

## Elite and excluded

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There are people who will stand up against the bullies, but more often than not these people are the minority and sometimes they change sides whenever it is convenient for them.

Two weeks ago, a former Raffles Girls' School (RGS) student filed a suit naming RGS as a defendant. The student, who has since switched to a school in the UK, claimed she was bullied at RGS. Does bullying happen more often in top schools?

Adrian (not his real name) was in a top secondary school and in one of the top classes in the science stream.

It was a major achievement but he never enjoyed it - his time in school was marred by endless bullying.

The 21-year-old, who is waiting to enter university, says he drew flak for topping his class in humanities subjects like literature and social studies while performing poorly in the science subjects.

His classmates began to tease him.

Adrian says: "The taunts began with requests to score less in the humanities, followed by calling me out as a failure in the science stream."

They isolated him in class and avoided him during recess and breaks between lessons.

He eventually joined a prestigious humanities scholarship programme in a junior college which was almost exclusively made up of students who were from the programme's feeder school.

The bullying started again.

"I found myself in an unusual position where my new class dismissed me as a product of the science stream but my old classmates felt intimidated by my new position.

"Neither group wanted to hang out with me.

"There were some exceptions but overall, I experienced a sense of exclusion," says Adrian.

Just like in secondary school, his junior college classmates avoided him during breaks. They would also not sit with him during lessons.

While not fitting into the academic archetype was one reason for the isolation, he admits that his acting strangely may have caused others to avoid him.

His classmate in junior college, one of the fewer than five friends Adrian has and who does not want to be identified, says: "It's difficult to connect with him because we seem to be on different wavelengths."

"And sometimes, he may mistake friendliness and cordiality for closeness and make really awkward remarks that don't sit well with everyone else."

Adrian was not the only one in a top school to experience bullying.

The competitive environment in these schools means bullying can have an added dimension.

Some high-achieving students may incite the jealousy of others but often under-performing students are ostracised, says Dr Lim Boon Leng, a psychiatrist from Gleneagles Hospital.

Does it happen more often in top schools?

"Bullying can occur in any school and I cannot say that the frequency is higher in top schools."

"However, in a top school, kids may have a stronger sense of, and may bond through, elitism."

"As such, they may ostracise or bully others they deem unworthy," says Dr Lim.

## **CONSEQUENCES**

The impact of bullying can be significant.

Mr Daniel Koh, a psychologist with Insights Mind Centre, says: "In a top school, being in a certain social group, being recognised or being seen to have certain qualities is important. If you are being isolated, it may be more damaging."

But bullying in top schools is not restricted to Singapore.

In 2009, an elite private school in Australia, Ascham School, was hit with a cyber-bullying case that saw two students pulled out of the school.

The bullies had posted personal and malicious information about their classmates on social networking site Myspace.

A former student, who claimed to have been a victim of cyber-bullying at the school, accused it of having a bullying culture.

She said that a number of students had left the school because of cyber-bullying.

### **Some types of bullying victims**

Ming (not his real name) was also from a top school and says he was bullied because he was overweight and exempted from the National Physical Fitness Assessment test.

Physical differences manifest themselves in ways that are hard to disguise. Ming could not hide his size.

He says of his bullying: "Pettness and childishness are a thing wherever you go, regardless of whether it's a top school or not."

His friend and former classmate, who does not want to be named, stood up for him when he was bullied.

He says: "While it's true that Ming was different, it's not a good reason to pick on him. The bullies sometimes went too far."

They pinched, grabbed and poked Ming, especially in the stomach region.

He was unable to fight back when they assaulted him as he was weaker than them.

The bullies were often from sports teams or uniformed groups, while he was in the choir.

He says: "At its worst, it was happening every day. I would usually be targeted if I stayed in class. So I would escape to another class when possible."

There were some classmates who supported him but their efforts proved quite ineffective once they went up against the rest of the class, who made up the majority.

"There were people who switched sides a few times, sometimes supporting me but then going along with the bullies when it was convenient," says Ming.

## **THE UNDERACHIEVER**

John (not his real name) is a junior college student in the humanities scholarship programme.

He describes the competitive atmosphere in his class: "There is the sense that we are all competing for the same prestigious scholarships and the same top few UK and US universities. So there is definitely pressure."

John says it is not uncommon for his notes and calculator to "disappear" near exams.

A female student from the same programme in another school, who does not want to be named, says: "Sometimes, they would invite former students who have been to prestigious universities like Oxford and Cambridge, and who have attained prestigious scholarships.

"We are then made to feel that this 'ideal' is not so far off from reality after all."

While she admits this can be a source of motivation, it more often than not results in a feeling of inferiority that demoralises.

She says the moment some students fall behind and need support, they are instead ostracised by better students for not being on par with them.

It is made worse by the highly competitive atmosphere in the top schools, where the individual ranking of students within their class matters and affects whether their teachers recommend them for top universities or not.

## **Feeling bullied and alone**

Adrian was ostracised in school and felt lonely.

"By isolating a child from his peers, bullies are playing the power imbalance game with the intent of taking away the relationship the child has with his peers," says Ms Tan Kai Lin, counsellor and Bully-Free Programme Coordinator at the Singapore Children's Society.

While physical bullying may leave visible scars, emotional bullying can be even more traumatic.

The wounds are invisible and the perpetrators, hard to pinpoint.

## **TYPES OF BULLYING**

Ms Tan says there are four main types of bullying - verbal, relational, physical and cyber.

Emotional bullying falls in both the verbal and relational categories. Ostracism is a form of relational bullying.

Mr Daniel Koh, psychologist from Insights Mind Centre, says ostracism is "a group act".

"The victim is ostracised in front of his peers as opposed to physical bullying, which can occur in private.

"This disrupts the whole social setting. The victim not only faces one person, he has to face the whole group, which can increase his emotional distress," he explains.

And bystanders may be unwilling to step in for fear of being included as an outcast even if they know that it is wrong.

Says Ms Tan: "Bullies may pick on vulnerable victims, who may be seen as less powerful in areas such as popularity, age, size or status in school."

Dr Lim Boon Leng, a psychiatrist from Gleneagles Hospital, says a high-performing student, for some reason, may fall sick and find she cannot perform at the same level.

"That's when the bullying comes in because other students may be jealous of her and when she suddenly collapses under pressure, she can be seen as unworthy."

The incidence of ostracism in top schools may increase if other students feel one of them is compromising the school's prestige.

Dr Lim says the impact of ostracism is just as bad in top schools as it is in neighbourhood ones.

"Victims are likely to be traumatised and more likely to develop clinical depression and anxiety disorders. Some bullying cases may result in suicide of the victims.

"In a fast-paced and highly competitive arena such as a top school, their deterioration becomes more obvious and there is less time and fewer buffers for them to pick themselves up."



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