The Star

A teacher’s role

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Rajalakshmi

TEACHERS are encouraged to go out of their way to support struggling students and to develop positive relationships with them.

Sometimes, the help required may be immediate and personal, and teachers may need to step in more directly.

However, granular guidance on how not to cross boundaries must be provided, said UTAR lecturer Tay Kok Wai.

“Support for students should ideally be provided within the framework of professional boundaries, utilising formal channels such as tutoring sessions, counselling referrals, and structured support programmes.

“In certain contexts, teachers might need to extend their support beyond formal means to effectively help students in need.

“In these situations, teachers should still strive to maintain professional boundaries but can provide the necessary assistance to ensure the students’ well-being and academic progress,” he said.

Cautioning that students who need additional support from teachers are often the most vulnerable to being groomed, he said balancing this kind of support with professionalism ensures that the help provided is effective, appropriate, and within the limits of their professional role.

Taylor's University lecturer Rajalakshmi Ganesan said navigating these limits may be tougher for younger teachers.

"Boundaries can blur when teachers and students use similar language and feel they can relate personally to each other.

"Younger students might have difficulty telling the difference between a friendly teacher and a friend, causing them to overshare their experiences and secrets.

"As their social and emotional development is still in progress, students run the risk of misinterpreting professional interactions as something more," she said, adding that this can also happen at the tertiary level when lecturers are closer in age to their students and hold power over them.

Power imbalance

Tay explained a teacher-student power imbalance as a sense of obligation or pressure for students to comply with their teachers' wishes, even if they are uncomfortable with the situation.

"A classic social psychology study called the Milgram's obedience study showed that people generally have the tendency to obey figures of authority.

"It also demonstrated that people are likely to follow orders from authority figures even when those orders go against their personal values and cause discomfort.

"The study highlights the powerful influence authority figures have on an individual's willingness to comply, which is relevant in the teacher-student dynamic," he shared.

Concurring, Rajalakshmi said that while teachers are experts and hold authority in schools, students also have rights and must have a say when it comes to their education.

"Take a doctor-patient relationship, for example. A doctor holds immense power over the patient due to his or her medical expertise.

“However, for treatment to be ethical, the patient must be able to give informed consent,” she said.

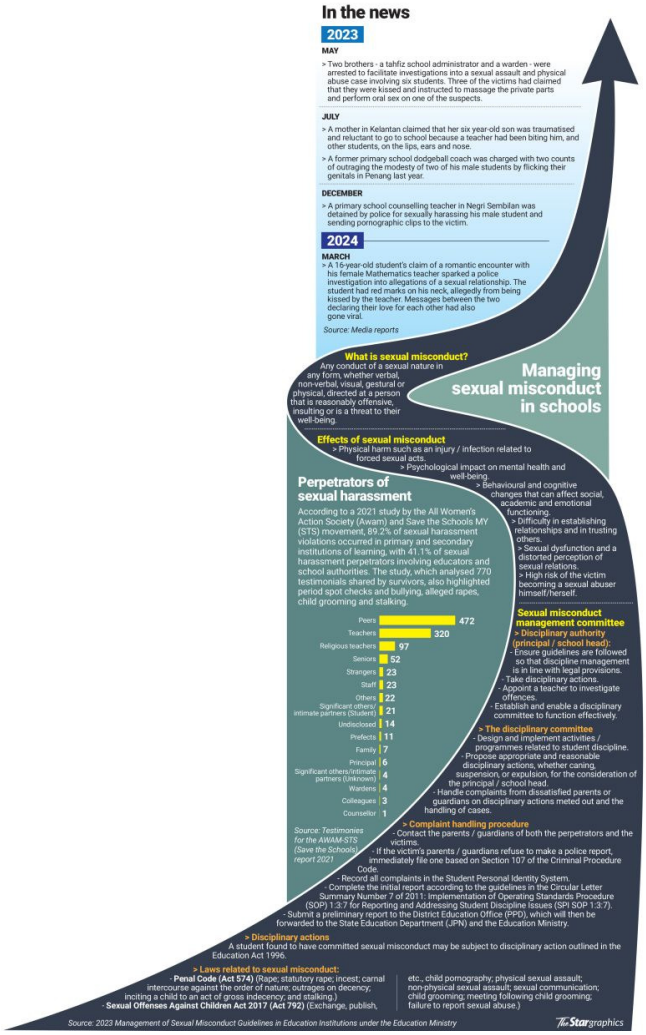
Tay said sometimes, informed consent becomes difficult to provide due to factors such as fear of repercussion.

“For example, students may fear negative consequences, such as lower grades, poor recommendations, or disciplinary actions if they refuse a teacher’s advances.

“This fear can coerce them into agreeing to something they would not otherwise consent to.

“Apart from this, as a clinical psychologist myself, I have encountered many students who express fear of potential relational abuse by teachers,” he said, adding that students worry about being attacked verbally, spoken to sarcastically, or isolated from their peers because they have displeased a teacher.

He said such abusive behaviours can further entrench the power imbalance and make students even more vulnerable.



Maintaining clear limits

This reminds me of an incident from nine years ago when I was a discipline teacher. I had a good relationship with my students. We behaved like friends due to our close age gap. I spoke to them like they were my siblings. One day, a student told the mother that there was a ‘sexy teacher’ at school who was very close to the students and spoke to them about personal matters. I was shocked when the parent questioned me about this because I had always maintained professional boundaries with my students. Teachers can be friendly with students, but it is essential to set professional boundaries and avoid sharing personal information that could blur the line between being a fun teacher and an authority figure. Often, teachers put their friendship with their students above all else, including learning. Making friendship the focus is a bad idea because students know we aren’t their friends. There are more appropriate ways to build relationships with them. I’ve noticed that students facing stress or depression often come to me because they

trust that I can help them with their challenges. Building such a relationship is valuable, but it's crucial to be a supportive teacher while still maintaining clear professional limits in your interactions and conversations.

– Shanti, English language teacher in Selangor

Cool teachers are those who connect deeply with their students, whether through small acts of kindness or just being a supportive presence. They use this bond to foster both academic and behavioural excellence. Being cool doesn't mean being overly friendly or trendy; it means knowing how to build a special teacher-student relationship and using it for the child's benefit. The key, however, is discipline. When students start showing disrespect, like not completing homework, cheating, bullying or being rude to other teachers, and expect to be excused because of their closeness to a teacher, it's time to reassess that relationship. Students must admit to their mistakes and learn from them. This is a fundamental learning process that shouldn't be altered just to maintain a friendly relationship with students. Teachers should never compromise their educational responsibilities to please students or to get something in return. As a teacher and a mother, I believe in the Tamil proverb, 'Alavukku minjinal, amirthamum nanju', which means that too much of anything, even love or punishment, can be harmful. We must always maintain a healthy balance, aiming only for the best for our students.

– Kalyani, Biology teacher in Ipoh

***Names changed to protect the identity of the teachers**