

When school isn't safe

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Standing out: A Mahidol University survey of 2,000 students found LGBT youth were more than twice as likely to be bullied than their non-LGBT peers, with a third reporting physical and verbal attacks.

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Bung* is in Mathayom 3 and is counting down the days until he can leave and finally join a school where male students are in the minority. "Three more months in hell," Bung says hopefully.

Bung is now enrolled at one of the most popular schools in southern Thailand. The 15-year-old self-identifies as a young katoey, has a small build and acts in a very feminine manner. Bung moved to the school almost three years ago and is in the elite academic stream.

"I have no problem in the classroom because all my friends focus on studying," Bung explained. "But as soon as I walk out of class, I get harassed by the boys. They've never hurt me physically, but I've been traumatised by the verbal and sexual abuse."

Bung is one of many high school students who experience bullying in what is supposed to be one of the safest places for children. Thailand has a reputation for being open to the LGBT community, but research has dispelled this myth, especially when it comes to the school environment.

THE DISTURBING TRUTH

Associate professor Pimpawun Boonmongkon, who heads the Centre for Health Policy Studies at Mahidol University, is always looking for ways to improve young people's lives. Ms Pimpawun, who has a special interest in child development and education, has been researching obstacles to learning, in the hope her work can be used to improve children's experience of school.

She has found one of the main things that interferes with a child's education is bullying, especially among LGBT students at secondary level.

Ms Pimpawun's team conducted research across Bangkok and the central, northern, northeastern and southern regions in 2012 and 2013.

A total of 2,070 students participated, with 246 — more than 10% — identifying as LGBT. The research found that 11.3% of non-LGBT students were bullied physically, 12.9% verbally, 13% socially, and 7.7% sexually.

But the LGBT students faced much higher incidences of attacks. At least 30% were bullied physically, 29.3% verbally, 36.4% socially and 24.4% sexually.

When the numbers were broken down by region, Ms Pimpawun said the South, which is known for being socially conservative, was where the most bullying occurred.

"Southern culture is a male dominant culture," she said. "Therefore they have less sympathy and tolerance towards LGBT people. The northern region is more tolerant when it comes to LGBT acceptance."

Bung, who studies in the South, has had been subjected to weekly harassment from boys at school since he was in Mathayom 1. Bung was once pulled into a classroom by a group of boys while the teenager was walking to submit homework to a teacher.

"They grabbed my chest, my bottom and my penis. Then they stripped me to see if I had boobs like a girl," Bung said. "I was very close to leaving school but my mum told me to put up with the bullying and wait. She told me it would get better when I get older."

WIDESPREAD ABUSE

Ms Pimpawun's research helped inform a wider regional report on school bullying, sexual orientation and gender identity, called *From Insult to Inclusion*, published by Unesco at the end of last year.

Justine Sass, a regional education adviser at Unesco Bangkok, told Spectrum school should be the most protective environment for students and a place where parents feel comfortable sending their children.

Zero tolerance: Pibool Uppatham director Somsak Swaengkarn wants to wipe out bullying.

But according to the Unesco report, more than half (56%) of young LGBT people in Thailand are bullied every month, while nearly a third experience physical abuse (31%) and verbal abuse (29%); and almost one quarter (24%) are victims of sexual harassment. Another study found discrimination, violence and exclusion in education often follows LGBT young people into the workforce.

Bullying can occur in the playground, in toilets, changing rooms or classrooms, or on the way to and from school. It may also extend to virtual spaces through cyberbullying, which is an increasing concern given widespread internet access, particularly through mobile phones.

A worldwide study of 7,644 young people aged eight to 17 years old in 25 countries showed cyberbullying was widespread. Of the 25 countries surveyed, the three in which participants reported the highest rates of online bullying were in Asia: China with 70%, Singapore with 58%, and India with 53%. Other Asian countries in the study reported lower levels of 33% in Malaysia, 26% in Pakistan and 17% in Japan.

“Online bullying is worse than actual physical bullying. When a child is bullied at school, it ends at school. But online bullying exists in the cyber world for a very long time, and can come back to hurt those who are bullied later,” Ms Sass said.

POWER, NOT PLAY

While Ms Pimpawun’s research focused on young LGBT people, Thawatchai Pachun, a project leader from the Path2Health Foundation, warns bullying affects all kinds of students equally.

The Path2Health Foundation runs anti-bullying campaigns in many secondary schools and works directly with child victims.

“Our experience shows anyone can be bullied, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation,” Mr Thawatchai said.

Somsak Swaengkarn, director of Pibool Uppatham School in Huai Khwang, Bangkok, has been a head teacher for more than a decade. He has worked in many schools: all boys, all girls and mixed. Each has their own problems, he said. “Single gender schools tend to have less problems than mixed gender schools,” Mr Somsak said. “Sometimes the bullying victims are non-LGBT kids and those who bully them are LGBT kids. It’s all about power and how they manipulate that.”

Mr Thawatchai said potential victims include children with special needs, new students, quiet children who don’t have many friends, young people with something outstanding about their physical appearance (such as being fat or thin, dark skinned or tall), nerdy students, LGBT youth and children from wealthy backgrounds.

“I read some research that found children who are bullied in school are 10 times more likely to grow up to become murderers,” Mr Thawatchai said. “If we can create a safer school environment for students, then we’ll have better quality adults in the future.”

At another secondary school in the heart of Bangkok, one Mathayom 1 boy who enrolled this semester separates himself from everyone else. He can’t get along with the other pupils and has only a few friends.

Once a week, a group of older students tease him, patting him on the head and demanding money. The boy gives them 10 or 20 baht to protect himself, but that doesn’t guarantee his safety.

“One time I didn’t give them enough money. They hit me in the head and took my wallet. I was too afraid to tell my teacher or mum,” said the boy, who didn’t want to be named.

STUDENT ARMY

During lunchtime at Pibool Uppatham School, more than 2,000 students are enjoying their break from



classes. From kindergarten level to Mathayom 6, there are enough of them to fill the school yard. But among all the pupils, there are 30 with an important job.

They wear regular school uniform, but with a special armband. It reads "Anti-Bullying Team" and marks them out as part of a team charged with keeping the students in order.

"I am part of the student committee and part of my responsibility is to make sure that every student feels safe to come to school," said Mathayom 5 student and squad member Nithima Namtanchuan.

"It was our director Ajarn Somsak's idea to create the team to help monitor the school, since we know more students on a more personal level than he does," she added proudly.

"We don't have that much of a bullying problem in our school," Ticha Wongparwed, a Mathayom 4 student explained. "But I hope there will be zero bullying with hard work and effort from us and our teachers."

Wannisa Pikuntong, the school counsellor, told Spectrum the school's anti-bullying campaign has been running for one month. Those who feel threatened by other students can write anonymous complaint cards and put them into a box. The anti-bullying squad then read the cards and consult her about any problems.

"The student committee has a closer relationship to their peers than teachers. I tend to guide the team on how to consult the students. If they get out of their depth, I step in to help," Mrs Wannisa said.

Mr Somsak hopes to bring the bullying rate in his school down to zero within four years. "Besides working with the students, we also want to get parents involved with the campaign. We've had some incidents when fights between students were encouraged by parents," Mr Somsak said.

Since the project is new, not every student has benefitted, such as one Mathayom 3 boy who identified himself as a young katoey. He told Spectrum he still gets physically bullied by boys at school and no one seems to care.

"I get punched all the time. I know I am not a beautiful katoey like others at school. I am fat and have dark skin, at least that's what they say. They call me a big, black, ugly katoey," he said.

BOY ON FIRE

While Pibool Uppatham School has its anti-bullying squad, Taweethapisek School in Bangkok Yai district is doing things differently. The all-boys school, for pupils from Mathayom 1 to 6, has been raising awareness through a short film project.

Budding film-makers: The pupils from Taweethapisek School who made 'Piratch, the Boy on Fire'.

Pimonmart Putsamond, Taweethapisek's vice-director, said the school has always been a place for gentlemen, with a long history since King Rama V. To honour this tradition, they are teaching students to respect one another like true gentlemen.

"We do have some bullying in our school, just like all schools. But our problems are not serious. We know how to manage our students well," Ms Pimonmart said. "Katoey students here are not the target. New students are more likely to be victims."

Students at the school were invited to enter a competition to make a short film promoting the anti-bullying message.

Many teams competed, but the winners impressed with a story about how bullying affected two young men — a gay student and a new student.

“I think gay kids and new kids are easy targets for bullies. So I used them as the main characters,” said the director of the film, Tattaporn Deethaworn.

The film, called *Piratch, the Boy on Fire*, focuses on a gay student who is bullied for his sexual orientation by a group of boys. One day a new student comes to talk to him and they hit it off. The two date for a while, until the gay boy finds out that the new student was sent by the bullies, and had tricked him into falling in love.

BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

Last year the Raks Thai Foundation found bullying affected between 20% and 30% of students who took part in focus groups at 30 elementary schools across the country.

Executive director Promboon Panitchpakdi said the foundation targets its support services at small elementary schools, since “we assume big schools already have counsellors to help students”.

Mr Promboon said making the distinction between teasing and bullying is important. Teasing is less persistent, but bullying is when a child is the victim of repeated physical or mental abuse at the hands of others.

The foundation used different techniques to ask students about their experience of bullying, including getting them to draw pictures. They asked whether they had been bullied, if they had bullied someone, if they had seen a student being bullied and done nothing, or if they had cheered on while another student was bullied.

Schools in different locations yielded different results. Students at schools in border areas, for example, were more likely to be bullied because of ethnic differences, such as accent or skin colour.

But there were also universal cases of victims who stuttered or were bad at sports, students who wore thick-rimmed glasses and overweight children. Some pupils said they no longer wanted to attend school because of their experiences.

“Things can get better once children grow up, but there may be a long-term effect on the self-esteem of some victims,” Mr Promboon said.

Bullying related to gender and sexuality is serious because it can compromise a child's development and leave them with negative perceptions of themselves that persist into adult life.

“Our findings were surprising,” Mr Promboon said. “We didn't think we would see this kind of bullying at elementary level.”

Some pupils were bullied because they seemed to be “gay”, while pre-teen female students were targeted for starting puberty early.

“Some adults may dismiss the behaviour as childish teasing,” Mr Promboon said. “But the victim feels very



bad. We had a girl who was maturing faster than others and was verbally teased by boys who also tried to touch her body repeatedly. If we let this behaviour carry on, the male students grow up with the belief that it is OK to bully a woman. It contributes to gender inequality.

“We target elementary students because it will be too late to change their behaviour once they go to middle school.”

Getting pupils to take an active role in stopping bullying is key, he said. “The students who see others being bullied should feel the urge to help. It is a basic principle that children need to understand to live in a peaceful society. But some prefer to stay quiet.”

As well as the focus groups, the Raks Thai Foundation conducted training with parents, to teach them how to help their children cope with bullying.

“Some parents pay little attention to bullying because they think it’s a childish matter. But they must realise that victims can go through years of living in misery. It can have a lasting impact on both the bullies and victims. We have to pay attention to the way children treat each other in the same way we do for adults.”

*** Names have been changed.**



Handheld vice: Bullying often takes place in the playground, or on the way to and from school, but these days it also extends to virtual spaces, given widespread internet access through mobile phones.



Dedicated: Pibool Uppatham school counsellor Wannisa Pikuntong helps students protect each other.



Keeping order: During lunch at Pibool Uppatham School, more than 2,000 students enjoy their break. Among them, 30 are part of an anti-bullying squad.



Pupil power: Pibool Uppatham School's anti-bullying squad patrols classrooms at break times, offering help to fellow students and stepping in to support those who feel threatened. They can be identified by the special red armbands they wear at all times.



United front: Mathayom 4 student Ticha Wongparwed and Mathayom 5 student Nithima Namtanchuan are both anti-bullying squad members.