

## Painful life lessons from bullying



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One in eight students in our schools is bullied.

These students are harassed at least once a week.

Ms Esther Ng, the founder of the Coalition Against Bullying for Children and Youth, revealed the numbers to me when I spoke to her last year.

Imagine the dread bullied children feel each morning when they have to go to school, knowing that their tormentors are waiting for them.

Now, add into this mix the pressure of being in a top school. Not only are your peers competing to outdo you, they are very capable of doing so.

It is in this highly competitive environment that jealousy breeds.

This, as I understood from Ms Ng, is the precursor to bullying.

As a student at a top school, you are expected to be a role model and to excel academically.

I know this because I was a Raffles Institution student from 2001 to 2004.

In my time there, bullies resorted to giving their victims "wedgies", which involved pulling the victim's underwear to his upper torso.

Because you are a Rafflesian, parents and friends put you on a pedestal, believing that you can never do any wrong.

You start to believe that you are someone special too.

But when your cohort has a thousand other top students, not everyone can be that special snowflake.

To feel better about themselves, some students turn to getting leadership positions in co-curricular activities (CCAs).

At the secondary school level, students can take on as many positions as they can handle.

So when there is - and there always is - a classmate who happens to do well in his studies and CCAs, you cannot help but feel jealous.

**Anti-Bullying**

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An Education Ministry spokesman says it does not tolerate bullying "in any form" and has taken steps to stop bullying, not just in top schools.

"Anti-bullying awareness programmes, organised in many schools, empower students to help themselves and support their peers who are bullied," he tells The New Paper on Sunday.

To get a fresh perspective, I spoke to some students in Raffles Institution and Raffles Girls' School to get an idea of how bullying tactics have changed over the years.

Vulgarity, offensive gestures and hurtful nicknames are the most prevalent weapons used by bullies today, they say.

A Secondary 4 prefect recounts how a student in his class is picked on because of his sexuality. The prefect confessed that he rarely steps in because the victim is not a popular student. He also does not want to be a target.

Understandable, as popularity is important in a school which picks its student leaders by nominations and votes.

But the more I hear from students, the more I come to realise that the "happiest" bully victims are those who take it in their stride.

One said the bullying and name-calling stopped when he laughed them off.

Many famous personalities, like comedian Chris Rock and former US president Bill Clinton, were bullied growing up. They fought back and proved their bullies wrong.

The student culture in top schools can be brutal and unforgiving but a sterile environment devoid of conflict is not real.

Call me old-school but I believe that if you erase everything offensive or hurtful, you get an institution where everyone thinks they are special snowflakes.

And if previous controversies of elitism in top schools are any indication, I doubt society is prepared for that snowstorm.

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