Revenge of the Geeks
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ARGUMENT

1. Many popular students approach graduation day with bittersweet nostalgia. Excitement for the future is clouded by fear of losing status. But as cap-and-gown season nears, let’s also stop to consider the outcasts. For some students, finishing high school feels like liberation from a jail sentence.

2. I’ve spent seven years of reporting from American middle and high schools. I’ve seen it repeatedly. The differences that cause students to be excluded in high school are often the same traits or skills that serve them well after graduation.

3. Examples are everywhere. Taylor Swift’s classmates left the lunch table as soon as she sat down. They disdained her taste for country music. Last year, the Grammy winner was the nation’s top-selling recording artist.

4. Students mocked Tim Gunn’s love of making things. Now he is a fashion icon. You might know his catchphrase “Make it work.”

5. J. K. Rowling, author of the bestselling “Harry Potter” series, has described herself as a bullied child. She says she “lived mostly in books and daydreams.” It’s no wonder she went on to write books populated with excluded kids. She describes them as “outcasts and comfortable with being so.”

6. For many, says Sacred Heart University psychology professor Kathryn LaFontana, high school is the “first foray into the adult world where [kids] have to think about their own status.” LaFontana studies adolescent peer relationships and social status. For teens, she says, “the worst thing in the world is to be different from other people. That’s what makes someone unpopular.”

7. The school environment is a highly conformist one. The qualities that make people different make them targets. In adulthood, however, the qualities that make people different make them compelling.

8. Some students are vaguely aware of this reality. An eighth-grade boy in Indiana told me: “I’m always single, so it’s tough. Never can get a girl. The smart thing repels girls. I like being smart because I breeze through school. ... That’s the good thing, but the girl thing is killing me.”

1. foray (FAWR ay) n. attempt to do something.
It's hard to know when you're in high school that "the smart thing" is likely to translate into later success. Similarly, dating is bound to improve. That's why it's up to adults to express constantly to teenagers that the characteristics that isolate them can pay off after graduation.

Geeks profit from their technological knowhow. Emos benefit from being empathetic and unafraid to display emotion. Skaters, punks, and others who pursue their art with passion benefit from their creativity. Gamers have learned both problem-solving skills and the ability to collaborate through collective intelligence.

In the adult world, being out is in. "Geek chic" and "nerd merch" are on the rise. Nerdcore hip-hop artists have penetrated mainstream thinking. And the nerd prom known as Comic Con draws high-profile celebrities and crowds of smitten fans. They're all part of what Jerry Holkins calls "the social pariah outcast aesthetic." Holkins is the creator of the Penny Arcade webcomic and video game conference.

Adults tend to be mature enough to recognize that there would be no progress—cures for diseases, ways to harness new energy sources—without people who are different. Successful scientists think uniquely.

So what happens to high school's popular students? Research shows that they are more likely than outsiders to conform. This can also mean they're less likely to innovate. They are more likely to be both targets and instigators of aggression. These aggressions are both physical and relational. Relational aggression includes rumors, gossip, and backstabbing. Popular students are more likely to drink and engage in other risky behaviors. Students who are popular and involved in aggression are less likely to do well in school. Psychologists point out that high-status cliques teach exclusionary behavior. This behavior may be the foundation for eventual racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, and other forms of bigotry.

That's not to say that popularity in high school necessarily leads to mediocrity or worse in adulthood. But neither is there necessarily something wrong with a student merely because he is excluded by classmates. We don't view a saxophonist as musically challenged if he can't play the violin. He's just a different kind of musician. A sprinter is still an athlete even if she can't play basketball. She's a different kind of athlete. Similarly, we might acknowledge that students who don't follow the popular crowd's lead aren't any less socially successful. They're just a different kind of social.

The education world would be so much more bearable if students could understand this. And if schools found better ways to nurture kids who reject the in-crowd image.

The worst part of the treatment of student outsiders isn't the name-calling. It isn't the loneliness. It isn't even the demise of attitudes and
programs that are important for supporting creativity and independence. The most heartbreaking consequence of this treatment is that tens of thousands of imaginative, interesting, impressionable students think that they have done or felt something wrong.

It’s not enough merely to tell them that in the real world, “it gets better.” They need to know before graduation that being different is not a problem but a strength.