

Hong Kong's major reforms to its education system included encouraging creativity. More than a decade on, complaints remain about stress, and tuition centres are thriving.

# Report card on reforms still mixed



Li Xueying  
Hong Kong Correspondent

It's Wednesday afternoon and a class of 15-year-olds at Pooi To Middle School are pondering a big question.

How should "individual rights" be balanced against "societal harmony" as Hong Kong considers allowing drug testing of suspected users in the street, a policy now under public consultation?

A pony-tailed girl bounces to the front of the class and says: "We should draw the line at testing those aged below 12, and only those from the narcotics force - not all cops - should be allowed to do the checks."

After the class, a student giggles and lets on that there is a "set formula" to answering such questions in the new liberal studies exam that is aimed, ironically, at fostering independent and creative thinking.

Sixteen-year-old Chung Ching Fong, already a veteran at acing the subject, says you need an answer with a "3+1+1" structure - three positive agreements, one opposing contention and a final exposition to refute the preceding one.

Meanwhile, tuition centres across the city are doing brisk business imparting exam techniques for the subject, taught at senior secondary level. "You have to memorise these key points and where to put in this four-paragraph formula," tutor Catherine Lui from the Modern Education chain tells her class at a Tuesday night session.

"For all topics related to Hong Kong's democratic development, societal development, political reform and conflict between the mainland and Hong Kong, adopt this same formula."

Speaking to The Sunday Times, she scoffs at the idea that liberal studies are about creative thinking. "The government is too idealistic," she says. "Exams are about scoring points, always about higher scores."

## 'No losers'

This was certainly not what the government had in mind 13 years ago when it began rolling out comprehensive education reforms.

In a 185-page report, Learning For Life, Learning Through Life, put together after two years of review, three rounds of consultation and 30,000 submissions, a government-appointed commission was scathing of the existing system at the time. It was too examination-driven, school life was monotonous and children did not have enough room to think, explore and create.

Instead, students should become well-rounded, independent and creative, and enjoy learning, stated the commission. There must be a broader definition for education, and activities in and out of the classroom should contribute equally to an all-round education.

And there are "no losers": Every



Students at Pooi To Middle School in Kowloon City role-play during a liberal studies class, aimed at fostering creative and analytical thinking. In a society that still prizes grades and where competition for limited university spots is cut-throat, parents and schools have found ways to help students maximise their scores.

child should have opportunities to develop his or her potential.

To get there, substantive reforms were introduced in stages in Hong Kong schools starting in 2000. They included:

- A through-train system which allows children to move from primary to senior secondary. Instead of three public examinations over the years, they take only one at age 18, the Diploma of Secondary Education (DSE).

- More school-based assessments that account for about 20 per cent of the final DSE score, to reduce the weighting of examinations.

- No more streaming into science, arts or commerce classes; students may take any combination of subjects based on their interest, beyond four mandatory subjects including liberal studies.

The first batch of through-train DSE students graduated last year. While the reforms have helped to expose students to a wider array of skills and created more opportunities for weaker students, they have ironically led to more stress overall, principals, teachers, academics and students told The Sunday Times.

In a society that still prizes grades and where competition for limited university spots is cut-throat, parents and schools have found ways to help students maximise their scores.

As Ms Tsang Enian, principal of Pooi To Middle School in Kowloon City, notes ruefully: "Creativity? In Hong Kong, many feel, what use is creativity if you cannot get good exam grades? We have the reforms in place, but we have not achieved the spirit."

"We have the reforms in place, but we have not achieved the spirit."

## More hope for the weak

This is not to say there are no bright spots.

One is that students get a longer runway to strive for university entry, unlike under the old system, where 70 per cent of each cohort was winnowed out at age 16.

Another is that academically weaker students seem to do better,

## THE ABCS OF HK SYSTEM

Hong Kong children start compulsory education at age six, with six years of primary schooling.

Under the old system, they sat a standardised Academic Aptitude Test at Primary 6, on the strength of which they applied to secondary schools.

Secondary school started at Form One, and at Form Five, 16-year-olds sat the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination, the equivalent of the O levels. The top 30 per cent then proceeded to two years of pre-university - called Form Six - and sat the Advanced Level Exams that determined their chances of going to university.

Starting from 2000, comprehensive reforms allowed children to move all the way from Primary One to Form Six without having to take major exams. The exams at Primary Six and Form Five were scrapped.

Now, all students can have 12 years of education and sit only one public exam at age 18, the new Diploma of Secondary Education. This means that everyone conceivably has a shot at trying for university.

Not all stay the full 12 years though. Compulsory education is for only nine years, and a small proportion leave along the way.

Although the Primary Six exam has been scrapped, elite secondary schools still pick and choose their students.

Two factors are involved: the students' banding (they are segregated into three bands based on internal tests administered by the primary schools); as well as the primary schools' rankings, as collated by the media. This hinges on how well former pupils performed in secondary school.

All this feeds into a system where schools are grouped, albeit unofficially, into three

bands - Band One for the top performers, followed by Bands Two and Three - and this information is well known and easily found online.

Hong Kong's schools are a mix of government, subsidised schools run by charitable organisations, private Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) schools and international schools.

Besides international schools that generally run the International Baccalaureate system, the top schools are the DSS schools - similar to Singapore's independent schools - and make up about 10 per cent of secondary schools.

Previously high-performing government schools, they can set their own curriculum, entrance requirements and fees - which can go up to HK\$5,000 (\$3,780) a month. By contrast, government schools are free.

While DSS schools are supposed to reserve at least 10 per cent of their fee income for scholarships for poor students, a government audit in 2010 found that one-third did not comply.

Another form of segregation in the system is the medium of instruction: Only schools that attract better-performing students are allowed to use English. These schools are generally entrenched at the top.

These realities have led to complaints that the system discriminates against students from poorer families from the very beginning.

It is therefore little wonder that parents who can afford it frantically prep their kids from pre-school with language and extra-curricular skills - such as the ability to play musical instruments, given that popular primary schools conduct demanding admissions interviews with both pupils and parents to determine their eligibility.

says Mr Lee Chi Shing, principal of Concordia Lutheran School, which is in the lowest Band 3.

One reason is there are new subjects such as tourism and hospitality, which are more hands-on and emphasise project work. Take Angel Po, 17, who with three classmates organised a local tour for parents as a project. "It makes our portfolio look better when we apply to universities or for related jobs," she says.

Says Mr Lee: "Our students regard themselves as losers. So we try to give them hope. They get higher marks for project work, which they can handle bit by bit."

While it is still tough for his students to qualify for the competitive local universities, a quarter make it to private tertiary options, including self-financing associate degrees at community colleges or overseas universities, based on their DSE results. This is up from 14 per cent previously.

A second bright spot is that the new curriculum emphasises more analytical thinking, says Ms Tsang. History exams, for example, no longer require regurgitation of facts. Instead, students are asked to interpret information that is provided - although she notes wryly: "These can be memorised too."

Some also observe that the teaching of liberal studies has made young Hong Kong people more aware of the society around them. Yume Wong, 15, says: "Now I read the newspapers at breakfast and will try to picture myself in the news." Recently, she has been mulling over the plight of the poor, given news about the city's new poverty line.

History professor Lee Kam Keung of Baptist University notes of his more recent batches of students: "They are reaching out to new diversified resources, say, the Internet. They do not rely only on what we teach in the classroom, textbooks or library books."

## 'Distortions' in system

But those interviewed highlighted deeper problems that run against the spirit of the reforms.

A continuing obsession with grades and university admissions means the tuition culture has become even more pervasive.

Even at Elegancia College, which prides itself on fleshing out the reforms, clippings of its top-banded ac-

ademic ranking take pride of place at its entrance. "It's what parents want to see," says principal Tso Kai Lok, a member of the education reform commission.

One casualty has been students' freedom to choose subjects. Taking subjects from the same stream has been found to help students score better, so schools have nudged students to do this.

"For the most brilliant students, we say, take whatever you want. But the average should concentrate on the same stream," explains Mr Tso.

Another irony is that although school-based assessments were meant to reduce exam pressure, students and teachers alike say stress levels have gone up.

"It's like having tests every day - if we fail, it might cost us two points in the final DSE result," says 16-year-old Lau Tsz Ying. "I dare not give up a single point."

Teacher Chan Hei Shui reveals that parents and teachers end up helping students with their projects.

Yet another problem is that assessments are subjective. Says principal Tsang: "Teachers hate it because they have to give a mark and there are lots of appeal mechanisms."

Teachers found it difficult to move away from the long-ingrained habit of testing, and the stress led to resignations in the profession, with even a spate of teacher suicides in 2005 attributed to the stress of implementing the reforms.

Professor Chung Yue Ping, a commission member and education academic at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, acknowledges: "We did not anticipate the difficulty of implementation - that it would involve a lot more work for teachers and students."

"Teachers faced pressure from principals and parents to give high marks, while dealing with the additional workload of reading tons of essays. It was also difficult for them to ascertain the originality of the work when many could copy from the Internet."

## High-stakes game

What needs to be done now, those interviewed say, is to make the system less high-stakes.

As student Tsz Ying describes the DSE exam: "Everything - not only our university degree, but also our jobs, our future life - will be decided by this one exam, one result."

The move to let all students proceed to the DSE also raised expectations of getting a degree, when the reality is government-subsidised university spots have continued to hover at 12,000 to 15,000 places each year.

This year, 18 per cent of the 82,000-strong cohort made it to subsidised universities. This compares with 27 per cent in Singapore, a figure that will rise to 40 per cent by 2020. "The corresponding expansion of tertiary education was not explored carefully as part of the reforms," says Prof Chung.

For those who do not make it to university, the alternatives are unpalatable. Many rush to private associate degrees in courses such as business and marketing, but find themselves armed with generic skills that employers have little use for.

Meanwhile, vocational training institutes continue to be viewed as inferior. Ms Tsang says: "We Asian parents want our children to do well. How? By going to university. How? You have to excel in the DSE. It's all or nothing. So the pressure is always there."

Without tackling this root issue, the report card on Hong Kong's education reforms will remain mixed.

xueying@sph.com.sg  
Additional reporting by  
Pearl Liu