

Teachers: Outside school, we still need to be role models

BY ADRIAN LIM

BOUNDARIES in teacher-student interaction have been the subject of debate, after reports surfaced last week of a teacher who got into trouble for using expletives in a WhatsApp group chat with youths.

While classroom etiquette is clear-cut, the boundaries are less well-defined in online group chats and on social media, teachers said.

Many of them told My Paper that while there is a need to use such platforms, they have to constantly remind themselves to set the correct tone and act with *decorum*, especially when students become too friendly.

Some have made their Facebook profiles private, while others have chosen not to add their students as friends.

A former secondary-school teacher, aged 30, who wanted to be known only as Mr Nazri, said of exchanges with students over instant messaging: "Students speak in a more casual tone, and ask personal questions. But I always try to keep it short."

Said another secondary-school teacher, who declined to be named: "We can be friendly, but not their friends."

On Nov 30, a police report was lodged against Mr Adrian Chng, from Raffles Institution (RI), for using expletives in a WhatsApp group chat.

Mr Chng is an assistant head of the physical-education and co-curricular-activities department at the school.

According to reports, he was communicating with co-captains of the national youth softball team, which he also manages. He had reportedly used profanities – he was said to have used the f*** word no fewer than four times – during the chat which took place in September.

Although he was not acting in his capacity as an RI teacher, RI said it does not condone the use of such language and will take action to discipline and counsel Mr Chng.

The Ministry of Education also said the use of inappropriate language by an educator towards his students will not be condoned.

One educator, who has been in the pro-

fession for three years, said: "Both teachers and students have a tendency to get carried away when communicating online. Outside of school, we don't want to be teachers all the time."

Mr Nazri said being a teacher is a "public job", like being a politician, and there is an image to be upheld outside school. He added that when he was teaching, he took steps not to be seen in the company of friends who smoke or drink.

Teachers My Paper interviewed generally agreed that outside of school, they have to continue being **role models**.

But online, students can dig up information which may be unfavourable to teachers. Social-media expert Michael Netzley, an assistant professor at the Singapore Management University, said there is "virtually no distinction between public and private" on social networks.

"When you enter that space, anything can be captured and redistributed," he said.

Still, Dr Netzley said he was not sure if a police report was warranted in Mr Chng's case.

"Youth also need to be talked to about what is an appropriate response when they see something on these networks they are not comfortable with. I would turn this into a learning opportunity for teachers and coaches," he added.

Lawyer Chia Boon Teck said a victim of verbal abuse involving vulgar language may lodge a police report if he feels **harassed**, alarmed or distressed by it. The guilty party may be fined up to \$5,000, under the Miscellaneous Offences Act.

✉ adrianl@sph.com.sg

ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY
ANDRE C. NEVILLE

HELP DESK 我的字典

Expletives: 粗话 cū huà

Decorum: 得体有礼 dé tǐ yǒu lǐ

Role models: 榜样 bāng yàng

Harassed: 被骚扰 bèi sāo rǎo

» Legal ramifications of verbal abuse

UNDER the Miscellaneous Offences Act, anyone who uses threatening, abusive or insulting words – or engages in such behaviour – on another person in a public or private place, with intent to cause harassment, alarm or distress to that person or any other person, can be fined up to \$5,000.

There are also laws to protect women from verbal abuse or any gesture intended to insult their modesty. The Penal Code states that any person who insults the modesty of a woman, through verbal or physical means, and intends for such actions to be seen or heard by the woman, would be fined and/or jailed for up to one year.



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION:
ONG WEE JIN