools to submit annual reports on bullying cases. But as the Edcom II study noted, “these memos do not contain any clause on sanctions for schools that are unable to comply.”

Schools should not ignore or sweep under the rug the incidence of bullying on their premises or involving their students. Social media has become a platform for exposing these incidents, especially in the absence of courage on the victims’ part to report them to authorities but this need not be the case if schools have created an environment that makes victims feel safe to report the harassment.

The action of the Pasig local government to conduct a parallel investigation in coordination with DepEd, particularly the Schools Division Office of Pasig that has jurisdiction, can also serve as a reference for handling bullying cases. DepEd should also consider the long-standing appeal to train dedicated personnel better equipped to handle bullying and mental health-related cases instead of schools assigning the task to teaching personnel with no appropriate training just so they can comply with the law.

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