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Headline: 'We are no failures': Some stifled, others driven by Normal stream label

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Raj Nadarajan/TODAYL-R: Former Normal stream students Dr Felix Tan, Fabian Kwok and Fathul Hanif Ariffin.

SINGAPORE — He flunked his Primary School Leaving Examination on the first attempt and succeeded on the second. Subsequently, Dr Felix Tan was posted to the Normal stream at Bukit View Secondary School, where he studied between 1987 and 1990.

He recalled the denigrating comments thrown at him. “People tend to say you’re not good enough, you’re a failure,” said Dr Tan, who is now 45 and an associate lecturer at SIM Global Education.

“And at the age of 12 or 13 and you’re being labelled as a failure and so many other names which I’d rather not say, it kind of creates a sense of incompetence in yourself. It discourages you from doing a lot of things.”

Back then, students were categorised into Special, Express and Normal streams. In 1994, the Normal stream was broken up into Normal (Academic) and Normal (Technical).



Lecturer Dr Felix Tan was posted to the Normal stream but made it to the Express stream in Secondary 2. Photo: Raj Nadarajan/TODAY

Dr Tan chose not to be held back by such labels. After doing well in Secondary 1, he was promoted to the Express stream in Sec 2.

The stigma that comes with the Normal stream label, however, continued to stick with him in the initial months he was in the Express stream.

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He recounted the comments made by some classmates. "I was made fun of like, 'Oh, you were from Normal stream, so you were the success story of the Normal students. So, you're better than them'."



After secondary school, he studied in a junior college before graduating from the National University of Singapore. He went on to pursue his masters and later his doctorate from the University of Melbourne.

Professor David Chan, director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute at the Singapore Management University, said the stigma associated with social labelling and categorisation resulting from streaming is clear and unhealthy in many ways.

For instance, it creates excessive negative stress, overemphasises on achievements in all subjects regardless of abilities, aptitudes and interests, and on the importance of overall academic ability.

There is also an under-emphasis and even neglect of the value of specific abilities, he added.

THOSE WHO BENEFITED FROM STREAMING

Over the decades since streaming was introduced in 1981, several past and present Members of Parliament have called for it to be scrapped, citing the stigma attached to the Normal stream label.

But not all Normal stream students felt stultified. Some told TODAY that they had actually "benefited" from streaming.

Fabian Kwok, 29, said that he never felt judged by his teachers or Express stream students at his alma mater St Gabriel's Secondary School. He studied there between 2002 and 2006.



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Marketing executive at a car distributor company, Mr Fabian Kwok was posted to the Normal (Academic) stream. Photo: Raj Nadarajan/TODAY

On the contrary, they were “very supportive”, citing his experience in the school's football team. There were “no lines drawn when it came to sports, where the Express stream students would be in one clique and the Normal stream students would be in another”, he added.

“Everybody gelled well. In fact, the Express students could sometimes be seen helping the Normal (Academic) students (in their school work),” said Mr Kwok, who works as a marketing executive at car distributor Komoco Motors and is also a professional footballer with Hougang United Football Club.

He did well enough in his GCE N-Level examination to move on to Sec 5 and take his O-Levels. He subsequently furthered his studies at Temasek Polytechnic and SIM Global Education, graduating with a business degree awarded by RMIT University.

Being placed in the Normal (Academic) stream, said Mr Kwok, worked for him as he was not a “quick learner”.

He might feel “a little more pressure to match up to certain expectations or standards” if he had been posted to the Express stream. Having to do the N-Level examination first might have set a “better foundation for me to be prepared for the O-Level”, he added.

Even though he was in the Normal stream, Mr Kwok said he was determined to do well. “I told myself I want to get a degree. And I managed to do it.”

Mr Fathul Hanif Ariffin, 23, also experienced being sneered at just because he was from the Normal (Academic) stream. He was a former student at Hougang Secondary School where, according to him, both teachers and peers from the Express stream, among others, labelled Normal stream students as “not smart”.



Mr Fathul Hanif Ariffin, 23, felt streaming helped him as it allowed him to learn at his own pace. Photo: Fathul Hanif Ariffin

Notwithstanding that, he too agreed that streaming allowed him to learn at his own pace.

The self-described slow learner said: “If I had gone to the Express stream, I wouldn't know how I would have done. Perhaps, I wouldn't do as well if I didn't have an extra year.”

Mr Fathul is now a first-year student at the University of Western Australia.

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CHANGING ASPIRATIONS

Come 2024, subject-based banding will replace streaming.

And former Normal stream students told TODAY that it is a better system, one that recognises students' strengths in different subjects.

On top of that, gone will be the labels of Express, Normal (Academic) and Normal (Technical), which they hope will reduce the stigma.

Though education experts as well as former and present MPs were divided on whether streaming was a success or failure, they agreed on one thing: Streaming served its purpose when needed but later became outdated.

One reason is the changing aspirations of students as the education landscape and workforce evolve.

Mr Fathul echoed this sentiment. He vividly remembers a lesson in secondary school, during which a teacher opened up his laptop with its wallpaper displaying an image of an Institute of Technical Education (ITE).

One of his classmates asked the teacher why he made the picture his laptop's wallpaper.

"He told us, 'I don't want to send my students there'. So, he created stigma where ITE is a place where students who fail secondary school go to and that they could only get mediocre jobs if they study there."

Times have changed, however, former Normal stream students said. For one thing, the ITEs are providing more courses and there are more routes for students to further their studies in polytechnics.

In addition, the varied pathways created in recent years do not just cater to students' strengths, but also made them aspire to greater heights.

Mr Fathul said: "We want to do the best we can. It's as simple as that."