

Tall Poppies: Bullying Behaviors Faced by Australian High-Performance School-Age Athletes

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Little is known about Australian high-performance school-age athletes' experiences as victims of the tall poppy syndrome. Tall poppies are successful individuals bullied by those who are less successful in order to "normalize them." Nineteen current or previous national or international high-performance school-age athletes were interviewed (12 females and seven males). NVivo 10 was used to analyze interview data. Findings indicated all 12 females were bullied at school and this had a detrimental impact on their school life and well-being. No male athletes reported being bullied and their failure to mention this warrants further investigation. Parents and teachers require a greater awareness of tall poppy syndrome behaviors, and schools should promote an antibullying culture that includes resilience training for talented individuals.

KEYWORDS *bullying, tall poppy syndrome, high-performance athletes, school, dual life*

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INTRODUCTION

The number of high-performance school-age athletes in Australia competing in national and international sporting events is rising and has increased markedly over recent years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009). At the 2012 London Olympic Games, 17 of the 400 Australian competitors were still at school compared to 10 school-age athletes who represented Australia 4 years earlier at the 2008 Beijing Olympics (Australian Olympic Committee, 2012). Several researchers have highlighted the diverse problems these athletes face in trying to balance school and sporting commitments (Burden, Tremayne, & Marsh, 2004; Finney, 2001; Gurkan, 2009; Helsen, Starkes, & Van Winckel, 1998; McKenzie, Hodge, & Caranachan, 2003; Radtke & Coalter, 2007). Success at school and on the sporting field requires exceptional dedication, long hours of hard work over several years, and the ability to manage both school and sporting environments whilst still growing through adolescence. For school-age, high-performance athletes, surviving all these demands is extremely challenging and many potential talented athletes succumb to the ensuing pressures and then fail to achieve their full potential (Hill, Hall, Appleton, & Kozub, 2008). However, little has been published portraying the personal views and experiences of high-performance school-age athletes' in coping with these two full-time roles (Godber, 2012; O'Neill, 2013). Any extra barriers compounding these challenges can "make or break" these individuals, so any evidence of them being bullied at school is of critical importance as this can be that extra barrier to their personal progress and well-being.

Bullying is common in Australian schools (Rigby, 2011, 2012) with reports indicating that between 1 in 4, and 1 in 6 students are subjected to bullying on a weekly basis (Cross et al., 2009; Rigby, 1999). There are numerous reasons why children bully other children and both covert (marginalizing, spreading misinformation) and reactive (verbal or physical aggression) actions are manifestations of this behavior (Baldry & Farrington, 1998; Sutton & Keogh, 2000; Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 1999). However, when specific bullying actions target successful performers it is often referred to as the tall poppy syndrome (Feather, 1989). This behavior is common in Australasia and occurs when successful individuals are "cut down to size" by those who are less successful in order to "normalize them" (Mouly & Sankaran, 2000; Peeters, 2004).

Although the origins of the tall poppy syndrome date back to classical Greece and ancient Rome, the use of the term in Australia stems from the nineteenth century (Feather, 1989). Tall poppy behaviors in Australian society range from resentment for authority, individual cultural and personal values and norms, to personal envy. These behaviors stem from the settlement of Australia by English freemen and convicts. This social mix led to a distinctive hierarchy with a strong underdog culture accompanied by an intense

resentment for authority (Feather, 1989, Peeters, 2004). From the mid-1800s to recent times, socialists and Labour politicians have fostered the promotion of an egalitarian Australian society. While this has had a positive influence in facilitating mobility between social classes, the negative effects of this approach have led to a culture of resentment towards successful individuals (Feather, 1993, Peeters, 2004). As a result, high achievers in many fields are often subjected to negative criticism because their talents or achievements elevate them above or distinguish them from their less successful peers (Feather, 1993; Paccagnella & Grove, 2001; Peeters, 2004). The Australian media frequently provides examples of these types of behaviors particular when reporting the “fall from grace” of popular and successful politicians or athletes (Paccagnella & Grove, 2001). As a result, young Australians are familiar with tall poppy behaviors. However, research publications reporting tall poppy behaviors towards athletes refer almost exclusively to adults (Feather, 1989; Paccagnella & Grove, 2001) rather than any reporting on these issues for high-performance adolescent athletes still at school.

While Australian schools are sensitive to the requirements of developing adolescents there are relatively few schools that attempt to cater for the specific needs of high-performance school-age athletes. Although there are some 30 sport schools and colleges operating within Australia that cater to the development of high-performance athletes, most high-performance school-age athletes attend government schools (O'Neill, 2013). Government schools tend to have very limited resources and struggle to cater for the specialist needs of high-performance athlete students. This is compounded by the fact that athletes in specific sports are often spread thinly throughout the country. The few government schools that do cater for these students are often located close to a national or state training center such as the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra. Nongovernment or private schools usually require higher fees that can be used to offset the costs of specialist programs and resources, both in terms of staff and facilities (e.g., specialist sport coaches, training facilities and equipment). However, not all of these cater for the performance levels required of high-performance school-age athletes and the corresponding expectations of their respective National Sporting Bodies. Some government schools have embedded programs of excellence including those for excellence in scholarship, leadership, and specialization, such as a sport. Excellence programs often provide the school funding for successful students who are required to maintain high performance levels in their sport as well as their academic studies and good behavior, in order to retain the scholarships.

Paradoxically, the fact that high-performance school-age athletes in these excellence programs are given special treatment and extra support can lead to other students feeling resentful and envious. The fact that these talented student athletes have to manage full study loads, training, and high-pressure sporting performances is not always understood, and the bullying

behaviors from envious peers is rarely acknowledged as a problem that requires attention. Consequently, this study explores the experiences of a group of Australian high-performance school-age athletes about being bullied by their school peers. It attempts to examine the impact of the tall poppy syndrome on high-performance school-age athletes and to raise awareness about this as a problem in Australian schools.

METHOD

Participants

Participants for this study were 19 high-performance school-age athletes and included 12 females and seven males. They represented two distinct cohorts. One consisted of nine athletes currently at school between the ages of 15 and 17 years, and the second cohort consisted of 10 former school-age, high-performance athletes who were adults and no longer at school (see [Table 1](#)). The younger current school-age group was selected to provide a fresh voice for the views of high-performance school-age athletes, whilst the older group was selected to provide the reflective experiences about being high-performance school-age athletes from a more mature adult perspective.

The athletes currently at school all competed at national levels in their sports, and in two cases also at international levels. Sports represented in this group included both individual and team sports such as surfing, water polo, rugby league, swimming, ocean-ski paddling, surf lifesaving, gymnastics, dance, and kayaking. The second group of former high-performance school-age athletes had also been involved in a variety of individual and team sports (surf lifesaving, water polo, rugby league, royal lifesaving, swimming, association football, surfing, and kayaking). The second cohort had all competed at national levels and all but one had also represented Australia internationally. Of this cohort, two were world champions, three were former Olympians, and one was also a Commonwealth Games medalist. All of these participants are still involved in their chosen sports, although some no longer compete.

TABLE 1 Participant Distribution Across School Types

School type	Females		Males		Total
	Current	Former	Current	Former	
Government	1	2	0	3	6
Government in-school excellence and specialist pathway programs	2	2	1	1	6
Nongovernment/private schools	2	1	1	2	6
Home schooled	0	0	1	0	1

Participants from both cohorts currently attend, or had attended nongovernment/private schools, government schools, or government schools with in-school excellence or specific pathway programs in sport, and one was home schooled (see Table 1). When combined, the two cohorts represent a fairly even distribution for participants across the three main school types.

Data Collection

All participants were interviewed using a semistructured interview schedule. The main questions focused on the participants' experiences of being high-performance school-age athletes. Two interview schedules were designed—one based on the present perspectives of current school-age athletes (15–17 years old), and the other designed to capture the reflective perspectives of former school-age athletes (≥ 18 years old). Five categories of questions were used including introducing, probing, specifying, indirect, and direct questions (Burns, 2000; Patton, 2002). The last two categories constituted 60% of the questions, as these focused on the problems participants had confronted balancing their sporting and schoolwork commitments. Additionally, these questions explored who they perceived supported them to achieve their educational and sporting goals.

Following the recommendations of Legard, Keegan, and Ward (2003), dimension- and perspective-widening questions were used to focus the participants on specific details. These questions enticed the subjects to look at issues from a different perspective to uncover more layers of information. Specifically, the questions included were: "What problems did you encounter whilst at school?" and "How did these affect the balance between your sport and school commitments?" If the participants mentioned any problems or issues the interviewer then used open questions such as, "What happened next?" or "So what did you do?" This approach enabled the interviewer to explore any issues that the subjects had identified such as bullying.

All interviews were recorded with a Livescribe pen. Ethics approval for this research was obtained from the University of the Sunshine Coast Human Research Ethics Committee ([EC0029] approval S/11/347).

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using NVivo 10. A four-stage schedule was used to analyze the data through descriptive, topic, analytic, and drawing conclusion stages (Edhlund, 2011; Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012). This process involved data being sorted from lower to higher order themes through the four stages. The specific NVivo statistical and analytical tools known as "queries" were used to discern and interpret the data from each participant with reference

to each of the themes. More complex aspects of the themes required using running queries (Bryman, 2008), especially related to the impact of managing school and sport and identifying strategies and other persons involved in either context. This allowed each participant to incorporate any information that they felt relevant to the knowledge of what needs and problems they regarded as significant in managing school and sporting roles. After the queries were generated, the results were exported into Excel and SPSS for subsequent analysis. Chi-squared analyses were used to generate numbers of coded references and percentage concentrations of data from participants. A Jaccard's coefficient of correlation (Edhlund, 2011) was used in the NVivo program to determine similar content in certain themes.

RESULTS

Results were grouped into major social issues with particular reference to the social impacts that participants experienced. All 12 female participants responded that they were bullied at school and provided comments reporting: (a) marginalization (including alienated, ostracized, and treated as a tall poppy; 12 participants); (b) name calling (including teasing and taunts; 4 participants); and (c) mean behavior experiences (10 participants). In contrast, no male participants mentioned bullying as an issue either at school or elsewhere.

Bullying Behaviors

A typical response from a current female participant included:

I have a group of friends that I hang with at morning tea and lunchtimes. Certain girls in the groups will talk around me, not use my name, not have eye contact with me and give me the death stare. (15-year-old)

Three former female athletes spoke of the exclusion and alienation from their group of friends by never being referred to by their proper name but only "she." One former swimming athlete mentioned being called the derogatory term "the rig" by most of the students at her school. This athlete highlighted the issue of younger students also imitating the words and actions of the older students: "It so hurt me when the younger kids were yelling it at me as well" (32-year-old). Similarly, two current 15-year-old female athletes recounted being constantly called disparaging names. One current athlete became quite emotional in her interview and exclaimed: "I'm so fed up of being yelled at across the playground 'there goes that f***** bitch'" (16-year-old).

One former school-age athlete spoke of being physically pushed around by other girls in the school and ending up resorting to withdrawal tactics simply to survive in her government school, "I ended up just going to the sick room and getting the nurse to ring my mother to pick me up as this was easier than being pushed and shoved in the playground or even at assembly times." She further added, "in this way I was not being harmed or constantly having to put up with being called the 'f***** bitch' as they would deliberately shove me into a wall" (36-year-old).

Tall Poppy Syndrome Behaviors

The types of bullying that all 12 female participants experienced ranged from taunts, teasing, name-calling, alienation, judgmental comments, body language, gossiping, and mean behavior to ostracizing. Six of the female athletes felt this unsavory behavior by other school peers towards them was due to other students regarding them as tall poppies. For example, a current school-age athlete stated: "Others at my school constantly teased me by calling me a tall poppy" (15-year-old). Former school-age athletes reported similar experiences: "There was stigma in my school about being the tall poppy as some people assume that you perform at a high level so they try to take you down" (32-year-old). The tall poppy syndrome was even suggested by a current 15-year-old athlete as the "constant teasing and taunts I endure from some of my school peers" (15-year-old).

Name-calling behaviors extended to any perceived failure in the sporting performances of the school-age female athletes in this study. Participants reported that their school peers would often gloat if a tall poppy were perceived to have failed. Several current and former female participants reported that they were called "loser," "f***** show off," or "weirdo," especially if they came back from a competition where they placed but did not win in a high-performance event. Jealousy was a major reason identified by female participants for the bullying they experienced at school. Four participants noted how they were constantly told: "You always win so why should we try!" (16-year-old, 32-year-old, two 36-year-olds). One former high-performance athlete indicated that teachers were also a part of this problem: "I got bullied from other students and teachers at my school as they were jealous that I achieved excellence in sport and education, which others students in my school could never do" (36-year-old). Another former school-age athlete reinforced this by indicating how mean other school peers were to her: "Other students just gave me 'the look,' which was unwarranted" (32-year-old).

As one former high-performance athlete emphasized, "Bullying was bad and created troubles for me at school" (36-year-old). Both current and former high-performance female participants indicated that this mean behavior was due to what one current female school-age athlete described as "other kids being jealous" (17-year-old).

Coping with School Bullying and its Aftermaths

One former school-age athlete spoke emotionally about how she was bullied so much at school that she had to resort to truancy to escape from the bullying she was experiencing. This participant was bullied, alienated, and ostracized at her school by her peers and other younger students, who mimicked the taunts of the older ones. Due to the severity of the victimization, she decided to only go to school when her subject lessons were scheduled: “I had to play the system and put my own strategies into place to get away from the bullies” (36-year-old). This former Commonwealth Games athlete elaborated on the detrimental impact that bullying had on her adult life after her school days. She commented that school life for her with those “bitchy girls” had left “indelible scars on me.” Socially this athlete felt that all the years of putting up with the “bitchy ways” of those jealous girls had resulted in her being “very selective in choosing her circle of friends.” As she stated, “My school days were a nightmare so as a result I have chosen and learnt how to be very selective in whom I let surround me or even know any of my life details” (34-year-old).

Bullying and School Types

The frequency of bullying reports varied only marginally between the different school types: government schools (10 participants), government specialist pathways programs (9 participants), and nongovernment private schools (8 participants). However, female athletes in government schools were the only ones to make negative comments. For example, a former female athlete spoke of the lack of care and response of teachers to her situation of bullying in her school, as she stated: “I was bullied and no one did anything about it” (36-year-old). In contrast, only positive comments were made by female athletes in nongovernment schools that supported these female from being bullied by other school students. For example, a current female athlete at a private school said:

At my school, I have a high performance co-ordinator and when I was being called a “f***** bitch” by these other nasty girls he called them into his office and spoke to these girls and their parents. This put a stop to me being bullied and called rude names. He also followed up and monitored me and made sure I was not being bullied anymore. (17-year-old)

Bullying behaviors towards high-performance female athletes existed in all school types with most of the incidents stemming from student peers. The mechanisms of support for the bullied participants varied considerably from teachers being empathetic, responsive, and terminating any bullying

situations, to other teachers appearing to be disinterested and even jealous of successful athlete students.

DISCUSSION

This research examined tall poppy bullying behaviors towards high-performance athletes in Australian schools. A key finding was that all female participants in this study reported being marginalized and bullied at school and that this behavior had a detrimental impact on their lives. Interestingly, none of the male participants talked about this issue despite its known existence for talented male school-age athletes (Atkinhead, 2009; Corbett, 2011). Generally, the problem of bullying for school-age, high-performance athletes is as complex in this context as it is in schools. Consequently, most of the evidence of being bullied from this research has centered on behaviors characteristic of the tall poppy syndrome in Australia (Feather, 1989, 1993; Paccagnella & Grove, 2001; Peeters 2004).

Challenges for High-Performance Athletes at School

Changes brought about by physical growth and emotional development during the teenage years are sufficiently challenging for any adolescent without the additional demands of a high-performance training program. The extra physical workloads and psychological demands of a high-performance sports program expose these school-age athletes to an increased range of stresses than would be experienced by their scholastic peers. These adolescent athletes have increased susceptibility to overtraining, overuse, and burnout problems as they try to cope with normal developmental growth plus arduous training loads and competition (Calder, 2004, 2009). One coping mechanism identified by Hemery (1991) was for these athletes to adopt a strong self-centered approach leading to a belief that “top performers are often selfish individuals” (p. 134). Adolescent developmental changes and personal growth often engender an egocentric focus so extra personal challenges such as training and high-performance demands can accentuate any self-centered attention, “the ends to which athletes have to go themselves almost force that state upon them” (Hemery, 1991, p. 134). This perception of successful athletes being selfish can lead to high-performance school-age athletes becoming targets of peer victimization. For example, Atkinhead (2009) graphically described the bullying of Tom Daley, a 14-year-old English high-performance school-age athlete. Daley gained a gold medal in the 2008 European Diving Championships, but on his return to school his peers bullied him because he was a high achiever. He was so emotionally stressed that he had to move schools to escape the bullying. The opposite can also occur when a student who has been bullied by school peers performs well

at a sport and then the bullying abates. [Corbett \(2011\)](#) described the bullying of Hazem el Masri, a former successful professional rugby league player. Hazem moved to Australia at the age of 10 to escape a war-torn country. On his first day of school, Hazem did not speak a word of English. Corbett's article described how Hazem was bullied because he was different, spoke a different language, and could not communicate with other children at the school he attended. However, Hazem believed he was luckier than a lot of children who were also bullied at school, as he was able to perform on the sports field and this saved him from far greater teasing that may have occurred had he not been talented in football ([Corbett, 2011](#)).

Tall Poppy Syndrome Behaviors in Australian Schools

While Hazem el Masri was protected from bullying by his school peers because of his sporting successes, this is not the case for many other Australian school-age athletes. Half of the female athletes in this study said that they felt they were bullied in school because they were successful. Ironically, not only did their successful sports performances attract jealous behaviors from their peers, but any sporting failures made them targets for abuse as "losers" as well. Consequently, these high-performance school-age female athletes were damned if they succeeded and damned if they failed.

Most of the bullying came from other females. [Carr-Gregg \(2006\)](#) suggested that this "bitchface syndrome" might explain the unpleasant and nasty behaviors inflicted by girls on their female peers. The type of marginalized behavior exhibited towards female athletes in this study may also be attributed to "girl culture," which is "learned aggression by girls" ([Volk & Lagzdins, 2009](#), p. 22). This learned aggression was evident in reports from participants about being bullied not only by their own age school peers but also by younger school students who mimicked senior students' name-calling and taunts.

These characteristic Australian tall poppy behaviors are used to "normalize" successful individuals and are underpinned by a culture of envy. The negative feedback and damaging experiences felt by these talented athletes' marginalizes them from their peers and in some cases isolates them from their schools. The ramifications of bullying for school-age female athletes by girl culture can lead to negative consequences such as social withdrawal or alienation ([Volk & Lagzdins, 2009](#)). Two female athletes reported a sense of not fitting in or belonging to the school to such an extent that both withdrew from school activities to try to escape bullying. These are characteristic avoidance strategies ([Belk, Garcia-Falconi, Hernandez-Sanches, & Snell, 1988](#)), but they do nothing to resolve the bullying problem.

A better approach is for the athletes and schools to take a proactive stance both individually and collectively. All 12 female athletes interviewed

mentioned they felt they were being judged by others' standards and had to respond to others' dictates. School-age female athletes at risk of being bullied need to become more self-empowered (Mullaly, 2007). Mullaly argued they may need to "be going and getting what they feel they need in schools rather than waiting for others to decide their needs and then give it to them" (p. 22). Similarly, Fuller (2012a) suggested that there are unrealistic expectations placed on such successful students. To address this issue, schools also have a responsibility to provide resilience training to help ameliorate these tall poppy behaviors at school and also to engender a healthier culture where individual diversity is valued (Fuller, 2012b).

Differences Between Genders and Reports of Bullying

The lack of bullying reports from male participants was in stark contrast to the reports from the female athletes interviewed. Harzing (2006) speculated that the absence of boys' reporting any bullying issues could be related to the behavior of acquiescence. This is reflected by boys being "submissive in their response style to the interviewer" (Harzing, 2006, p. 26), as boys might feel embarrassed to talk about such issues preferring to keep such matters to themselves. Another reason suggested by deLara (2012) as to why male students do not disclose being bullied might lie in the fact that a large percentage of boys participate in bullying others. One 15-year-old current school-age male athlete explained, "there are just some things I don't think I need to tell everyone about, they do it to me and I kind of do it back." Similarly Hoar, Crocker, Holt, and Tamminen (2010) found females reported "using more instances of seeking social support in contrast to males who used more instances of aggression compared to females" (p. 141). These differences could also relate to an individual's sense of self-esteem as reported by Gendron, Williams, and Guerra (2011). In a study of 78 schools in Colorado (United States), they found that the higher the level of self-esteem a student exhibited, the less aggressive their reactions were to bullying from other students.

Another tentative explanation for gender specific problems between adolescent boys and girls, especially in relation to high-performance sport, might lie in the nature of how this sociological problem may impact across the two sexes (Nagel, 2006, 2008). The psychological dimension of female bullying makes all girls, irrespective of physique or reputation, a potential target (Nagel, 2008). Furthermore, the functioning of the male and female brain at this adolescent stage may also accentuate vast differences in the ways by which a high-performance girl or boy athlete may cope. For example, in general a boy athlete may not be focused on organizational skills, whereas a girl athlete at the same developmental stage may have pedantic tendencies about such skills (Nagel, 2008).

Another plausible explanation for this gender-specific difference in reporting bullying might lie in the nature of bullying behaviors across the two sexes. Boys' bullying tends to have a physical dimension. A relatively larger or mesomorphic shape may be physically inhibiting to aggressors, so the male high-performance athlete is less of a target for such action (Nagel, 2006). A frequent perception is that it is unlikely that strong fit male school-age athletes would be perceived as victims of bullying as they do not fit the normal construct of victims. However, the absence of reports of bullying by the male participants in this investigation does not necessarily affirm this belief. On the contrary, it raises more questions about why it has not been reported and therefore the nonresponses by these male athletes requires further investigation.

Irrespective of physique or reputation the mental dimension of female bullying makes all girls' potential targets for bullying (Carr-Gregg, 2006; Nagel, 2008). Inappropriate body language, taunts, teasing, ostracizing, alienation, name-calling, and mean and jealous behavior were problems all female participants had experienced at school. Similar findings to those in this study were evident in an investigation by Volk and Lagzdins (2009) who studied 69 school-age girls who were all members of school competitive athletic clubs. Additionally, these researchers indicated that bullying and victimization for girl athletes were two to three times more prevalent at school than in a sports context. Fuller (2012b) suggested that schools were unlikely to identify high-performance school-age athletes as the targets for bullies, as schools do not comply with the normal victim construct within schools.

School Responses to Reports of Bullying

Bullying of talented athletes is common across all school types and mirrors the prevalence of tall poppy syndrome behaviors in Australian culture. While the frequency of bullying behaviors may vary marginally between school types, the differences between schools are most evident in the strategies they employed to address bullying issues for their athlete students. Findings from this investigation indicated that the ideal "athlete-friendly" school is one that is empathetic to talented student athletes' needs. The best athlete-friendly schools identify a distinct teacher with a pastoral care role who understands the challenges and issues confronting these athletes. This individual has a dedicated interest in the athlete's well-being and is able to provide appropriate support and guidance for the student through their school years. Regular and frequent communication between teachers, parents, and the coaches of these students ensures these vulnerable individuals can be monitored and supported in an emotionally positive and healthy environment so they are able to perform at their best in both their educational and sporting endeavors.

Limitations of this Investigation

The most obvious limitations of this study relate to sample size and gender representation. Although the range of sports covered across the whole sample is representative of the sports typical at many Australian schools, there were only 19 subjects in total. Therefore, the views of these individuals represent only a small snapshot of Australian high-performance school-age athletes. In particular, only six of the male athletes attended school because one was home schooled and thereby unlikely to experience bullying from school peers. The small male sample size also accentuates the issue of no reports of bullying at school by the male participants. Future studies will need to incorporate larger sample sizes of both genders and focus on identifying any constraints for them in reporting information.

Recommendations

All high-performance athletes should be trained in self-empowerment through dedicated emotional skills programs that provide them with strategies for taking onus for their own emotional responsibility (Ciarrochi, Chan, & Bajgar, 2001). One example of such a program for first-year university students that focuses on emotional health and resilience is Mytern (Foster, 2012). This is a three-step program that includes personal emotional tools and taking control of personal thoughts. Fuller has identified 10 tips to promote resilience of character for people who feel they are being bullied (Fuller, 2012b, pp. 1–5). An example of one of these strategies is the use of SMS messages that are sent regularly to the students about taking ownership of their emotional responsibility (Foster, 2012). This approach may help school-age athletes to build personal strengths to overcome any bullying or ostracizing that they may experience from others (Ungar, Liebenberg, & Ikeda, 2012).

All high-performance school-age athletes need to be monitored at school for excessive stress and pressures. It is possible that many schools are unaware that high-performance student athletes are subjected to being bullied by their peers. Although most schools are engaged in a diverse range of programs to prevent bullying, the likelihood of successful school-age athletes being victims of bullying behaviors can go unrecognized as these students fall outside the normal victim construct. Effective school monitoring strategies that identify and support at risk tall poppies in the student cohort are essential for the health and well-being of these students and the school culture as a whole.

A number of antibullying programs already exist in Australia and these could be adapted to include an awareness of tall poppy syndrome behaviors towards high-performance school-age athletes. These programs include Working Together Against Bullying, a program designed to reduce bullying by the collective actions of schools, students, parents, and the

wider community (Carr-Greg, 2006; Mazzerole, Legoszo, & Finnighan, 2011). Tackling Bullying in Your School is another program that identifies specific actions to be adopted school-wide to address bullying behaviors through classroom and curriculum activities (Sharp & Smith, 1994). Resilience strategies are also taught to strengthen student victims through The Heart Masters program. Students are educated to “bungee jump through life” and to “bounce off” bullying through schools to encourage a sense of belonging for marginalized victims (Fuller, 2012b, p. 1).

Many Australian schools already have pastoral care programs and these can help detect, monitor, and support victims of the tall poppy syndrome. The best pastoral care programs include not only students and teachers but also parents in an effort to “bridge the gulf between intimacy and isolation” (Fuller, 2012c, p. 6). For high-performance athlete students it is also important to include the coach in this monitoring process as well. Schools need to both shelter high-performance athletes from feeling separate and different, and at the same time help them to develop a sense of belonging that connects and embraces them in school activities (Ungar, 2012). Parents and coaches can be encouraged to monitor and be aware of the signs and symptoms indicating when these school-age athletes are experiencing bullying at school. If bullying is detected these adults can contact and discuss the issue with the schools’ pastoral care coordinator to ensure there is a collective and integrated approach to managing the problem.

Conclusion

Whilst it is unrealistic to be able to eradicate tall poppy syndrome behaviors in Australian schools, the results from this study provide recommendations about how to minimize its effects on talented school-age students. The first step is the recognition of bullying issues as early as possible. To this end, schools need a system for monitoring the health and well-being of high-performance school-age athletes as they deal with a myriad of stresses at school, in sport and as potential victims of tall poppy behaviors. This can be coordinated by a dedicated pastoral care person who liaises closely with the parents and coaches of these students. Secondly, whilst schools have antibullying programs in place to engender a healthy school culture, individuals also need their own self-help strategies for handling victimization and bullying by their school peers. Resilience programs and support networks offered within the school system could nurture self-confidence and self-respect for victims and other students who are at risk because they are successful. With resilience skills and a supportive school environment, these talented athlete students will be able to perform well in both their school and sporting roles in a supportive scholastic environment.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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