

You Say

Pauline Bunce

Back-to-front system fails homework test for those who matter

In an education system undergoing reform in the context of a shrinking school population, it should be possible to put the well-being of students at the centre of the process. One would think that the presence of fewer pupils in the system would mean a lowered need for intense competition.

Unfortunately, Hong Kong education continues to remain addicted to large class sizes and the "pressure cooker" atmosphere of several decades ago.

This same addiction also drives many Hong Kong parents, who pass on their former schooling pressures to their children.

Recently this unhealthy combination of adult pressure cost 11-year-old Yu Cheuk-him his life. The Primary Five pupil leapt to his death in Fanling after being chided about missed homework.

Missed homework? Just what is it about homework in this city that has turned it into a life-and-death issue?

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In most Hong Kong schools, homework has become the proverbial "cart" that leads the horse. It has evolved into an all-consuming series of rituals that combine to strangle the daily routines of our primary and secondary schools. Students who fail to complete a single homework exercise quickly learn that this is a very public crime indeed.

By design, the Hong Kong school homework-collection ritual guarantees maximum publicity of student non-compliance.

Oddly, far less loss-of-face follows from incorrect, misunderstood or even copied homework.

A close examination of most schools' daily routines will demonstrate that "homework processing" has become the default purpose of many local schools.

First thing in the morning, students proceed directly from assembly to their form classes where their row monitors will make several trips down the aisles between the desks, collecting the students' English homework, Chinese homework, maths homework and any other exercise or piece of work that may have been chalked up on the classroom blackboard.

Each exercise book needs to be opened at the correct page so that the monitors can stack them in

numerical order from the front of the row to the back. Each open pile is then folded shut and stacked alternately, together with those from the other rows.

The combined bundle is encircled by a rubber band, accompanied by a checklist that indicates any missing books, and is immediately delivered to the relevant teacher's pigeon-hole.

Teachers will then spend their non-teaching time checking and "marking" these stacks of identical exercises.

The numerically ordered, corrected books will be returned to the students by their row monitors after a number of days.

This "homework ritual" takes up most of the form-class period, almost all of the subject teachers' non-teaching time and a fair proportion of every 30-to-40-minute lesson.

When every student is required to do the exact same exercises, there is ample opportunity for copying. Indeed, a peek through the fence before any school begins in the morning will almost certainly reveal small "nests" of students in the school canteen, madly copying homework answers from each other.

To add another level of absurdity to this "homework circus", it should be noted that it is these very exercise books that department chairpersons and principals collect and examine when the time comes to assess the competency of their teaching staff.

To anyone from outside the Hong Kong school system the entire "ritual" appears strangely Pythonesque. There is an air of clockwork efficiency about it, but the whole thing is a time-wasting absurdity.

It is a rare thing to hear a Hong Kong teacher say: "Take out your homework." It has already been collected and is waiting for them back in the staff room.

However, the ritualised collection routine also means that students will not receive immediate feedback on the work they did the previous night. Instead they will have to wait until the specific weekday designated as "grammar" or "algebra" to get that particular exercise book back.

Being seen to have done homework, that's what really counts in this time-consuming, almost sacred ritual.

The death of any young person for homework-related reasons should surely ring a loud alarm bell in the corridors of Hong Kong's Education and Manpower Bureau.

"Reform" is not a strong enough word for what is needed.

Hong Kong's often soul-destroying, cart-before-the-horse education system needs a total, top-to-bottom overhaul.

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Yale president Richard Levin believes the mainland and the US have a lot of misperceptions about each other which must be addressed. Photo: Steve Gray

A quiet but educated take on diplomacy

Relations between Yale and the mainland go back to 1850, writes **Nora Tong**

For Richard Levin, the bespectacled and soft-spoken president of Yale University who has the look of a composed intellectual, education can be a quiet but effective form of diplomacy.

"The opportunity for young people to know one another and understand another culture is a very good investment that is going to be conducive to better understanding among nations," said Professor Levin, who was in Hong Kong last week following a visit to China with 100 students and faculty from Yale.

He was in the mainland at the invitation of President Hu Jintao, who spoke at Yale in April last year. "We were received by President Hu in the Great Hall of People and had visits arranged with government leaders and leading universities in the cities we visited," Professor Levin said, adding that there were also sight-seeing trips to the Great Wall and Forbidden City.

"We're exposing some young people who may become future leaders of America to take a more in-depth look at China," he said. "The majority - 85 out of the 100 - have never been to China before."

In Beijing, Professor Levin and his delegation visited Peking and Tsinghua universities where they had formal talks and informal exchanges with academics and students. Among the topics discussed were reforms in mainland education and global education.

Also, a new publication programme is starting with the China International Publishing Group to produce Chinese-language textbooks and video materials to help students around the world to learn Chinese.

The relationship between Yale and China goes back a long way. The first Chinese students went to Yale in 1850 while the Yale-China Association was set

up in 1901, sending Yale graduates over to teach English as China sent its medical and nursing students to the US.

Professor Levin, an economist who assumed presidency at Yale in 1993 and who is the longest serving Ivy League president, is focused on China.

Holding an honorary degree from Peking University and an honorary professorship from Fudan, he has travelled to China five times in the past four years.

The university was chosen to sponsor a programme for the presidents and vice-presidents of China's 14 leading universities as well as an executive education course for senior Chinese government officials to study outside the country, looking at how the rule of law could be extended in China.

Last year Yale and Peking University launched an undergraduate exchange programme in which Yale and mainland students shared dormitories.

"In every room there's one Chinese and one American student," Professor Levin said. "This is quite novel. Foreign students are [traditionally] segregated into an international dorm."

The head of Yale said he wanted more students to get to know China and build connections there. "[China is home to] 20 per cent of the world's population and probably a larger share of the world's talented population."

"From the point of view of educating Americans, China's rise as an economic power means it's going to have a very significant role in the world in the years to come. It will be valuable if Americans have a better understanding of China and vice versa. There are a lot of misperceptions on both sides. We have to understand one another to coexist in a peaceful and productive way."

"The world today is so interconnected and interdependent. It's really important that these large countries, which have historically been inward-looking, take an outward-looking attitude and recognise better their role in the world."

Comparing the quality of education in China and the West, Professor Levin said while students at Peking and Tsinghua universities were "completely comparable" to those at Oxford and Cambridge or Harvard and Yale, mainlanders still had some way to go to develop their faculties to be leading researchers globally.

Another difference lay in the style of education, he said, with universities in the US and UK focusing more on interactive education that cultivated independence.

But there wasn't a right or wrong to the philosophy of education, Professor Levin said. "A more passive mode of education sometimes does lead to students mastering a great deal more of content."

He said Yale provided a classical and liberal education that encouraged students to acquaint themselves with a broad range of subjects before specialising in their last two years.

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Professor Richard Levin, president of Yale University

And like other world-class universities, Yale focused on developing in students the ability to dissect arguments and to think critically and independently.

"One distinctive feature of Yale is that we put a lot of emphasis on the extra-curricular side of the student life," Professor Levin said. Students lived in small communities or residential colleges, promoting their active participation in student organisations

which had been a laboratory for the development of leadership skills.

Pitching top American universities against their British counterparts, the Yale president said Oxford and Cambridge retained "unique and wonderful" features.

"The very intensive method of teaching - the tutorial method - provides superb training," said Professor Levin, who received a Bachelor of Letters in politics and philosophy from Oxford having earned a bachelor degree in history at Stanford University. "[The tutorial method] was extremely rigorous and certainly taught me how to write, develop and defend an argument," he said. "It's very labour-intensive and very expensive to replicate."

Meanwhile, the education system in the US was beset by the problem of cutthroat competition as students scrambled to get into top schools. "I think that's unfortunate. There's too much anxiety suffered by parents and high school students about getting into college," Professor Levin said.

But all students had a fair chance to get in, given the many access points. "There are elite private institutions like Yale, some very good state universities, many colleges and universities at different levels of quality and a broad community college system."

While the lowest income strata in the US was not proportionally represented at Yale, about half of the students were on some form of financial aid. He added that the cost of higher education was less of a problem at schools such as Yale, Princeton and Harvard that gave generous financial aid than at schools that were less well-endowed.

Notwithstanding the prominence of Yale, Professor Levin is determined not to be lured into complacency.

In 2001 and 2003 Yale undertook a comprehensive review of its undergraduate curriculum, which led to a number of changes, including the commitment to send students overseas, putting more prominence on international education and some other modest changes in the structure of the first two years of the curriculum.

"We got some real benefit out of that review even though we could have just sat there and thought we were fine," Professor Levin said.

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Education Mailbag

Multilingual teachers would better meet needs of NETs scheme

While I sympathise with the plight of some NETs as recently reported ("Shortage of NETs looming; educators, *Education Post*, May 26) the problems associated with Native English-speaking teachers could be easily solved if the Hong Kong government were to adapt its current policies to better meet the changing roles of English, both in the region and internationally.

The major role of English in today's world is as a means of intercultural communication between multilingual people who have learned English as a second or foreign language. In the local context, people from China, Korea, Japan and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations are likely to communicate with each other through English. English has become a truly Asian language.

There are now far more multilingual users of English than there are native speakers. It has been estimated that some 300 million people are currently learning English in the mainland alone. This is more than the entire population of the United States and Canada combined.

This has implications for the teaching of English in Hong Kong's schools. Rather than focusing on so-called native speakers of English, it would make more sense to employ suitably trained Asian multilingual speakers of English in our schools. This would provide children with exposure to regional varieties of English while delivering the highly motivating message that Asians are able to communicate extremely successfully through English.

(The current message implicitly provided to children is that you have to be a "native speaker" - and a white one at that - in order to speak English "properly". This seriously disadvantages

local teachers who, by virtue of being multilingual and well-trained are, in fact, the ideal linguistic role models for their children in today's world).

The government therefore needs to move away from the position that native English teachers provide the most appropriate linguistic models for our children. Instead, it needs to realise that the future of English lies in the multilingual speaker of English.

Not only would this be extremely motivating to both students and teachers, it would also save the government a significant sum of money, which could be used to upgrade the training of local multilingual teachers and to employ suitably trained English teachers from the region.

Not least, this would also allow the government to take the lead in setting professional and moral standards by insisting that only multilingual and suitably trained teachers be employed in

our schools as English language teachers.

ANDY KIRKPATRICK, Professor and head of English Department, HKIED

Slow-moving EMB must carry some blame

Damien Vance, quoted on reasons why, among other things, 100 NETs are leaving this year has left me confused and left the EMB needing to answer searching questions. Mr Vance is quoted as saying that the NETs are leaving this year "because they're useless or there has been an argument of some sort".

No, Mr Vance, I suggest most of these are leaving for family and personal reasons. Some are no doubt leaving because of the limited opportunities and lack of financial support they have for their children's education.

As to Mr Vance's audacity in declaring certain NETs useless, he would be better off pointing the bone at their recruiting agency. NETs are generally recruited by the EMB and that organisation has not won accolades from many of us for its understanding of NETs' needs or of sound recruitment processes.

Mr Vance also errs in not holding the EMB to blame for the lateness at which schools inform the EMB of vacancies. The EMB's own officers requested information from the schools only on May 4 this year. Hardly time then for anyone to do anything, I would suggest.

And this year the contracts prepared by the EMB that allow incoming NETs time to give notice to their present employers and obtain visas were again months too late.

So probing questions need to be asked of the administrators of the scheme and it would seem Mr Vance is not the person to assist in bringing

forward a better-administered NET scheme for students and schools.

DES MORIARTY, Ma On Shan



We welcome all letters

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It's more about culture than remuneration

All the latest articles about the high NET turnover have missed the point. The underlying problem is cultural, not remunerative.

Hong Kong carries the label of an ex-British colony but has the substance of Chinese society. For NETs, this gap between preconception and reality is a big culture shock - so imagine how they feel when they find themselves the lone Westerner in a Chinese school.

When these NETs arrive on Hong Kong soil, should they try to do as the Chinese do or expect us, including their Chinese colleagues, to adapt to their foreign ways? The tug of war between these approaches will remain contentious. For the sake of Hong Kong education, I hope the outcome is a tie. **JULIE LEUNG, Island South**